

## **Sexual Addiction - A Brief Description - Part 1**

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

If you see yourself in this brief description of sexual addiction, it can be the beginning of achieving recovery and getting your life back. The hope is that there is recovery, that it is possible. "The journey of a thousand miles begins by taking the initial step". The good news is that you don't have to make the journey alone. Sexual addiction is an ongoing and potentially worsening pattern of compulsive sexual behavior despite awareness of negative consequences on the addict's life.

Compulsion is defined as an "irresistible" impulse to do something. Although the addict feels compelled to engage in the problem behavior, it is typically not emotionally satisfying. The acting out usually produces shame and guilt, followed by a desire and perhaps a promise to self to stop. The compulsive behavior keeps returning. Sexual addiction has negative consequences not only on the lives of the addict, but on the lives of family members and friends. Sexual addiction can bring about all manner of losses, including close relationships, freedom due to legal consequences (i.e. jail), financial, self-esteem, meaningful participation in your own life, and loss of health. Sex addiction has direct parallels with alcohol and other drug (AOD) addictions.

Sex addicts, like other addicts, attempt to escape from, medicate, or alter their feelings and their "reality" with sex. In sexual addiction, sex is the mind/mood altering drug. Anything that an addict "likes" that works to change how they feel, can become compulsive or addictive. Most sex addicts have preferences for acting out, such as compulsive masturbation, internet sex, phone sex, prostitutes, serial infidelity, and others. Sexual addiction is usually progressive, which means that the behaviors escalate in intensity, frequency, or levels of inappropriateness. Sex addicts often progress from compulsive, yet seemingly innocuous behavior like masturbation, to illegal (e.g. window peeping, etc.) behavior, or dangerous sexual behavior.

Although sexual addiction can represent a range of sexual behaviors, there seems to be common characteristics among the addicts. Some of the common themes running through sexual addiction include (but are not limited to): difficulties forming close, intimate attachments, fear of allowing others to really know them and ultimately fear of rejection, feelings of shame and worthlessness, and loneliness. There are often other members of the family of origin who had a history of sexually acting out.

There is often a history of having been sexually abused in childhood. Sex addicts engage in dishonesty and compulsive lying. They often live two separate lives - the hidden, acting out one and the one your neighbors see. Addicts act outside their own value systems and become alienated from themselves. Most addicts live in fear - fear about not being able to engage in the compulsive behavior, fear about continuing to engage in the behavior, fear of getting caught or found out, and fear of loss of what they truly value (i.e. family, job, reputation). Sex addiction often occurs as a co-occurring disorder with alcohol and other drug (AOD) addictions. If you see yourself in these descriptions, seek help immediately.

You don't have to wait until you lose everything to find help and get into recovery. Actually, addicts with the best prognosis of sustained recovery are those who still have the infrastructure of their lives-their marriages, other family members, jobs, home, friends. An internet search can reveal recovery resources for sexual addiction. If you are unable to find local resources, call the addiction treatment providers in your community and ask for a referral. One of the hardest parts of early recovery is getting past the "denial" that tells you that you don't need help.

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