

The Addiction That No One Wants to Talk About

Many men struggle with sex addictions. But in the United States today, a growing number of women also are falling prey to pornography and perversion.

Marsha is a 32-year-old woman who appears to have a perfect life. She is the attractive, healthy wife of a successful doctor in town and the mother of a terrific little boy. She began our first counseling session by saying, "I have everything going for me, but I have a problem I am so ashamed of that I can hardly tell you."

Through tears she told me her story, which included numerous rotating affairs and one-night stands with men. "I know it's wrong, and I've tried to stop," she cried. "I've repented many times, but I still do it over and over again."

Some of us would classify Marsha as simply an "adulteress" while others would pass off her problem as "just sin." But is it possible that Marsha struggles with sexual addiction? We're quick to assume that sexual addicts are always men, but recent studies indicate that in the last decade more and more women, including Christians, are struggling with sexual addiction.

What is sexual addiction? It is using a sexual activity as a way of coping with or "medicating" the emotional pain of one's past or present. This behavior becomes compulsive, oftentimes at the expense of loved ones or responsibilities. The sex addict, whether male or female, goes into a sexual fantasy or sexual behavior in order to find solace in his or her life.

Why would a woman need to escape? Many sex addicts—44 percent—are survivors of sexual abuse. Sixty-five percent say they were raped, and 53 percent say they were raped more than once. For 96 percent, their first sexual encounter had a

direct impact on their sexual addictive behavior. Other statistics include the 79 percent who say they have had extramarital affairs.

The list continues: 48 percent have contracted a venereal disease; 59 percent have had an abortion; 52 percent have eating disorders; and 50 percent have alcohol problems.

Soul Pain

Female sex addicts are often women with severe emotional pain and low self-esteem. They view themselves as sexually damaged and feel as though they are limping through life. Their “soul pain” often begins in childhood or adolescence, and sex becomes the “medicine” for their hurting hearts.

There is also a physiological process accompanying their sexual behavior. Most sex addicts don’t realize that during sexual release the highest level of endorphins and enkephalins are transmitted to the medial preoptic nucleus in the brain. In essence, the brain gets a strong chemical reward that attaches to whatever or whomever the person is looking at—whether real or imaginary, pornography or fantasy.

As Christians, we can understand why God intended to reserve sex solely for marriage—so that husband and wife attach only to each other.

Often the sexually addicted woman becomes addicted to the sexual high from this fantasy. She becomes “hooked,” so to speak. This makes sense when we read Paul’s words, “All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body” (1 Cor. 6:18, NIV). The sex addict is setting up a biological device that is unhealthy for her and destructive to her faith.

Even a Spirit-filled woman who regularly prays and reads God’s Word can have a sexual reward system that moves her into desiring what she knows is wrong. Internal struggles occur as her body desires her conditioned behavior, even though her

spirit desires purity. Some of these women may feel God made them defective and unworthy of any real love.

Setting the Captive Free

Thank God for Jesus, who came to set the captives free! Many of the sexually addicted women and men who fly from all over the country to our office are Spirit-filled believers.

How can that be, you ask? Most of them need healing in their souls.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:23 Paul encourages us to sanctify our spirit, soul and body. Sexual addiction can be rooted in any or all these areas within the body.

I remember vividly when I accepted Christ as my Savior at 19 years of age. He instantly delivered me from alcohol and drugs. Yet I continued to struggle with sexual addiction.

I was in Bible college, attending church and chapel several times a week. I memorized Scripture, prayed and regularly fasted for what I thought was just a spiritual problem.

Years later God started to heal me and showed me practical steps to take that would allow Him to begin healing my soul. As I obeyed these principles God set before me, I was able to break free and remain that way.

What does this freedom look like today? It is freedom from ongoing lust, freedom from the fear of someone finding out about the secrets, freedom to enjoy the real joy of intimacy with my spouse, and freedom of having a clear conscience before God and men. Plus, it's my greatest joy now to be able to help others get and stay free.

God wants every woman and man to have such freedom in their lives. He wants them to be free from the kinds of secrets Marsha was struggling with.

How does someone like Marsha get free and stay free? It's a process that involves several components. Not all sex addicts need to participate in each of these processes, though most women who are sexually addicted have to work through the list.

1. Honesty. She must be honest about herself, which means she can't have any secrets. Some women even go so far as to take polygraph exams so their husbands can know for sure that they are not engaging in sexual behaviors outside their marriages.

2. Accountability and support. Another component of this healing process is the need for accountability and support. Few churches have support groups for female sex addicts, though church would be a great place for this type of ministry. Some sexually addicted women attend a secular 12-step support group called Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous. Others locate a support and accountability structure with other Christian women in their church.

3. Spiritual growth. Another aspect of the healing process requires a daily regimen that fosters spiritual growth. Reading God's Word, praying and fasting are great disciplines for those with addictions. Reading literature about recovering from female sex addiction is a crucial element in understanding the addiction and the recovery process. The Secret Solutions Workbook has more than 100 practical exercises that female addicts can walk through along with a female accountability partner or therapist.

4. Christian counseling. Christian counseling can also be very helpful. Unfortunately there are few Christian counselors who deal with sexual addiction. In my office I am blessed to have a female counselor who is a recovering sex addict and who offers telephone counseling and three-day intensive workshops for female sex addicts.

Safe People, Safe Havens

Women such as Marsha can get free and stay free by following a

lifestyle of honesty, accountability, support and spiritual growth. I have seen so many women, including former prostitutes, break free from their sexual addictions.

It's beautiful to see God restore a woman to her original grace and giftedness. As she gets free from her sexual behaviors, she often senses a spiritual calling.

In the research we conducted for the book *She Has a Secret*, we found that women who overcome sexual addiction are twice as likely to start regularly attending church and become active members. Without shame or fear they can lift up holy hands and worship God with sincere adoration. My experience is that those who are forgiven much, love much—just as Jesus said about the woman who washed His feet with her tears and hair.

I encourage churches to start Freedom Groups, which are accountability work groups for men and women to break free from sexual addiction. This is a vast plague facing the church today. If the church is deaf to these cries, sex addicts will have to seek secular help. Today's church can take the lead in healing the brokenhearted.

Regularly I am seeing women and men called into this healing ministry. What a great day it is when the sexually broken in the world can go to a church to get and stay free.

My prayer is that any woman struggling with a secret life of sexual addiction will take the next step and tell a safe person. She needs to ask God for direction and to send her someone who can help. Who knows—she may eventually become that safe haven for others who are enduring the torment of a secret life.

What happened to Marsha? She's doing great! Not only is she a strong, beautiful Christian woman, but she is happily married and sexually pure. She graduated from college and is now helping other women to overcome struggles similar to hers.

Isn't that just like Jesus, to take a person such as Marsha and raise her out of the rubble of abuse, neglect, pain and shame and move her into a life-giving ministry? I have seen the process of this miracle repeated so often in our office that we've come to expect miraculous outcomes when hurting souls walk through our door!

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