

Control Issues

Everyone's fallen in and out of love. And virtually everyone's had sexual experiences at one time or another that they felt powerless to resist. Feelings of love and sexual excitement are part of being human.

For sex addicts, though, arousal is a self-reinforcing habit, no less than alcohol, drugs, and other pursuits are to other addicts.

Putting your life back together again after a period of sexual addiction first rests on seeing compulsive sexuality for what it is: an addiction—and a problem.



From there, it's important to cut yourself off from compulsive sexual behavior, as surely as it's necessary for an alcoholic to avoid the next drink and a cocaine addict the next line or rock, in order to rediscover the role of sexuality—and of others—in our lives.

Because what's missing from a sex addict's life can't be found in repeating the same old patterns.

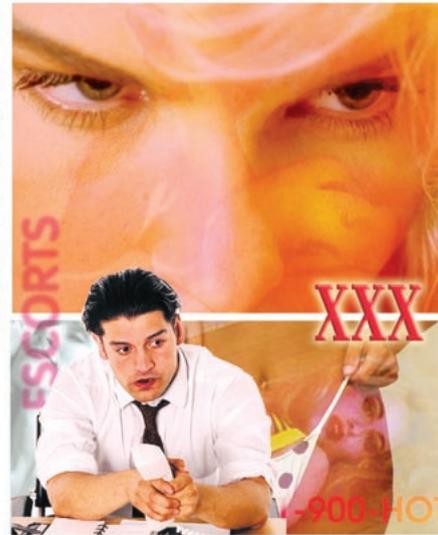
But it can be discovered if we look close enough into the lives of others, and see more there than potential sex partners or impulse objects, and instead glimpse the deeper, ultimate love that connects and binds us all. ■



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 **Do It Now Foundation**
Box 27568 ■ Tempe, AZ 85285-7568 ■ 480.736.0599

ADDICTED TO LOVE



Sex, Love & Compulsion

A D.I.N. Publication By Jennifer James

Pleasure & Pain

Their faces are the faces of addicts. See if any look familiar.

■ Ben is a successful attorney. Married with three children, his life looks exemplary and he seems destined for great public achievement. But Ben also leads a secret life, revolving around visits to prostitutes and adult book stores. Lately, he's taken to cruising the World Wide Web, downloading porn and searching for partners in electronic chat rooms and online hook-up sites.



Contact high. Sex addicts are addicted to sexual thrill-seeking the same way others are addicted to drugs and alcohol.

■ Susan is a mid-level administrator and a single mother. Every few weeks or months she goes on a sexual binge, dressing provocatively and acting out exhibitionistic fantasies in local bars. She has sex with at least one man each night, and sometimes more.

■ Charles spends hours each day driving between retail outlets as head of regional sales for a publisher. Between clients, he often stops at shopping malls and supermarkets, fantasizing about sex with women he sees and masturbating. Increasingly he spends his days cruising, rather than working.

■ Paul is gay and afraid of AIDS. Still, he spends most evenings and weekends in bars. He can't remember how many men he's had sex with in the past year, but guesses somewhere around 100.

And those are just *some* of the faces—because according to experts, six to 10 percent of the American public experiences real problems with sexual compulsivity or inappropriate sexual expression.

The personalities and patterns change, but one thing stays the same. For addicts, sex isn't an expression of love or a pleasurable pastime, but an obsessive force that causes trance-like states of arousal and overpowering urges to act out sexual fantasies.



For addicts, sex is an obsessive force that causes trance-like states of arousal—and overpowering urges to act out sexual fantasies.

That's the way it is for millions of people—but it doesn't have to stay that way.

Loosening the grip of sex addiction *is* possible, and starts with recognizing it as a problem and identifying the factors that keep it in place.

And if its your problem, it starts where you are now.

What is sexual addiction?

Addictive sexuality is like most other compulsive behaviors, including eating disorders and drug and alcohol abuse: a potentially-destructive twist on a normal life-enhancing activity.

Still, defining sex addiction depends less on the behavior itself than on the motivations of the person.

That's why even though each involves often-unacceptable activities, the person given to sexual flings or an interest in pornography is not necessarily a sexual addict.

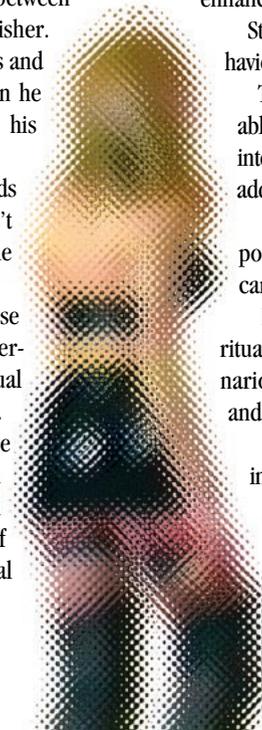
The difference lies in the ability to control or postpone sexual feelings and actions. Sex addicts can't—or don't realize they can—for long.

Rather than trying to satisfy their sexuality, they ritualize sex instead, often constructing elaborate scenarios that result in a constant state of sexual arousal and need.

It's the need for arousal that replaces the need for intimacy in sex addicts. Eventually, thrill-seeking be-

Habitual ritual. Sex addicts often act out rituals aimed at intensifying and prolonging desire, rather than satisfying it.

comes more important than family, career, even personal health and safety.



■ How can sex be addictive?

In the same way other things are addictive—in the brain and central nervous system.

In fact, researchers have begun to unravel much of the mystery of sexual attraction and compulsion through the study of the brain's internal chemistry.

On a biochemical level, sexual arousal lights up the central nervous system and triggers powerful physiological changes. Hormone levels soar, boosting heart rate and blood pressure and increasing overall physical sensitivity.

But things don't end there.

That's because the brain also plays a big role in romance and sexual arousal.

In fact, the so-called "chemistry of love" seems to be just that—chemical chain-reactions in the brain. Researchers have even identified a specific chemical in the brain (called *phenylethylamine* or *PEA*) which they believe is implicated in the thrill and general euphoria that comes with falling in love.

PEA is a built-in "love drug." It has stimulant properties like cocaine and amphetamine. Levels of the chemical

appear to rise with feelings of infatuation which, in turn, boosts euphoria and excitement.

Sex addicts, then, may not be addicted to sex so much as they're dependent upon the physical and psychological arousal triggered by constant "doses" of PEA and stress-related neurotransmitters.

■ If love is addicting, why isn't everyone a sex addict?

For the same reason that everyone who drinks a beer isn't an alcoholic and everyone who ever popped a pill or smoked a joint isn't an addict.

Sexuality is shaped to a great extent by learning, particularly within the family. In fact, therapists say the family plays a key role in the development of sexual compulsion.

Many sex addicts report some form of abuse or neglect as children and frequently see themselves as diminished or damaged in the process.

The long-term emotional fallout can involve chronic feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. Their parents, often sex addicts themselves, may attempt to compensate by raising their children with inflexible attitudes about sexuality.

Under such circumstances, normal forms of youthful sexual behavior, such as masturbation, can become compulsive and ritualized, blunting feelings of inadequacy, perhaps, but just as easily triggering guilt and shame over "bad" behavior.

The cycle can repeat itself into adulthood. Sexual compulsion is often accompanied by complex, competing feelings of arousal and shame, excitement and embarrassment. Continued compulsive sexual experiences may offer a short-term relief from psychological pain, but eventually feed back into the shame-blame cycle.

Stress also plays a part in fueling compulsive sexual behavior. Demands on the job and in the home can trigger sexual compulsion by feeding the addict's need for withdrawal and fantasy.



Affirmative action. Sex addicts can be male or female, black or white, rich or poor. The only thing they have in common is a loss of control over sexual impulses.



Sex addicts may not be addicted to sex itself so much as they are dependent upon the arousal triggered by constant 'doses' of stress-related neurotransmitters in the brain.

Problems of sexual control are usually victimizing—both to the addict, who feels powerless to stop, and others, who serve only as objects of his or her arousal.

■ What are signs of sex addiction?

Problems in controlling sexual behavior usually reveal themselves in four distinct stages:

■ **Preoccupation:** The person continually fantasizes about sexual prospects or situations. Constant sexual focus results in a high level of arousal which can trigger an episode of sexual "acting-out."

■ **Ritualization:** A preferred sexual activity or situation is often stereotyped and repetitive, and may include a wide variety of activities intended to keep arousal at a high pitch, rather than being aimed at sexual release.

■ **Compulsion:** The person continues to engage in sexual activity despite negative consequences and a sin-

cere desire to stop. A sex addict can feel as powerless as an alcoholic or drug addict over his or her addiction.

■ **Despair:** Sex addicts experience guilt or shame, often intensely, over their inability to control their behavior or feel remorse for pain they've caused others. The psychological fallout is equally crippling. Addicts may suffer other behavioral problems, particularly chemical dependency and eating disorders.

Sex addicts also frequently suffer from intense depression and anxiety, often fueled by the fear of discovery. Suicide rates also tend to be higher among those with problems of sexual control.

The toll that compulsive sexuality takes is often seen in a loss of intimacy with loved ones, including problems in family functioning, communication, and marital sex life.

Ironically, the way out of sexual addiction often centers on renewing and strengthening the same relationships most affected by the problem.

OTHER 'LOVE' ADDICTIONS

Today, sexual addiction is often seen as just one of three common and sometimes overlapping processes that involve "addictions" to other people.

The other two—labelled "love" and "relationship" addictions—can be just as disruptive to the those involved and every bit as self-defeating as sex addiction.

Differences are both clear-cut and subtle.

Love addicts live in endless anticipation of perfect love, and not finding it with one lover, immediately begin searching for it with another. A common result is a landscape littered with broken hearts and homes.

Relationship addicts fix their attention on a particular individual and act out their dependency needs with that person, typically becoming obsessed, isolated, and manipulating in the process.

Therapist and author Anne Wilson Schaefer describes the differences this way: Sex addicts "come on," she says, while romance addicts "move on," and relationship addicts "hang on."

The one thing they tend not to do, without a giant jolt of self-awareness, though, is "get on" with their lives, free of the need to control and manipulate others. ■

BREAKING THE SPELL: GETTING PAST SEX ADDICTION

Overcoming sexual compulsivity and addiction starts with recognizing that you *are* out of control sexually, at least some of the time. Getting to that point requires taking a hard look at yourself and the problems—emotional, physical, or financial—caused by your sexual behavior.

What comes next depends on you, but should probably involve at least some of the following:

► **A commitment to abstinence:** It's impossible to move beyond compulsive sexuality if you continue to act out sexual impulses. That's why most treatment programs recommend an initial period of abstinence for newly-recovering members.

► **Rebuilding relationships:** Rediscovering and rehabilitating relationships with others, often through family or individual counseling, can help reduce the isolation and loss of intimacy common among sex addicts.

► **Managing stress:** Since stress often serves as a trigger for periods of compulsive sexual activity, it's a good idea to learn new ways to control life stress.

► **Self-help:** A number of support groups based on the AA model have emerged in recent years in all areas of the country. Examples, which include Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA) and Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA), can be found in your local phone book's white pages. ■



Facing facts. If inappropriate or compulsive sexuality is interfering with your life, do something about it.