

projects, volunteering, and helping others.

i) Diminished personal integrity due to sexual addiction: Most people have a strong sense of morality. This includes: 1) a sense of what is right and wrong; 2) what one ought to do (and not do); 3) how others should be treated; and, 4) a sense of responsibility to one's family, community, employer, and to society as a whole. However, a tiny percentage of people (roughly 1%) seem to be missing this sense of morality. Such people are often termed sociopathic, psychopathic, or antisocially disordered. Although the terms are not identical, they are similar enough for our purposes. This sociopathic 1% of the population will commonly develop addictions. Unfortunately, if someone in the other 99% of the population develops an addiction they will begin to behave in a manner similar to sociopaths. As their addiction progresses, they begin to lose their morality.

As addicted people gradually lose their moral compass, they begin to disrespect the rights and needs of other people. They even mistreat the people that matter to them most. This initially begins by failing to meet certain responsibilities, commitments, or obligations. Examples of these failures might be, failing to show up for things; becoming dishonest by failing to disclose information; or making excuses rather than making a sincere apology. As addiction progresses, this type of disregard will evolve into more obvious forms of disrespect and mistreatment. This progression might include flat-out lying and deception; stealing from loved ones; and, threatening these same people if they do not meet the addicted person's demands. Unlike their sociopathic counterparts, people who once had a moral compass experience tremendous feelings of guilt and self-loathing as they break their own moral code. Addiction can only relieve these feelings temporarily.

j) A life that is absent of meaning and purpose due to sexual addiction: This cost is perhaps the ultimate one. For some, this loss takes the form of experiencing a separation and estrangement from God. It might be a feeling that one has disappointed God by not fulfilling God's higher purpose. For others, it means living a life without meaning or purpose. This meaning and purpose is ordinarily derived from two sources. First, our loving involvement with other people enriches our life. Second, we derive a sense of purpose from productive activities (work, learning, achievement, contribution to others, etc.) In either case, addicted persons have traded away these essential ingredients to life satisfaction for the sake of pursuing momentary pleasures. Momentary relief eventually gives way to further suffering.

There appears to be no carefully collected and easily generalized statistics about sexual or pornography addiction. This is partially because the American Psychiatric Association does not include a specific diagnosis for sexual addiction (APA, 2013). Instead, clinicians use several non-specific diagnostic labels such as unspecified impulse control disorder. Obviously many scientists and practitioners considered sexual addiction a large enough concern to consider establishing scientific criteria to study it. A review of the available scientific literature is available online (Kafka, 2009).

## Tri County Recovery

### SEX AND PORNOGRAPHY ADDICTION

What is Sex/Pornography Addiction?

v.2.0.0.1



## SAA

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Sexual addiction refers to a preoccupation with sexual thoughts or sexual behavior to the extent that this preoccupation continues even though it causes substantial harm. This harm may include: 1) risky, dangerous, or unhealthy sexual behaviors; 2) damage to relationships; 3) avoidance of meaningful intimate relationships; 4) financial consequences; 5) legal consequences, or 6) a failure to fulfill important life roles such as employee, student, spouse, parent, friend, etc. Sexual addiction does not refer to any particular type of sexual behavior. Likewise, sexual addiction does not refer to a high degree of sexual desire, or frequency of sexual activity. Sexual addiction is indicated when someone experiences a reduced control over sexual behavior despite negative consequences. Ordinarily, negative consequences serve to decrease or diminish the behaviors that cause them. In the case of addictions, these behaviors continue despite negative consequences. Examples of these consequences include: arguments with a partner over excessive pornography use; losing a job because of inappropriate sexual behavior in the workplace; and health, legal, and financial problems.

Sexual addiction falls into a specific category of addictions called activity addictions. Sexual addiction meets the definition of addiction that we discuss in our topic center on addiction. We defined addiction as follows:

Addiction is the repeated involvement with a substance or activity, despite the substantial harm it now causes, because that involvement was (and may continue to be) pleasurable and/or valuable.

Sexual addiction is not a diagnostic term currently recognized by the American Psychiatric Association. Instead, clinicians use non-specific diagnostic labels such as unspecified impulsive control disorder, unspecified paraphilic disorder, or unspecified sexual dysfunction. However, the use of the later diagnosis is controversial as sexual addiction is not the same as sexual dysfunction. Some addictive activities may lead to sexual dysfunction. For instance, it is not uncommon for heavy users of pornography to become unable to achieve an erection with a partner. The

diagnosis of sexual addiction is discussed in a later portion of this center.

It may be difficult to understand how someone can become addicted to an activity such as sex. When people develop an addiction, they become addicted to the release of certain brain chemicals. It doesn't matter what causes this release of brain chemicals. It could be a drug or an activity that causes this release. Like drugs and alcohol, sexual activity increases levels of dopamine in the brain. Dopamine is the primary neurotransmitter in the brain's reward system. Because sex is an activity that promotes the survival of the species, the brain rewards this activity with dopamine. Dopamine creates pleasurable feelings. People are motivated to repeat behaviors that create pleasurable feelings. Unfortunately, the brain's reward system makes us vulnerable to addiction.

Like all addictions, sexual addiction causes changes to the brain's prefrontal cortex. Unfortunately, these changes also make the discontinuation of the addiction more difficult. These brain changes account for two characteristics of sexual addiction: impulsivity and compulsivity. Impulsivity is the inclination to act upon sudden urges or desires without considering potential consequences. Sometimes people describe impulsivity as living in the present moment without regard to the future. Impulsivity is evident in the early stages of addiction. During this phase, people impulsively act on powerful urges to experience sexual pleasure. The future consequences of those activities are not considered. Anxiety is not associated with the urges during these early stages.

As sexual addiction progresses a shift begins to occur. At this point, the compulsive aspect of addiction takes hold. Compulsivity is a behavior that an individual feels driven to perform to relieve anxiety. Once a person performs the compulsive behavior, the anxiety goes away and comfort is restored. When this shift occurs, people are no longer pursuing sexual activity for pleasure alone. The compulsions compel them to participate in these activities to relieve anxious, uncomfortable feelings. These may arise at the mere thought of anything that might interfere with the addiction. For example, suppose a man views pornography after his wife goes to bed every night. If she were to decide to stay up later than usual, her husband may become irritable and anxious because she is interfering with his addiction. At

this later compulsive stage, "pleasure" comes in the form of relief from these anxious, uncomfortable feelings. Thus, despite the negative consequences of sexual activity, the addictive behavior continues in a compulsive manner.

Unlike alcohol or drugs, sexual activity is a normal healthy activity. Therefore, it is sensible to wonder when this activity crosses the line from normal and healthy, to addiction. Because addiction is defined by continued use despite substantial harm, it is useful to review these harmful consequences of addiction. This list may help someone recognize if s/he may be developing an addiction to sex or pornography:

- a) Emotional costs of sexual addiction: living with daily feelings of fear; anger; sadness; shame; guilt; paranoia; loss of pleasure; boredom; emotional instability; self-loathing (disgust with oneself); loneliness and isolation; and feelings worthlessness.
- b) Social costs of sexual addiction: disruption or damage to important relationships; decreased ability or interest in forming meaningful connections with others; and limiting one's social sphere to other unhealthy, addicted persons.
- c) Physical and health costs of sexual addiction: poor general health; poor personal hygiene; lowered energy and endurance; diminished enjoyment of healthy sexual activity and/or sexual dysfunction; poor sleep.
- d) Intellectual costs of sexual addiction: loss of creative pursuits; decreased ability to solve problems; and poor memory.
- e) Work and productivity costs of sexual addiction: decreased productivity in all aspects of life; missing important deadlines; and, failing to meet obligations.
- f) Financial costs of sexual addiction: money spent on the addiction itself (e.g., pornography, prostitutes); money spent dealing with the consequences of addiction (healthcare costs, legal costs, etc.).
- g) Legal costs of sexual addiction: legal costs because of what someone did while engaging in their addiction (sexual assault, engaging in sex with a child, domestic violence, divorce); or did not do (failing to care for children properly).
- h) Lost time due to sexual addiction: Time is a limited resource. Time spent while pursuing addiction is no longer available to spend in meaningful, life-enriching activities. Meaningful, life-enriching activities are of two basic types: 1) love - time spent in relationships with others, and 2) work - time spent being productive including employment, learning, working on personal