

IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

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TALKING ABOUT SEX ADDICTION

Sex addiction affects both men and women. It causes untold shame and alienation for the addict and often also causes profound damage to families, partners, and significant relationships. Fortunately, people are increasingly showing up in therapists' offices to seek help for their sex addiction issues. OAAP Attorney Counselor Doug Querin, JD, LPC, CADC I, recently interviewed Portland-area counselor Larry Conner, MA, LPC, who offers sex addiction recovery counseling. Conner discussed the impact of this devastating addiction and the treatment that is available.

Doug Querin: *What is "sex addiction"? Is there a standard definition?*

Larry Conner: There is no single definition of sex addiction that is agreed upon at this time. For me and other treating professionals, the primary characteristic of this condition has to do with a loss of control – an individual's inability to manage in a healthy and appropriate way intense, obsessive sexual impulses, thoughts, and urges in order to manage the person's emotions. Another common component in sex addiction involves the individual's inability to manage and express intimacy; the addict is threatened by the vulnerability of true intimacy that comes with healthy sexual relationships and instead seeks situations that allow a greater sense of power. For the sex addict, his or her inability to manage emotions and/or inability to tolerate intimacy is manifested as a repetitive, compulsive, and addictive behavior.

While sex addiction can occur in women, it is most often found in men, in

large part because of men's higher levels of testosterone. In my experience, sexual addictive behavior in women is primarily the result of trauma reenactment; the woman sex addict was likely sexually abused and unconsciously seeks to recreate the pattern of abuse as a way of trying to find mastery over it.

DQ: *What are the different ways sex addiction can manifest in a person?*

LC: Sex addiction is varied. Most common today is addictive use of pornography. However, I see men caught in patterns of going to strip clubs, using prostitutes, having multiple affairs, or even just masturbating so often they are physically harmed.

There was a critically acclaimed film a number of years ago titled *Shame* (2011), which accurately portrayed the emotional numbness of a male sex addict. The main character was engaged in compulsive and varied sexual behavior in a way that created alienation from himself and the world. To me, that is one of the most destructive elements of sex addiction – the alienation and shame can become paralyzing.

DQ: *What is the neurology of sex addiction?*

LC: Although there is no clear understanding of how sex addiction works in the brain, testosterone is likely one of the primary factors. We know this hormone plays a major role in male psychology and behavior. What is unclear is why some males are able to manage it better than others. Many of those of us who treat sex addicts think

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that dopamine also probably plays a significant role in sex addiction, alongside testosterone. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter released by the brain that facilitates pleasure or reward. It biologically encourages us to seek out food, sex, and other life-sustaining activities necessary for survival and propagation.

DQ: *What factors tend to contribute to sex addiction?*

LC: In my experience, sex addiction often runs in families. It is unknown whether that is a biological consequence or the result of modeling behavior.

A history of having been sexually abused is also common among sex addicts, but by no means universal. Some male sex abuse survivors, similar to female sex abuse survivors, repetitively engage in reenactment scenarios, unconsciously seeking to recreate the pattern of abuse as a way of trying to find mastery over it. But that is not the case with all male sex abuse survivors

who are also sex addicts. Clinically, I and other therapists who treat this condition have worked with many male sex addicts who had strained relationships with their mothers while growing up. However, that is not universal.

It is also common for sex addicts to have a history with other addictions. My first exposure to sex addicts came from my work with recovering alcoholics who had long-term sobriety but were still acting out addictively with sex. So there are often many factors, alone or in combination, that can be at play in contributing to sex addiction.

DQ: *What roles do stress, anxiety, and depression play in sex addiction?*

LC: Like any other addiction, the triggers are often emotional. Sex addicts learn to channel all of their emotions into sexual behavior in a misdirected and unhealthy effort to manage those emotions. However, sex addiction is NOT merely masking an anxiety or depression

Resources for Sex Addiction

Sex Addicts Anonymous
<https://saa-recovery.org/>
 1-800-477-8191

Sexaholics Anonymous
www.sa.org
 1-866-424-8777

Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous
<http://www.slaafws.org/>

Society for the Advancement of Sexual
 Health (SASH)
www.sash.net

Sex Addicts Anonymous – Portland
<http://portlandsaa.org/>
 503-452-5961

Sexaholics Anonymous – Portland
<http://www.saportlandmetro.org/>
 503-224-9840

Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous – Portland
<http://www.slaa-portland.org/>
info@slaa-portland.org

The OAAP has confidential weekly recovery meetings for lawyers dealing with sex addiction issues. Information about these meetings and other counseling resources can be obtained by contacting OAAP attorney counselors:

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disorder. In a clinical context, ignoring a sex addiction and treating only an underlying depression or anxiety will not reduce the depression or anxiety. They are both fed by the addiction. In turn, they feed the addiction. A therapist working with a sex addict, in most cases, must address the addiction first before trying to resolve any depression or anxiety disorder.

DQ: *What forms of treatment are available for sex addiction?*

LC: Quite a few therapists in Oregon treat sex addicts. A good way to find a therapist is to get a referral from the Society for the Advancement of Sexual Health (SASH), the national organization that works to promote sex addiction treatment. You can find a list of SASH members online. Some therapists in Oregon provide groups, which is a very effective way to treat the issue. There are residential programs around the country for sex addicts who need to get away from their environs in order to achieve some recovery. Any individual, group, or residential treatment for sex addiction should include some help for the spouse or partner of the sex addict. The effect of sex addiction on the partner can be devastating, and no healing will likely happen without some help for the partner. There are three 12-step groups active in Oregon where sex addicts can go to get support with recovery: Sex Addicts Anonymous, Sexaholics Anonymous, and Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous. See the resource box for contact information.

DQ: *What advice would you give to a person seeking assessment and/or treatment?*

LC: Don't wait to get help. Sex addiction erodes the self and any ability to sustain healthy relationships with family and friends. It is a very isolating addiction. When asking for help, make sure to inquire about how much experience the therapist has with treating sex addiction. Don't be afraid of 12-step programs; they are confidential. For those who are especially concerned about confidentiality, there are some closed group meetings for attorneys and other professionals who need a very strong reassurance of confidentiality. Many therapists working with this issue know how to get a sex addict into one of those groups.

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