

Ask Dr. Reef

So you think you're a sex addict?

By Dr. Reef Karim



As a psychiatrist and addiction specialist, I see individuals with sex addiction regularly. And I get asked all the time by patients and sometimes friends (you know who you are) if they may have a sex addiction - most of the time I say "no". So for all of you curious readers, let's figure it out...what is a sex addiction?

First off, a person who likes sex frequently or likes "animalistic" sex is not necessarily a sex addict. To really understand sex addiction, we have to understand why the person is having sex and what the sex means to that individual.

Sex addiction is an impulse control problem with emotional roots; it's a way that some people "medicate" their feelings of being stressed, overwhelmed, depressed, etc. and sex becomes a destructive coping mechanism. Similar to an alcoholic who's unable to stop drinking, a sex addict is unable to stop their self-destructive sexual behavior and as a result, they usually suffer major consequences with relationships, work, finances and health. In other words, it destroys their ability to function normally in their life.

A sex addict could be anybody - from a homemaker to an executive - but there are a few common themes.

Most research reveals that many sex addicts were abused as children (either sexually, physically and/or emotionally) and many grew up in families in which addiction was already present (alcohol, drugs, gambling, etc.) The sex completely dominates their life and provides only temporary relief along with shame, guilt and a continued loss of self-esteem.



Sex addicts are more likely to be men but it also does occur in women; behaviors include compulsive masturbation, compulsive heterosexual and/or homosexual relationships, pornography, prostitution, anonymous sex and many other behaviors that can cause trauma to the addict or others.

Now before you freak out and say, "I've done some of those things", remember the emotional and addiction part of this. A sex addict needs the sex to fill a void; to feel normal; to cope with stress and to temporarily try to achieve more self worth. The person spends most of their time both obsessing about sex and dealing with the consequences of their acting out. It can be truly debilitating.

If you really feel that you meet these criteria, you should see a therapist and/or psychiatrist who treats sex addiction. The first step is to admit you have the problem and treatment can include inpatient and outpatient programs as well as twelve step groups, professional associations, therapy (to understand the underlying mental health issue) and even medications to decrease sex drive.

We've all heard the term "sex sells" but imagine trying to manage sexual behavior and everywhere you go, you're reminded of sex. It's really a serious problem that requires professional assistance.