

Hooked on Sex

An addiction as powerful as any other **MARCIA KAYE**



Are You a Sex Addict?

Do you...

- feel that your sexual behaviour is controlling you?
- crave an increasing variety of sexual stimuli?
- find that the pursuit of sex interferes with your family life or work?
- experience remorse, shame or guilt after a sexual encounter that you've instigated?
- lead a double life full of denial and sexual secrets?
- feel that you can't stop your behaviour?

If you've answered Yes to more than one of these questions, then speak to your physician or a therapist about your concerns. Or learn more at Sexaholics Anonymous (www.sa.org) or Sex Addicts Anonymous (www.sexaa.org).

Surely the snickers were heard around the world when *X-Files* star David Duchovny, who now plays a sex-mad writer on the series *Californication*, announced last August that he was entering a rehab facility for sex addiction. It may be tempting to dismiss this as a publicity stunt, but sex addiction is a serious problem. It can damage your health, place you in danger, ruin your relationships, jeopardize your career and destroy your family.

It's estimated that 5% of people in North America — or one in 20 — are sex addicts, says Doris Vincent, an Edmonton-based psychologist and certified sexual addiction therapist. "About 93% of them have experienced emotional abuse," she says, adding that fewer are victims of physical abuse, and fewer still of sexual abuse. Most are straight males, but there are many heterosexual female and homosexual addicts, too. Whether the addiction involves promiscuity, multiple anonymous partners, a compulsion to masturbate or an obsession with porn, it's likely that most sex addicts don't realize they have a treatable disorder.

"I thought that what I was doing, every guy was doing," says Tom (not his real name), a Toronto businessman now in his early 60s who had dozens of extramarital affairs. Only after his wife caught him at age 57 hitting on their female friends, including recent widows, and dragged him to couples counselling did an astute therapist recognize the disorder. In rehab, Tom at first felt out of place among all the alcoholics, drug addicts and compulsive gamblers. "But I realized I was no different — my drug of choice was sex," he says.

Because sex addiction doesn't involve a chemical dependency, there's little agreement about how to classify it. The American Psychiatric Association has not yet categorized it, although the Mayo Clinic considers it an impulse-control disorder, also known as compulsive sexual behaviour and hypersexuality.

Not all sex addicts have a high sex drive, just as not all those with a high sex drive are sex addicts. And while we're all sexual beings, sexaholics feel compelled to act on their sexual thoughts and feelings. "An addiction is a pathological relationship to a substance, and sex addicts become addicted to the neurochemicals produced by the behaviour," says Vincent. The good feelings, though, are short-lived. Most sexaholics feel deeply unfulfilled.

According to Vincent, however, there is great hope for recovery. Treatment, whether in residential rehab, weekly therapy or 12-step programs in the community, helps addicts hook up — but this time with their emotional selves, so they can set boundaries and rebuild relationships. "Addiction is about disconnecting. Relationships are about connecting," says Vincent.

Tom has now marked several years of sexual sobriety, a state that involves regaining control over his sexual behaviour. To pre-empt his triggers, he watches no television except for sports programs. Before therapy, any show with a female or a sexual remark set off his addiction.

During his first year of rehab, whenever he travelled on business, he'd ask the hotel staff to remove the TV from his room so he would not be tempted. He also avoids bars and always turns his chair to face the wall in restaurants.

After intensive couples therapy, Tom's wife has chosen to stay with him. He admits that she hasn't completely forgiven his behaviour but, he says, "she has come to understand it." ❧

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