

Reclaiming Sexual Sanity

Understanding and overcoming sexual addiction

By Mark Brouwer
<http://sexualsanity.com>

This is a printer friendly version of a recently published ebook.
To see the book in its original layout with graphics, go to:

<http://sexual-sanity.com/reportreader.html>

Preface

This book is the culmination of 15 years of work as a senior pastor with individuals and couples struggling in their sex lives, nine years of personal recovery work around sexual struggles, and four years of full-time workshop leading and recovery coaching around sex addiction.

In these past four years I have personally worked with over 500 men in recovery coaching groups, and co-facilitated workshops with hundreds more. At any given time, I am working with 40 to 50 men in a variety of groups. Needless to say these experiences have taught me some things about sex addiction and recovery. I still have much to learn, but I thought it might be helpful to distill my learning and experience thus far into a concise overview of this important and complicated topic.

I want to acknowledge my debt to my mentor Dr. Mark Laaser , and Dr. Patrick Carnes, who have greatly influenced my thinking on this subject. Some of this material is adapted from a chapter Mark Laaser and I coauthored in the book "A Christian Handbook of abuse, addiction, and difficult issues," which was published in the UK, and unfortunately never got much exposure in the U.S.

For this ebook, I tried to include only the things I had personally written in that chapter. However, I recognize that since Mark is my mentor, and I continue to teach regularly with him, much of my thinking about addiction, sexuality, and recovery has been strongly influenced by him. Thank you Mark.

I wish to thank and express my love to my wife Charlene, and our sons Alexander and Jonathan. They have journeyed with me in the dark times of struggle and warm light of recovery.

Table of Contents

Sex as an addiction	5
When does sex become an addiction	6
Sex as a chemical addiction	10
Sex addiction is not clear cut	11
Myths about sex addiction	13
How to Overcome Sexual Struggles	17
The “Back to the Future” approach to recovery	18
Establish your vision	19
Recovery is not just about what you subtract	21
Vision takes time	22
Establish an environment that leads to recovery	23
Find safe community	25
Remove temptations	27
Be vigilant about your emotional health	27
Work to reconcile your marriage	28
Make peace with your past	30
Coming to terms with the ways we’ve been hurt	31
Healing versus mourning	34

The spiritual dynamics of recovery	35
Awakening to who God is	36
Awakening to how God works	37
Recovery is about doing, not just knowing	39
Conclusion	41
About the author	43
The recovery journey program	44

“Sexuality expresses God's intention that people find authentic humanness not in isolation but in relationship.”

– James B. Nelson

Sex as an Addiction?

It might seem strange at first to think that sex can become an addiction. It's a natural biological activity, not a chemical ingested into the system. But just as alcohol and drugs can become addictive, so can natural activities like eating and sex. These activities become problematic when they are used as a means of escaping pain or boredom, and when the behaviors continue even when they become destructive.

In his confessional book *Secret Life*, Michael Ryan describes his addiction this way: “The substance I used was human beings. You marshal all your intelligence and charm and power to keep the addiction alive. Getting fired from my job did not make me stop. Losing my wife did not make me stop. Risking my life and the lives of my sexual partners did not make me stop. Everything and everyone in your life, who you are and what you believe, falls in line around it.”

As sexual mores change in our society, and as pornography and the sexual activity it portrays become ever more common,

millions of people find themselves becoming compulsive in their sexual behavior. Like Ryan, they find themselves engaging in unhealthy and destructive habits, unable to stop.

The challenge with sex addiction is that, because sex is so personal and private, people are especially hesitant to acknowledge their struggles with it. Sex addiction is easy to laugh about, but hard to admit.

When does sex become an addiction?

Even if society accepts something as “normal,” we certainly recognize that it can be addictive and destructive (think about alcohol, tobacco, and gambling). But what about sex? When does someone become a sex addict? Where is the line that separates a normal, healthy sex drive from sexual addiction? The line gets drawn when that person finds him or herself unable to stop - when they repeatedly go back to the same behavior, despite negative consequences.

The medical and counseling communities have established several universal criteria for determining if a substance or

“Sexual addiction is a hidden addiction; I have found more willingness to confront almost any other addiction. Sexual addiction carries a particularly large component of shame and denial with it.

Paradoxically it is also one of the addictions most integrated into our society.”

- Anne Wilson Shaef

behavior is an addiction. Notice how these apply to sexual behavior as well as chemical use:

1. Use of the substance or behavior has become unmanageable

This means that the addict wants - and repeatedly tries - to stop but can't. There is a history of failed attempts. The word *powerlessness* - a key word in Step One of the 12 Steps - aptly describes the feeling the addict has about his or her sexual behavior.

Even when an addict experiences destructive consequences for his or her sexual behavior, it's not enough to get them to stop. Susan Cheever sums up this aspect of addiction: "Addiction is not weakness, but it is helplessness. Addiction is not a lack of willpower; it is a powerlessness over the substance or behavior in question."

2. The addiction gets worse over time

This happens because more and more of the substance or behavior is needed over time to achieve the same effect. The chemistry of the brain adjusts to whatever an addict puts into it. Over time the brain demands more to achieve the same effect. For alcoholics, the brain adjusts to alcohol and requires more.

Thinking about sex and engaging in sexual behavior requires that the brain produce the brain chemistry to achieve sexual

response. New research is finding that the sexual chemistry of the brain can also become tolerant, which means more and more stimulation is necessary to have the same brain chemistry effects – the feelings of arousal, excitement, and pleasure.

This escalation can take two forms. The most basic is that the addict does more and more of the same kind of behavior. For other addicts, escalation means that they will need new kinds of acting out experiences to achieve the same high. So they will look for new, novel, or more risky forms of sexually acting out. Almost every addict can point to certain behaviors that they at one time said they would never do, and later find themselves doing. This is the effect of neurochemical tolerance.

3. Addicts use the thoughts and behaviors that produce the neurochemical highs to either raise or lower their moods

This is what is meant by saying that addicts medicate their feelings. If an addict is depressed, lonely or bored, he or she can engage in - or even simply fantasize about - a sexual encounter, and the arousal part of the sexual response produces chemicals that raise his or her mood.

If an addict is stressed, anxious or fearful, the chemicals that flood the brain after orgasm (or in fantasies

"What you have become is the price you paid to get what you used to want."

- Mignon McLaughlin

of the romance and attachment aspects of a relationship) create a feeling of well-being and contentment that lowers his or her mood.

Most addicts are capable of both kinds of behaviors, and therefore, can both raise and lower their moods depending on their feelings at the moment.

4. Addicts act out despite negative consequences

Addicts don't pay attention to negative consequences; instead they live in denial. They minimize or rationalize their acting out, despite the consequences. Until an addict decides to surrender control of the fears that prevent him or her from getting help, the addiction will continue. As the addict experiences negative consequences for his or her behavior, feelings of depression and self hatred grow.

Unless they are somehow helped to find hope and guidance for change, these negative feelings create the *addiction spiral*: shame and hopelessness leading to acting out as a way of coping, which leads to feelings of guilt and often also to negative consequences, which lead to more shame and hopelessness, which lead to more acting out, etc.

Sex as a chemical addiction

A common thread in the criteria for addiction mentioned above is the inability of the addict to set and maintain limits to his or her behavior, because of the overpowering neuro-chemical pull of the addiction. Roschbeth Ewald goes so far as to define sex addiction as becoming “addicted to the neuro-chemical changes that take place in the body during sexual behavior.”

Put another way, *sex addiction is chemical addiction; it's just that sex addicts carry the chemicals with them in their brains.*

Sex addicts are people who early in life, usually as a result of childhood trauma (abuse or deprivation) found sexual behaviors to be a way to cope, and they became dependent on these neuro-chemical interactions as time went on. Make no mistake, sex has a powerful - some would say “overpowering” - effect on the brain.

Nora Volkov, the director of the National Institute of Drug Abuse,

“Directly or indirectly, virtually all ‘drugs of abuse’ affect a single pathway in the brain, the mesolimbic reward system, activated by dopamine. Romantic love [and sex] stimulates parts of the same pathway with the same chemical. In fact, when we compare the brain scans of love-stricken subjects with those of men and women who have injected cocaine or opioids, we find that many of the same brain regions become active.”

- Helen Fisher, PhD

puts it this way: “The body has a natural reward system, a system of dopamine pathways set up to help us survive. ... The drugs or the addictive behavior provide the brain with a more efficient delivery system and the addict experiences a dopamine spike – an unnatural level of pleasure which, when it subsides, leaves pleasure levels lower than normal.”

So, when the addict stops doing his or her addictive behaviors, life feels ever more joyless, and the need for more of the behavior feels ever more pressing.

Sex addiction is not clear cut

With the above list in mind, it may be helpful to think about sex addiction as a spectrum, not an easily definable, black-and-white category. Because of the shame attached to sex addiction, and confusion about addiction in general, many people resist the label. But the label isn't really that important.

“For all the definitions that have been written by the hundreds of addiction specialists and doctors, addiction is still mysterious and baffling. In many cases it's hard to tell if someone is an addict or just a passionate amateur.”

Even if we are addicts, we are still responsible for what we do. And if we are not addicts, but struggle at times to control

- Susan Cheever

sexual behaviors, we can still learn many lessons about ourselves by applying the insights of addiction and recovery to our lives.

Many people waste time and mental energy trying to decide if they “are a sex addict or not.” But if you are struggling to control your sexual behavior, who cares what label you put on it? Call it dependency, addiction, compulsion, “bondage to sin,” whatever you like. But recognize that problems related to our sexuality run deep.

Later on in this report I will talk about the *Back to the Future* approach to recovery, which helps us get away from the “am I an addict or not” question. Instead of fixating on the diagnosis, we work on successive areas related to our sexual life. We discover that by taking certain steps, we find freedom from our sexual struggles. And if taking those steps is not enough, then we need to take additional steps (which usually involve more intensive work on dealing with childhood traumas).

Myths about sex addiction

Myth #1 - If I'm already in recovery from another addiction, I don't need to worry about sex

The either/or approach to addiction is misguided and dangerous. The reality is that addictions usually come in clusters. If addictions are coping strategies we develop to deal with suffering, it only makes sense that we would want or need to develop multiple strategies, and not just one.

“Addicts are not addicted to substances; addicts are addicted to the feelings they get from their substances, and if they are denied a substance and they can get that feeling from another substance, they will.”

- Susan Cheever

Many studies reveal the prevalence of cross addictions, and sex addiction is often part of that mix. For example, one 1989 study found that more than half of cocaine users had sexual compulsion problems. Pat Carnes says “Clinicians have long noted that sex addiction was woven into an intricate web of addictions, compulsions, and avoidance strategies. ... The ‘monodrug user’ is a vanishing species in American culture.”

The interactions between addictions are complex, and the varieties of “addiction interaction disorder” (AID) are practically limitless.

Every month I teach at a workshop for men, with Dr. Mark Laaser at Faithful and True Ministries. Men from around the country come to Minneapolis for three days to learn about and develop a recovery plan for sex addiction. Most of the men acknowledge that sex is but one of the addictions they are dealing with. Many of them have done years of 12 Step recovery work for other addictions. But sobriety from alcohol or drugs didn't stop their sex addiction.

Myth #2 - Sex Addiction is a “guy thing”

The truth is that sex addiction is an equal opportunity disorder that affects women as well as men. Since the field of sex addiction has been tracking these statistics, the gender breakdown has been that 20% of people who seek treatment for sex addiction are female.

But in recent years this is changing, and the gender gap is narrowing. Hitwise, a company that tracks web usage with huge databases monitoring web traffic, reports that in 2007, 27% of visitors to adult web sites were female. The sites tracked for this research included not only visual pornography, but also erotic stories and chat, which generally have higher female usage.

Gender stereotypes may be helpful for pop psychology books and stand-up comics, but not for recovery. Especially in

younger generations - who didn't grow up with the same kinds of biases and cultural mindset as older generations - we find the typical gender stereotypes about sex increasingly inapplicable. We find girls as likely to be the sexual aggressor as guys, and as drawn to visual pornography as well as guys. We also find guys as likely to be drawn to chat rooms and romance addiction as girls.

In recent years I have observed this trend of the gender gap shrinking. When I speak to church or community groups, or respond to email traffic from my sexualsanity.com website, I am finding more women asking questions and seeking help for themselves. Sex addiction is not just for men.

Myth #3 - Most sex addicts are (or will be) sex offenders

One of the barriers that keeps people from talking about sex addiction is the mistaken association between sex addiction and offending behaviors, such as sexual assault or molestation. It's important to note that while a significant percentage of sex offenders are also sex addicts, only a tiny fraction of sex addicts are offenders.

Experts such as Pat Carnes estimate that 30% of sex offenders in prisons today can be diagnosed as sex addicts, and 70% of offenders in prison for child-related sex crimes can be diagnosed as sex addicts. But the vast majority of people who are addicted to sex never cross the line of sexual offending.

Most experts - including Pat Carnes and Mark Laaser - estimate that only 2 - 5% of sex addicts are sex offenders.

“You can’t cross the sea merely by standing and staring at the water.”

– Rabindranath Tagore

How to overcome sexual struggles

People who deal with sex addiction face a challenge unlike recovery from drugs or alcohol. With chemical addictions, recovery is hard but at least sobriety is straightforward: recovery means complete abstinence from the substance. Sex addiction is more complicated. We will always be sexual people, and most addicts will engage in sexual activity throughout their lives. The question then becomes: what constitutes healthy - as opposed to addictive - sexual activity?

In this sense, the challenge is more like that faced by food addicts. As the saying from Overeater's Anonymous goes, "Trying to eat abstinently is like trying to take a tiger out of a cage three times a day and then coax him back in until the next time." Recovering food addicts have to eat. They can't just abstain from their "drug" - they have to develop a healthy, ongoing relationship with it. So must sex addicts.

The task can feel overwhelming, but there is hope. Many people around the world are finding recovery from addictive sexual behavior. How? How does recovery from sex addiction happen?

The “Back to the Future” approach to recovery

Recovery involves facing issues about our past, present, and future. In my work with men in workshops and support groups I encourage them to adopt what I call a "back to the future" approach: start by getting clear about your vision for healthy sexuality (future), make sure that your environment helps you move toward that vision (present), and do whatever it takes to make peace with your past.

I understand the importance of living in the present. Jesus encouraged his followers to not be anxious tomorrow, but instead focus on the needs of today (Matthew 6:34). Paul wrote about his resolve to “forget what lies behind” (Philippians 3:13). Many spiritual teachers emphasize the importance of living in the moment, an idea that is highlighted by the “one day at a time” focus in much recovery teaching.

The “Back to the Future” approach is simply a way to think about the issues of recovery. We get clear about our vision for the future, not because we discount living in the present, but because we want to move in the right direction.

We seek to make peace with our past not because we want to dredge up old wounds and stay stuck in the past. We do it because we want to free ourselves from the shackles of the past. We want to let those old wounds go, so we can be free to live in the present, one day at a time.

With that in mind, consider this “Back to the Future” approach to recovery from sexual struggles.

1. Establish your vision for a sexually healthy life

Pat Carnes, an early pioneer in sex addiction treatment, says that one the first tasks of recovery is to "establish sobriety." With sex addiction, it's even more elementary: **we need to establish what sexual sobriety is.**

Until we get clear about this, we are stuck. The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said, "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." But in this case we must first clarify the direction in which to take that step.

In its early stages, recovery from sex addiction involves deciding what behaviors a person wants to include in her or her life, and what behaviors to abstain from. How do you decide this? Twelve step recovery fellowships disagree about this. One group (Sex Addicts Anonymous, or SAA), encourages recovering

addicts to decide for themselves - with guidance from their sponsor and support group - what their bottom lines need to be.

People in SAA recognize that this bottom line may change over time, often moving from a broad definition of sobriety to a more narrow view over time. For example, early recovery may involve identifying only the most problematic, high-risk behaviors (such as unprotected sex, or sex outside of one's committed relationship). As time goes on, the addict may come to believe that other activities (such as pornography use or compulsive masturbation) are addictive as well.

Another fellowship (Sexaholics Anonymous, or SA) outlines for its members a universal definition of sobriety: "no sex in any form with oneself, or anyone other than the spouse." Their concern is that leaving the definition of sobriety undefined opens the door to self deception. They believe that addicts will struggle to find sexual health if they persist in compulsive behaviors, even if they have not listed those behaviors as part of their own personal "bottom lines."

However we go about drawing the line between healthy and addictive

In the work I do with Dr. Mark Laaser at Faithful and True Ministries, we advocate a three-fold definition of sobriety using the acronym MAP: sexual sobriety means abstaining from:

- Masturbation (sex with oneself)
- Adultery (sex with anyone other than the spouse)
- Pornography (intentional viewing of erotic media)

behavior, the point here is that **recovery can't happen until we experience sobriety from the addictive behaviors.**

Until we experience some ongoing sobriety, we live in the mental and emotional fog of addiction. We cycle back and forth from addictive craving, acting out, remorse, and self-hatred for our behavior. When we begin to break that cycle, we can start the work of self-reflection that leads to internal transformation.

Recovery vision is about what we add, not just what we subtract

One of the important issues in recovery from addiction is to know what to fill one's life with when confronted by the void created by ending the behavior. As the saying goes, **"It's hard to say no until you know what yes is."** It's hard for an addict to give up sexual behaviors that have brought comfort and excitement to life without having hope that other healthy things can meet those needs.

A vision is a picture of the future that draws us forward. For sex addicts, one of the many losses associated with their addiction is a loss of vision. Many addicts are so filled with shame that they have lost hope for a positive future. Their addiction has likely created chaos in their lives. They may have lost jobs because of their addiction, or at least struggled with diminished productivity. As addiction escalates, it eats up more and more of an addicts' time.

Consequently, many addicts lose touch with the hobbies and pastimes that brought a healthy balance to life in the past. Life feels increasingly grim, and a positive future increasingly remote.

Vision takes time

A vision for a healthy future is essential for recovery, but it takes time to develop. In early recovery, addicts' lives are often still filled with the chaos created by their addiction, and their minds are clouded by denial, rationalization, and hopelessness.

The future orientation of early recovery must center around a vision of a life free from the power of addictive sexual behavior. Many addicts have lived so long with their addiction, and struggled with attempts to stop their behaviors for so long that they have lost hope. They wonder if living sexually sober lives is even possible for them.

Spending time with other people who have gone through the struggle and come through on the other side is helpful at this stage. Seeing other addicts who have established long-term sobriety instills the beginnings of a vision for an addict, as they start to think, "If he/she can do this, maybe I can too."

It's also important for addicts to spend time thinking of healthy ways to experience renewal. Often addicts have lost touch with healthy ways of getting their needs met.

As time goes on, and the addict finds the emotional and spiritual clarity that comes from extended sobriety, his or her vision becomes more clear. Time that had been spent in fantasy and acting out now can be invested in ways that tap into the addicts' innate gifts and passions.

Our sex drive is, at its most basic level, a creative and passionate urge. Recovery from sex addiction does not involve suppressing this drive, but rather channeling its energy towards other pursuits which can become outlets for one's creativity and passion.

In their addiction, many addicts lost touch with the things they were passionate about, and invested more and more of their passion and creativity in acting out behaviors. The process of recovery involves putting that same amount of energy, passion, and creativity into healthy pursuits.

Obviously the establishment of vision - of sobriety and of personal renewal - is easier said than done, especially for addicts who are living in environments filled with temptations to fall back into old sexual habits. Clarity and resolve aren't enough: we need to make changes to our environment.

2. Establish an environment that is aligned with our vision for sexual health

Environmental change precedes life change. Life-change doesn't happen with resolutions, promises, and exertions of will-power. Unless we do things to change our environment - making it more conducive to our new commitment - we will inevitably fall back into old behaviors. In the battle between will-power and environment, environment always wins.

Nobody has enough willpower to sustain significant life-change if their personal environment undermines those changes with temptations and discouragement. If we don't change our environment, the only leverage we have is the strength of will, and will-power is a much more limited commodity than we realize.

Imagine someone trying to achieve sobriety from an addiction to alcohol while working as a bartender. Of course it is theoretically possible to abstain from drinking in that context, but to do so would involve facing down powerful and repeated temptations.

A human being can only be expected to overcome a limited number of these temptations. To be successful, the recovering alcoholic needs to change the environment so that he or she is not required to fight such a constant battle.

Our environment is multi-dimensional. It includes family, friendships, work, the places we spend our time (physical environment), and the media we consume. Four arenas are especially important:

1) Find a safe community of recovering addicts

This is the most frequently prescribed strategy for recovery, and for good reason. It is vitally important for the recovering sex addict to be in community with other people who understand his or her struggle, and support them in it. In all my work with addicts in recovery, I have yet to find a person who established long-term recovery who was not part of some kind of support group.

Even an individual “accountability partner” is not enough. For the addict who has developed a pattern of dishonesty and sexual compulsion, it’s easy to drift out of touch with one’s accountability partner when we are struggling. And sometimes, when we need this person and do reach out, he himself may be struggling or unavailable.

A person in recovery will need a multiplicity of people who will help him or her in this journey. By being a part of a group, recovering addicts are exposed

Three resources:

The Recovery Journey

A home study course with materials to read each day and weekly teaching, and phone support groups

<http://recoveryjourney.com>

Men’s Workshops

Three-day intensive workshops for sex addicts that I teach with Dr. Mark Laaser

www.faithfulandtrueministries.com

LIFE Ministries

Christian support groups for people in recovery from sex addiction

www.freedomeveryday.org

to a variety of challenges and solutions, successes and failures, ideas and insights.

There are a variety of support groups available for people struggling with sex addiction. There are several 12-step groups specifically focused around sex addiction, and many church groups as well. We encourage addicts to focus on groups that understand and focus on sex addiction in particular.

Sex addiction is unique. It carries its own brand of shame, and is frequently misunderstood not only by the population in general, but also by other addicts. Recovering sex addicts need a place where they can be honest, and where other addicts can be honest with them.

Another reason support groups are so important is that most sex addicts are starved for friendship. Sex addiction is an isolating syndrome. Addicts live "in their heads," distracted by thoughts of sexual fantasy, plans for acting out, or shame for having acted out. They objectify and fantasize about the people around them, rather than relating authentically with them.

Furthermore, sex addicts are isolated because they have created walls of deception to hide their behavior. They live in fear and shame, convinced that "if people really knew the truth about me they wouldn't love me."

The only way to overcome this isolation is to develop safe relationships where addicts can be honest about their stories, and find acceptance and love. And this can be found in support groups with like-minded sex addicts in recovery.

2) Remove temptations

For the same reason that an alcoholic should not spend time in a bar, the sex addict needs to monitor the people and images around him or her, and limit the things that will trigger sexual thoughts and fantasies. Certain video channels may need to be blocked, and Internet filter or accountability software put in place. The recovering sex addict may decide not to go to certain movies, or visit certain sections of town, beaches, etcetera. The temptations found in these places are just too powerful.

One area of particular importance is to go through the home and office to make sure that any stash of sexual material is taken away. This obviously includes pornography, but also may include secret e-mail accounts, post office boxes, or cell phones.

Online Safety:

Many tools are available to provide accountability and blocking of adult content. At the time of this writing, these are the best:

Covenant Eyes

This program tracks online usage, and sends reports to accountability partners. It also offers filtering.

www.covenanteyes.com

Safe Eyes

This program focuses on filtering out adult content, and offers some reporting options as well.

www.safeeyes.com

3) Be hyper-vigilant about emotional health

People in recovery from sex addiction need to learn ways of dealing with the emotional ups and downs of life without acting out sexually. In the past, they have turned to fantasy and sexual activity as a way to manage painful feelings.

So when painful feelings arise, addicts must realize that their sobriety is at risk. They have learned to deny or minimize the negative feelings they have, and instead used fantasy and sexual activity as a way to manage these emotions. The process of recovery involves gaining a new sensitivity to the feelings that come up, and developing strategies to deal with them.

In the support groups I lead, I begin by having each member identify and tell the group what he is feeling. It's surprising how hard this exercise is for many people. They don't know what they are feeling, because they have grown accustomed to pushing their feelings aside. The journey of recovery involves developing a new attentiveness to one's emotional state, and implementing healthy coping strategies for painful emotions such as sadness, anger, and fear.

4) Work towards reconciliation and health in marriage

Most addicts who are married have significant issues to work through with their partners, and much healing to be done. Sex addiction is especially destructive for marriages. Its very

expression violates the commitment to sexual fidelity, and creates tremendous hurt and alienation.

Acting out behaviors are almost always accompanied by some form of dishonesty – and often an extensive web of lies – so trust has also been broken and needs to be rebuilt.

Sex addicts need help developing intimate relationships. Their addiction and the lies and guilt it fosters has created a distance and superficiality in their marriage.

Most addicts don't know how to process their anger towards their spouse in a healthy way. Because they are used to feeling guilt and shame about their actions, they can't find ways of accepting and expressing their own needs and hurts. When they felt anger in the past, they often acted out sexually instead of dealing with the disappointment or hurt that caused the feeling. Now they need to learn to do this.

But it's more complicated than that. Sex addicts need to learn how to be honest about their feelings and needs **with the spouse that they have hurt deeply.**

Their spouse – because of the pain caused by the acting out behaviors – will likely be struggling to demonstrate acceptance and compassion to them. Many addicts struggle to deal with the mixture of feelings they have towards their spouse ... often love, compassion, and remorse combined with disappointment and anger. If nothing else, addicts need the support of their recovery group and other trusted friends to help them go through the

transition from disclosure of their addiction to openness and healing with their spouse. This will take time.

Many sexual strugglers find that just doing the things we've talked about thus far brings profound changes:

- (1) clarifying and committing to sexual sobriety (future vision)
- (2) establishing an environment that supports that vision (present environment)

But even after doing this hard and important work, some people still struggle to maintain sexual sobriety. Almost always, this happens because the third challenge of recovery has not been dealt with.

3. Make peace with your past

People are often mystified about why they fail to keep their resolve to abandon destructive behaviors. Addictions are more powerful than mere habits, which can be formed and changed at will. Sex addicts have become dependent on sexual behavior as a way of dealing with the stress, grief, and pain they faced in their past.

Most sex addicts found sexual behaviors early in life to be a solution to medicate pain that was overwhelming to them. Very often these addicts find themselves being triggered into these same feelings of shame, loss, and stress as adults, and find

themselves reaching for the same solutions. As the saying goes, "old wounds, old solutions."

Until they learn to deal with these past feelings and hurts in ways that are healthy, they will continue to struggle with addiction.

Coming to terms with the ways we've been hurt

Wounds from abuse suffered as children will affect addicts for the remainder of their lives, unless they understand and come to terms with them. Recovery from sexual addiction begins when a person comes to a conscious awareness of what happened to them in childhood.

In this connection, **people may wonder if sex addicts aren't just trying to blame their families or their abusers for their behaviors.** The fact is that unrecovered sex addicts do indeed blame lots of other people, including family members. But focusing on past abuse as a way of shifting responsibility for present behavior is unhealthy and detrimental to recovery. Recovering sex addicts seek to understand their abuse in order to heal from it.

Understanding abuse allows people to recognize what happened to them and see how they cope with it through their addictions. It helps them to understand how painful the abuse was, how frightened they were, how alone they felt, and how angry they are. Acknowledging these feelings and finding healthy ways to express and cope with them can heal them.

There are two kinds of abuse: invasion and abandonment. To recover, we need to understand both kinds of abuse, and see how they have affected our lives.

Invasive Abuse

Invasive abuse is what occurs when interactions that shouldn't take place happen in families, or in other significant relationships. These destructive interactions may damage people in several ways:

- **emotionally** – yelling, screaming, putdowns, name-calling
- **physically** – hitting, slapping, pushing, shoving, spanking in rage
- **sexually** – touching or penetrating genital area, teasing about body, sexual humor
- **spiritually** – judgmental and angry messages about God, self-righteousness, overly negative messages about sex

When these kinds of boundaries are crossed, victims of the abuse feel afraid, alone, and ashamed. Invasive abuse is extremely stressful and traumatic for children to endure, and sets them up to look for relief and consolation in unhealthy ways.

The Abuse of Abandonment

The other kind of abuse is abandonment, which is often harder for people to identify from their own past. It is one thing to remember certain traumatic experiences, and identify them as

unhealthy. It's quite another to identify normal, healthy, positive things that should have happened, but never did.

Abandonment occurs when children do not get the love, attention, and nurturing they need to thrive. When children are not listened to, when they receive few (if any) displays of affection, when they are left alone for extended periods of time, when they receive inadequate food, shelter, or clothing, when they are not taught appropriate physical self-care, or given information about intimacy or sexuality ... they grow up confused and damaged.

When children are abused emotionally, sexually, physically, or spiritually, they are too small and helpless to defend themselves against these injuries. What are children to think about themselves when they are being invaded or abandoned?

They come to a very logical conclusion: "If this is happening to me, I must be bad, because bad people are punished." Or, "If no one loves me, it must be because I am bad. Good people are loved."

Sex addicts believe that sexual activity is the only way to meet their needs for love and nurturing. For many of them, sex was the only way they received attention and physical touch. They learned to make the connection between love, nurture, touch, and sex. Sex became their most important need because it was the only association they had between having needs and having them met.

Healing versus mourning

To recover, the sex addict must come to terms with his or her own past. To suggest that “healing” of the past is necessary may create an unrealistic standard or expectation. What does it mean to be “healed” of past wounds? For many, it means that the feeling of sadness or hurt will go away. Or that relationships will be restored.

Many addicts come to workshops and groups I lead looking for the magic bullet – some way of magically finding healing from the pain of their past. Often the assumption is that they will remain stuck in their addiction until they have some kind of powerful breakthrough, where they confront parents or other people who mistreated them in the past.

Usually those confrontational conversations are unsatisfying, and sometimes can even set a person's recovery back.

Instead I counsel people to simply grieve the losses and hurts they experienced. Addicts must learn to feel the painful feelings of anger and loss and deal with them appropriately, rather than try to cover them up or run away from them.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus promises "comfort for those who mourn." Addicts must learn to mourn, so that they can be comforted. What they have learned to do is to cover up feelings of sadness by distracting themselves with sexual behaviors instead of letting themselves mourn.

The spiritual dynamics of recovery from addiction

From the beginning, the 12 Step recovery movement was built around spiritual principles, although its language may be more vague and "faith neutral" than many Christians would like.

In step one, we admit that we are powerless over addictive sexual behavior and our lives have become unmanageable. We learn that we're not evil, rotten people, but loved by God and others, in spite of our faults. We don't have to be alone - isolated from authentic relationships - any longer. By ourselves, we are unable to overcome the power of our dependence on sexual behavior. But with help, we can overcome. In essence, step one is about admitting that we need outside help.

In the Twelve Step program, step two is: "Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves (God) could restore us to sanity." As is often said, step two is about **learning to see addiction is a spiritual problem that requires a spiritual solution**. This step is not as easy as it might seem for people who have a strong Christian background. On the one hand, it appears to simply reinforce the message we hear every Sunday: our problems have spiritual solutions ... we need to turn to God for help.

But it still leaves us with two important - and not obvious - questions:

(1) "Who is this 'God' we are turning to for help?"

(2) "How does God bring this help into our lives?"

Just because someone is a Christian doesn't mean they get to jump ahead in the steps of recovery, even though they assume they already "have the faith part figured out."

Awakening to who God is

The genius of the 12 step movement is also the thing that causes many Christians to view it with suspicion: the vague nature of how the Steps speak about God. This makes Christians nervous, because we want to be sure that we're focusing on the God of the Bible.

But the problem is that **many Christian people carry around ideas about God that have been filtered and distorted by their unprocessed abuse and abandonment.** This is further complicated by erroneous spiritual teaching they received over the years. Various views about who God is and how we relate can sound very "biblically-correct," but contradict other teaching in the Bible, and be very damaging to our souls.

The founders and early members of the 12 Step movement affirmed that overcoming addiction is tied to a spiritual awakening. But they also understood that nobody comes into recovery with a blank spiritual slate.

Some people have very little spiritual interest or experience prior to recovery, and so recovery involves embracing a faith they never had.

But many people come into the program with deeply-rooted ideas about God, and some of these might be distorted and even childish. For these people, the “spiritual awakening of recovery” involves a shift in their understanding and experience of faith, not moving from no-faith to faith. This is usually a process, it doesn't happen overnight.

In my life, recovery has taught me that God's ways in the world - and in my own life - are more mysterious than I used to believe. It has also taught me that God's love is greater than I had ever dared to hope.

Sometimes people feel let down because they continue to struggle with addictive or compulsive behavior even after praying countless prayers, and trying to "surrender" to God. I know I did. But recovery has also taught me that I need to let go of magical thinking about how God heals.

Awakening to how God works in our lives

I believe that at each step along the way in the "back to the future" approach to recovery - developing a vision for the future, creating a supportive present environment, and making peace with our past - we look to God for help and healing. We pray and try to do our part for recovery in the hope that God's power will come into our lives to bring about restoration.

But if we agree that it's God who brings about healing, we're still left with the question: *How does that healing come into our lives?*

Too many Christians make the mistake of seeing God's work only in the mysterious and subjective. They expect that healing to come in some miraculous way, directly from God, **while they remain relatively passive and simply "receive" it.** In the meantime, they stay isolated from other people, because they are too ashamed - or simply unwilling - to talk honestly about their struggles.

The key issue for Christian people struggling with ongoing sexual sin (especially if it's compulsive or addictive behavior) is to end their isolation and access the power of God through genuine community with other Christian strugglers.

My experience has been that most of the people I work with have genuinely sought God's help to overcome their sexual addiction, but they have expected this healing to somehow mysteriously come into their lives in answer to their prayers. Instead, God extends his grace into our lives through people (I Peter 4:10-11).

God's power comes into our lives as we get honest with other Christian men and women, and allow other people to be part of our lives in a genuine way (as opposed to living in isolation with our secret lives).

If anything, I emphasize the human side of this equation because the men I work with have heard many sermons urging them to trust God more, seek God more, pray more, memorize more scripture ... but they do those things and still find themselves fighting a losing battle with sexual temptation.

It should come as no surprise that genuine friendships are the missing link — and a very biblical solution — when you look again at the New Testament. Notice how essential community was to Jesus, Paul, and the other New Testament leaders. Jesus spent much of his time with the disciples, and the apostles always seemed to be doing their work in teams, and spending time together in peoples' homes.

Think of the passage, “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17). Genuine friendships help us overcome our insecurities and selfishness. They help us stay consistent with the limits we establish. This can be applied in many ways, but part of its power is that it underlines the principle: God works through people.

Recovery is about doing, not just knowing

Many people pursue recovery as a quest for knowledge. They judge the value of a seminar, a book like this, or a meeting based on how much new information they picked up. If they don't “hear anything new,” they tend to feel let down, as though it wasn't worth their time.

The implicit assumption is that learning leads to progress: the accumulation of knowledge brings you further along the path. Being exposed to a new concepts is often seen as learning something ... if we can understand and grasp these new ideas, we feel like we're moving forward.

But recovery doesn't work that way.

What really matters is the process of translating concepts into tangible action. The "learning" of recovery involves not just storing more facts in our heads ... it means acquiring new knowledge that changes who we are, including how we live.

As is often stated in recovery meetings, "this is a program of action." The problem we must overcome in recovery is not new knowledge acquisition - it is execution. Our problem is not that we don't know enough - the problem is that we don't act on what we know.

This is manifest in the tendency we have to learn new things about recovery, start to apply them, and then shortly thereafter move on to some other new insights, some other new approach, and start acting on those ideas. Meanwhile, we stop doing the things we had started to do at first, because we've jumped to a new set of priorities and actions.

When people get "slippery" in their behaviors and/or relapse, it always come down to this: **they have stopped doing the fundamentals.** They drifted away from the practices they identified as the key steps that help them in recovery (such as going to meetings, making calls, engaging in open conversations with their spouse, engaging in spiritual practices, etc).

Along with this, they have likely started compromising some of the "middle circle" behaviors — things that are not necessarily breaking sobriety, but are unhealthy and feed our addictive

tendencies (such as surfing around on the computer, isolating, harboring resentment, engaging in 'harmless' flirting, etc.).

Of course, I don't mean to imply that knowledge isn't important in our recovery journey. We need to learn about addiction and recovery if we're going to recover. It's just that knowledge isn't enough - it needs to be acted upon.

At the end of this book you will find information about a new program that helps people move forward in their recovery. If you or someone you love could use more support and help with their sexual struggles, "The Recovery Journey" might be just what you need.

Conclusion

Like many things in life, recovery may appear simple on paper, but in practice it's not easy. It requires the willingness to be honest, to end isolation, and to invest in recovery materials, therapy, and groups. But the rewards are tremendous.

It might seem that the result of recovery is simply the termination of destructive behaviors, but it goes much deeper than that.

Recovery results in the opening of one's heart. Recovery makes it possible to live with a new freedom and self respect. Recovery - especially from sex addiction - opens the door to honesty and genuine intimacy in relationships. Going "back to the future" with this recovery approach opens up a whole new life.

Maybe this book has given you some new insights about how recovery works. Maybe it reinforced things you've already heard, and gave you a reminder or different perspective about them. I do hope it has helped.

But now the question is:

What will you do?

About the author

Mark Brouwer is a teacher, counselor, and leadership coach. He is a graduate of Concordia College (Moorhead, MN), Calvin Theological Seminary (Grand Rapids, MI), and Coach University (Bradenton, FL).

Mark is the editor of one of the leading blogs about recovery from sexual addiction: sexualsanity.com. He is contributing author of "A Christian Handbook of Abuse, Addiction, and Difficult Issues," is coauthor of "Sexual Addiction and Internet Pornography" from Kevin Mayhew Publishing, and has written articles for such magazines as The Banner, and Leadership Journal.

Mark has been a pastor for 15 years, starting two churches (in Austin, TX in 1992, and Savage, MN in 1998). Early in 2006, Mark left his role as senior pastor to partner with Dr. Mark Laaser (of Faithful and True Ministries) in his work with men struggling with sexual purity. Since that time, he has served as Director of Training, and currently teaches at the monthly men's workshops, and coordinates their aftercare program.

He is also the director of Recovery Remixed, an organization devoted to applying timeless recovery wisdom to today's challenges. Mark speaks to church and community organizations around the country about recovery and sexual health. Through his coaching groups, he has helped hundreds of men take their next step towards recovery. He lives with his wife Charlene and their two sons in Savage, Minnesota.

The Recovery Journey

Would you like to learn more, or get more personalized help in recovery? The Recovery Journey is a distance learning and support process that provides teaching, support groups, daily recovery reading, and expert recovery coaching on a confidential basis directly to you. It is for people who want help dealing with sexual struggles, and also for those who love them and want to learn more about addiction and recovery. For more information, click on the link below:

<http://recoveryjourney.com>

Who else could use this book?

If you found this book helpful, please share it! It is being offered for free in the hopes that people will share it with fellow support group members, family, and friends who could use helpful information about sexual struggles.

Send people a link to get their copy of this book, along with other updates from me. The place to go for this is:

<http://sexualsanity.com/ebook.html>