

Sex Addiction: Real Disease or Just Bad Behavior?

Sex addiction makes headlines every time a politician or celebrity is caught in a compromising position and blames it on the condition. The latest, of course, is New York mayoral candidate Anthony Weiner.

But is sex addiction really a disease like alcoholism? UCLA professor of psychiatry Dr. Gary Small discussed the nature of addiction with Newsmax Health.

Sex addiction did not make the cut in the latest edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, often called the DSM-5 and considered the Bible of mental health conditions. Regardless, hypersexuality—as Dr. Small calls it—is a problematic behavior that can damage people's lives.

"It's clear that it falls into the category of [an] obsessive and compulsive problem, and to me it clearly does have elements of an addiction, where there's a behavior that is compulsive, hard to control, that people have disruptions in their life," he explains. "It clearly affects their self-esteem, their relationships, and can affect their careers as we have seen in people in the limelight."

When you consider hypersexuality in relation to drug and alcohol addictions, there are differences and similarities, Small observes. Sex addiction, like food and gambling addictions, does not result in the physiological response that drug and alcohol addicts experience when they go without their substance of choice.

"On the other hand, the behaviors are very similar," Small says. "There are these compulsive behaviors that disrupt people's lives. The addict has trouble diminishing those

behaviors. When they're not engaging in the behaviors, they think about them. And it makes a big difference in their lives in a very negative way."

Research by Small's UCLA colleague Nicole Prause found that sexually provocative images viewed by self-described sex addicts did not produce the same reaction in their brain waves that cocaine and other substance-abuse addicts experience. The experiment, which used electroencephalography, led Prause to conclude that hypersexuality is unlikely a true addiction.

However, the work does not prove brain changes don't occur with hypersexuality, and more research is needed, says Dr. Small, author of *The Mind Health Report*.

While Dr. Small refrains from diagnosing Weiner "at a distance," he says that in general, when people experience uncontrolled urges that negatively impact their lives, they should seek professional help.

"It's clear to me that there are many people who suffer from hypersexuality to the point that it is disrupting their lives, and getting into therapy helps," he says. "There are many different kinds of programs—group therapy, 12-step programs, individual therapy—where it can make a difference in people's life, but they have to want to change."

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