

Sexual Addiction (Sexual Compulsion)

Sexual addiction is characterized by an excessive increase in sex drive to the point of influencing the person's behaviour in everyday life. Common terms for this condition, such as "nymphomaniac" (for women) and "Don-Juan-Syndrome" (for men), have been replaced in recent years by "hyper sexuality." Such patients suffer from an overwhelming compulsion to seek new sexual partners in the hope of reaching sexual fulfilment, although most (especially women) are incapable of reaching orgasm. Generally, patients are also unable to form deeper emotional bonds with their sexual partners. Through this situation, a cycle of addiction is formed out of which hyper sexual people can not escape alone.

Clinical nymphomania is comparatively seldom. In the past, it was often used for women whose sexuality fell outside of the societal norms of their time. For example, in the 19th century, sexual behaviour such as masturbation or sex outside of marriage were not tolerated and often strictly punished. Other methods to correct such "sexual addiction" included the application of ice to the genitals, blood letting with leeches, or in extreme situations, the operational removal of the clitoris or ovaries. It is now clear that women who are sexually active and reach orgasm with their partners are clinically normal. This behaviour is not a behavioural disorder in spite of the fact that sexuality plays an important roll in the lives of these women.

Sexual compulsion can be considered when sexual contact is experienced as unsatisfying, a compulsion to find sexual satisfaction determines the patient's whole life, and the failure to experience sexual satisfaction continues in spite of the promiscuous behaviour. As is common in all substance and non-substance based addictions, the beginning of the pathological behaviour is difficult to define and occurs slowly and unnoticed. The occurrence of the behaviour increases gradually and begins to restrict other aspects of the persons' life. Symptoms vary from patient to patient. Some people display a compulsive, uncontrolled indulgence of sexual outlets, such as pornography, telephone sex or masturbation. For others, frequently changing sexual partners are most important. These behaviours lead to neglect of the family, job, and social contacts. Loss of control, negative repercussions on daily life, compulsivity, psychological strain, self-destructive behaviour (such as unprotected sex), gradual increase in behaviour, and emotional instability are characteristics of a sexual addiction.

There are many factors that together form the underlying cause of sexual and other addictions and compulsions. Some scientists see the triggers in the childhood (e.g. abuse). Others lay some responsibility with loveless family relationships. In addition, personality structure, inadequate interpersonal contact and genetic factors all play a role in the development of a sexual addiction.

In the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) published by the World Health Organization (WHO), the sexual compulsion is categorized in chapter F52.8 "Other sexual dysfunction, not caused by organic disorder or disease".

Therapeutic interventions are offered most often in psychotherapy settings. In Austria, there are also several self-help groups that meet regularly using a structure based on Alcoholics Anonymous.