

Sexual Addiction - Help for the Sex Addict's Spouse

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Can the spouse of a sex addict find help individually for the effects of the sexual addiction on their lives? Sure. Much of the time, however, it is the crisis of discovery of the acting out, or some other related crisis that brings the sex addict and spouse into treatment. They usually seek services at the same time, if the spouse gets help. Unfortunately, many times only the addict is treated.

Although there are inpatient and outpatient treatment services, many sex addicts and their partners have a difficult time finding an appropriate treatment provider. Couples may seek marriage counseling and not address the sexual addiction. Possible reasons for this are varied, but couples often come to counseling with a variety of relationship complaints that may not be immediately identifiable as sexual addiction. Addiction-related behavior or problems may be hidden intentionally or unintentionally from the therapist and the couple may not understand the connections between the sexual behavior and their other presenting problems. Additionally, many treatment providers have a general lack of knowledge about sexual addiction. Sexual addiction demands treatment.

Once sexual addiction has been correctly diagnosed, the addict's number one goal would be abstinence from the compulsive sexual behavior(s). A first step in achieving that goal is to define "abstinence". Although abstinence in drug addiction treatment is easily defined, that is not necessarily the case with sexual addiction. A lifetime of abstinence is not usually recommended, but treatment for sexual addiction will often involve complete sexual abstinence for a period of time (often 60-90 days). Spouses should be part of the discussions about definitions of abstinence and any expectations of abstinence within the marriage for any period of time. This is important because couples often assume that they agree on something when it has not even been discussed.

Treatment for the addict and co-addict would involve education about sexual addiction. The importance of using all recovery resources available, (i.e., sex addicts anonymous (SAA), sexaholics anonymous (SA), Co-SA (co-dependents of sex addicts), group counseling, individual and couples counseling would be discussed. Therapists would also usually make reading recommendations.

What kinds of issues would the spouse of an addict work on in counseling? Many spouses initially have the attitude that it is the addict only that has "the problem". But when you look at the devastation in your own life that is associated with the sex addiction, you begin to see not just the benefit of counseling but the importance of it.

A line of communication begins, with assistance in learning effective, non-acting out dialogue. Couples learn fair fighting and active listening skills. This assists in a more comprehensive disclosure about the sexual compulsivity. The addict usually feels some relief about getting the secrets out into the open. But both the addict and spouse usually feel overwhelming shame. Both may feel grief. The spouse or co-addict may grieve the loss of the fantasy marriage. The addict may feel grief over the loss of the addiction. The

spouse inevitably feels betrayed and very angry. Painful issues are uncovered. Couples need good communication skills in order to talk about these painful experiences and feelings. Although the couple may be talking about these issues with each other, they may still be withdrawing and isolating from other family members and friends due to shame. Self esteem takes a hit in early recovery but usually recovers during the process of recovery over time.

Couples usually need help with rebuilding, not just the trust and intimacy in their lives, but with damage to infrastructure, like finances. Some of the negative consequences of sexual addiction are loss of job, financial devastation, and an arrest or other legal consequences (i.e., sexual harassment). These are issues that require the processing of feelings, and problem solving skills. Partners need help working through the emotional damage of the acting out, with working through hurt feelings and betrayal, rebuilding trust, and recovering a willingness to risk letting down their guard with each other.

The spouse needs therapeutic attention of his/her own. Treatment goals for the co-addict would probably involve a frank discussion of feelings about the acting out, with an assessment of the damage to the spouse from that acting out. Spouses often blame themselves for the acting out, believing that if they were pretty/handsome enough, smart enough, sexual enough, etc. that their spouse would not be acting out. They may feel guilty about not seeing it earlier and/or not recognizing the problem so that it could be solved. The spouse usually needs help with learning to let go of responsibility for the addict's recovery, to stop inappropriate caretaking or enabling, or to stop trying to control the addict. The co-addict is assisted in empowering themselves to make decisions based on strengths rather than fear. Self-esteem is a focus of therapeutic attention. Co-addicts often discover in the process of recovery that they had their own issues before the sexual addiction issues surfaced. Similarly, the addict usually has the beginning of their sexual addiction before the marriage. A lot of co-addicts (and addicts) uncover addictions of other family members, and unresolved family of origin trauma, like childhood sexual abuse, physical abuse, or neglect. These are issues that need to be addressed and treated in order to be able to truly be intimate in relationships.

Just as the addict needs to change their core beliefs in recovery, the co-addict must change some core beliefs about themselves and their own competence in recovery. As recovery continues, and time passes, the co-addict can eventually regain the trust for their addicted spouse. This is not a short process, and the addict often gets frustrated, angry, and resentful when the spouse continues to bring up the past, and discuss and process negative feelings. Counseling helps facilitate this process with assistance in talking about it and reminding the addict that it takes the spouse this long to work through those feelings. The spouse's ability to regain trust for the sex addict is in part dependent upon their perception of addict's performance in honesty, consistency, dependability, and sensitivity to the co-addict's feelings. Identifying and working through one's own issues, along with increase self-esteem and self-confidence, helps facilitate the recovery of trust. Other important therapeutic work of the spouse is development of a plan for how they would deal with relapse. Through their own hard work they learn to determine for

themselves what they are willing to live with and what they are not. They learn to define and declare their bottom lines and to set boundaries about relapse accordingly. They learn to reject unacceptable behavior and take care of themselves. Co-addicts can learn to trust their own opinions and reality and make decisions appropriate to being responsible for their own health, welfare, and happiness.

Treatment is not just for the addict. Even if the addict does not recover, the spouse can, if they are willing to do the work. Just divorcing the addict, usually does not solve the problem for the co-addict. Without work, the emotional baggage that you carry around from one relationship to another just keeps getting heavier.

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Hubbard House Publishing, Stillwater, Oklahoma