

THE “S” STANDS FOR “SHAME”

I’ve struggled with my addiction since the age of 12. This addiction is powerful, shameful, and frequently unmanageable. The essential underpinnings of this addiction remain glamorized by media, stoked by popular culture, and often handled with a nod or a wink by dearest friends. Yet this addiction also has a unique ability to destroy not only the life and self-respect of the addict, but also the lives of the addict’s family, friends, and loved ones. Finally, this addiction is one of the most common and shameful – yet least recognized and treated – addictive diseases prevalent today among the general population.

I am talking about sex addiction.

Sex addiction can take many forms. For some sex addicts, it is “acting out” in an endless, serial ritual of loveless, sexually driven relationships in search of real intimacy to heal the “hole in the soul.” This is the same void that relentlessly drives addicts to fill or medicate it with one thing or another, be it substances (e.g., alcohol, drugs) or behaviors (e.g., gambling, abuse). For other sex addicts, it can be a variation on other empty rituals such as strip clubs, escorts, prostitutes, massage parlors – all representing money and time poured into a void of increasingly risky behaviors feeding a cycle of shame, isolation, and a growing inability to relate to anyone as a real human being.

As with many sex addicts, my cycle of sex addiction was fueled by pornography that, in my case, led to isolated, self-shaming behaviors starting at a very early age. I later learned that I fit a certain profile. As a socially isolated adolescent with no father in the home, I was seeking some kind of release from family trauma and I never really developed much in the way of social coping skills. I also developed related problems of overeating and overindulgence, particularly where drugs were concerned, and I en-

tered adulthood with little in the way of boundaries, role models, or emotional maturity.

My addictive fascination with pornography tended to go in cycles over the years, and bore a noticeable correlation to times of emotional stress or unhappiness in my life. For example, I often tended to gravitate toward “checking out” behaviors such as finding a pornographic fantasy magazine or movie when I was feeling lonely, sad, disconnected, or overwhelmed. Still, I made it through law school and even a first marriage without really considering the toll this occasional “bad habit” (as I considered it) was taking on my mind and my soul.

Then sometime in 1995, I found the Internet – and I was a goner. Suddenly, the adult bookstore (the scene of my occasional acting out) was as close as my office desk or my study at home. Suddenly, every adolescent pornographic fantasy in the universe was just a few mouse-clicks away. I looked for images out of curiosity, and I stayed mesmerized for hours wrapped in the sick fantasy world of sex addiction.

Eventually, my home life began to suffer. The lying began. My long-suffering wife asked, “When are you coming home?” I lied to her by inventing projects or reports, any excuse to get more computer time after everyone had left the office for the day. I would stay for hours, transfixed, cruising websites around the world, the pilot of my own Internet Concorde blazing through the pornographic ether. Like any addict, I soon began looking for different thrills, racier material, forbidden niches. Where didn’t they want me to go? Web-cams? Bulletin boards? Chat rooms? Anything was fair game for an addict seeking new thrills. At times, I could stay up all night doing this. Master of the universe, indeed.

It wasn’t long before work boundaries also began to evaporate. I thought maybe I could just “sneak a peak” during my lunch hour. Four hours later, I was still going strong, and a long evening

beckoned, necessitating more lies to my wife and family. My wife became a widow to the Internet, and my children were orphans.

Eventually, my employer caught on. I was suddenly summoned for a reckoning. I confessed that I had a serious problem and that I was also in treatment for some of my other addictive behaviors. At the time, I thought I was lucky that they merely sealed a letter of reprimand into my file and told me to go out and sin no more. I was relieved, and I resolved to live a clean life. This resolution lasted about a month.

Fortunately, at some point after that, my sister called the OAAP – not about my sex addiction but about my dependence on prescription drugs. The OAAP reached out to me and this eventually led to my first tour of residential treatment. It wasn't so bad, and I learned a lot about addictive disease and treatment methods for alcohol and drugs while there. In fact, I was quite happy to receive some serious help for my drug problem, which was a dangerous problem but really only a recent development for me. I was also happy that no one in treatment really talked about the "other" addiction I had, the really shameful one. I even felt that I was getting away with something because there was nothing my fellow treatment buddies liked to laugh and talk about more than sex, and I heartily joined in with them.

I eventually left treatment and returned to my family and job with high resolve, prepared to lead a clean, sober, drug-free life. I was healthy but, as you might imagine, so was my untreated sex addiction.

The amazing thing I've learned about addictive disease is that it just keeps getting worse – whether you're actively in your addiction or not. For the alcoholic, this generally means that if you pick up the bottle after a year's sobriety, you don't just "pick up where you left off," you pick up with a year's progression into the disease, and you are weaker and more vulnerable than you were before.

I found my sex addiction worked exactly the same way. Until this time, I hadn't acted out with anyone but myself, and I never purchased or looked at anything but pornographic fantasies. But now, seemingly free to return to my sex addiction, I also became free to break barriers and look for new lows, new risks,

new thrills, and so it began: now I could use the Internet to look for others to act out with. My behaviors and intentions started to gravitate toward riskier highs. My abandonment of myself, my family, my career, and my values was nearly complete. My addictive behavior was now substituting for both work life and home life as it burned and raged out of control in this new and more dangerous phase. Loss of family, job, and everything else must surely follow as night follows day.

As might be expected, a crisis soon erupted. My wife found my "secret" email box and all the details contained in it.

At that point, for reasons I still don't understand, a power greater than mine intervened. Instead of filing divorce papers, my wife gave me the option of getting specialized treatment. Within a week, I was lucky enough to get to one of the few facilities in the United States that works with sex addiction.

Now back home after treatment, I have finally been able to begin a recovery in this area with my wife's tough but unfailing encouragement, love, and support. This is a small miracle, but it is still very early for me. My recovery is also fragile. I have to work every day to make progress against the sick patterns developed over a lifetime.

There is no question in my mind that sex addiction is one of the least understood, most difficult, and most shameful of addictions. One essential key-stone of my recovery has been to regularly attend meetings of the various "S" fellowships in Portland (i.e., Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA) and Sexaholics Anonymous (SA)). Each of these fellowships also has "partner" programs providing help and support to spouses and family members of those who are acting out in the addiction or who are trying to recover.

If you are suffering from this addiction – or know someone who is – call the OAAP for help.

Taking One Day at a Time