

AreYou Suffering From Someone Else's Sexual Addiction?

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Are you feeling angry, depressed, confused, and constantly trying to figure out what your partner is up to? If you find yourself spinning your wheels, attempting to strategize and find solutions for your partner and your relationship before pinpointing the problem, continue reading. Family members can be affected by the sexual addiction of their partners, spending countless hours trying to address the issue before genuinely understanding what they are dealing with. If you are experiencing negative consequences due to someone else's sexual behavior, you might be in a relationship with a person struggling with sex addiction.

How can you determine if you are in a relationship with someone dealing with sex addiction? Sex may assume an inappropriate level of importance in such relationships. There may be a lack of sexual intimacy. In a healthy relationship, couples engage in a variety of intimate acts. You might sense that something is amiss with your relationship's intimacy level. You could feel lonely before, during, or after sexual activity. You might feel objectified sexually. You may perceive that your partner is incapable of emotional intimacy and can only express intimacy sexually. Perhaps you find yourselves frequently in conflict over sex. While it's normal for couples to have differing levels of sexual desire, excessive arguments over sex may occur. Your partner might sulk or act out if they don't get sex when they desire it. Even after engaging in sex, they may continue to demand more, feeling unsatisfied with the experience they just had. Maybe they demand certain sexual activities that you are uncomfortable with, and perhaps you comply. You might find yourself having sex with your partner because you fear they will seek sex elsewhere if you don't comply. Alternatively, your partner may seem disinterested in sex with you altogether.

Addiction inherently involves dishonesty and secrecy. For family members, this dishonesty and secrecy often manifest as a compulsion to uncover the "truth" to "fix" the problem. You might find yourself playing detective, constantly looking for evidence regarding whether your partner is truthful about their actions or whereabouts. You might feel compelled to interrogate them. Perhaps you discover pornography hidden in the house, prompting you to embark on a "search and destroy" mission. When you encounter unexplained charges on credit cards and phone bills, your compulsion to investigate further may intensify. You might even consider hiring a private investigator. The compulsion to gather information is strong, driven by the belief that if you acquire enough information, you can solve "the problem." You likely feel isolated, believing you can't confide in anyone about your situation.

By now, your partner's addiction is likely having significant adverse effects on you. Family members bear the financial, social, emotional, and relational consequences of their loved one's addiction. You might find yourself engaged in a compulsive game of cat and mouse, attempting to control the addict's behavior. Your mental and physical health is probably suffering; you may experience stress-related physical ailments and depression, even having suicidal thoughts. You may withdraw from family and friends. Your self-confidence and self-esteem are diminishing, affecting other areas of your life. While you may have initially maintained your self-esteem at work, eventually, it too begins to deteriorate. You feel hurt or embarrassed by your partner's behavior, yet you may also feel responsible. You make excuses for them or lie to conceal their actions from others. You blame yourself, thinking that if you were more attractive, sexier, more intelligent, taller or shorter, etc., your partner wouldn't behave this way. You find yourself acting in ways you never imagined, scolding, lecturing, yelling, threatening to leave, or coercing them into behaving appropriately. You might even engage in retaliatory behavior, such as overspending or having your own affairs.

Regardless of the symptoms of family dynamics related to sexual addiction that you are experiencing, help is available. A simple internet search will reveal a variety of online resources. Although most resources

serve the person with sex addiction, some cater to the needs of the family. You can also find a list of local 12-step meetings for sex addicts and their family members. Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA) and Sexaholics Anonymous (SA) are for sex addicts, while Co-SA (Codependents of Sex Addicts) is for family and friends of sex addicts (www.cosa-recovery.org.) Many private and community facilities that treat substance use disorder also offer treatment for sexual addiction.

You might think, "I'm not the one with the addiction, so why should I seek help?" If you exhibit any of the behaviors described above, or if your self-esteem is suffering, or if you are experiencing depression, seek help for yourself. You may not be able to convince your partner to seek help, but you have power and control over your life decisions. You can recover, regardless of whether the person with an addiction does.

