

How to Find Help For Sexual Addiction

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Treatment for sex addiction can take place in either an inpatient or outpatient setting. Similar to addiction treatment for alcohol and other substances, therapeutically addressing sex addiction usually involves individual and group counseling, addiction education, and self-help involvement. Individuals should weigh the advantages and disadvantages when deciding between inpatient and outpatient programs. Inpatient treatment offers a highly structured environment, which can make early recovery less prone to relapse. Conversely, outpatient programs offer more freedom as individuals continue to live in the real world while applying the skills learned in treatment.

The primary immediate objective of sex addiction treatment is to halt compulsive sexual behaviors. Early treatment tasks are to identify problematic sexual behaviors, personally define recovery, and acquire abstinence skills.

With assistance, individuals identify accountability partners (such as counselors, 12-step groups, or clergy) to support them in abstaining from problematic sexual behaviors. While "abstinence" in alcohol and substance addiction is straightforward, defining it in sexual addiction requires more consideration. Though complete sexual abstinence is not typically a long-term goal in sexual addiction recovery, early recovery may involve temporary abstinence from all sexual behaviors. Therapists teach various craving management and other skills to support abstinence in early recovery.

Beyond abstinence, a key therapeutic goal is gaining insight into how addictive behaviors impact various aspects of life. Through therapeutic guidance, individuals begin to recognize the harm caused to themselves

and others by their addictions, which helps dismantle denial mechanisms that perpetuate destructive behaviors and emotional distress. Diminishing denial reduces the risk of relapse. Similar to recovery from other addictions, treatment focuses on identifying triggers for relapse and establishing a relapse prevention plan. Negative feelings associated with addiction, such as shame and guilt, are often addressed in group settings where peers offer support, challenge defense mechanisms, and help reduce shame.

Individuals have an opportunity to address their grief and loss stemming from addiction-related consequences. They are encouraged to identify and replace roles filled by sexual acting out with healthy living skills. Counseling services often involve couples and family therapy, which assists in improving communication, problem-solving, and working through feelings of betrayal experienced by non-addicted partners. Recovering individuals are urged to build a robust support network and practice reaching out to fulfill dependency needs, countering the social isolation common in sexual addiction. Participation in 12-step or other recovery groups is usually recommended.

Sex addiction frequently coexists with other disorders, such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and compulsive spending. Treatment typically addresses these co-occurring conditions concurrently, with support group participation often encouraged for other addictions.

Counselors and the person seeking recovery from sexual addiction construct a treatment plan to address the components of sex addiction, aiming for relapse prevention, resolution of intrapersonal and interpersonal issues, and the substitution of problematic behaviors with healthy living skills. Recovery from sexual addiction is achievable, and resources for support are accessible. For local assistance, individuals can contact national treatment or local substance abuse facilities for referrals. **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 clarity and accuracy.**

