

Addicted to sex



Case study

Sexual addiction is not just about indulging your outlandish libido – it's a real disorder that affects millions. But can it be cured?

Chronic cheaters are nothing new – the headlines are full of famous philanderers. But it's not just the stars who don't have boundaries. Sexual addiction, say experts, is real and as destructive as drug or alcohol abuse. It's a lot more common than we might think, too.

"We describe something as an addiction when the pursuit of it disrupts the rest of your life," explains Melbourne-based sex therapist Dr Janet Hall.

"Normal 'sex-hungry' people fit it around everything else – but when you're a sex addict, you have to have it. In the cases of famous people, [those urges mean] you make silly mistakes that expose you publicly."

Secret sex lives

Experts differ on figures, but sex addiction guru Dr Patrick Carnes estimates up to 6% of the US population are addicted to sex, with more men than women.

Australian statistics aren't known, and they're hard to gauge as most sex addicts don't come clean about their problem.

"It's as taboo to admit it as it is to seek help," Dr Hall says. "If I see a sex addict, they've usually been exposed in some way or are about to be caught. They rarely come in and say, 'Look, I really think I shouldn't be doing this.'"

"For example, I had a man email me this week and write, 'I've got a good job, but no money because I spend it all on Internet porn, and I'm

miserable and about to be found out at any minute.'

"I also had a man who was an accountant. He was going to a brothel four times a week. That's \$800 per week he was spending [on his addiction]."

Can't say no

The reward may seem worth it to an addict, but they usually end up paying a very high price.

They could contract a disease, lose their job, blow their savings or destroy their relationship.

Still, says Dr Hall, it's very hard for them to stop the rituals, the

chase, the plotting of how and when they'll next feed their "fix".

"I'll be talking and they'll agree with all the logic about what they should and shouldn't do," she says.

"Then you'll ask them a question and you see that Cheshire cat smile. You see them already calculating what they're going to do next, and they say, 'I'm not quite ready to give it up yet.'"

Hard to change

Treatments available include group therapy at Sex & Love Addicts Anonymous, which has branches in Australia and is based on the 12 steps, like AA.

"I've gone to a meeting just as an observer," Dr Hall says. "I think it's very humbling to see people admit they're powerless over their addiction and that it is a sickness."

"There are private counsellors and cognitive behavioural therapy

(CBT), which basically teaches you how to dispute your irrational thoughts and feelings.

"But because sex has such a huge pay-off, it's difficult to treat. And those who do get treatment don't overcome it. They curtail the addiction and come up with a system of living their lives which limits temptation."

BY RACHEL SMITH

→ For more information...

■ **The Sex Addiction Workbook** (New Harbinger, rrp \$36.95).

■ **Sex & Love Addicts Anonymous** – www.slaafws.org

■ **Find a sex therapist at ASSERT NSW** –

www.assertnsw.org.au

■ **For info, books and tapes** –

www.sex-therapy.com.au

■ **Resources for sex addiction recovery** –

www.sexhelp.com

Could you be a sex addict?

* A range of behaviour can indicate sexual addiction, but experts say you have a problem if sex has become obsessive, you've lost control over it or need it compulsively, or your sexual encounters are shameful, secret or abusive.

It's also considered to be an addiction if you let other areas of your life slip in order to get the "high".

Frequent one-night stands, an obsession with Internet porn, indulging in multiple affairs or visiting prostitutes could indicate you have a problem.

Can your relationship survive?

* "I see people who stay in relationships, but this creates a pattern of co-dependency where one person is the addict and one is the 'enabler'," explains Dr Janet Hall.

"The enabler basically stays with a person and tries to get them to stop it, but in reality they're constantly forgiving them or giving in."

"One woman's partner was addicted to Internet porn. She banned him from the computer and withheld sex, but she never said, 'If you do that again, it's over'."

"You have to say, 'I deserve better'. You have to insist they get help. If they don't? You walk."

FAMOUS SEX ADDICTS

MICHAEL DOUGLAS



→ He claims marriage to Catherine Zeta-Jones has curbed his womanising ways, but it's believed the actor was treated at an Arizona sex clinic during his first marriage.

ROB LOWE



→ In 1988, an explicit videotape showing Rob in bed with a 16-year-old girl led the actor to treatment for his addictions. These days, he's sober and a married father of two.

CHARLIE SHEEN



→ Not even marriage and children with gorgeous actress Denise Richards seemed to curb Charlie's penchant for prostitutes and flirting. It was a deal-breaker for his soon-to-be-ex wife.

BILL CLINTON



→ When the former US president was impeached for lying about an affair he had with White Office aide Monica Lewinsky, his wife Hillary stuck by her man – and still does.

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