

Thousands Experience Online-Sex Addiction

It's 2 a.m. Kendra, 47, married with one grown son in college, sits in the dark corner of her study, transfixed by the messages appearing across her computer screen. With each word, her typing becomes more hypnotic.



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With only the glow of the monitor to illuminate the keyboard, she sits in the shadows, sharing sexual fantasies with a stranger. Kendra's cyber-relationship

with Carl (or whatever his real name might be) has been escalating over the past 6 months. What started off as a seemingly harmless online chat has turned into a powerful sexual addiction. Who would have thought that a wife, mother and senior vice president of a large financial institution would become hooked on cybersex? Thoughts of her online liaison preoccupy most of her waking hours. Each day, as she drives home from the office, she can feel her heart quicken as she nears her driveway. Will there be an e-mail from Carl? Will they "meet" tonight? She feels giddy. Although she's exhausted after a long day, she can't sleep.

Instead, she finds herself feverishly

typing things she could never imagine saying to her husband. She doesn't know much about Carl. Just that he's a divorced high school teacher (or so he says). She doesn't even know if Carl is really a "he" or how old he is, but for some reason, all of those sensible questions don't seem to matter right now. Her excitement mounts as Carl "says" just the right things to bring her to the peak of her sexual arousal. After she signs off for the night, she's overwhelmed with shame and guilt, as she slips into bed next to her sleeping husband.

Kendra is one of nearly a quarter of a million people who have a cybersex addiction. There is no typical cyber addict. Most of my clients are hard-working, church/temple-going, everyday folks who have become trapped in an extremely seductive predicament. Just as many women as men are addicted to cyber sex, although women tend to become immersed in fantasized relationships and role enactments, rather than explicit visual images pitched to male tastes. But whether one is addicted to the visuals or to the imagined relationship, the power of the addiction is equally intense. It offers an accessible, anonymous, affordable avenue to explore fantasies, try on new roles, and add adventure to an otherwise boring routine.

Genevieve, a middle-aged registered nurse, married 11 years, never imagined that she could be a sex addict. She met Everett on line, innocently at first. Soon he suggested they move to a "private" chat room where they could interact in "real time." Genevieve described it as a "virtual bedroom," where they would have sex. "I suppose I fell for him," she said. "But one of the dumbest things I ever did was to agree to meet him in a hotel room where he sexually assaulted me. He tied me to a bed and beat me until I passed out. I came to in the hospital. The hardest part of all of this was facing my husband and admitting this problem had taken control of my life."

Like Genevieve and Kendra, most people who check out chat rooms may be simply "curious" at first. For some, the taste of forbidden fruit and the rush of the "high" becomes intoxicating, especially for those who have a predisposition to addictive behaviors.

If you wonder whether you (or your partner) have a "problem" in this area, ask yourself the following questions:

Have you ever engaged in secret sexual conversations online? Do you find yourself in a hypnotic trance or a dissociative state where hours go by while you're on the Internet? Have you planned a way to "shut down" your screen quickly or switch to a work

project if your wife or husband enters the room? Do you frequently erase your Internet history to destroy the "evidence"? Do you engage in compromising behavior despite the possible adverse consequences? Do you lie about what you're doing online? Are you seeking higher and higher erotic stimuli? Are you using the Internet to "self-medicate" against depression, anxiety, or the lack of intimacy? If you say yes to these questions and your Internet use has begun to interfere with any aspect of your life, it's likely that you're sexually addicted.

So what can you do if you or the person you love has a sexual addiction? Using "spy ware" or other "tracking" devices to monitor behaviors or catch them in the act is a mistake. It will only induce resentment and add to feelings of mistrust. The most effective way to treat sexual addiction is the relapse prevention model pioneered by Dr. Patrick Carnes. It includes identifying situations that stimulate urges and cravings, learning to anticipate these situations, and developing healthier ways to channel sexual impulses and behaviors.

One of the unique challenges of treating sexual addiction is in defining "sexual sobriety" and "healthy sexual functioning." With other addictions, you can stop going to the casino or stop

drinking, but we can't just use sexual abstinence as a marker for success. Sex addicts must learn to deal with their sexual thoughts, fantasies, and arousal triggers in ways that don't stimulate addictive behaviors. This is especially complicated when there is a committed relationship that suffers in the balance.

Sexual addiction robs you of authentic intimacy by leaving you unsatisfied and longing for more. When the pseudo-intimate addictive behaviors are modified, anxiety will surface, but that's to be expected, along with failures, challenges and improved sexual intimacy. According to Abraham Maslow, we can actually "touch the divine" through our sexual connection. This takes our willingness to be vulnerable and to face our own truths. Only then will we achieve the sexual fulfillment we crave.

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