



kort's korner

Sexual Anorexia or Low-T?

SEXUAL ANOREXIA ISN'T A COMMON TERM. *Anorexic* usually describes people with an eating disorder who can literally starve themselves to death. Similarly, many people think that sexual anorexia means sexual *starvation*,

or depriving oneself of sexual pleasure. They link it to having a low sex drive and being (low-T). But neither assumption is correct.

In his book *Sexual Anorexia: Overcoming Sexual Self-Hatred* Patrick Carnes—who coined the term sexual addiction—writes about sexual anorexia as a disorder that parallels sexual addiction and compulsivity, based on childhood sexual trauma. He describes it as “an obsessive state in which the physical, mental, and emotional task of avoiding sex dominates one’s life.” The sufferer is preoccupied with avoiding sex, and finds sex repulsive—which is quite different from having a low libido or simply being neutral and not interested in sex. For the most part, people with low sexual drives are not avoiding sex; they are unable to activate their libido, no matter how hard they try. They simply have no interest, because their desire has been squelched or is non-existent. They may be avoiding a partner who wants sex more than they do, but they are also trying to avoid

having to face a low sexual desire.

Sexual Anorexia is defined by a set of characteristics that sufferers typically experience:

- A pattern of resistance to anything sexual
- Continuing that pattern of avoidance, even though they may know it’s self-destructive (i.e., harm a marriage, prevent relationships)
- Going to great lengths to avoid sexual contact or attention
- Rigid or judgmental attitudes toward sexuality—their own, and others
- Resistance and avoidance of deeper, more painful life issues
- Extreme shame and self-loathing about their bodies, sexual attributes and experiences
- Obsessing about sex and how to avoid it, to a point where it interferes with normal living
- Possible episodes of sexual bingeing or periods of sexual compulsivity

The sexual anorexic’s primary goal is to find ways not to combine intimacy with sex. Both men and women can suffer from this disorder, and most keep silent about it. They initially feel out-of-sorts and don’t speak openly about their apathy for fear of being judged negatively in today’s society, which values sexual behavior so very highly.

Other symptoms of sexual anorexia can include

- a desire to control one’s body, sexuality and environments;
- terror and high anxiety of being sexual or appearing sexual in any way; and
- anger and self-hatred.

Negative associations about sexuality are usually formed by some sexual trauma or abuse—possibly incest by a family member such as a mother or father, sibling, grandparent, aunt or uncle. It could be sexual abuse by an older neighborhood boy or girl, a clergyman, teacher, or anyone older who imposes their adult sexuality on the child, leaving them feeling terrified, powerless, angry and often blaming themselves—and contributing to their own self-hatred.

Children should not be exposed to any form of sexual contact for many reasons, one of which is that they are not ready, physically or develop-

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mentally, to handle it. In adulthood, many trauma survivors become sexually anorexic or sexually addicted. But neither disorder is really about sex: it arises from the initial loss of control over what happened to them as children. Adult sexuality imposed on a child impedes the child's own sexual development, so they either act out (in sexual addiction) or acts in (becomes sexually anorexic). This helps them feel that they are protecting themselves from further sexual betrayal and sexual insult.

Also, as Carnes's research demonstrates, many sexual anorexics come from rigid homes with very judgmental parents who condemn sex in highly negative terms. In many cases, one of the parents is punitive with their children on sexual issues. Both parents are authoritative, closed to new ideas and demonstrate little or no affection. Children must measure up to their parents' expectations, without being able to negotiate the rules. They're forced to withdraw inside themselves to find affection and love on their own. Suddenly, their world begins to feel unsafe. As Carnes points out, this leads the child to adopt four core beliefs:

- I am basically bad and unworthy.
- No one would love me if they really knew me.
- The world is dangerous.
- If I have to depend on others, my needs are never going to be met.

This, I believe, is why men and women drift into the "ex-gay" movement and decide to suppress their homosexual urges. Reading Dr. Carnes's book explains why someone with a gay sexual and romantic orientation would go to great lengths to fight their natural sexual urges.

Many religious homes are very judgmental about homosexuality. Ex-gays go through exaggerated attempts to repress, control and avoid their sexuality—in a way that parallels the dynamics of sexual anorexia.

It is particularly interesting how family issues of a sexual anorexic parallel the societal issues around gays and lesbians. Society tries to—and often succeeds in—imposing a deep-seated terror of sex onto gays and lesbians for having sexual desires toward the same gender. Gays and lesbians face the risk of emotional and/or physical abuse and rejection, sexual self-hatred, shame and self-loathing, and rigid judgments about what their sexual interests are. According to the religious morality that many preach, heterosexuality is superior to homosexuality. They preach that only heterosexuals should be granted rights and privileges, because of what gays and lesbians did in their bedrooms the night before. "Hands off gays and lesbians" homophobes preach, "and do not demonstrate love and affection for them". What they do sexually "makes us sick!" say many homophobes and heterosexists.

"Love the sinner, hate the sin" these folks say. However, their actions of passing laws against gays and preaching anti-gay rhetoric is no different from the restrictive homes where sexual anorexics grow up in families that are sex negative and overly judgmental.

It makes sense to me that many men and women of homosexual orientation don't want to come out and declare themselves gay, and be forced to face this hatred and contempt spewed by many families, society and religions. They would choose to self-identify as "ex"-gays, live a lie, and become sexual anorexics.

Ex-gays who have come to see me talk about believing their homosexual urges were sick and wrong. They believe their homosexuality is a sexual addiction and try to use Patrick Carnes's model to set boundaries around their "sexual acting out" behavior. They speak of hating themselves for having these homoerotic urges and would never consider acting them out. Instead, they work hard at repressing them. Preoccupied with any feelings toward the same gender, they're extremely judgmental toward those who do live out their homosexual orientation, sexually and romantically. They tell me they don't believe me when as I say I'm happy in my life as a gay man.

Ex-gays go to extremes to avoid sexual contact with the same gender, even if it means behaving in hateful

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ways—such as trying to pass legislation against gays. I strongly believe that those in the forefront of the ex-gay movement suffer from sexual anorexia and self-hatred about homosexuality, which was taught to them as children. So many come from families, cultures, and communities that disdain homosexuality, and have incorporated this to such an extreme that they can never fully actualize themselves as the gays and lesbians they were meant to be and truly are. Along with their true sexual orientation, they have shut down their capacity to be loving and accepting, particular toward other gays and lesbians.

Since I published my book, *10 Smart Things Gay Men Can Do To Improve Their Lives* and my being a part of www.exgaywatch.com, I can't tell you how many emails I've received from ex-gays and "those who love them," telling me about other ex-gay websites, books, and organizations, and criticizing me for not promoting the "other side" of being gay—that is, the ex-gay side.

Some do it nicely, sending me emails like, "Have you seen [a certain] site on changing one's sexuality? Check it out." Some are cowards, not leaving a return address, and telling me I am "going to hell" —even though being Jewish, I don't believe in hell! The fact is, these folks simply cannot live their lives as ex-gays without being judgmental of those who live their lives as openly happy gays and lesbians. Ex-gays make a

lifestyle of promoting themselves as the "healthy" alternative, as though gays and lesbians are pitted against them! It doesn't, and shouldn't have to be this way. If they were truly happy and aligned with how they choose to live, they would just live that way with very little fuss. They would maintain their own organizations, but not try to impose their thoughts and beliefs on others.

I'm not against those of a homosexual orientation who choose not to live as gay or lesbian. I do quarrel with their constant attempts to pass laws against me and send me emails me telling me I'm bad and wrong for living the life I do. Based on everything I've read and observed, I believe that ex-gays can be correctly diagnosed as sexual anorexics.