

Compulsive Sexual Behavior

Introduction

Welcome to the Compulsive Sexual Behavior session of the *Living in Balance* program. This session examines healthy sexuality and the causes of and treatment for compulsive sexual behavior. Compulsive sexual behavior is an addiction much like the addiction to alcohol and other drugs, and it needs similar treatment. This session discusses the importance of communication in treating this behavior and provides contact information for Twelve Step groups for people who have a sexual compulsion, as well as for their families and loved ones.

What is in this session?

This session has three major parts: (1) Healthy Sexuality, (2) Understanding Compulsive Sexual Behavior, and (3) Recovery from Compulsive Sexual Behavior.

- ✓ After participating in part 1, you will be able to
 - Understand how the way you talk about sex reflects your feelings and insecurities on the subject
 - Understand how getting poor information about sex as a child can cause you problems later in life
 - Recognize the importance of healthy intimate relationships in a person's recovery from both substance abuse and compulsive sexual behavior



SESSION 29 HAS THREE MAJOR PARTS:

1. Healthy Sexuality
2. Understanding
Compulsive Sexual
Behavior
3. Recovery from
Compulsive Sexual
Behavior

- ✓ After participating in part 2, you will be able to
 - Understand the disorder called compulsive sexual behavior
 - Understand some of the factors that influence the development of compulsive sexual behavior
 - Understand how substance use relates to compulsive sexual behavior

- ✓ After participating in part 3, you will be able to
 - Recognize some of the behaviors that accompany sexual compulsion
 - Understand what recovery from sexual compulsion means
 - Understand the importance of communication in recovery from compulsive sexual behavior

What will be asked of you?

You will be asked to look at your beliefs and attitudes about sex and intimate relationships. You will be asked to examine where these beliefs and attitudes came from and what potential problems they may cause in your life. You will also look closely at the relationship between substance abuse and compulsive sexual behavior, and how they can affect each other. Sexual behavior is not an easy topic to discuss for most people. For people who have sexual compulsions, this topic can be quite difficult to examine and review. However, working through this session can help you to understand important aspects about your sexuality and sexual compulsions. Working through this session can provide you with important tools for your recovery.

A note to facilitators

This session addresses sexual issues and compulsive sexual behaviors. These issues are powerful and deeply personal. Many clients have never personally examined these issues or discussed them with others. Many clients will find it difficult to discuss these issues with others, and especially with members of the opposite gender. This is especially true for clients in early treatment and recovery. Consequently, please consider structuring the Compulsive Sexual Behavior session as separate male and female groups.

**Part 1: Healthy Sexuality****Talking about Sex versus Sexual Feelings**

Sexuality is one of the most private and sensitive topics in our lives. Many families never discuss sex and sexual feelings.

There is an important difference between talking about sex and talking about your sexual feelings. Many people talk about sex in terms of how good a particular sexual experience was, how great a lover they are, how good a lover someone else is, or how they would like to have sex with a specific person. However, none of that is about genuine, personal, sexual feelings.

In fact, talking about sex or sexual conquests is a mask that many people hide behind in an attempt to be accepted by other people. People often talk about sexual experiences to try to prove to themselves and others how sexually desirable or capable they are. They may do so to hide that insecurity from others.

By talking about sex in this way, a person can keep sex impersonal. Sex stays impersonal when it is described as (1) a conquest, (2) something done to, rather than with, another person, or (3) a way of gaining control over another person.

**LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 1:**

You will

- Understand how the way you talk about sex reflects your feelings and insecurities on the subject
- Understand how getting poor information about sex as a child can cause you problems later in life
- Recognize the importance of healthy intimate relationships in a person's recovery from both substance abuse and compulsive sexual behavior

There is an important difference between talking about sex and talking about your sexual feelings.



EXERCISE 1

Please answer the following questions:

1. You hear a person talking about a recent sexual experience—the person brags about his or her sexual expertise and remarks about his or her sexual style and ability to satisfy a lover. What image does this person want you to have about him or her?

2. In your own words, what is the difference between talking about sexual behaviors and sexual feelings? Why do you think it is difficult for many people to talk about sexual feelings?

Learning about Sex

Because sex education in schools is relatively new, and because most parents don't discuss sex or personal sexual feelings, people learn about sex from different sources, many of which are not accurate.

Some people never really learn some basic information about sex, sexual hygiene, birth control, and sexually transmitted diseases. Others receive incorrect information during their youth and may continue to believe it as adults. Many people are too scared to ask questions about sex for fear that they will be viewed as inexperienced or not smart.

Meanwhile, commercials, movies, magazines, and other media overload people with sexual images each day. They frequently portray sex, sexual behavior, and intimate relationships in a very unrealistic way.

Thus, people are surrounded by images of sex every day, but they are not receiving correct information about sex or their own sexual feelings.



Many people are too scared to ask questions about sex for fear that they will be viewed as inexperienced or not smart.



EXERCISE 2

Please answer the following questions:

- 1. From whom did you learn about sex? Parents? Friends? Someone on the street? Teachers? Brothers and sisters? Cousins? A minister or other religious leader? Do you think you got correct information?

2. Do you feel that you know everything you need to know about sex, or are there certain things you would like to know? Please explain.

3. In what ways can having inaccurate information about sex affect people as adults? In what ways can this contribute to a substance abuse problem?

Healthy Intimacy

During active addiction, everything focuses on satisfying one’s hunger for alcohol or other drugs. Other people are often only as important as their ability to help you get or stay high. Addiction promotes self-centered thinking and behavior.

However, a healthy relationship involves being willing to sometimes put another person’s needs before your own and being sensitive to his or her concerns. Recovering addicts often react to new friends by trying to figure out what they can get from them.

A healthy relationship involves learning what can be given to someone else to make him or her happy. Unselfish giving creates good feelings for both people.

Healthy intimacy also involves trust. Healthy relationships are based on mutual respect and trust, not on one person controlling the other.

Moving too quickly to sexual intimacy ruins many relationships, such as those developed during early recovery. A problem can develop if one relies on sexual and physical closeness, without really knowing the other person. Often, the sexual attraction is more powerful than personal and emotional attraction, and a person may remain in an unhealthy relationship simply because of the sex.

Developing healthy relationships is a particular problem for people in early recovery, because many feelings, including sexual feelings, return, and people may be overwhelmed by them. These feelings can be very strong, because they have been hidden for years. Part of recovery is learning *not* to act on some feelings right away, but instead taking time to make reasonable decisions.



EXERCISE 3

Please answer the following questions:

1. What are you looking for in an intimate relationship?



Healthy intimacy also involves trust.

2. What do you not want in an intimate relationship?

3. Why does sexual intimacy require trust and respect?

4. People in treatment and early recovery begin experiencing feelings for the first time in a long time. People who meet in a treatment program often feel like they are “in love” although they hardly know each other. How can intimate relationships developed during early recovery harm a person’s recovery program?

Part 2: Understanding Compulsive Sexual Behavior

What Is Compulsive Sexual Behavior?

People are naturally different regarding the amount and intensity of sex they feel they need. Within the range of normal sexual behavior, some have more—and more intense—sex than others.

However, compulsive sexual behavior is not simply a matter of having more sex or more intense sex. Rather, compulsive sexual behavior involves (1) overpowering sexual compulsions and obsessions, (2) a loss of control over sexual behavior, (3) continued sexual behavior despite serious, bad consequences, and (4) distortions in thinking, such as denial that the compulsive sexual behavior is a problem.

Like drug addiction, compulsive sexual behavior is powerful and overwhelming. People addicted to alcohol and other drugs have strong obsessions about their drug of choice. Similarly, some people have powerful compulsions and obsessions for sex. They experience a loss of control over their behavior, and they often have made many failed attempts to stop or control certain sexual behaviors. These people continue the behavior despite adverse social, medical, psychological, and family problems. They often feel pain, frustration, and rage because they can't control their sexual behavior.



EXERCISE 4

Please answer the following questions:

1. In what ways is compulsive sexual behavior an addiction?



LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 2:

You will

- Understand the disorder called compulsive sexual behavior
- Understand some of the factors that influence the development of compulsive sexual behavior
- Understand how substance use relates to compulsive sexual behavior

Like drug addiction, compulsive sexual behavior is powerful and overwhelming.

2. How would you describe a compulsive sexual behavior or a sexual obsession? How would it feel?

3. Would you describe your sexual feelings and behaviors by using the following terms: *compulsion*, *loss of control*, or *negative consequences*? Please explain.



Compulsive sexual behavior is unhealthy sexual behavior.

Compulsive Sexual Behavior Is Unhealthy

Compulsive sexual behavior is unhealthy sexual behavior. It may involve a normal type of sexual behavior, such as intercourse or masturbation. And it may involve an abnormal or unhealthy behavior, such as exhibitionism or rape. But in either case, the person has a powerful compulsion to repeat the behavior.

Compulsive sexual behavior is a serious psychological problem. It may be caused by feelings of inferiority, which the person tries to get rid of through sexual success. The compulsive sexual behavior becomes a primary source of good feelings, and the main way to deal with problems.

For people with compulsive sexual behavior, sexual behaviors are similar to drinking or using a drug. In addition, people with this problem often use alcohol or other drugs to deaden the strong pain, frustration, and rage they feel, or to increase the frequency or pleasure of the sexual act.



EXERCISE 5

Please answer the following questions:

1. How might having sex help control someone's feeling of inferiority?

2. Why is it important to describe compulsive sexual behavior not in terms of frequency, but in terms of compulsion?

3. What is wrong with a person's compulsive sexual behavior being a primary source of good feelings or a primary way to solve problems?

A number of factors seem to influence the development of compulsive sexual behavior.

Factors That Influence Compulsive Sexual Behavior

A number of factors seem to influence the development of compulsive sexual behavior.

Dysfunctional families. Many people who have sexual compulsions grew up in families that were very violent, rigid, or chaotic. Children from these families often feel they can't depend on anyone. As adults, these people learn instead to depend on drugs and sex to deal with their needs and feelings.

Sexual abuse. Being sexually abused as a child doesn't mean that a person will develop compulsive sexual behavior. However, it does increase the likelihood of doing so. After being abused, children may become very confused about how to have a relationship with another person and may believe that the only way to relate to others and make them happy is through a sexual relationship. They may learn that sex is the only way to get nurturing and love from another person. As a result, they confuse sex with love.

Environmental messages. The movies, commercials, and other media constantly overload people with unrealistic ideas about sex, sexuality, and intimacy. At the same time, other cultural and religious messages make sex out to be something evil and sinful, and many families refuse to discuss sex. These contrary and unrealistic views of sex may make a person more confused about what healthy sexual behavior is.

Stressful events. Like people addicted to alcohol and other drugs, people with sexual compulsions may be more likely to engage in the compulsive behavior when they have experienced a stressful event. This stressful event can make them feel abandoned and isolated. They may become out of touch not only with others but also with some aspects of reality. They may use sexual behavior to regain a sense of control.

Codependency. As is true of people addicted to alcohol and other drugs, people who have sexual compulsions may become involved with others who have similar problems or whose codependent behavior helps them engage in their own compulsive behavior. These other people may participate in, encourage, ignore, or enable the sexual behaviors.



EXERCISE 6

Please answer the following questions:

- 1. What kind of stressful events do you think might trigger someone's compulsive sexual behavior?

- 2. What kind of codependent behavior would make it easier for someone to engage in compulsive sexual activity? Why would a codependent person become involved in this kind of relationship?

3. Considering the list of factors that influence compulsive sexual behavior described on page 12, how might a recovery program for substance abuse be modified to reduce or prevent compulsive sexual behaviors?

Compulsive Sexual Behavior and Drug Use

Many people with compulsive sexual behaviors abuse alcohol and other drugs. Many such people use drugs, such as alcohol and cocaine, as part of their compulsive sexual behavior. For instance, a man who is addicted to sexual intercourse with multiple partners may use alcohol and cocaine to make it easier to meet new partners and to entice them to have sex with him. Some male sexual compulsives may use amphetamines to help sustain erections for many hours. However, after doing this many times, they may not be able to sexually perform without drugs.

People who are sexually compulsive may experience severe psychological pain, loneliness, and frustration. Their behaviors often cause significant damage to themselves, their family, and their friends. Because of this, they may also self-medicate their emotional problems with alcohol and other mood-altering drugs. In fact, they may use drugs to stop feeling at all.

While on a drug binge, many sexual compulsives may not feel the compulsions. As long as they stay high, they can avoid the need to engage in compulsive sexual behavior. As the drug wears off, and as their feelings return, they again become compulsively sexually active. Such people dread sobriety because of the return of their sexual compulsions.



People who are sexually compulsive may experience severe psychological pain, loneliness, and frustration.

People who have both a sexual compulsion and an addiction to alcohol or other drugs need to work on both problems together in their recovery. Although the causes of the two addictions may be related, recovery from one will not automatically lead to recovery from the other. Both addictions must be examined and treated in order to achieve complete recovery; if not, the one addiction may lead to a relapse of the other.



EXERCISE 7

Please answer the following questions:

- 1. What are some ways that compulsive sexual behavior and substance use might be associated?

- 2. Did your alcohol or other drug use ever make you engage in compulsive sexual behavior? If so, how and why?

3. How could untreated compulsive sexual behavior lead to an addiction relapse?

Steps in Compulsive Sexual Behavior Episodes

Sexual compulsive behaviors often follow a certain pattern. In many ways, this pattern is similar to those experienced by people addicted to alcohol and other drugs.

Step 1: Just a Thought

Many compulsive sexual behavior episodes start with a trigger (such as anxiety, loneliness, depression, or anger) followed by a brief thought. The thought may be wanting to look at a pornographic magazine or movie or wanting to call someone who might be interested in or provide sex.

Step 2: Building a Fantasy

People with compulsive sexual behaviors can take steps to reduce the power of the trigger. If they don't, they are likely to take the thought and build it into a bigger fantasy. The fantasy helps to increase the obsession and increase sexual arousal. Once aroused, the individual finds it hard to stop thinking about sexual behavior.

Step 3: Obsessing and Planning

As the fantasy increases and the obsession becomes stronger, the compulsive sexual behavior takes hold. The individual may feel out of control. The individual



Many compulsive behavior episodes start with a trigger, such as anxiety, loneliness, depression, or anger.

has a strong need to engage in sexual behavior. The individual makes plans to engage in the sexual behavior.

Step 4: Engaging in the Sexual Behavior

Once plans are made, the individual follows through on the sexual behavior. An episode involving two people may end with one person being humiliated, hurt, or rejected. The compulsive behavior may be followed by feelings of embarrassment and shame. It may end with anxiety about being discovered.

Step 5: Withdrawal

Following the experience, individuals may feel lonely, ashamed, guilty, depressed, or angry with themselves. They may fear being caught and may take steps to conceal their behavior from other people. They may make promises to themselves never to engage in the behavior again, a promise that is typically not kept.



Part 3: Recovery from Compulsive Sexual Behavior

As with other addictions, recovery from compulsive sexual behavior begins with people identifying and admitting their problem. One informal method of identifying and detecting compulsive sexual behavior is applying the SAFE formula.

SAFE = **S**ecretive, **A**busive, **F**eelings, **E**mpy

Sexual behavior may be compulsive when

1. You must be **S**ecretive about your sexual behavior.
2. Your behavior is **A**busive to yourself or others.
3. Sex is used to avoid painful **F**eelings or to alter mood.
4. Sex is **E**mpy of a caring, committed relationship.



LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 3:

You will

- Recognize some of the behaviors that accompany sexual compulsion
- Understand what recovery from sexual compulsion means
- Understand the importance of communication in recovery from compulsive sexual behavior

One informal method of identifying and detecting compulsive sexual behavior is applying the SAFE formula.

Recovery from compulsive sexual behavior does not necessarily mean abstinence, since sex is a natural part of people’s lives. Rather, recovery from compulsive sexual behavior means learning to stop unhealthy and abusive sexual experiences. Recovery from compulsive sexual behavior involves developing real and honest intimate relations with others, which are not based purely on sex.

The development of healthy, committed relationships that may still involve sex is an essential part of the recovery process. Sex outside of committed relationships, however, can trigger relapse to compulsive sexual behavior.



EXERCISE 8

Please answer the following questions:

1. Does any element of the SAFE formula apply to your sexual behavior?

Yes No *(If yes, please explain.)*

2. What is unhealthy about the SAFE formula elements (Secretive, Abusive, Feelings, Empty)?

3. Why might a healthy, committed relationship keep someone from returning to compulsive sexual behavior?

A Self-Evaluation about Compulsive Sexual Behavior

Researchers and treatment providers understand that compulsive sexual behavior involves an obsession with sexual behavior that is often accompanied by guilt and shame. People who experience compulsive sexual behavior often continually look for potential sexual behaviors and situations. Such people often have intense but unfulfilling relationships.



EXERCISE 9

Please select yes or no for the following questions:

Do you or others who know you find that you are overly preoccupied or obsessed with sexual activity?

Yes No

Do you feel guilty or ashamed about some of your sexual activity?

Yes No

Do you find yourself constantly searching or scanning the environment for a potential sexual partner?

Yes No

Do you obsessively use pornography, phone lines, or the Internet for sexual satisfaction?

Yes No

Have you had numerous sexual relationships that were short-lived, intense, and unfulfilling?

Yes No

Do you ever find yourself sexually obsessed with someone who is not interested in you or doesn't even know you?

Yes No

If you answered yes to two or more of these questions, speak with your counselor and consider asking for a referral to a specialist who works with compulsive sexual behaviors.

Talking about Sexual Feelings

Silence is the enemy of recovery.

Recovery requires that you learn to talk about personal feelings, because keeping these feelings bottled up creates tension and anxiety, and it increases your chances of relapse.

For many people, sex may be a trigger for substance use, because they often used alcohol and other drugs when they had sex and the two things became closely associated. Many people will become anxious and nervous during the first few intimate or sexual experiences without using drugs. They may also be surprised by the strength of their sexual desires because they have covered them up with drugs before. These sexual desires, combined with the nervousness of intimacy without drugs, can cause significant anxiety.

The best way to deal with this anxiety is to talk about it. A healthy intimate relationship is one where people can communicate. When something is wrong, the other person often knows immediately and wants to talk. By sharing real feelings, even



Recovery requires that you learn to talk about personal feelings.

insecurities and fears, the other person can respond appropriately and possibly make the situation better. By talking honestly about feelings as they happen, the relationship is allowed to grow, and relapse becomes less likely.



EXERCISE 10

Please answer the following questions:

1. Why is silence called the enemy of recovery? What is the opposite of silence in recovery?

2. How do you feel when talking about sex with your partner?

By talking honestly about feelings as they happen, the relationship is allowed to grow, and relapse becomes less likely.

Treatment Options

Compulsive sexual behavior is a disorder. Treatment is available. Recovery is possible. Like addiction to alcohol and other drugs, there are many treatment options. Specific treatment options should be reviewed with specialists who treat compulsive sexual behavior.

Psychoeducation. This *Living in Balance* session is a beginning. If you have compulsive sexual behavior, you can learn a lot more about what it is, how it occurs, how to prevent it, and how to recover. There are many good books, articles, and workshops that can provide helpful insights.

Psychotherapy. This can take the form of individual, group, family, and couples therapy. These sessions can help people to reduce their shame, gain insights about their disorder, address any trauma caused by the disorder, and develop a wealth of coping strategies.

Medication. Research is discovering that certain medications, such as antidepressants and antianxiety medications, can be helpful. For many people, medication reduces the obsessions and compulsions associated with compulsive sexual behavior.

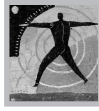
Self-help groups. Twelve Step self-help groups are especially important components of recovery from compulsive sexual behaviors. These groups provide critical ways to relearn how to develop healthy friendships, redefine intimate relationships, reduce shame, improve social and spiritual growth, and maintain a healthy social support system. A list of self-help groups is provided at the end of this session.



Session 29 Summary

In this session you have learned about the problem of compulsive sexual behavior. You have looked at some of the factors that contribute to it and some of the ways in which it can be prevented. You have also examined the relationship between alcohol and other drug use and compulsive sexual behavior, and how this behavior acts like drug addiction. Finally, you have found out about the importance of communication in treating this behavior and gotten some information on Twelve Step groups for people who have a sexual compulsion, as well as for their families and loved ones.

Sexual behavior is not an easy topic for most people to discuss, especially for people who have sexual compulsions. However, by working through this session, you will walk away with a greater understanding of important aspects of your sexuality and sexual compulsions. Having worked through this session, you have gained important tools for your recovery.



Self-Help Groups for Sexually Compulsive People

Self-help groups can be very beneficial for people who have a sexual compulsion because they allow them to see that they are not alone. Self-help groups enable people to share their problems with others who will understand them. The groups also provide a place where people can safely express themselves without fear of judgment. Compulsives say that it is a relief to finally talk about the behavior that they have kept secret for so long.

There are several self-help groups modeled after the Twelve Step recovery program of Alcoholics Anonymous. They include the following:

Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA)

Augustine Fellowship
P.O. Box 338
Norwood, MA 02062-0338

Phone: (781) 255-8825
Web site: www.slaafws.org
E-mail: slaaoffice@slaafws.org

Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA)

International Service Office
P.O. Box 70949
Houston, TX 77270

Phone: (713) 869-4902; (800) 477-8191
Web site: www.sexaa.org
E-mail: info@saa-recovery.org

Self-Help Groups continued

Sexaholics Anonymous (SA)

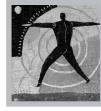
P.O. Box 3565
Brentwood, TN 37024-3565
Phone: (615) 370-6062
Fax: (615) 370-0882
Web site: www.sa.org
E-mail: saico@sa.org

Codependents of Sexual Addicts (COSA)

COSA National Service Organization
P.O. Box 14537
Minneapolis, MN 55414
Phone: (763) 537-6904
Web site: www.cosa-recovery.org
E-mail: info@cosa-recovery.org

S-Anon

P.O. Box 111242
Nashville, TN 37222-1242
Phone: (615) 833-3152
Web site: www.sanon.org
E-mail: sanon@sanon.org



The Twelve Steps of Sexaholics Anonymous

1. We admitted that we were powerless over lust—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to sexaholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

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