

Sexual Addiction: The Basics

How does sex addiction affect the brain?

Sexual addiction is first and foremost a disease of the brain. Even though sex is not being ingested like a chemical substance (such as alcohol or drugs) it still dramatically affects brain chemistry creating a dependency on sexual arousal for the addict.

Sexual arousal changes the mood of the addict by providing a hit or a high to the reward center of the brain resulting in a brain bath of pleasure chemicals. Any behavior that produces pleasure temporarily alters brain chemistry and can result in a compulsion to repeat the behavior to gain more pleasure.

This sets up a perfect feedback loop where the chemistry of the brain reinforces behavior through providing a reward (the high) and the behavior in turn alters the chemistry of the brain.

Sex Addiction as way to Regulate Emotions

Many sex addicts grew up in homes where they were not given the level of emotional nurturing and care that were needed. As a result, they were left to try to find ways to handle their emotional worlds by themselves.

Take Sam as an example. Sam grew up in a violent home. As a result Sam felt great fear, anxiety, pain, rage, shame and loneliness. Because of the state of his home, Sam could not go to his parents for comfort. He had nowhere to go with all the feelings piling up inside of him. However, there was pornography. In Sam's words, "I thought pornography could save me."

Porn took him out of an awful situation allowing him an escape. Porn provided a fantasy that he was being focused on exclusively and given physical touch and affection that felt good. Porn gave him a sense that he was wanted. Masturbation gave him a way to soothe himself; to calm the anxiety that ran through his veins all day long. Sam turned to porn for the nurturing that he needed and could not get from his parents.

While many sex addicts do not have a story as severe as Sam's, they often do come out of homes where they were left on their own to find ways to emotionally cope with whatever life was throwing at them.

As a result they may have learned to use sex to comfort themselves, soothe anxiety, relieve boredom, take them out of their present, calm themselves, make themselves feel alive, etc. Over time, they (and their brain chemistry) become dependent upon sex to regulate their emotions.

It's Not About Sex

Sex addiction is never really about sex. We mistakenly think that since so much time is being spent in the pursuit of or recovery from sex that it must be about sex. In reality, sex is the canvas that is being used to paint a picture revealing the deeper emotional world of the addict. Often the painting is an unconscious effort to relieve wounds from childhood.

The addict is usually unaware of the connection between their sexual acting out and past life events. It isn't until they look more closely at their story and begin to understand how it is affecting them that the colors begin to fill in and the picture starts to take shape. One of the first things people learn in recovery is that whatever their chosen sexual behavior, it is not random and it does have meaning. The behavior is somehow related to their story.

As addicts begin to explore their behaviors and for the first time they hear themselves tell their secrets out loud they start to see patterns line up and suddenly things begin to make more sense. This is often very relieving for the addict as their behavior has confounded them and created deep shame.

As the addict begins to understand that their behavior is grounded in their story and has meaning, the shame begins to diminish. Along with the shame, the pull toward the behaviors also begins to lose power as the underlying forces are brought out of the unconscious mind and into awareness.

How does sex addiction differ from other addictions?

For starters, sex addiction is a process addiction. Other process addictions include food addiction, money addictions (such as gambling or compulsive spending/debting) and workaholism. The difference between these addictions and a substance addiction like drug or alcohol dependency is that with a substance addiction you can put the substance (i.e., alcohol, cocaine) down and never pick it up again.

Recovery from a process addiction is different because the addictive behavior revolves around good and necessary parts of life (i.e. food, sex). Rather than total sobriety from the addictive substance instead sobriety is centered on a commitment to abstain from certain addictive behaviors and attitudes. The goal is to learn to have a healthy relationship with the behavior they have been abusing. So the goal for a sex addict is to learn to have a healthy relationship with sex.

Second, our sexuality is an innately powerful part of our identity as human beings. Everything about who we are is informed by our sexuality. What this means for sex addicts is that their compulsive sexual behaviors are not only creating a profound physiological response, but also a profound emotional, psychological and spiritual response as sex is used to affirm their sense of identity, self-worth, and desirability.

Sex addiction is very powerful because the sexual experience not only medicates painful feelings but also serves as a healing balm for the addict's spiritual and emotional wounds. Recovery from sexual addiction requires the addict to address their sense of identity and the wounds that they have been trying to heal with sex.

Third, the source is always available. While a person addicted to a substance must go find the substance, pick it up and ingest it, a sex addict, through their mind, has a ready source available all the time, in any situation. Because sex addicts carry the source of their addiction with them, they have to work both on their outward sexual behaviors as well as what they do in the privacy of their own minds.

What Happens if Sex Addiction is Left Untreated?

Addiction always escalates. As the brain acclimates to the original stimuli (pornography, masturbation, voyeurism etc.), production of pleasure chemicals in the brain levels off and eventually decreases. The brain basically reaches a saturation point.

Over time the addict will notice that the usual behaviors no longer produce the same level of arousal, stimulation or high. As the brain acclimates, the things that originally create sexual arousal eventually lose their power. This is called building tolerance and is what creates the dynamic of escalating behaviors over time.

As tolerance increases, in order to get the high they are used to, the addict will escalate their behaviors. They might move from one type of pornography to another. Or from pornography to sexual chat with live individuals. Or from sex with people they know to sex with random strangers. Escalation can occur in endless ways, but it always involves a deepening of the addictive behaviors.

By changing behaviors and experiencing something new the addict once again creates high arousal and stimulation for themselves. Also, the very act of pushing sexual boundaries heightens stimulation and arousal, as there may be an added feeling of risk or of engaging in the 'forbidden' or 'taboo'.