

Intimately Impaired  
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*Counselor's Corner*

A 36 year old woman close to a divorce due to multiple affairs, a 20 year old college student who recently contracted a sexually transmitted disease, and a 43 year old woman who lost her job due to sexual harassment may have something in common. They may all have a sexual addiction.

Sexual addictions are difficult to treat due to society's stigma, personal shame, and the immediate gratification sex gives addicts. Some common behaviors for female sex addicts may include seductive language and gestures, provocative dress, and multiple partners. While there are many more characteristics, one common theme they all share is a trail of devastating relationships. But like most addicts, the addiction masks deeper problems.

Ironically, the sexually addicted woman may give the appearance of having it all together and functioning well in life. Most people will never know the hurt these women feel and how they use sex to attempt to cure their emotional pain. These women have difficulty relating to the same gender and tend to have more male friends than female friends.

The friends of the sexually addicted woman may be puzzled as to why the woman pursues dangerous relationships, such as dating married men. They may also wonder why she dates men that appear "not in her league." The reason the sexually addicted woman pursues men who may be significantly older, younger, less intelligent, or uglier, is because they are less likely to break up with her. The sexually addicted woman does not tolerate rejection well.

When she is confronted about her promiscuity, the sexually addicted woman may react in anger, avoidance, defensiveness, or arrogance. Admitting she has a self-destructive problem is not likely, due to a fear of being judged. Furthermore, she may project her feelings of self hatred onto loved ones, pushing them away in a fit of frustration and confusion. She tends to view other women as having similar behaviors, or at least capable of similar sexual promiscuity. To these

addicted women, every one has affairs. Their judgment regarding relationships and intimacy is impaired.

The sexually addicted woman's need to be accepted is so great that she will risk self respect, the possibility of contracting a sexually transmitted disease, and her marriage in order to pursue her addiction. The hunger for a new partner that will understand, love, and fulfill her is never satisfied. Yet each time she falls for another man, she is likely to temporarily convince herself that he will save or complete her. The thought of being alone and/or rejected is terrifying, so she keeps a list of men she can seduce quickly.

Diana was a sexually addicted, married woman who had a steady boyfriend and several men "on retainer". Like the majority of these women, she was sexually abused at a young age. Because of the sexual abuse, she had terrible problems with social boundaries and difficulties saying "no" to exploitive men. The men she tended to attract, and was attracted to, were either exploiters themselves or men that mistakenly believed they could rescue her. Either type of relationship was doomed to failure. Facing middle age, Diana turned to plastic surgery, making her more sexually attractive to the same type of men. And so, her childhood trauma was repeated through continued self-destructive relationships. Sexually acting out was her ineffective way of attempting to take control of her life; the control she did not have when she was a sexually abused child.

More than likely, sexually abused women did not have a healthy bond with one or both parents. Their fathers may have been consumed with affairs or substance abuse, and their mothers may have been depressed enablers. Abandonment is a likely fear beginning in childhood and continuing throughout adulthood. Fear of abandonment is a major force driving these women to keep a considerable amount of lustful men on speed dial. Unable to relate to men without flirting, they do not seek out jobs that demand strict moral conduct. If they do work, they tend to seek out positions that allow for flexibility of time and lax rules. This allows them to continue their addiction more easily. They do not understand that true intimacy comes from effort, honest communication, and ensuing trust. These women are impaired intimately. Because they

have failed repeatedly at true love, sex has become the quick fix substitute.

Treatment of sexual addiction is difficult. When the sexually addicted woman does seek out treatment, it is usually out of desperation; maybe she has lost everything significant in her life, gotten in legal trouble, or has suffered too many rejections. The common factor among these women is the inability to see their real problem.

Establishing a trusting relationship with a therapist is the first step toward recovery. But the therapist must be extremely skilled in dealing with these types of women because they are prone to quit therapy when confronted with the truth. Self doubt and defensiveness are typical road blocks to a better life for these women. An inexperienced therapist can easily be fooled by a veteran sex addict. Convincing lies are a trademark of all experienced addicts. The cycle of self-abuse needs to be stopped, but in order to achieve this, the client must recognize her problem. She must deal with the childhood sexual abuse and examine her thoughts and behaviors beyond the abuse. The skilled therapist needs to find a way to allow the woman to realize that she can confront her fears, love and respect herself, and build a trusting relationship with men who will love and respect her.