

COUPLES: Stages of Recovery

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One of the great challenges to recovery from sexual addiction is restoring or building an intimate relationship with a committed partner. Regaining trust can be very difficult. And yet, it is possible. Not only is it possible, the work you do in recovery can take you to a level of emotional, spiritual, and physical intimacy that is greater than any you have ever known. The key to achieving this higher level of intimacy is teamwork. Each partner must commit to his/her own growth as an individual as well as to the growth of the relationship.

Couples dealing with the issue of sexual compulsivity go through certain stages of discovery and healing. While there can always be “exceptions to the rule,” the following are reported by the majority of couples. Please be aware that these are not rigid stages, but fluid- a couple may not experience some stages or may cycle back and forth between others.

Pre-discovery: Both the sex addict (SA) and the co-sex addict (CoSA) report noticing changes in the relationship before the actual discovery or disclosure of the problem occurs.

The SA reports decreasing sexual satisfaction with his/her partner- often resulting in either increased demands for more frequent sex and/or more “exotic” forms of sexual activity. Alternately, there may be a sexual “pulling away” from the partner as the SA spends more and more time engaged in the activity or in recovering from it.

There is also an increasing level of emotional stress related to the guilt, shame, fears of sexually transmitted diseases, fears of discovery, fears of legal repercussions, legal consequences, increasing financial expense; impact on employment; and emotional involvement with romantic/sexual partners. The SA may suffer from depression and/or anxiety (chronic or “panic attacks”). There may also be an increasing level of irritability/anger as the SA loses sleep, doesn’t eat well, and blames others for his/her behavior.

Some CoSA’s report being completely unaware of any problems in the relationship before the discovery/disclosure occurs, but most are aware of the changes noted above long before the problem is out in the open. He/she may believe these changes are due to other stressors in the SA’s life or be too distracted with his/her own life issues to pay much attention to the changes. If he/she does try to talk with the partner about perceived changes, he/she may be met with denial and/or hostility. The CoSA may give up until a crisis or disclosure occurs or become increasingly suspicious and start searching for clues to the problem.

Tension or distance within the relationship grows.

Discovery/Disclosure: Shock. A crisis or disclosure occurs. The CoSA may react with anger and/or depression. There are intense feelings of betrayal and broken trust. Some may feel personally/sexually inadequate and blame themselves for the problem. The CoSA may tell the SA to: move out of the bedroom, move out of the house, or he/she may immediately proceed with divorce action. Intensity of reaction will be greater if there have been previous episodes of discovery/disclosure.

Additional Disclosures: Typically, disclosure is a process in which more is revealed over time- this is due to the SA’s own shame/guilt/fear or a “repression” of things he/she has done. The SA may be contrite, he/she may minimize the problem & insist he/she can stop on his/her own, or he/she may be defensive- “normalizing” the problem or even blaming the CoSA for “making” them “go outside the relationship for gratification.

Dealing With the Problem: If the couple decide to stay together, it may be the CoSA who seeks information and/or support. He/she may insist on religious counseling and/or professional therapy- individually for the SA and/or for the couple. The CoSA may fall into a codependent “policing” of the SA which increases the tension/conflict between the couple. In seeking help, studies have shown that it is important to seek a therapist with specific knowledge/training in sex addiction to maximize the effectiveness on treatment.

Time Out: Most treatment models have found that a period of sexual abstinence (ranging from 1-3 months) in the relationship is important to the healing process. This allows for a “cooling off” of stressed emotions and for the SA to begin disconnecting from sex as an emotional “drug.”

Couples Therapy: Primary goals will be to build honest communication between the couple; explore each person’s “programming” around relationship models, sexuality, codependency, and gender-role models- this usually entails family-of-origin work (FoO); reviewing of each persons’ FoO & personal alcohol/addiction history; and a reviewing of each persons’ sexual and relationship history. There may be additional work, depending on the couples particular situation. The support of other “recovering” couples has been found to increase the chances for successful healing and recovery.

12- Step Support: Recovering Couples Anonymous: www.recovering-couples.org Codependents of Sex Addicts (CoSA) www.cosa-recovery.org S-Anon (partners/family) www.sanon.org

Books:

Bader, E. & Pearson, P.T. (1988). In Quest of the mythical mate. NY:Brunner/Mazel.

Carnes, P.J. (2001). Facing the Shadow: Starting sexual & relationship recovery. Gentle Path Press. (Workbook)

Carnes, P.J., Laaser, Debra & Mark (1999). Open Hearts: Renewing Relationships With Recovery, Romance & Reality. Gentle Path Press. (Workbook)

Carnes, P.J (1999). The Betrayal Bond: Breaking Free of Exploitive Relationships. Deerfield Beach:Health Communications,Inc.

Carnes, P.J. (1991). Don't call it love: Recovery from sexual addiction. NY:Bantam.

Schneider, J.P. & Schneider, B. (1991). Sex, lies, and forgiveness. Center City, MN:Hazelden.

Schneider, J.P. (1990). Back from Betrayal: Recovering from his affairs. NY:Ballantine Books