



UNDERSTANDING SEX ADDICTION

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Short guides to understanding addiction and mental health

UNDERSTANDING SEX ADDICTION

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As with addiction to pornography, sex addiction is not always recognised as a medical condition by healthcare professionals. However, many counsellors and psychologists work with men and women who have symptoms that sound similar to an addiction. This might include regular, strong urges to have sex or take part in sexual activity, and a feeling of no longer being in control of these desires. As with pornography addiction, the lack of a formal diagnosis does not make the symptoms of this compulsion any less real, and an addiction to sex can lead to serious problems. It is therefore important to seek help if you think you, your child, a friend or your partner might be struggling with sex addiction.



WHAT IS SEX ADDICTION?

Sex 'addiction', although not something that can be formally diagnosed, is described as a compulsive need to have sex or perform a sexual act. Afterwards, a person will feel that they have achieved the rush or 'fix' they needed. It is thought that this fix is similar to the relief someone who is addicted to drugs or alcohol might feel after taking a drug or having a drink.

Sex addiction more commonly affects boys and men, but girls and women can be affected, too. This type of behavioural compulsion can lead to relationship difficulties, as one partner may feel coerced (persuaded or forced) into sexual activity. As with other forms of addiction, it can also cause problems with your physical and mental health, your quality of life, the safety of yourself and others, and the friendships that you have.

In the right circumstances, sex should be pleasurable for both partners. Both individuals should consent to the sexual activity, feel safe, and in control of what happens. The regularity of sex will vary between all couples, with some enjoying sex once a day or more, and others not having sex for weeks, months or years at a time. However, the key is that regardless of how often sex occurs, both partners feel that they can manage their sexual desires and don't feel that they have lost control.

A person with sex addiction may feel a compulsive need to masturbate (touch themselves sexually), view pornography, or be stimulated sexually by someone else. In order to get the fix they need, other parts of their life may start to suffer. If you have sex addiction, you may stop seeing friends, give up your hobbies, ignore your homework or withdraw from your family so that you have more time for sex or activities that are sexually stimulating. This can feel very frustrating, as you may no longer enjoy the physical act of sex, but feel compelled to do it anyway. You may also feel ashamed or disappointed each time an urge overpowers you.

It is important to remember that sex addiction is not the same as sexual disorders such as paedophilia (sexual attraction to children), or bestiality (sexual attraction to animals). When acted upon, both of these disorders are a type of sexual offence.

WHAT ARE THE TYPES OF SEX ADDICTION?

There are several different types of sex addiction.

1. Sex or sexual acts

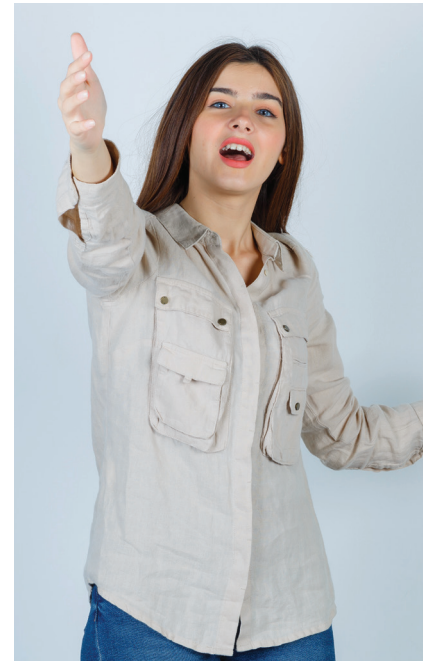
Someone who is addicted to sex acts may feel compelled to have sex or be sexually stimulated regardless of the day, time or circumstances. To achieve this fix, someone may seek the consent of their partner, or persuade a partner to consent. If coercion (finding a way to persuade a partner against their will) is used, this could be considered sexual assault or rape. Those who are addicted to sex acts may seek out multiple partners or have a series of 'one night stands'. They may also pay a sex worker for sex or other forms of stimulation.

2. Masturbation

Some people will feel compelled to masturbate multiple times each day. Triggers may be present for this, such as watching a suggestive advert, driving past someone who is attractive to the individual, or having sexual fantasies during the day. This form of sex addiction can greatly impact a person's day, as they may have to stop activities or take regular breaks at work or school to find a private space to get their fix.

3. Watching pornography

Pornography is readily accessible to those who search for it both online and offline. Those who are addicted may feel compelled to watch, read or view a form of porn regularly. This can lead to consistent interruptions throughout the day, and some people may find that as time goes on, they want to watch more extreme porn to get the same rush. Although an addiction to watching pornography is not the same as sex addiction, the two can be closely linked.



WHY DO PEOPLE BECOME ADDICTED TO SEX?

Sex addiction may occur gradually. The pleasure of sex leads to feelings of contentment or happiness within the brain, but over time this natural form of pleasure may become less intense. Some people feel that they need to have more sex, or sex more often, to get the same feeling of contentment. Rather than feeling like a desire, those who are addicted to sex will feel it as a compulsion or something that they cannot cope without. This means they will try very hard to get their next fix.

There are many factors that might be linked to the likelihood of becoming addicted to sex. These include:

- Mental health problems such as anxiety or depression
- Believing that sex provides comfort or contentment that you cannot find elsewhere
- Feeling rejected in a relationship or in your social circle
- Being exposed to sexual content, such as pornography, early in life
- Being in a friendship group in which many people are having sex or watching pornography
- Being more impulsive by nature.



WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF SEX ADDICTION?

If you think you might have an addiction to sex, you may have noticed the following:

- You feel a constant urge to have sex or to be sexually stimulated in another way
- Sex takes priority over other activities such as sports, schoolwork, or seeing friends
- You may feel regret, shame, sadness or anxiety after having sex



- You watch pornography, have phone sex or masturbate when you cannot have sex with someone else
- You cheat on your partner, or have multiple partners, to get more sex
- You regularly masturbate when you are alone, or often interrupt activities to find somewhere private to masturbate
- You begin riskier, harmful or illegal behaviours, such as masturbating in a public place
- You try to coerce others into performing sex acts with you or for you
- You want to stop the amount of sexual activity you take part in, but if you try to you find that you can't
- Over time, you may notice that your self-esteem falls, or that you feel anxious, depressed, dirty or worthless.



HOW CAN SEX ADDICTION CAUSE PROBLEMS?

Aside from interrupting your daily life and impacting your mental health, sex addiction can cause additional serious problems. The desire to have sex may be linked to the following issues.

Coercive control

Coercive control is when pressure is used to persuade someone else to do something that they do not want to do. In a relationship, a sex addict may 'persuade' their partner into having sex with them by threatening them with something, or acting on a threat, if they don't comply. This might include withholding money, embarrassing them, taking away possessions, or isolating them from their family. 'Persuading' someone to have sex with you by using a threat or pressure means that they are not able to genuinely consent to the activity. In many cases, coercion is deemed to be sexual assault.

Rape

In some cases, the desire to have sex to get a 'fix' may cause someone to sexually assault or rape an individual. This serious offence cannot be excused by sex addiction, and will be prosecuted regardless of the reason for the crime being committed.

Domestic Violence

Cases of domestic violence, or violence towards another man or woman, may occur if a sex addict requests sex but is denied. There is never an excuse for harming, intimidating, or threatening another individual to get what you want.

As with other forms of addiction, the risk of domestic violence may be higher if one partner is an addict, because they may be obsessed with the addiction and at risk of the symptoms of withdrawal. The symptoms of addiction may also lead to extreme frustration and loss of control towards other family members, including children. Becoming violent towards a partner or your children, either to engage in sex or because of the poor mental and physical health associated with addiction, should never be tolerated.



It is important to remember that sex addiction will not cause these dangerous and harmful behaviours in everyone. Some sex offenders may have an addiction to sex, but if you have a sex addiction this will not necessarily lead you to commit an offence.

If you have an addiction to sex and recognise that you behave in one of the above concerning ways, or if you have experienced abuse as a result of someone else's addiction, you must seek professional help or contact the Gardaí.

HOW CAN I OVERCOME SEX ADDICTION?

It is possible to overcome sex addiction. The first step is recognising that you might have an addiction, which many people may only realise when they try to stop and find that they can't.

Like all addictions, taking the stimulus away (in this case, sex), may lead to feelings of withdrawal. When you try to stop, you may therefore feel irritable, stressed, frustrated or angry, and decide that sex will give you a release from these feelings. This is what makes it difficult to break the cycle of addiction.

Because addictions are difficult to overcome, many people require the support of friends, family, their partner, a counsellor, or an addiction specialist. The following tips may be helpful for overcoming sex addiction.



Consider what a healthy relationship is

Sex might be part of an intimate relationship, but it should be enjoyed by both partners who should always fully consent before and during. If you are persuading a partner by any means, pushing them into it, or forcing them, this may be sexual assault. Your desire for sex may be having a negative impact on your



partner in other ways too, for example if you are cheating, seeing sex workers, or if your mood is volatile or irritable. Sex addiction can lead to mental health problems that may impact other people who live with you, including your parents, any children, or housemates.

Similarly, think about your friendships or social life. If sex addiction means you no longer socialise, reject offers to see your friends, or decline to take part in activities you used to enjoy, then sex is no longer a healthy part of your life.

Use a journal to write down how you feel about your relationships, any issues you can identify, and the changes you would like to see in your future.

Talk to friends, family or your partner about your concerns

If you think you have an addiction to sex, depending on your individual circumstances you may need to talk to those close to you about your worries. This might include family, friends or your partner. Although the conversation may feel difficult, those close to you could offer valuable support to help you break the cycle of addiction. They may also be able to help with practical steps such as finding professional help or taking you to appointments.



Seek professional help

If you think you have an addiction to sex, you may require help from a doctor, addiction specialist, or counsellor. This can be especially helpful if a compulsion for sexual stimulation is impacting your mental health, or causing you to have thoughts of acting in a risky or illegal manner, including thoughts of committing a sexual assault.

Seeking specialist help should help you delve into the roots of why an addiction to sex might have formed, and how best to break the addiction cycle. A counsellor will also discuss alternative coping strategies for managing sexual desires. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) may be used to help with the behaviour change needed to treat sex addiction. In some cases, you may also need to consider couple's counselling as your partner will need to be fully aware of what your treatment involves so that they can support you.



Support groups

Group therapy or support groups may help you to find other people who understand what you are going through. Both online and in person groups can be found by searching online.

WHAT CAN I DO IF MY FRIEND OR CHILD IS ADDICTED TO SEX?

If you have a friend or child who you think might be addicted to sex, it can feel awkward to raise your concerns with them. If they reject your concerns or offers of help, try not to feel personally offended. You can always try again later, or, if you remain concerned, speak to another friend or responsible adult about your concerns.

If your friend or child agrees that they may have an addiction to sex, you cannot solve the addiction, but you can try to support them while they attempt to manage their feelings. This might include:

- Keeping an open mind when they talk to you and not being judgmental
- Asking if they think they need professional help with the addiction
- Checking if you can help them manage the impact sex addiction has had on other areas of their life, such as work, finances or their schoolwork
- Gently ensuring that they understand coercive control, consent and the law around sexual activity
- Offering to look for a suitable counsellor or therapist for them
- Being available to accompany or drive them to appointments.



WHAT CAN I DO IF MY PARTNER IS ADDICTED TO SEX?

If your partner is addicted to sex, you may have had concerns about their behaviour for a while. Alternatively, they may have hidden their behaviour from you so subtly that the signs may not have been obvious.

Being in a relationship with an addict can be very upsetting and challenging as a partner. You will need to set strict boundaries so as not to collude in the addiction while they are recovering from it. This might include:



- Only engaging in sexual activities that you consent to, and making sure that you are not being coerced into it
- In some cases, you may need to enforce a break from sexual activity between the two of you until they have dealt with their addiction
- Agreeing between you that your partner will remain faithful and not seek sex elsewhere
- Ask that your partner is honest with you about sexual activity that occurs without you, especially if this could put you at risk of a sexually transmitted infection
- Requesting that your partner seeks help for their addiction.

Remember that you do not have to stay with your partner if you do not want to. If their sex addiction is affecting your mental or physical health, causing them to be unfaithful, putting your sexual health at risk, or affecting your finances, it is ok to end the relationship.

WHERE CAN I SEEK SUPPORT FOR SEX ADDICTION?

If you are looking for help for sex addiction, your doctor may be able to arrange counselling for you. The following resources may also be helpful:

Sexaholics Anonymous, Ireland:

saireland.com

YSPI Crisis Information:

ineedhelp.ie

HSE Addiction Services:

www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/5/addiction

The Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy:

iacp.ie

www.rutlandcentre.ie/addictions-we-treat/sex-addiction-porn-addiction



WHERE CAN I SEEK SHELTER FROM A SEX ADDICT?

If you need to find shelter from a sex addict as a result of coercion, domestic violence, or sexual violence, the following support agencies may be able to offer help.

Women's Aid Refuges:

www.womensaid.ie/help/options/refuge.html

A full geographical list of refuges is available here:

www.womensaid.ie/services/local.html

Saiorse Domestic Violence Services:

sdvs.ie

Adapt Domestic Abuse Services:

www.adaptservices.ie



In an emergency, you must call 999 or 112 for Gardaí or an ambulance.

If you are in crisis, you can contact YSPI Crisis Information on FreeText 50015 or by visiting ineedhelp.ie.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Sex addiction can affect your personal life, mental health, and relationships with others. Like other forms of addiction, family and friends can also be negatively impacted by the choices you make or feelings you have. With support from others, including professionals such as addiction specialists or a counsellor, you can start to understand your relationship with sex to feel in better control of your behaviour and choices.



HELP AND ASSISTANCE

If you are concerned about yourself, friends or family you should contact your GP or Out of Hours Service immediately.

You can also get immediate support and information 24/7 by

FREETEXT HELP TO 50015

Texting 50015 is free of charge from any network and you can text this number even if you have no credit. This service is fully confidential and YSPI has no information on mobile numbers that use the FreeText service



For information on:

- Emergency Contacts
- National Helplines
- Local Support Groups
- Directions to your nearest GP or out of hours clinic
- Directions to your nearest safe place or refuge

 **WWW.INNEEDHELP.IE**

Always call 999 if someone is seriously ill or injured, and their life is at risk.

Gardaí / Ambulance / Fire call 999 or 112

ABOUT YOUTH SUICIDE PREVENTION IRELAND

Youth Suicide Prevention Ireland was founded in 2007 as there were no national charities focusing specifically on the problems and issues of youth suicide and self-harm in Ireland. We now provide a range of services aimed at mental health awareness and suicide prevention amongst teenagers.



Our main programme is **“Let’s Talk About Mental Health”** (www.letstalk.ie). This is a programme for students, teachers, parents and those who work with young people in schools, colleges, GAA clubs and youth organisations around Ireland.

Let’s Talk About Mental Health is a comprehensive mental health awareness and suicide prevention programme for ages 16+. As part of the programme we also provide a video workshop presented by John Sharpson that any organisation can book through our website at www.letstalk.ie/video.php.

We provide a wide range of free information including our “Let’s Talk About Mental Health” magazine delivered to schools and organisations as well as the “Coping With” series of mental health guides.

We also operate a 24/7 FreeText Crisis Information Service and fund a Youth Crisis Counselling Service at www.youthcrisiscounselling.ie.

Full details are available at www.yspi.ie



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5. Understanding Pornography Addiction
6. Understanding Sex Addiction
7. Understanding Consent

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