

Comorbidity and Sex Addiction

Information based on Facing the Shadow by Patrick Carnes, The Betrayal Bond by Patrick Carnes and Back from Betrayal by Jennifer P. Schneider M.D.

Recap of Sex Addiction:

Sex addicts have a set of core beliefs very similar to those of many partners. They go something like this:

- I am basically a bad person
- No one would love me as I am
- My needs are never going to be met if I have to depend on others
- Sex is my most important need

Sex Addicts often grow up with parents (one or both) that are either alcoholics, workaholics, mentally ill, emotionally disturbed, physically ill, disabled, or abusive. Regardless of the details, the addict, as a child, comes to believe that they are unloved and unworthy, and feel isolated and different from others. The addict may take on the role of Family Hero, Scapegoat, Lost Child, or Mascot. The child often learns to comfort themselves with the addictive substance or behavior. If the child is told that sex, or the addictive behavior is wrong, then the addict finds themselves in a double bind of knowing that what is so comforting is actually wrong and bad. By the time the addict is an adult they believe that no one would ever accept them or want them if they truly knew what they were like inside. This leads the addict into the repetitive addictive cycle in order to try to cope with their feelings through escape, control, numbing, blocking, etc.

Addiction Cycle:

Preoccupation - obsessing about the solution (addictive behavior)

Ritualization - behaviors that separate us further from reality so that we can't say no to the solution (addictive behavior)

Acting Out - engaging in the solution (addictive behavior) and experiencing relief

Despair - reality sets in and shame comes to the forefront. We promise ourselves that we will never do it again.

Key Features of any addiction:

Impaired control - Efforts to reduce addictive behavior repeatedly fail.

Compulsive use despite harmful consequences - The addictive behavior persists even though it damages the addict's relationships, employment status, or health, or even when it leads to legal problems

Craving - Addicts feel a powerful desire to engage in the addictive behavior.

Denial - The addict refuses to admit the devastating consequences of the compulsive behavior.

The Role of Other Addictions:

Alcoholism plays a prominent role in the families of origin of many persons who have multiple affairs. In adulthood, alcohol is also often an important factor in the lives of sex addicts. Alcohol, (other substance addictions, gambling, food, and money addictions) and sex addiction tend to reinforce each other.

Compared with non-sex addicts, sex addicts have an increased likelihood of concurrent chemical dependency and other addictions, and also are likely to substitute one addictive behavior for another if the first is no longer available.

According to Patrick Carnes, *“one of the greatest unacknowledged contributors to recidivism (relapse) in alcoholism is the failure of treatment programs to treat multiple addictions.”*

Research has shown that it is almost impossible to maintain sobriety unless all addictions have been treated.

“The real problem isn’t alcohol - its my sex addiction. I felt so bad about what I was doing sexually that I started drinking again to feel better. If i could get that part of my life straightened out, I know I’d have no trouble staying away from alcohol.”

When one addiction becomes problematic in one’s life, it is easier to switch to another addictive behavior and continue to avoid reality, than to learn non-addictive ways of dealing with life’s problems.

Not all sex addicts abuse alcohol or others drugs, however for other sex addicts, workaholism is the addiction that coexists with affairs. If something were to go bad at work they would again turn to their drug of choice, other women.

Sex addiction can be thought of as similar to the addiction to alcohol. Fantasy is the first drink to the sex addict. The endless ruminating about the other woman or man, the pursuit, the risk taking - all of these are important elements of the addictive mood-altering experience. For many sex addicts, each of these elements are as important as the sex act itself.

Sex addiction, like every other addiction, is progressive. In the early stages the addict makes rules for themselves that allow them to think they have control over their behaviors. Over time however, the addict will find themselves breaking all of their own rules.

The price that addicts pay for their behavior is guilt and shame. Unlike a sociopath, addicts commonly feel remorse for their behaviors, dishonesty, lies and feel guilty for the pain they have caused their partner.

Although they are unable to stop their behavior, they judge themselves as harshly as others do, if not more so. In their shame they promise never to do it again and then feel twice as bad when they are unable to stop themselves in the future.