

## Tiger, Jesse, Eliot and Bill W.- Sex Addiction Comes Out of the Closet

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Published: National Council on Alcoholism & Drug Dependence, **New Times**, V16, 06/10, pg. 4.

Tiger Woods, Jesse James, Eliot Spitzer, it seems as if not a month can go by that some new celebrity- be it sports figure, actor, preacher, or president- doesn't get caught *in flagrante delicto* & sent off to *sex addiction* treatment "boot camp." Meanwhile, puzzled fans and followers stand by shaking their heads and ask each other in bemused wonder, "What will they think of next?"

While the idea of sex addiction may be new to the general public we, in the recovery community, are very familiar with the harsh realities of sex addiction, even though we too have kept it "in the closet." Yes, sex addiction has been with us from our earliest beginning- just like nicotine, caffeine and sugar. One of our founding-father's, Bill W., was most likely a sex addict. Author Susan Cheever, in her new book, *Desire*, notes that Bill's "inability to regulate his behavior with women" seriously threatened not only his 53 year marriage, but "his entire life's work."

Sadly for Bill W., it would be another 42 years from the time he & Dr. Bob founded Alcoholics Anonymous before its time-honored tenants would be applied to the disease of sex addiction. Even though romantic and sexual "acting-out" so common in-program that we developed a term for it- "thirteenth-stepping." And, we warned newcomers not to get into a new relationship in the first year.

Yes, we realized a long time ago that love and sex addiction was a real issue in our fellowship and, in 1977, the first Sex Addicts Anonymous program was formed. This was quickly followed by Sexaholics Anonymous, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, Sexual Compulsives Anonymous, S-ANON, and CoSA. But, we still don't talk openly about sex addiction in-program and many of us aren't even aware of the SA programs. Why, because sex addiction, today, carries the same kind of moral stigma that alcoholism and drug addiction did back in 1935, when AA was originally formed. And the only way to de-stigmatize it is to recognize it as the same kind of *disease* process as the substance addictions.

So, what *is* sex addiction and why is it so prevalent in our recovery community? Sex addiction is what

we call a *behavioral* or *process* addiction, which is defined as: any activity that alters brain/body chemistry and is engaged in to the extent that it meets the criteria for "addiction."

And the four primary criteria for addiction are: 1) the problem becomes **P**rogressively worse over time, 2) it becomes **C**ompulsive- the person loses control of it, 3) **O**bsessive thoughts of the activity begin to preoccupy the individual, and 4) the behavior continues despite ever increasing negative **C**onsequences (PCOC). Sexual addiction can be defined, then, as any sexually-related, compulsive behavior that interferes with normal living and causes *significant* stress in important areas of one's life.

Some examples of sex addiction are:

- Compulsive masturbation
- Excessive use of pornography
- Having chronic
- Exhibitionism
- High-risk sexual practices
- Paying for sex: prostitution, massage parlors, lap dances, etc.
- Anonymous sex
- Compulsive sexual episodes
- Voyeurism

Love addiction can be more challenging to recognize due to the many subtle forms it can take, but basically it is a behavioral addiction wherein someone becomes compulsively attached to some aspect of the "dating-mating" process.

Some signs of love addiction are:

- Constantly seeking a sexual partner, new romance or significant other
- An inability or difficulty in being alone
- Consistently choosing partners who are abusive or emotionally unavailable
- Using sex, seduction and intrigue to "hook" or hold onto a partner
- Using sex or romantic intensity to tolerate difficult experiences or emotions
- Missing out on important family, career or social experiences in order to maintain a sexual high or romantic relationship
- When in a relationship, being detached or unhappy, when out of a relationship, feeling desperate and alone

- Avoiding sex or relationships for long periods of time to "solve the problem"
- An inability to leave unhealthy relationships despite repeated promises to self or others
- Returning to previously unmanageable or painful relationships despite promises to self or others
- Mistaking sexual experiences and romantic intensity for love

Newcomers who come into program and immediately fall in love with someone (think Elizabeth Taylor and Larry Fortensky) or members who are always hitting on vulnerable newcomers ("thirteenth-stepping"), may simply be trading their alcohol/drug addiction for love/sex addiction. The same may be true of any member who is "sober" from substances, but continues to habitually engage in any of the behaviors (or others) noted above.

So, why is love & sex addiction so prevalent in the recovery community? Dr. Patrick Carnes, a noted researcher, clinician, and author in the area of sex addiction, explains the connection in terms of Addiction Interaction Disorder (A.I.D.). He points to scientific studies which have shown an *underlying biochemical link* between substance addictions, behavioral addictions (like overeating, gambling, compulsive working, compulsive spending, and compulsive sexual behavior), and certain mental health problems (like depression, bipolar disorder, or Attention Deficit Disorder).

This biochemical disorder is called the *Reward Deficiency Syndrome (RDS)* and it is the result of too little dopamine being produced in the *Reward or pleasure center* of the brain. Sometimes present from birth, this condition causes an individual to suffer from a chronic state of "low-grade" depression. S/he will be unable to feel really happy or joyful, will always feel tired or sluggish (lacking energy or motivation), and may not really be interested in sex. S/he may also be chronically irritable, with periodic anger or rage episodes. People suffering from this condition will unconsciously seek out one or more substances and/or activities that will help them feel better (a stimulant) or that will alleviate (numb-out) the unpleasant feelings.

Reward Deficiency Syndrome can be caused by heredity, childhood trauma, and/or chronic alcohol/drug abuse. Studies have shown that 50-60% of addiction is due to genetic factors. Children who have an alcoholic or drug addicted parent are eight times more likely to become alcoholic or drug addicted themselves as adults- even if they don't grow up with that parent.

Carnes has found a high percentage of parental addiction in the families of sex addicts. His studies found that 87% of sex addicts had at least one parent who was an alcoholic or was drug addicted. He also found that one-third had a parent with an eating disorder, 7% had a parent who was a compulsive gambler, and 36% who had at least one parent who was also a sex addict.

Childhood trauma was also very prevalent among his patients. Ninety-seven percent reported emotional neglect and/or abuse, 72% reported physical abuse, and 81% reported some form of sexual molest/abuse. Such neglect and abuse can actually affect the brain's development and result in a variety of cognitive, emotional, and psychological impairments. It can also damage a child's ability to attach to others and make him/her more prone to a host of problems- including alcoholism, drug addiction, behavioral addictions, and mental health issues.

Which is just what Dr. Carnes found among sex addicts seeking treatment- 83% reported multiple addictions and a variety of mental health issues. Seventy-three percent reported some form of substance abuse, 38% had an eating disorder, 28% stated they worked compulsively, 26% were compulsive spenders, and 5% compulsive gamblers.

The majority also suffered from some form of mental health issue, such as depression or dysthymia ("low-grade" depression), bipolar disorder, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, Attention Deficit Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and/or attachment disorders.

When we think, then, of someone suffering from an inherent brain chemistry disorder (RDS) *and* the psychological pain of a traumatic childhood, it is hardly surprising that person would instinctually seek some form of relief. Drugs can numb us out or they can stimulate us. Alcohol can certainly numb us out and it eventually metabolizes into dopamine- the depleted chemical in RDS. But another, faster, route to activating dopamine is through sex and love activities. The molecular structure of the chemicals released during the "courtship/mating" process parallels that of opiates and amphetamines!

And, when we consider the limited resources of a child trapped in an unloving and/or abusive home

environment, it is easier to understand how food, alcohol/drugs, and sex (masturbation) might become primary coping mechanisms. Over time, these coping mechanisms become closely intertwined and deeply habituated.

This, then, is the basis of Addiction Interaction Disorder- that there is an underlying biochemical link (Reward Deficiency Syndrome) between substance addictions, behavioral addictions and certain mental health problems that drives “self-medicating” behaviors. When we give up or get sober from one coping mechanism, we may instinctually switch to another in order to avoid the underlying physiological and/or psychological pain. It’s crucial, then, that we be aware of the phenomenon of dual-and-multi-addictions (substance & behavioral) and their co-existence with mental health issues. Treating both at the same time may be essential to initial recovery and long-term sobriety.

Given that sex and love addiction may be the preferred “drug-of-choice” in early recovery from substance abuse, it is important that we, as a fellowship, begin to acknowledge its prevalence more openly and that we become more active in supporting each other into dual-participation with the SA programs.

More information regarding sex addiction is available on Dr. Carnes site: [sexhelp.com](http://sexhelp.com)

### 12-Step Programs

Sexaholics Anonymous (S.A.)	<a href="http://www.sa.org">www.sa.org</a>
Sex Addicts Anonymous (S.A.A.)	<a href="http://www.saa-recovery.org">www.saa-recovery.org</a>
Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (S.L.A.A.)	<a href="http://www.slaafws.org">www.slaafws.org</a>
S-Anon (partners)	<a href="http://www.sanon.org">www.sanon.org</a>
CoSA (partners)	<a href="http://www.cosa-recovery.org">www.cosa-recovery.org</a>

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