The Assessment, Diagnosis and Treatment of Sexual Addiction in the Digital Age

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Elements Behavioral Health

Promises Treatment Centers- Malibu, Austin
The Sexual Recovery Institute- California
The Ranch-Tennessee
The Recovery Place -Florida
The Right Step - Texas
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Myths: Sexual Addiction is not ...

- A symptom of a ADD/OCD/Bipolar Disorders or Active Drug Abuse
- Fun
- Symptomatic of Moral or Religious failing
- “Sex negative” or a cultural bias
- Fetish Behavior
- Same Sex Interest or Activity
- Crystal Meth Addiction
- Sexual Offending - non consensual
**Typical Sex Addict Behaviors**

- Compulsive Use of Porn (with or without masturbation)
- Anonymous Hook-ups (met online)
- Adult Bookstores and Strip Clubs
- Sexual Exchange (i.e. Drugs or Favors for Sex)
- Prostitutes and “Sensual” Massage Parlors
- Cruising, Intriguing, Objectifying, Seduction
- Pushing Boundaries, Viewing “no” as a challenge
- Multiple Affairs / Anonymous Infidelity
- SmartPhone Hook-ups - using APPS
- Sexting / Abusing Social Networks / Virtual Sex
- Crossing Professional Boundaries
- Living a Double Life - compartmentalization

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**Yeah, Ok but how much Sex = addiction?**

  How many drinks = Alcoholism?
  How much money lost = Addictive Gambling?
  How many meals = Eating Disorder?

**Yeah, Ok but what kind of sex = addiction?**

  What kind of Alcohol consumed = Alcoholism?
  What kind of gaming activity = Addictive Gambling?
  What kind of food consumed = Eating Disorder?

**Addictive disorders are not determined NOT quantitatively - but qualitatively. How is this (substance or behavior) affecting the persons life & functionality?**
Is Sexual Addiction a valid Mental Health Diagnosis?

- Was in the DSM III - as a descriptor
- Was out of the DSM IV
- No longer being considered for the DSM 5 (Hypersexual Disorder)

What does it mean to not have a Diagnosis

- Moral Judgement
- Religious Abuse
- Misdiagnosis
- Misdirected Treatment - often with meds

Think Alcoholism prior to the 1970’s
Addiction 2013 Current Definitions

Addiction is a primary, chronic disease of brain reward, motivation, memory and related circuitry. Dysfunction in these circuits leads to characteristic biological, psychological, social and spiritual manifestations. This is reflected in an individual pathologically pursuing reward and/or relief by substance use and other behaviors.

ASAM 2011

DSM IV-TR on Addictive Disorders

• Loss of Control
• Continuation Despite Averse Consequences
• Obsession and Preoccupation

How Can You Be Addicted to ... Sex?

› Increased Heart Rate
› Pupils Dilate
› Hearing More Acute
› Shallow Breathing
› Perspiration- palms, underarms, etc.
› “Rush” or “Intensity” Feeling
› Reduced Intellectual Functioning!
Sexual Addiction (like compulsive gambling) is the use of Intense Fantasy to Induce Neurochemical Release

- Serotonin - mood stability
- Dopamine - pleasure
- Adrenaline - energy, jolt
- Endorphins - calm
- Oxytocin - love/jealousy

In essence it is a mechanism of neurological compensation or simply put- “a brain problem”

ADDICTS CALL IT...

- The Bubble
- The Trance
- Spaced Out
- Think ...
- Dissociative State
- Trauma
- Self Soothing
In 12-Step Language ...

POWERLESS!

Sex Addiction is not about sex or orgasm. It is about the search for sex and desire for orgasm. It’s a Process Addiction.
The Process Addictions

- Gambling
- Internet / Video Gaming
- Workaholism
- Binge Eating
- Sex
- Religion
- Exercise
- Spending

Brief Etiology of Sexual Addiction
How Do You Grow an (Sex) Addict?

- Sexual Abuse - overt and covert
- Early Attachment Deficits
- Social Anxiety - Social Avoidance
- Early trauma, neglect and abuse
- Parental Enmeshment - narcissistic parenting
- Pre-existing, untreated character pathology

All of which keep the individual from learning to utilizing basic intimacy, socialization and support to meet healthy human dependency needs.

Sex addicts seek ...

Intensity vs. Intimacy

Maladaptive, survival-based emotional coping (addiction) offers a sense of being in control when feeling needful (out of control)

- Self soothing
- Self Regulation - Calm
- Distraction / Dissociation
- Stimulation

In the absence of and/or limited experience with healthier, more integrated relational means of self stability.

To Show Vulnerability = SHAMEFUL
Most (sex) Addicts desperately seek something they can never achieve ...

CONTROLLABLE INTIMACY

Sex, Tech & Addiction: The Influence of the Internet & Digital Media on Addiction
Note The Escalating Speed of Technological Change

• Radio - took 38 years to reach 50 million people
• Television - took 13 years to reach 50 million people
• Internet - took 4 years to reach 50 million people
• Social Networking - took 16 months to reach 50 million
• Smart Phone apps - took 9 months to reach 50 million

• Whatever is yet to come is now here before we even know it.

• Consider the lowly QR Code

Old Words, Shifting Concepts

• Today, infidelity can no longer be defined in physical terms. Think of it more globally as the keeping of secrets in an intimate relationship.

And today, what you consider to be a relationship, depends mostly on how old you are ...
Sex and Tech
What have been the most profound changes in our experience of sexual content & sexual contact in past 25 years?
• Access
• Affordability
• Anonymity

* Cooper, Del Monico et al 1998 - 1999

Sexual Access Timeline
Pre-history - 1860’s
• Recreational and Intimate Sexuality
• Cave drawings and painted pornography
• Affairs & Infidelity
• Public Baths and Steam Rooms
• Prostitutes & Harems
• Masturbation
Sexual Access Timeline
1860’s - 1970’s

• All of the above plus ...
• Photographic Porn
• Porn Movies
• Porn theaters (XXX)
• Adult Bookstores
• Bath-houses & Strip clubs

Sexual Content Access
1977 - 1990

• All of the above plus ...
• Video = VCR and BETA
• Phone Sex
• Soft-core on cable TV- at home
• “Adult” and “Escort” Sections in Yellow Pages, magazines and newspapers
Sexual Content Access
1990 - 2004

• All of the above plus ...
• BBS - Online bulletin board systems (BBS)
• Websites for porn and prostitution
• Online Porn and file transfer sites
• Chat Rooms
• Online Hook-ups - i.e. craigslist
• Webcams and interactive live sex

Sexual Content Access
2004 - Present

• All of the above plus ...
1. Sexting and live video streaming from your smartphone
2. Smart Phones with GPS & apps
3. Social Networks (facebook, twitter, mySpace)
4. Virtual World Sex (2nd-Life, virtual games etc)
5. Virtual Sex and Teledildonics
6. Chat Roulette
7. Eye Tracking Software
About Ashley Madison

• Started as a website - now also a mobile app - perfect example of content access progression

• AM Slogan: “Life is short, have an affair.”

• AM Mission Statement: “To provide an interactive way for like-minded users to explore whether they wish to meet each other, chat with each other and/or explore extra-marital relationships”

• Over 14-million international members

• In May 2011 1.2 million men and women used the service to contact a sexual partner in that single month

• 92% of males on the site sign in as married

• 60% of female members sign in as married

Think, about what is being exploited here.

Don’t be a victim of your marriage ... CHEAT!”
Smartphones, Pads and Apps

• They have GPS locators = immediate live access to sexual partners and sexual content anywhere, anytime

• Universal Internet access anywhere - to porn, to sexually oriented environments (strip clubs, adult bookstores, etc)

• Live video streaming

• They use Apps - Apps are applications loaded from the Internet onto your smart phone or ‘pad’ to perform specific functions.

• Sex apps, called euphemistically, “adult friend finders” are the same. loaded to your phone to geolocate sexual partners.

Now let’s take a closer look at these apps ...

• Ashley Madison - for married people

• Grindr - for MSM

• And something to make you feel better after ...
Why Does Technological Advance Lead to Behavioral Escalation?

1. *Increasing access* means *decreasing inhibitors* to impulsive problem behavior.

2. The human brain hungers for any new stimulation that leads to rapid fire Dopamine release (pleasure).

3. Increasing accessibility thru phones and pads means sexual acting out is easier to hide.

4. Those with preexisting social/emotional deficits no longer need to evolve a social skill set in order to be sexual.

5. Certain sexual behavior considered illegal/offending/consequential in the “real world” is not so online.

Good News!

- Treatment and recovery are also entering the new media frontier. We all need to be aware of these options for our clients:
  - Tele 12-step meetings
  - Online 12-step Chats
  - Face to Face Skype Meetings
  - Face to face video sponsorship
  - Virtual Reality de-sensitization techniques ...
A Strong Clinical Suggestion ...

• It’s less productive to blame the medium (computer, phone etc.) for “the problem” and more productive to look at the who is person using it.

Sexual Addiction Treatment
What about slips and relapse?

Addiction Treatment Method vs. Psychotherapy

• Behavioral problems REQUIRE behavioral forms of intervention and treatment
• This includes structured steps and tasks
• Problem behaviors have to be contained FIRST before psycho-dynamic therapy and trauma work begins in earnest
• **Group work is more effective** than individual
• Groups must be homogeneous by disorder
• Group focus - shame reduction, social support, sobriety and reality check
• Gender separate work essential
• High accountability- primarily to peers and the group
That said, the method we use to engage the client depends on:

- Their motivation - both internal and external
- Who has the power to motivate them and how?
- Where they are in the process (pre-contemplation, contemplation etc.)

We always meet the client where they are, but in the addiction world we are often pushing them along faster than the therapist who is utilizing insight alone.

**Required Treatment Steps When Working with Sex Addicts**

Do a thorough psycho-sexual history/assessment - individually and then in group

Confront Denial and maintain high accountability

Identify the genuine client treatment goals and co-create a sexual sobriety contract or plan aligned with those goals.

Hold clients accountable to all their agreements!

Have client evaluated for psychotropic medication

Educate and teach relapse prevention

Get them into a sex addiction group therapy

Find support for the spouse

Direct healthcare, family and crisis resolution

Refer to long-term 12-step, therapy or faith-based group
What is Sexual Sobriety?

• A mutually agreed upon clear, written and signed, behavioral *contract* based on client goals.
• Sobriety plans don’t change without prior discussion.
• Similar to how we handle eating disorders

Sexual Sobriety Contract

List of Behaviors *I Want to Stop*  
- A  
- B  
- C  
- D  
- E  
- F

List of Behaviors *I Want to Add*  
- A  
- B  
- C  
- D  
- E  
- F

Primary Treatment Goal ______________________
# 12-step Support Groups for Sexual Addicts and Partners

**Sex Addict Support**
- SAA
- SA (not for gay men)
- SCA
- SLAA-Women
- SRA

**Partner Support**
- S-Anon
- Alanon
- COSA
- CODA
- RCA - Couples

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# Sexual Addiction Education and Treatment Information

- The Sexual Recovery Institute  
  [www.sexualrecovery.com](http://www.sexualrecovery.com)
- The Ranch  
  [www.recoveryranch.com](http://www.recoveryranch.com)
- IITAP - International Institute for Trauma, and Addiction Professionals  
  [www.iitap.com](http://www.iitap.com)
- SASH - The Society for the Advancement of Sexual Health  
  [www.sash.net](http://www.sash.net)
- Promises Malibu- The Substance Abuse and Intimacy Disorders Program  
  [www.promises.com](http://www.promises.com)
- E-summits  
  [www.e-summits.com](http://www.e-summits.com) Online and video learning with available CEU's
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