

## CHAPTER ONE

# OUR ADDICTION

**B**efore coming to Sex Addicts Anonymous, many of us never knew that our problem had a name. All we knew was that we couldn't control our sexual behavior. For us, sex was a consuming way of life. Although the details of our stories were different, our problem was the same. We were addicted to sexual behaviors that we returned to over and over, despite the consequences.

Sex addiction is a disease affecting the mind, body, and spirit. It is progressive, with the behavior and its consequences usually becoming more severe over time. We experience it as compulsion, which is an urge that is stronger than our will to resist, and as obsession, which is a mental preoccupation with sexual behavior and fantasies. In SAA, we have come to call our addictive sexual behavior *acting out*.

Acting out altered our feelings and consciousness, and we found this altered state very desirable. The obsession and rituals that led up to the sex act itself were part of the "high." We sought this addictive high repeatedly, preferring it to many other activities, and feeling our compulsions more strongly than our basic needs to eat, drink, sleep, or be safe. These compulsive desires were irresistible, persistent, and insatiable. They went off like alarms in our heads that made it difficult to focus on anything else. When we wanted to act out, the urge didn't go away. Nor did we feel satisfied when we got our "fix." Instead, the more we acted out sexually, the

more we wanted to act out. We lost more and more of our lives to our addiction, which cost us time, money, relationships, our health, our jobs, and even our freedom. The consequences of our addiction did not make us stop or limit our acting out. The more we tried to control our behavior, the worse it got. We were unable to stop on our own, and the pleas or threats of the people in our lives didn't help us to stop, either.

We acted out in many different ways. Sometimes we had trouble with one unwanted behavior, sometimes with many. We struggled with promiscuity; anonymous sex; compulsive masturbation; destructive relationships; romantic obsession; infidelity; obsessive fantasizing; cybersex; compulsive use of pornography, including internet pornography; excessive fear or avoidance of sex; prostitution or use of prostitutes; compulsive cross-dressing; phone sex; voyeurism; exhibitionism; sex in public places; inappropriate touching; sexual assault or molestation; bestiality; or other behaviors that involve risk to ourselves—physical, legal, emotional, or spiritual—and harm to others. These are only examples of acting out; there are many more. The common thread among all these behaviors for us as sex addicts is that we engaged in them compulsively, our willpower was helpless against them, and they had negative, painful effects. It didn't matter if others appeared to do the same behaviors without ill effect. We could not engage in them without consequence.

Over time we have become aware of certain characteristics of our lives as sex addicts. While none of us fits the profile perfectly, we can all identify with some of the following traits. We chose sex and romantic obsession over those things we cherished the most—including friends, family, and career. Sexual thoughts, romantic fantasies, and seductive planning filled our minds and distorted our thinking. Sex became our way to escape our feelings and responsibilities. We repeated our sexual behaviors even though we knew

they would bring harm to ourselves and others. We made attempts to stop the behavior, but they failed. Much of our time was spent either being sexual, or managing crises and problems that arose because of our sexual behavior. We violated our own values, and sex became the chief measure of what was important. Our sexual choices created fear and despair. Our lives became filled with deceit in order to hide our behaviors. We found ourselves isolated and alone. We felt spiritually empty.

In our addiction, we lost control over our behavior; the disease had a life and an agenda of its own. This is a hard fact to accept. We may think that we acted out only when we wanted to. But if we look closely at our experience, we see that we couldn't maintain control of our behaviors. For example, many of us thought that we could act out for a while, and then go back to our lives. We would engage in one of our favorite behaviors, such as cruising the internet, only to find that we didn't stop when we said we would. Sometimes we didn't stop until we absolutely had to.

When we were active in our addiction, it was difficult to stop our sexual preoccupations. They intruded into our thoughts, especially when we were under pressure. These included fantasizing about sex, thinking about past sexual acting out, and planning to act out again. Sexual obsession had consequences of its own. When we were preoccupied by sex we had a hard time concentrating on anything else. We would use sexual fantasy to deal with emotions and situations that we didn't want to face. The more we did this, the more our sexual obsession grew. Before long, many of us were thinking or fantasizing about sex around the clock. Our fantasies would become more compulsive and more extreme. If we acted on our fantasies, in the hope that fulfilling them would satisfy us, we found ourselves simply hungry for more. The longer we stayed in this fantasy world, the more we lost touch with reality. Our sexual obsession often led us to believe that

other people were obsessed like we were. As a result of this belief, some of us would make sexually inappropriate suggestions, jokes, or remarks. It's not that sexual fantasy is necessarily unhealthy, in and of itself. Our problem was that we lost ourselves in these compulsive fantasies, becoming more and more isolated from others and from reality.

We would try to establish boundaries around our behavior, but eventually we'd violate these boundaries. Some of us decided that we would engage in certain behaviors, but that we wouldn't get involved in other things that were dangerous, caused harm to others, or were illegal. We would act out in so-called "safe" ways, and only fantasize about acting out in the forbidden ways. Then one day, we crossed those boundaries. We paid for sex when we thought we never would. We took risks meeting strangers for sex. Or we violated the sexual boundaries of others. We may have promised ourselves that we would not do these things a second time, and yet we did. Before long, we did them repeatedly, hoping we could stop, while praying that we wouldn't get caught.

We tried to stop our behaviors, to give up some or all of them. We would swear to never act out again, and then be right back in our addiction within days, hours, or even minutes. We would throw out all of our pornography or paraphernalia, only to dig it back out of the trash or buy more. We would promise ourselves, and sometimes our loved ones, that we wouldn't repeat our behavior. Sometimes we could keep our promises for weeks, months, or years. But eventually we would act out again.

We may have believed that, given time or changed circumstances, we would stop acting out. We may have thought that we would stop when we got married or into a committed relationship. And for some of us that was true— but only for a time. We believed that if we could just change our situation, the behavior would go away. We thought that as soon as we

finished school, training, or a difficult period, we would be able to get a handle on our problem. Yet we often found ourselves acting out after we got through a crisis.

Many of us lived a double life. We might have felt appalled by our acting-out behavior. But when we were in our addiction, we would slip into a kind of trance. What we usually considered immoral or shameful became sexually exciting. We went to places we wouldn't normally go to, spent time with people we wouldn't normally associate with, and did things we wouldn't want to tell anyone.

To hide our acting out, we lied to our families, friends, and co-workers. We also tried to hide our addiction from ourselves—by working hard, being perfectionists, or perhaps being very religious. Still, with all the self-discipline we could muster, it wasn't very long before we felt compelled to act out again.

Sex addiction impaired our judgment. In our obsession, we acted as if we were invisible, immortal, and invincible. We may have believed, for instance, that we could spy on others or expose ourselves or drive to sex shops without being seen. We may have believed that we could have unprotected sex with strangers without risk of disease or violence. We may have believed that we could engage in cybersex without anyone finding out or any damage to our intimate relationships. We may have thought we could lie to our partners, our bosses, or our friends without any consequences. When we were caught, or when we tried to explain what we were doing, we couldn't make up plausible reasons for our behavior. Our behavior didn't make sense, even to ourselves, until we understood that we were sex addicts.

For some of us, the compulsive avoidance of sex and intimacy became a destructive pattern, dominating our thoughts and actions. We may always

have felt unable or unwilling to be sexual. Or we may have experienced periods of feeling “shut down” alternating with other periods of sexual acting out. We have come to realize that both extremes represent symptoms of the same disease. Whether we were acting out or not being sexual at all, our addiction involved being emotionally unavailable.

Being a sex addict felt like being trapped in endless contradictions. We sought love and romance, but when we found it, we feared and fled from intimacy. We neglected or even avoided sex with those who loved us, preferring new conquests, the unknown, and the solitary. Some of us had periods of time when sex and relationships were unbearable and we avoided contact with others. Then we would plunge into a period when no amount of sex was sufficient. The more sex we would have, the less satisfied we felt, and the more our desire seemed to increase. The harder we tried to stop or moderate our behavior, the worse it became. Some of us remained loyal to those who would hurt us, abandoning the ones whose care was proven and true. Or we focused on behavior that we never even liked, or that violated our values. We sought comfort and security through dangerous, risky, and traumatic behaviors that left us more wounded, abused, and traumatized than when we started. Our sexuality, which should have been a source of happiness and pleasure, became joyless, and even destructive and dangerous to ourselves and others.

Some of us also had other addictive behaviors—such as addiction to alcohol and other drugs, compulsive eating habits, or addiction to gambling, work, smoking, spending, or any number of other behaviors or substances. These addictions tended to aggravate our sexual addiction, compounding the negative consequences of our disease.

These consequences were many and various. Some came as a direct result of our acting out: we were arrested, or got a sexually transmitted

disease. We lost jobs due to sexually inappropriate behavior. Our marriages and relationships broke up when our behavior was revealed. Our reputations and livelihoods were damaged by publicity about our illegal behavior. We suffered an emotional hangover after coming down from the high, or contemplated suicide.

Often the consequences were an indirect result of our addiction. We may have lost friendships or relationships because our acting out interfered with the energy and commitment they required. We may have performed poorly at work because we couldn't concentrate, due to staying up late acting out, or to being distracted by sexual obsession. We were often depressed and dissatisfied with our lives; we were resentful and blamed others for our unhappiness.

We thought of acting out as the peak experience of our addiction, but often it was only a prelude to the physical and emotional crash that followed. The high usually wasn't as "good" as we hoped it would be. It rarely matched our fantasies, and didn't recapture the excitement that it may once have had. When we realized that we had been seduced by our fantasies again, we often felt despair. The strange thing was that our despair, rather than deterring us, led us right back to acting out. Our feelings of pain and shame were often more than we could take. Without having any reason to hope we could stop, we looked for ways to dull the pain. That led us to be preoccupied with sex again.

Shame is a common experience for sex addicts. It is the feeling that we are never good enough, that there is something wrong with us, that we are bad people. Shame played a part in the addictive cycle, undermining our resistance to acting out. To the extent that we felt that we were unworthy people, it didn't seem to matter if we acted out or not. Acting out helped us to escape or hide from our shame. Sometimes shame became part of the

addictive high itself, so that we'd actually get a sexual thrill from being "bad." Shame also caused us to hide and isolate from others so that we did not seek the help we needed.

For many of us, even if we tried to quit, the distress of withdrawal impelled us to act out again despite ourselves. Abstaining from our addictive sexual behaviors prompted a reaction in our minds and bodies that was similar to that of a drug addict going through withdrawal. We could not tolerate the physical and emotional discomfort we felt when we stopped these behaviors, so we acted out again.

By the time we came to SAA, people could usually tell that something was wrong with us, even though we tried to hide our behavior. In many cases, our partners or family members knew about our addiction before we recognized it, and often had already sought help for us, or for themselves. We were frequently the last ones to recognize our problem.

One of the most dangerous aspects of our addiction is our inability to see it for what it is. This difficulty recognizing what we are doing, how serious and risky it is, and how much harm it causes or might cause, we call *denial*. Denial conceals the awful truth of our addiction by convincing us that what we are doing is not that bad or dangerous, or that other people or external circumstances are responsible for our behavior. Usually our denial is subtle. We may remember acting out, but we deny the pain of acting out, the consequences, the risks, or our inability to stop. Unfortunately, this often prevents us from seeking help.

For many of us, the spiral of sexual addiction led to what we call *hitting bottom*. To hit bottom is to reach such a low point—mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually—that we break through our denial. The depth of the bottom varies from person to person. For some, it may have taken



the form of an external crisis: we lost our career, our partner left us, or we were arrested. For others, it came in a moment of despair, with the realization that if we didn't stop, we were going to live a miserable, lonely, nightmarish existence. Or we reached a point where we felt we might die if we acted out much longer.

Sex addiction is not just a bad habit. Nor is it the result of poor self control, a lack of morals, or a series of mistakes. If it were something we could stop on our own, the negative consequences would be enough to make us stop. Many of us tried to cure ourselves with religious or spiritual practice, moral discipline, or self-improvement. Despite our sincerity and our best efforts, we continued to act out. Our behavior eluded all rational attempts at explanation or correction. We had to face the fact that we had a disease, and that we could not stop the addictive behavior by ourselves.

For all of us now in recovery, there came a time when we realized that we simply could not keep on living as before. Our denial cracked and we felt the full force of our unbearable situation. We saw that we were at the end of our rope, and that all that was left was the knot. To continue to act out seemed impossible, and yet not to act out seemed equally impossible. We knew we had to change, even if we didn't know how. Out of this despair, we came to Sex Addicts Anonymous.

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From Sex Addicts Anonymous 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition ("Green Book"):

<https://saa-recovery.org/literature/sex-addicts-anonymous-green-book-saas-basic-text/>

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