

Sex Addiction: Early Recovery Skills

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For most individuals grappling with sex addiction, abstaining from sexual activities is strongly recommended during the initial stages of recovery. Standard professional advice is to abstain for 30 to 90 days. While each person must define abstinence and recovery based on their unique personal and addiction history, initial abstinence generally entails refraining from all sexual behaviors, including masturbation. The ultimate objective is not lifelong celibacy but instead acquiring healthy sexual expression within intimate relationships.

Early recovery entails acquiring skills to maintain sexual abstinence despite overwhelming urges to indulge in compulsive sexual behaviors. Abstinence skills closely parallel the early recovery skills taught to individuals recovering from substance abuse. To effectively resist the urge to engage in compulsive behavior, several personal and lifestyle changes are necessary to foster and support abstinence. During early recovery, individuals modify their lifestyles from ones that facilitate sexual addiction to ones conducive to recovery.

Below are some guidelines for establishing early abstinence and ultimately achieving recovery from sexual addiction:

Adjust your lifestyle to promote recovery:

- Dispose of any materials facilitating the addiction, such as pornography, contact lists, videos, or internet bookmarks.
- Avoid carrying cash or credit cards.
- Implement a block on 1-900 numbers on your phone.
- Install internet filters on your computer.
- Attend meetings of Sexaholics Anonymous (SA) or Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA) and get a sponsor.

- Join a local "Celebrate Recovery" group and find an accountability partner.
- Introduce more structure into your life. Ensure someone is aware of your whereabouts at all times to reduce the likelihood of secretive and isolated acting out.
- Adjust your entertainment choices. Cancel premium cable channels and watch television and movies with others, opting for G-rated content for now.
- Avoid places conducive to relapse, such as strip clubs, massage parlors, adult bookstores, cruising spots, or bars.
- Identify and abstain from other addictive behaviors. Many people with sex addiction have other concurrent addictions like substance use disorder, gambling addiction, eating disorders, work addiction, or spending addiction.
- Develop a spiritual recovery program.

Acquire new coping skills to combat urges and cravings:

- Approach abstinence as a daily commitment rather than an indefinite vow. Focus on abstaining from compulsive sexual behavior one day at a time.
- Learn techniques for interrupting intrusive thoughts.
- Challenge distorted beliefs regarding sex as your most important need with a more realistic perspective.
- Employ cognitive therapy to confront cravings or urges as they arise.
- Stay occupied with healthy distractions.
- Counteract positive associations with acting out sexually by reminding yourself of the negative consequences it brings to your marriage, career, and overall well-being.
- Challenge defense mechanisms that justify relapse.
- Maintain a list of reasons why you want to abstain from sexual acting out, carrying it with you or displaying it prominently to deter relapse.
- Employ thought-stopping techniques to prevent fantasies from taking hold.

Identify the functions previously fulfilled by compulsive sexual behavior and seek healthy alternatives:

- Compile a list of the purposes served by previous sexual behavior, such as stress relief, sleep aid, escapism, or avoidance of emotions.
- For each purpose, identify alternative behaviors that can fulfill specific needs, such as exercise, hobbies, assertiveness training, or problem-solving techniques.
- Display the list prominently and update it regularly.

Address emotional and relational issues as they arise, recognizing that sexual addiction often exacerbates marital problems:

- Foster open communication about the relationship, including conflicts and emotions. Avoid dismissing concerns by claiming they belong to the past.
- Solicit feedback from your partner regarding boundaries and behaviors targeted for elimination, valuing their insights and perspectives.

Sexual addiction involves biological, social, emotional, psychological, and environmental influences that serve to maintain the acting out, even in the face of negative consequences. Recovery time can reduce the impact of some of these. Individuals influence some of these factors by taking charge of behaviors, thoughts, and feelings.

Abstinence from compulsive sexual behavior is essential in the initial stages of recovery to facilitate self-awareness, identify underlying patterns and issues, and learn to navigate life without using sex as a coping mechanism. Effective relapse prevention strategies are paramount during this phase. Acknowledging the challenges inherent in this process, seeking professional assistance is highly advisable. Whether inpatient or outpatient, professional counseling or treatment can provide invaluable support; ideally, seek help from professionals specializing in sexual addiction. If such specialists are unavailable, addiction specialists are often equipped to address sexual addiction effectively. **Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2009 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy.**