

**Sexual Addiction Recovery:
What Are We Trying To Accomplish?
Individually Defining Recovery**
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Recovery from sexual addiction is slightly different than recovery from alcohol and other (AOD) addiction. With chemical dependency recovery, the goal is to abstain from all mood altering drugs. The primary goal from sexual addiction is not abstinence from sex, but the development of the ability to become healthy in one's physical intimacy behavior. Those with compulsive erotic behavior, find it not only helpful, but most find it imperative to refrain from sex for a period of time in early recovery. This allows the addict to "detox" from using sex to alter their moods, deal with (or escape from) feelings, or in general use sex as a drug.

Early recovery tasks for sexually compulsive people include the following: a) identifying the sexual behaviors that are problematic, 2) identifying the adverse impact that this acting out has on different aspects of one's life, 3) identifying one's own "real" sexual values, and 4) establishing one's unique definition of "sexual sobriety".

In early recovery, counselors and sponsors (i.e., Sex Addicts Anonymous, Sexaholics Anonymous) aid the sex addict in identifying that definition of sobriety. Since there are as many different ways to act out sexually as there are sex addicts, each person must determine the sexual behavior that s/he engages in that are causing problems in his/her life. Some examples of problematic erotic behavior include compulsive masturbation, obsessive fantasy, pornography, use of prostitutes, massage parlors, internet sex, and phone sex. Compulsive acting out is classified within four levels of addiction (e.g. Patrick Carnes), with each level of behavior crossing more of others' boundaries and becoming more victimizing. Sex addicts may or may not escalate from one level of addiction to the next. An example of progressing from one level to another could be moving from any of the previous levels into adding some of the following behavior to one's sexual acting out repertoire: voyeurism, obscene phone calls, or sexual harassment.

Early recovery involves getting real about the compulsive nature of one's erotic behavior. It also involves an in-depth look at how the addiction came about. It often has its genesis in early childhood, with physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. Most sex addicts come from addicted families--sexually addicted, work addicted, or chemically addicted. They may not realize that there was addiction in their families of origin, but as recovery progresses and they put the pieces of the puzzle together, the essence of addiction usually emerges.

The troublesome behavior is eliminated in early recovery. In order to accomplish this, an addict must be able to place his/her own sexual behavior within the three circles of sexual behavior as described by Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA). The innermost circle

is populated with the core acting out behavior that has brought the addict into recovery, and which is the principal target for elimination.

The damaging impact of middle circle behavior is often uncertain at the beginning of the recovery process. This behavior, while not "bottom line", inner circle behavior that is targeted for extinction, is also not the healthy behavior of the outermost circle. Middle circle behavior tends to be that behavior which can and (routinely does) serve as a trigger for inner circle acting out. Sometimes when addicts continue to grapple with maintaining abstinence from target core behavior, persistence of middle circle behavior is at the core of the problem. For a multiplicity of reasons the recovering person may not have viewed middle circle behavior as particularly problematic and consequently they have not been included in their definition of "sobriety". When these middle circle behaviors persist and lead to relapse, the recovering person may then become more aware of the negative impact of these behaviors and move them into the inner circle, target behaviors to be eliminated.

Outer circle behavior is defined as that which involves positive, healthy, recovery behavior, some of which may involve healthy, intimate sex in committed relationships. Again, the primary goal for recovery is the development of the ability to become healthy in one's physical intimacy behavior.

While the addict is working on eliminating the innermost core behavior, they are simultaneously working to identify the living problems that they have been seeking to medicate through their addiction. A feeling of worthlessness and/or self-loathing is usually uncovered, and the addict begins to work through the shame.

One of the most potent tools for recovery is a "spiritual program". Other new living skills must be learned and applied to all areas of one's life. One important example of a new skill to be learned and one of the long term goals of recovery is to acquire new relationship skills, including how to be truly intimate. In recovery, sex moves from being a "drug of choice" into a healthy expression and a part of intimacy.

Recovery from sexual addiction is a process which includes major life changes, including lifestyle, beliefs, and attitudes. Recovering people generally discover that their network of friends change as the addict's behavior, beliefs, and attitudes no longer match old friendship networks. The sex addict stops "sexualizing" relationships with others. They challenge old, distorted thoughts about the self, the world, and others, and replace them with a more realistic worldview of life and relationships.

Marital sex changes in tone, frequency, and quality. Sex addicts stop looking to their spouse as a "provider" of sexual services. In recovery, intimate partners identify their feelings about the sexual behavior, and define and verbalize expectations and boundaries. Couples seeking to restore their relationship get honest. They recommit to the relationship. They work to restore the lost intimacy. They may now actually be having sex again for the first time in a long time. They identify problematic marital issues, including the erotic behavior and start to work through the conflicts and resolve old hurts.

One of the fundamental goals of recovery for sex addicts and their spouses is the development of healthy, "non-addictive" sex within the context of true intimacy. This process occurs over time, sometimes years.

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