

Introduction

Douglas Weiss writes that “[s]exual addiction is by far the leading addiction in the Church today.”¹ Many, including myself, may intuitively agree with this statement. Thus, this paper is an attempt to offer pastors, church leaders, etc. an introduction to this matter. It will suggest a practical definition of sexual addiction, show the effects it has on the addict as well as on his family, include resources (in print and on the internet) and list some suggestions of how pastors might engage in a productive way with the addict. However, understanding the inner world of the addict is key to being able to help him. Thus, the main part of this paper will try to explain the inner world of the addict.

Furthermore, although Ted Roberts writes that “sexual addiction is no longer the exclusive domain of men,”² this paper is limited to male sex addicts mainly because the resources I have found focus on male addicts but also for the practical purpose of establishing a reasonable boundary to limit the content of this paper.

Defining Sexual Addiction

As is often the case, finding a good definition is a hard task. With regards to sexual addiction there is some debate if a sexually compulsive behavior should always been seen as an addiction.³

An addiction is an unhealthy, habitual *relationship* with a substance or behavior [e.g. pornography] that causes impairment psychologically, socially, physically, or spiritually. Addictions are usually marked by some (not necessary all of the

¹ Douglas Weiss, *Sex, Men and God* (Lake Mary: Siloam, 2002), 50.

² Ted Roberts, *Pure Desire* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1999), 55.

³ Rodgerson summarizing Coleman writes: “Coleman ... saw potential harm in the use of the term ‘addiction’ and preferred to use the term ‘compulsivity.’ He saw compulsive sexual disorders as anxiety-based disorders and as a variant of obsessive-compulsive disorder.” [Thomas Rodgerson, “Pastors and Paraphilias: A Pastoral Counseling Approach,” in *American Journal of Pastoral Counseling*, Vol. 4(1)1 2001 : 24).]

following characteristics): (1) Continued use despite negative consequences. (2) The addictive behavior/substances becomes the main source of gratification for coping. (3) Important life responsibilities and relationships are neglected or impaired. (4) There is a preoccupation with the behavior or substance.⁴

Understanding Sexual Addiction and the addict

There seems to be considerable discussion regarding the roots of sexual addiction and if it should be located in the medical or theological arena (i.e. is it a sin or a disease?). Dr. Schaumberg believes that sexual addiction is caused by sin. He argues that a sex addict finds *false intimacy* in his addiction. Though all agree that sexual addiction is used as a 'fix' for stress or loneliness, some would argue that its main root is found in the addict's childhood. Arterburn writes:

With remarkable consistency, sex addiction find its origins at the foot of a mountain of childhood abandonment, abuse and family dysfunction. ... Some studies estimate that as many as eighty percent of sex addicts may have been sexually abused in childhood. Often the victim grows to be the victimizer, practicing the behaviours he learned from a parent or other significant adult figure.⁵

I do not want to dismiss Schaumberg's argument but I believe on a practical level (i.e. understanding the addict) and maybe on a theological level, holding to a both-and view is more appropriate. As Carnes writes: "The absence of relationship and the desire for heightened excitement are the twin pillars of the sexual addiction."⁶ However, it is important to understand that this longing for relationship, as well as a *false belief* of the addict that he is unlovable (ie, created through bad early childhood experiences as mentioned above), often preconditions these people for a sexual addiction. For a sexual addict to enter into recovery it is crucial for him to let go of these *false beliefs* of

⁴ John Auxier, *Class handouts: Overcoming Pornography and Internet Obsessions*, (Unpublished: Vancouver, 2006), 1.

⁵ Stephen Arterburn, *Addicted to "Love": Recovering from Unhealthy Dependencies in Romance, Relationships and Sex* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1991), 110.

⁶ Patrick Carnes, *Out of the Shadows: Understanding Sexual Addiction* (Minneapolis: CompCare Publishers, 1985), 32.

unworthiness. Arterburn, reporting from his experiences in dealing with sexuality addicted people, writes: “When sex addicts open up and honestly express their feelings, they say strikingly similar things. ‘I didn’t think I’d find someone who would love me.’ ‘I felt unworthy of love and respect.’”⁷

Furthermore, sexual addiction shares very similar patterns to other addictions such as gambling or alcoholism. Sexual addiction, like other addictions, is a system. Carnes writes: “The addiction is truly a system where behavior is interdependent. There are constantly shifting patterns which weave together. ... The system operates on a repetitive rhythm. The driving force for each cycle comes from a faulty belief.”⁸

Arterburn describes this cycle as follows:⁹

Stage 1 - Obsession: Obsession is triggered by an emotion such as anger, pain or shame. Once triggered the addict seeks to find relief as quickly as possible. This leads to the next stage.

Stage 2 – The Hunt: This involves the search for a “sex object” (ie, a place to masturbate, pornography, etc.).

Stage 3 – Recruitment: The purchase of pornography, or visiting a prostitute, an x-rated movie theatre, telephone-sex, etc.

Stage 4 – Gratification: Essentially this means that the addict has an orgasm. However, this is often very complicated because he *needs* certain, often very elaborate and escalating, rituals to fulfill his fantasy.

Stage 5 – Return to normal: For a short period the addict feels ‘normal’.

⁷ Arterburn, 112.

⁸ Carnes, 61.

⁹ Cf. Arterburn, 126-130.

Stage 6 – Justification: The addict realizes or feels that he needs to justify his actions. Arterbrung writes: “Addicts are accomplished mental gymnasts, going through colossal logical contortions to persuade themselves that it was really okay... no one was hurt... everyone does it.”¹⁰

Stage 7 – Blame : If the addict can no longer justify his actions he starts to blame other people for his behavior. This could be his parents, wife, society or even God.

Stage 8 – Shame : Eventually the addict finds himself unable to blame others and starts to blame himself. False beliefs about oneself are reinforced and the addict perceives himself as the “bottom rung of society.”¹¹

Stage 9 – Despair: Now the addict feels *even worse* than before because he is unable to change. He might try to compensate for his sexual addiction by drinking or with other compulsions. At this point suicide is often considered.

Stage 10 – Promises: The addict promises to himself, and maybe others, never to engage in this action again. However, Arterburn argues that this only refocuses his obsession and triggers the addictive process again.

Of course a person does not go through all 10 stages every time. However, it is helpful to see this pattern in order to understand the addict, and hopefully he will also recognize the cycle he is caught in.

Another tool used for understanding sexual addiction by Arterburn and also Carnes is the categorization of addicts into three levels. Carnes writes: “A workable structure which helps to identify patterns is to view the addiction as operating at three levels.”¹² It is important in recovery for all involved to recognize the patterns in which the

¹⁰ Arterburn, 127.

¹¹ Ibid, 129.

¹² Carnes, 27.

addiction plays itself out. Once they are recognized one can think about ways to stop the addiction cycle before it starts. An example that comes to mind from another addiction is that of an obese person. He had to change his route to work in order to avoid a fast-food restaurant where he usually went and overate. The sexual addict might have to avoid lonely evenings at home and seek community through a sports club or something similar.

The following three levels will help to show how the sexual addiction progresses from self-destructive behaviors to victimizing and criminal acts. (Arterburn distinguishes between 4 levels, dividing Carnes 1st level into activities that involve another human being – level 2 – and those that do not, e.g. masturbation). However, the level in which the addict is classified does not state how strong or self-damaging the addiction is. Further, an addict involved in level 2 or 3 activities will always also be active in level 1 activities.

Level 1 involves masturbation, heterosexual relationships,¹³ pornography, prostitution and homosexuality. These activities are usually culturally accepted and involve little if any legal consequence. They are also perceived as victimless crimes even though, as Carnes points out, “victimization and exploitation are often components.”¹⁴

Level 2 involves exhibitionism, voyeurism, indecent phone calls, and indecent liberties. Culturally, none of these activities are accepted and offenders are legally prosecuted. Furthermore, these actions always victimize other people.

¹³ With regards to masturbation and heterosexual relationships Carnes does see times and places where they are healthy and normal. With regards to masturbation he believes it is a normal part of discovering one’s sexuality. He writes: “Masturbation is an essential part of being a sexual person. Nurturing oneself, exploring sexual needs and fantasies, and establishing basic self-knowledge are vital contributions that masturbation makes to sexual identity” (Carnes, 28). Others, such as Schaumberg, believe that masturbation is always a false attempt to achieve intimacy. A more nuanced view is held by Weiss who differs between three different kinds of masturbation (cf. Weiss, 76-78).

¹⁴ Ibid., 55.

Level 3 involves child molestation, incest, and rape. Obviously each of these activities is culturally rejected and are vigorously prosecuted. These activities are highly victimizing and dramatizing for the victim. Thus, these people are often perceived as sub-human.

The addict, his family and friends

The way the addict perceives his world is often confusing to his friends and family. A sex addict holds several beliefs about himself which frequently were communicated to him during his childhood by his parents or other significant adults. Carnes identified four core beliefs. I will list and show how these are perceived by his family.

1st core belief: *I am basically a bad, unworthy person.* This belief is often communicated to the addict in his childhood. The addict then concludes that he deserves punishment. In extreme cases, spousal or parental abuse (often involving the genitals) creates this feeling.¹⁵ But the abuse does not require these violent expressions. Willingham writes: “Things like verbal put-downs, yelling, screaming or distancing on the part of the parent may have caused the child to retreat inwardly and thereby cut himself from the little nurturing that was available.”¹⁶

To the outside world, however, the addict appears insensitive. Outsiders see a troubling difference between the image the addict is trying to portray and the destructive behavioral patterns in his life.

¹⁵ The examples provided by Carnes help to more clearly understand how this abuse takes place but it is very disturbing to read, thus I will remain vague here. For more detailed explanation see Carnes, 63-81.

¹⁶ Russel Willingham, *Breaking free* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 197-198.

2nd core belief: *No one loves me the way I am.* Again, this is rooted in the addict's feeling of unworthiness. But to the outsider it looks like they, themselves, are useless, neglected and unneeded for the addict.

3rd core belief: *My needs are never going to be met if I have to depend on others.* This belief is one of the greatest fuels for the addiction. Nobody can meet my needs thus I have to meet them myself. However, those who are close to the addict see growing inconsistency between the private and public life of the addict. However, without knowing the inner life of the addict, his ups and downs remain a mystery.

4th core belief: *Sex is my most important need.* This is, of course, the necessary consequence of the 3rd core belief. This belief will become obvious to close friends or family. However, family and friends often feel like they do not have the right, or a close enough relationship, to address the issue and back out of the life of the addict. This again feeds into all of his beliefs, especially the 1st and 2nd one.

The wife. I find it important to address the role and the impact of a sexually addicted husband on his wife separately from family and friends. Though there is a lot of overlap, there are certain issues unique and especially challenging for the wife of an addict.

Willingham offers a helpful appendix in his book *BreakingFree* called "What is a Wife to do?" In it he offers many helpful suggestions. One of the key realizations the wife of an addict must come to is that her husband's addiction is not her fault and that no matter what she does (even acting out all his sexual fantasies) she will not satisfy his need because it was created before she even entered his life, and thus cannot be healed by her.

Furthermore, she must set and maintain certain boundaries, most importantly abstinence, if he is unwilling to admit his problem and seek help. (Although I am not a professional, I wonder if this treatment is helpful for a level 1 sex addict. It seems to me that it could feed into the problem.) Furthermore, Willingham speaks of the different forms of enabler that the wife can become. Unfortunately, space does not allow us to introduce more of the ideas from Willingham but it is very important to recognize that the wife of an addict will go through severe pain and needs to grieve over the lost of trust and intimacy with her husband. Only if she undergoes a healthy process of grieving will she be able to become a real source support for her husband.¹⁷

Advice for pastoral counseling of sexually addicted people

The following section will offer some advice for those who have friends and church members that struggle with sexual addiction. These suggestions are in no way complete and should not create an overconfidence. However, at the same time we should not be afraid to try to help an addict because we feel inadequate or unable to relate to the pain he experienced in his childhood. Counseling will need time and likely also the help of a professional counselor.

Rodgerson writes that one of the main problems for Christians, especially for those who are in ministry, is that it is terribly shameful to talk about one's "sexual monster" as he likes to call it. Not only our culture, but especially our Christian sub-culture, condemns this addiction. When somebody is willing to talk about his "monster" he will often do this slowly and over a long period of time because of his shame and fear

¹⁷ Cf. Willingham, 198-200. Here Willingham explains the five stages of mourning. He further advised the wife to find a group of Christian women who would mourn with and support her.

of rejection. Rodgerson writes: “Getting the whole story often required patience and the *building of trust*. As is often the case, the whole story came out over time and in bits and pieces.”¹⁸

To find the right attitude towards an addict a pastor must understand himself too as a wounded and recovering person. Simply withholding verbal judgment will not create an environment where the sex addict is willing to talk about his “monster”. Rod Wilson writes: “He [the addict] is not different than me. We both participate in the brokenness of creation. ... It is not that the person with the problem is weak and as a result of my strength he becomes strong. Rather, we are both living the reality ..., that it is in the embracing of the weakness that we become strong.”¹⁹

David Kyle Foster in his book *Sexual Healing* offers an extra section for ministers. This was the only resource I found offering practical advice for a minister counseling a sex addict. Unfortunately, the suggestions are limited (although not wrong) in the sense that they focus on the spiritual and demonic aspect. Essentially, and I am not trying to say this negatively, Foster asks ministers to help the person name his sin and weaknesses and then ask God to fill this void. I believe that God, at times, does work in these ways while at other times we may have to guide a sexual addict through a long process of recovery. One must keep in mind that sins committed by a sexual addict are often based on, but not excused by, experiences in his childhood from which he also needs to find healing.

Another helpful suggestion from Auxier is to do counseling along with the spouse. However, a pastor should know his limitations and refer the addict or couple to a

¹⁸ Rodgerson, 25 [italics mine].

¹⁹ Rod Wilson, *How Do I Help a Hurting Friend?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 154-155.

specialist if he or she is not sufficiently trained. However, if the minister finds himself or herself to have sufficient knowledge and competence, he or she should make sure to clarify and define the limitations and extent of his or her confidentiality. For example, the minister will not withhold information coming from one spouse to the other!

An initial session with an addict could consist of an assessment. There are different questionnaires available that help to identify a person struggling with sexual addiction. But assessment questions also help to understand the nature and behaviour patterns of the addict. Such questions could be:²⁰

- When and how did it start?
- What kind of behavior was practiced and which materials used?
Frequency?
- Are there certain locations of preference?

In order to gain knowledge and understanding of sexual addiction I would recommend two books. First of all, Douglas Weiss' book *Sex, men, and God*. Though he only deals briefly with sexual addiction in this book, he describes with great detail the way the male sexuality functions and how we can set wrong neural patterns. I believe this would be very helpful for any pastor because it deals with non-compulsive sexual problems. Something a Pastor might have to deal with more frequently but it also lays a good foundation for understanding how and why sexual addictions occur.

Secondly, Carnes' book *Out of the Shadow* seems to me to be a well researched and good introduction to sexual addiction. It covers most areas including the role of the wife. However, its many explicit stories about sexual abuse can be disturbing and those easily effected by these might prefer to jump over them while reading or search for a book with less examples.

²⁰ Auxier, 6.

Finally, for a better and more general understanding of how one can be of help to a struggling addict I would recommend Rod Wilson's book *How Do I Help a Hurting Friend?* Though he does not deal with addiction per se, he helps us to be sensitive of going to either extreme, either offering simplistic/naïve answers (e.g. just pray about it) to an addict or avoiding a person in need because we feel like we cannot understand the depths of this pain.

Conclusion

Dealing with a sexual addict requires much patience, love and understanding. The matter becomes very complicated when illegal activities are involved and the pastor has to inform the police. The guidelines in this paper only help a pastor dealing with a person involved in level 1 activities. For anything beyond that the addict should seek professional help as soon as possible. However, it is important that the pastor (along with everyone else in the church) understands that an addict is not a greater sinner but most likely a very broken and hurt person who needs love and not condemnation.

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Appendix A: Internet Resources

Information on sexual addiction can be found at www.xxxchurch.com, a website that wants to encourage churches to deal with the issue of pornography and sexual addiction. They also organize conferences and provide a good covenant tool. The website www.sexaddict.com also represents a well respected Christian organization founded by Dr. Steve Weiss. Also recommendable is www.pureintimacy.org, another resource from Focus on the Family. It primarily focuses on internet pornography and affairs. www.cvnt.net is a website offering an accountability tool. Instead of using filters that block pages containing sexual content, they will mail a log of the websites you have visited to another person, your covenant partner, who checks your log. The advantage is that you can still access websites with sexual, but not pornographic material. Blockers sometime hinder you when they block pages that have nothing to do with sexuality at all. The downside of accountability tools is that you do have access to pornographic sites. Filters can be found at: www.afafilter.com or www.safebrowse.com. Filters seem to be very helpful for families who want to protect their children. For people living in Germany the website www.wuestenstrom.de will be very helpful. Wuestenstrom is a Christian organization helping people who struggle with homosexuality and other sexual addictions.