

Understanding Sexual Addiction

When it comes to sexual addiction, the one thing we ALL need to reckon with is that we are vulnerable to becoming attached to those things that make us feel better, more secure, loved protected, and fulfilled. We become addicted to those things that give us a sense of self-worth, and that help us to cope with difficulties in our lives.

Therefore all of us are prone to addictions of one type or another. The same psychological and neurological processes that are involved in the making of an alcoholic or drug addict are responsible for addictions to work, stress, fantasies, dependent relationships, food, TV, cleanliness, sports, exercise, one's appearance, and daily routines. You name it!

A common saying is: "We are creatures of habit!"

And when it comes to most types of addictions, simply put:

If I do something that makes me feel good, I will probably do it again.

If I keep on doing it, and it keeps on making me feel good, I will probably make a habit of it, once a habit, it becomes more important to me and I will miss it if it is taken away. In other words, I have become attached to it. And when we become attached to something or someone, addiction is often present. To understand and to have compassion on what a sexual addict is going through, we can begin to enter into their own struggle by relating to our own capacity to sin in this way. We all have something to learn from the healing of the sexual addict.

OUR TENDENCY TOWARDS ADDICTION

"Where your treasure is there your heart will be also." Often we become attached or addicted to people, possessions, or forms of power. It is those things that begin to distract us; they can also displace or fill in the places in our hearts where we all experience deep longings to not be alone, to know and be known by God and others, to love and to be loved. Our addictions fill in that void where only God can satisfy us. Instead of focusing on Him, we try to meet our needs in our own way.

We can call addiction idolatry because these things can become 'gods' for us. Many times we look to our "idols" to meet our needs. They may provide for us: security, value, self-worth, a sense of being loved, a way of easing our burdens or of escaping from them. In confronting our capacity for addiction the question is: "Do these things free you to love God, yourself and your neighbour more freely? Or not?"

Am I An Addict?

Just about anything in life can become an object of attachment leading to addiction. True addictions are compulsive, habitual behaviours that interfere with our walk with God; addictions bind us rather than free us. They often promise a false sense of security or fulfilment. They will always, in different degrees of intensity, be characterised by tolerance, withdrawal symptoms, loss of will power and distortion (distraction) of attention.

Sexual Addiction – The Problem

Someone once described sexual addiction as the athlete's foot of the mind:

"It never goes away, it's always asking to be scratched, promising relief...to scratch however, is to cause pain and to intensify the itch." 2

Sexually addictive behaviour is a sin against one's own soul. As Saint Paul said in I Corinthians, when we sin sexually we sin against our own bodies.

"Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside the body. But he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body." (1Cor 6:18-20)

Often people who struggle with a sexual addiction feel trapped, desiring to stop yet unable. Some can go for weeks, months even years presumably free, until something triggers the addiction again; stress, free time, changes in life, a time of year, a place, an old song.

The addiction itself attacks the will and the self-esteem. Addiction splits the heart in two. People who are sexually addicted often tell you they feel like two different people – "Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde." One part of them really desires to obey the Lord, to honour their marriage or their singleness, the other part desires only to continue the addictive behaviour.

In the midst of a sexual addiction we identify with St Paul when he writes in Romans 7:19-25:

"For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing. What a wretched man I am, who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (verses 24,25a)

Levels of Sexual Addiction

There are four levels of addiction. These help to categorize and understand the scope of someone's addiction. All levels are destructive and binding to one's soul.

1. Compulsive masturbation, fantasy life, lust of heart, habitual masturbation in marriage. (Although fantasy and lust are at level one, often these thoughts and memories are the most difficult to be free from.)

2. Use of pornography (usually accompanied by masturbation), telephone sex, “soft” pornography, explicit books.
 3. Encounters with consenting adults, anonymous encounters, prostitutes, frequenting adult bookstores, strip shows.
 4. Things that involve others unknowingly or against their will. These include; indecent calls or liberties, exhibitionism, voyeurism, child molestation, rape and incest.
- These levels intermix easily and will often progress into level four activities if continued unchecked.

Recovery

Jesus is the only one who can truly deliver us from this body of sin and death. This Recognition is the beginning of recovery.

Anyone, whether struggling with a sexual addiction or any kind of an addiction, Can make resolutions to stop, fight it away, avoid it, replace it with something “positive” – but this is not freedom.

Freedom inevitably comes to us as a grace. (Grace is not earned, manipulated, or Seduced from God, It is just given. We can pray for it, seek it, receive it, desire It.) We can either fight this “monster within” by hating ourself for it, or can begin to view this broken, hurting area in our lives as a place that desperately needs God’s presence to enter into it. This comes with humility, quietness and the practice of the presence of God. To listen, as Leanne Payne has said, is to obey. This is no easy thing. True love is a difficult choice – we painfully turn away from lesser loves (idols) to the true God, Jesus Christ.

The Road To Freedom

1. Personal willingness/honesty: Personal honesty is a first step. Do you want to be free? Is it more important to appear free or to be free?
2. Learning to trust others: False attitude: “I can handle this alone!” The next step is to bring trusted others into the light of what is really happening in your life. One must find those people who accept and love you in light of your addiction.
3. Confession and repentance: Break the secret of your struggle through the ongoing accountability to others. The presence of informed others helps to break all the rationalizations that the addict has come to use to keep to addiction alive. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in Life Together: “A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother (or sister) knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person. As long as I am by myself in the confession of my sins, everything remains in the dark, but in the presence of a brother, the sin has to be brought into the light.”

4. Reclaiming the will: The addict must reclaim his or her God-given will. This is the ability to make choices for good or evil. No matter how weak, the will is always there. A word on “deliverance prayer.” We do not deny the forces of the demonic that are involved in sexual addiction. However, “deliverance prayer” (the naming and casting out of demons) does not take away personal responsibility, that is, one’s own will to make choices for good or evil. Nor does it take away the capacity to be addicted. What can happen is exemplified by Jesus’ words that refer to evil spirits returning to a house swept clean, with our last condition turning out to be worse than the first.
5. Facing the Truth Within: As the addictive habits and patterns begin to break down, many of the root issues begin to surface. What’s needful here are times of quiet, listening prayer, accountability, pastoral care, counseling, and support groups. (We must reclaim our own heart, not displace what is in it with distractions.)
6. Learning to give/receive non erotic love: As the addict learns to walk in his or her new self, they learn to see through a non-sexual lens, and to learn that intimacy does not equal sex. You don’t have to consummate relationships sexually in order to be in relationships.
7. Ongoing grace and accountability, support groups and therapy: Most sexual addicts will need an ongoing context to confess sin, share struggles and temptations, and receive encouragement. Avoid going it alone.
8. Special considerations for married couples: The spouse is also affected by the sin. A spouse cannot just focus on the “addict” or “type of addiction.” A spouse needs personal support as well. Trust has been violated and both parties need different kinds of support. A spouse should not be the primary or only source of accountability for the addict. They both need good boundaries here. DSM

ANNOTATIONS:

- (1) Addiction and Grace, pg 56 (paraphrased)
- (2) “Out of Shadows” Introduction pg vii
- (3) Matthew 12:43-45, Luke 11:24-26

Recommended books:

Out of the Shadows – by Patrick Carnes

Contrary to love– by Patrick Carnes

Addiction and Grace – by Gerald May M.D.

Contact Living Waters Australia for information about SALT Groups. (Sexual Addicts Learning Trust) 02 9529 0022