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Am I a Sex Addict, or Am I a High-T?

I'VE BEEN A SPECIALIST IN THE FIELD OF sexual addiction and compulsivity for almost 20 years. Clients will ask me if they are a sex addict by the specifics of what they're thinking, doing, and/or wanting to do make them a potential

sex addict. For example, does wanting sex every day, or twice a night make them an addict?

The surprising truth is that sexual addiction isn't about sex at all. Sexual compulsives behave sexually, but the underlying reason for their behavior has to do with their "acting out" something else inside such as sexual trauma or other forms of childhood abuse or neglect. To determine whether they're truly sex addicts and sexually acting out (SAO), many factors need to be considered.

Patrick Carnes coined the term sexual addiction in 1983. His work focuses on how "addictive sexuality feels shameful, is exploitive, compromises values, draws on fear for excitement, reenacts childhood abuses, disconnects one from one-self, creates a world of unreality, is self-destructive and dangerous, uses conquest and power, serves to medicate and kill pain, is dishon-

est, becomes routine, requires a double life, is grim and joyless and demands perfection."

I ask heterosexual men and women alike to take the sexual addiction screening tests that can be found in Patrick Carne's books, *Out of the Shadows* and *Don't Call It Love*. For gay men, I suggest taking the test in my own book *10 Smart Things Gay Men Can Do To Improve Their Lives* and for women, I recommend taking the test in Charlotte Kasl's book *Women, Sex and Addiction; A Search for Love and Power*. While these tests are anecdotal and not research-based, they open a dialogue about one's sexual behavior. If they point to possible addiction, then we start to examine what we refer to as one's "sexually acting out" (SAO) behaviors.

To confirm or rule out sexual addiction, the following ten signs should be explored:

1. A pattern of out-of-control sexual behavior

Reflecting on one's past can illuminate if this patterns exists. Usually someone with a sexual addiction doesn't recognize it until his/her 30s or 40s, when patterns have been firmly established.

2. Severe consequences as a result of out-of-control sexual behavior

If you're single and don't have frequent contact with family and friends, then repercussions of your out-of-control sexual behavior may not occur as easily. If you hide your sexual behavior from your partner and others you're close to, this too can result in your remaining unaware of your addiction. However, anyone with sexual addiction frequently incurs legal, medical, and relational consequences. These may include arrests at public restrooms, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), overindulging to the point of physical injury (ie: sores on one's genitals), and a partner threatening to leave.

3. Persistent pursuit of self-destructive or high-risk sexual behavior

Do you frequently: have sex with-

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out using a condom; give oral sex and swallow; cruise public areas for sex, knowing you can be arrested; secretly log onto the Internet at work or at home and changing the screen as soon as someone approaches; or have affairs outside of your partnered relationship?

4. On-going desire or efforts to limit this behavior

You should be able to easily determine how much sex you want to engage in, and how often. Of course at times, you'll let desire to overcome you and be spontaneous. But if allowing your desires to overcome you becomes the norm—where your desires are making the decisions, and not you—you might want to consider that you may have a problem.

5. Inability to stop, despite the consequences

If you never try to stop, you won't know if an inability exists. I tell clients that after a negative consequence, most people who don't have a problem, sexual or otherwise, will either greatly reduce the "offending" behavior or give it up completely. Those who continue in the face of unpleasant results usually have a problem.

6. Sexual obsession and fantasy are your chief strategies for coping

Obsession doesn't mean thinking about sex every minute of the day—but of course, it can. It can take on the following forms: planning time for acting out sexually; ensuring

that you'll have enough money to spend on SAO; lying and covering up your escapades; recovering from the effects of SAO; worrying about an STD or if you've passed it onto a partner; or not using up your libido so there's none left for your partner.

7. Increasing your quantity—or variety—of sexual experience because the current level no longer satisfies you

Your participation in SAO is enhanced by naturally-produced internal drugs like as PEA, adrenaline, and endorphins. Tolerance to these drugs begins to increase, so that over time, you need to engage in more dangerous behaviors or take higher risks to get the same sexual high.

8. Severe mood changes centering around sexual activity

Sex should heighten your self esteem and intimacy with others. The course of sexual addiction usually ends in feelings of shame, depression, and despair over one's SAO behavior. Beforehand, looking forward to sexual behavior usually boosts people's mood. But afterward, the addict often reports a lack of sleep and therefore, being on edge and easily irritated. If you feel shame after sex, that could indicate there's something wrong.

9. Inordinate time spent in looking for sexual experiences, engaging in them, or recovering from them

Sex addicts prefer the chase over the actual behavior; and so spend increasing amounts of time in Internet chat rooms while surfing for porn sites. They'll waste hours, day or night in bathhouses, at bars and rest areas in search of numerous hook-ups. The sex they experience is often a disappointing letdown.

10. Reducing or neglecting other social, occupational, or recreational activities

The true sex addict prefers sexual highs and the thrill of the chase over simply being with others, getting work done at his/her job and/or making time for fun and recreation. None of us can totally balance life perfectly. But if you're neglecting important areas of your life to spend time thinking about, planning for, looking for, and making time for SAO, that should cause you some concern.

Have you ruled out being a sex addict but still feel troubled by your sexual behavior? You may simply be: a high-T with a strong sex drive; in Stage 5 of coming out of the closet; or in romantic love—the first stage of a relationship; acting out childhood sexual abuse, or other forms of abuse or neglect that cause other forms of sexual discomfort.

Lastly, are you using sexual behavior to manage some affective disorder such as depression, anxiety, manic-depression, or ADHD? The solution is to read much of the self-help literature that's available online and in bookstores and seek therapy with someone with professional experience in dealing with SAO.