



## What Is Sexual Addiction?

Sexual Addiction is one of the most frequently misunderstood terms in behavioral health. To understand what sexual addiction is, let us first examine what it is not. Sexual Addiction is not a disease—by AMA standards. It is not an excuse for having marital affairs, nor is it a defense in criminal proceedings involving sexual behavior. It is neither rare, nor incurable. Sexual addiction is not found in the majority of rapists and stalkers. The vast majority of sexual addicts are no more likely to engage in child molestation or rape than a randomly-selected stranger. In fact, many times, the sexual addict is actually less likely to engage in such behaviors due to their skewed value system. So then, what is sexual addiction?

Sexual addiction is nothing more than a continuing pattern of unwanted compulsive sexual behavior that has had a negative impact on an individual's personal, social and/or economic standing. Let's break the most important parts of that sentence down:

**"A Continuing Pattern"** An occasional session of masturbation, a single affair, even a past series of date rapes do not constitute a continuing pattern. Sexual addiction is defined by an ongoing series of sexual behaviors, including the preoccupation with and the planning of those behaviors. Usually, these patterns become more and more ritualized, and this ritualization often serves as a measuring stick for the extent of their addiction.

**"Unwanted"** If someone is engaged in sexual behavior of their choosing, even when this behavior brings about significant negative consequences, this does not, in and of itself, warrant a definition of addiction. To be addicted, the person in question must have, at some point, felt the desire to stop (even if that desire no longer exists).

**"Compulsive Sexual Behavior"** The key to this phrase is the term "sexual behavior"—which should be interpreted loosely. Sexual behavior involves ANY type of sexual behavior—including sexual preoccupation, rumination and fantasy. Someone who can't stop thinking about sex can incur consequences that are just as significant as someone actually engaged in the behaviors themselves. The overwhelming majority of compulsive sexual behavior comes from "victimless" behavior—masturbation, prostitution, pornography, promiscuity. This, however, should never be misconstrued to think that the addiction isn't as severe, or as potentially devastating as those involving the more rare behaviors such as rape, stalking and molestation.

**"Negative Impact"** Add to this self-explanatory phrase, "or the potential for a negative impact—should the behavior(s) be discovered."

**"Personal, Social or Economic Standing"** What constitutes "negative impact"? Just about anything can have a negative impact on a person's life. Most often, sexual addiction negatively impacts people in the following ways:

*Personal:* Negative feelings frequently are exhibited through guilt and shame, low self-esteem, depression, thoughts of suicide and/or self-mutilation. Frequently, the dependence on other targets such as drugs and alcohol or gambling stem from the

same addictive processes that trigger the sexual behavior. One's self-identity becomes distorted, either through delusions of sexual grandeur or through self-loathing. Both can be devastating to maintaining balance and satisfaction in one's life.

*Social:* Existing interpersonal relationships become strained or destroyed. The need for secrecy inhibits the development of intimacy, especially with long-term romantic partners, friends and family. Over time, few new long-term relationships are built as the longer the addiction progresses, the more social interactions become either an active part of the addiction, or a means of distraction.

*Economic:* Often, the discovery of one's involvement in socially deviant and/or criminal behavior can have a devastating effect on one's career. Overtly, behaviors such as sexual harassment, an arrest for statutory rape, a child molestation conviction can mean not only the immediate loss of employment, but the exclusion of certain types of careers. Subtly, even constant ruminations and fantasies can keep people from reaching their full professional potential. The noted exception to this is the dual sexual addict/workaholic—who tends to excel in just about all areas professionally.

More important than the definition of sexual addiction, is the personal definition of a "sexual addict". *How do you know if someone is a sexual addict? What does it mean to be a sexual addict? Is there anything that can be done, once the diagnosis of "sexual addict" is made? When trying to define whether or not someone is a sexual addict, keep this in mind: it doesn't matter. If someone is displaying sexual behavior that is for some reason or another having a negative impact on your life (or theirs), then something needs to be done. No matter if that behavior meets the definition of "addiction"; no matter if the person meets the criteria for "an addict". Nobody ever recovers from a label, they recover from their reliance on an unhealthy pattern of thoughts and behaviors. All it means to be a sexual addict is that an individual is currently displaying a pattern of compulsive sexual behavior that is having a negative impact on their life. They still have the same types of sincere feelings, good thoughts and emotional quirks that are a part of us all. In a nutshell, they have learned to use sexual behavior to manage their emotions (temporarily). Just as others sometimes balance their emotions with food, or cigarettes, or spending, or alcohol, sexual addicts use sexual thoughts and behavior to manage theirs. Unfortunately, like other addictions, this type of stress management is quite effective for immediate relief, but the negative impact that is felt later tends to only increase the stress that they feel. Thus, the need for even more "stress management". It's a vicious cycle that at some point gets completely out of hand and the person eventually loses touch with society's values and begins to depend on sexual behavior to regulate feelings. This is one reason why it is so important to get this person into a recovery program that includes an emphasis on personal and social values. Without it, recovery will just be a matter of replacing one unhealthy behavior pattern with another. That is a dangerous and destructive proposition.<sup>1</sup>*

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