

Sexual Addiction: Early Recovery Skills

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

For most sex addicts, abstinence is encouraged in early recovery. A period of 30 - 90 days of complete abstinence is often recommended. Although each sex addict must define abstinence and recovery for himself or herself based on their own unique addiction and history, initial abstinence usually involves all sexual behavior, including masturbation. The ultimate goal is not to remain celibate forever but to learn healthy sexual expression in an intimate relationship.

Early recovery skills involve establishing sexual abstinence in the face of an overwhelming urge to act on one's sexual compulsions. Abstinence skills are much like the early recovery skills a drug addict or alcoholic would learn. To be successful in fighting the urge to engage in the compulsive behavior, a number of personal and lifestyle changes should occur that can encourage and support abstinence. The addict in early recovery alters his lifestyle from the environment that was created to support the sexual addiction to one that will support recovery. Below are some tips for establishing early abstinence and ultimately recovery from sexual addiction:

1. Make lifestyle adjustments that nourish recovery behavior.
 - a. Get rid of your stash. Get rid of the pornography, the "little black book", the videos, the internet favorites, etc.
 - b. Don't carry cash or credit cards.
 - c. Have a 1-900-number block put on the phone.
 - d. Install an internet filter on the computer
 - e. Go to Sexaholics Anonymous (SA) or Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA); Get a sponsor.
 - f. Go to a local "Celebrate Recovery" group and get an accountability partner.
 - g. Add more structure to your life. Make sure that someone knows where you are at all times, so that you will be less likely to act out in secrecy and isolation.
 - h. Alter your "entertainment" behavior. Get rid of the premium channels on cable. Watch television and movies with someone else and see only G rated movies for the time being.
 - i. Don't go to slippery places like strip clubs, massage parlors, adult bookstores, or bars.

- j. Identify what your other addictions are and abstain from them too. Most sex addicts have other addictions such as alcoholism/drug addiction, gambling addiction, eating disorders, work addiction, or spending addiction. Acting out in one addiction endangers sobriety in other addictions.
 - k. Develop a spiritual program of recovery.
2. Learn new skills to combat urges and cravings to engage in the compulsive behavior.
- a. Think of abstinence as a "one day at a time" task. Don't think of it as quitting forever. Do what you have to do today to not engage in the compulsive sexual behavior. Tomorrow do the same thing.
 - b. Learn "thought stopping" techniques to eliminate the fantasies.
 - c. Replace distorted beliefs about your need for sex with a realistic perspective about sexuality. An example would be that sex is not your most important need. You will not die without sex. Food, shelter, clothing-you need all these more than sex. Change how you think.
 - d. Use cognitive therapy to challenge each craving or urge as it occurs.
 - e. Keep busy. Distract yourself with healthy alternatives.
 - f. Tell yourself the truth. When you start thinking of all the positive attributes of sexually acting out, tell yourself the truth about those "positives". Point out to yourself, that your marriage is shot and your career is practically over. Remind yourself how "sex as a solution" has cost you dearly. Keep telling yourself that "sex is the problem, not the solution."
 - g. Challenge your own defense mechanism that make it alright to relapse. Early on, you will have identified the inner and middle circle sexual behaviors. Thoughts will reoccur that will tell you that some of those behaviors that you decided were problematic, really are not that problematic after all, and that you can engage in those without negative consequences.
 - h. In your wallet, carry a list of reasons why you want to quit sexually acting out. Or post it on the door or some other place that would most effectively help you avoid relapse.
 - i. Use thought stopping techniques to eliminate the fantasies before they take hold.
3. Identify the roles that the compulsive sexual behavior used to play in your life. Identify healthy alternatives with which to replace those roles.

- a. Make a list of the "things" that you once used sex for. Examples could include stress management, getting to sleep, escape from pressures, dealing with or not dealing with feelings, escape from relationship issues, etc.
 - b. For each one of the things that you used sex for, make a list of alternatives to sex that can be used for the same purpose. Examples for stress management could include exercise, hobbies, assertiveness training, sports, gardening, replacing worry with problem solving, etc.
 - c. Post your list where you can see it and add to it daily.
- 4. Deal with your emotions and your relationships issues as they occur. Marriages with sexual addiction have major problems. It comes with the territory.
 - a. Talk about the relationship. Deal with the conflicts. Deal with the feelings. Don't shut down and refuse to talk about what has happened. Don't put your spouse off with "It's in the past. Let's get out of the past". Last week is not the past. Last month is not the past.
 - b. Get feed back from your spouse about boundaries and sexual behavior targeted for elimination. Your spouse needs to tell you their observations, thoughts, and feelings about your behavior. You need to hear it. They may have some insight that you do not yet have.

Sexual addiction is a deeply ingrained pattern of behavior. In order to recover, you cannot wish it so. You must change your behavior, you thoughts, and your feelings. You must abstain from sexual behavior at the beginning. You do this to get back in touch with your feelings, to identify the patterns and problems of your life, and to learn to deal with life without using sex like a drug to escape from it. You will not die from lack of sex. You may, however, experience withdrawal symptoms much like withdrawal symptoms that people have when they withdraw from alcohol or other mood altering drugs. In early recovery, you must establish abstinence. To do this, you must get through the cravings and urges to act out. Relapse prevention is crucial in early recovery.

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