

Sexual Addiction - Help for the Sex Addict's Spouse

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Can a spouse of someone with sexual addiction seek help individually to cope with the effects of the addiction on their lives? Absolutely. However, it's often a crisis, such as the discovery of addictive behavior, that prompts both the person with the sex addiction and the spouse to seek treatment together. Typically, they pursue services concurrently, provided the spouse also seeks assistance. Sadly, the sexually addicted person alone is often the focus of treatment.

While inpatient and outpatient services exist, many couples grappling with this illness struggle to find suitable treatment providers. Couples may opt for marriage counseling, which may not necessarily address the sexual addiction. Often, couples bring a range of relationship issues to counseling that may not immediately point to sexual addiction. Moreover, addiction-related behaviors or problems might be concealed, intentionally or unintentionally, from the therapist, and the couple may fail to recognize the connections between the sexual behavior and other issues. Additionally, many treatment providers lack adequate knowledge about sexual addiction.

However, sexual addiction calls for treatment. Once correctly diagnosed, the primary goal for the sexually addicted person is usually abstinence from compulsive sexual behaviors. Defining "abstinence" in sexual addiction treatment isn't as straightforward as it is in drug addiction treatment. Though lifetime abstinence isn't typically recommended, treatment often involves complete sexual abstinence for a period, usually 60-90 days. Spouses must be part of discussions regarding the definition and expectations of abstinence within the marriage, as assumptions may lead to misunderstandings.

Treatment for both partners entails education about sexual addiction and using all available recovery resources, such as Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA), Sexaholics Anonymous (SA), Co-SA (Co-dependents of Sex Addicts), group counseling, and individual and couples counseling. Therapists often recommend additional reading materials. See the [Recommended Readings](#) page.

Initially, many spouses view the addiction as solely the problem of the person with sex addiction. However, upon realizing the devastation it brings to their own lives, they recognize the importance of counseling. Counseling facilitates communication and encourages effective, non-acting-out dialogue, fair fighting, and active listening skills. These communication changes aid in taking the risks for a comprehensive disclosure of sexually compulsive behavior. While both the addict and spouse experience relief in sharing secrets, they also grapple with overwhelming shame and grief. The spouse may mourn the loss of their perceived ideal marriage, while the afflicted person may mourn the loss of the addiction.

Painful issues will surface, necessitating practical communication skills to address them. Despite discussing these issues with each other, shame may still lead the couple to want to withdraw from family and friends. It takes effort to stay connected, which usually improves over time during the recovery process.

Rebuilding trust and intimacy in the relationship and addressing damage in financial and other life domains becomes essential. Negative consequences of sexual addiction, such as job loss, financial ruin, and legal issues, require emotional processing and problem-solving skills. Partners need assistance navigating through the emotional aftermath, rebuilding trust, and restoring openness in the relationship.


The spouse requires therapeutic attention, too. Treatment goals for the non-addicted spouse may involve discussing feelings about the addiction and assessing its impact on them individually. Spouses often blame themselves for the addiction, believing they could have prevented it. Counseling helps them let go of responsibility for their loved one's

recovery, cease any inappropriate caretaking or enabling behaviors, and empower themselves based on strengths rather than fear. Addressing self-esteem is crucial, as spouses uncover their issues during recovery.

As recovery progresses, spouses can rebuild, though it's a lengthy process. Counseling facilitates this process by addressing past issues and reminding the person with addiction that time is required for their spouse to work through their feelings. The spouse's ability to trust the loved one with addiction partly depends on the recovering partner's willingness to be honest, consistent, dependable, and sensitive to their feelings and needs.

Counseling also helps the non-addicted spouse develop a plan for dealing with relapse, defining personal boundaries and bottom lines, and prioritizing self-care. Through this process, spouses learn to trust their own judgment and reality, making decisions conducive to their well-being and happiness.

Treatment isn't just for the person who has a sexual addiction. Even if that person doesn't recover, the spouse can recover if willing to put in the effort. Merely divorcing someone with sexual addiction seldom resolves the spouse's issues. Without intervention, emotional baggage persists and complicates future relationships. **Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2009 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy.**



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