

Sexual Anorexia—The Mirror of Sex Addiction

Systems often work just as well in reverse. I collect old outboard motors built in the days before clutches and transmissions. These engines shifted into reverse simply by spinning the motor in the opposite direction.

This image of a boat motor as a system capable of spinning in both directions can be used to help understand another sexual disorder called sexual anorexia. Sexual anorexics have an aversion to being sexual. As a beginner in recovery from sex addiction, you may well wonder what on earth this has to do with you. The answer is that many sex addicts have an aversion problem too, and they will not become healthy until they understand this. Many addicts also switch to sexual anorexia, mistaking sexual inactivity for recovery. But by trying to avoid sex completely, they only make themselves vulnerable to relapse. Recovering addicts must understand the dynamics of aversion from the start.

The sexually anorexic simply avoids sex. They hate all things connected with sex. In its most pure form, it means that the anorexic will go to extreme lengths to avoid being sexual.

Consider the story of Stan who, at the age of 38, was suicidal due to his loneliness and isolation. He had never touched a woman, held hands, kissed, or dated. Further, he never wanted to. He came from a family with an alcoholic mother who was sexually out of control. His father had killed himself at the discovery of yet another affair by his mother. After his dad's death when Stan was 12, most of Stan's teenage years were filled with embarrassment at his mother's sexual escapades. He also had to fend off her sexual initiatives with him to the point where he actually had to forcibly take her hands off of him on different occasions. She argued that she had friends who were sexual with their sons and it was good for them. As an adult, he perceived sex as the source of all his pain and refused to allow himself to have sexual feelings. As a result, he found himself isolated and fearful.

Anorexics like Stan have common characteristics:

- dread of sexual pleasure
- fear of sexual contact
- despair after sexual contact
- obsessive vigilance about sexual matters
- avoidance of anything connected with sex
- preoccupation with other people being sexual
- distortions about personal body appearance
- extreme loathing of body functions
- obsessional self-doubt about sexual adequacy
- excessive fear of sexually transmitted diseases

- rigid judgmental attitudes
- self-destructive behavior to limit, stop, or avoid sex

The sexually anorexic system works the same way the addictive system works. It starts with unhealthy beliefs about sex and relationships. The same core beliefs exist about feeling defective, unworthy, and unlovable as a person. Anorexics also believe that sex is dangerous and are terrified of their own sexual needs. Out of these dysfunctional beliefs stem impaired thinking. To think, for example, that “everyone will take sexual advantage of me if I let them” is a major distortion of reality. Yet anorexics use many such distortions to keep sex at a distance. Similar compulsive cycles also exist, only the anorexic is preoccupied and obsessed with avoiding sex. Likewise, anorexics go through elaborate rituals, or distancing strategies, to avoid bringing sexual attention to themselves. Some, for example, go to extreme lengths to look unattractive and are then compulsively nonsexual or aversive. Then, they despair about this. The unmanageability is often harder to see than in sex addiction. Yet to lose a marriage because of being sexually unavailable to your partner is still to lose a marriage. To sexual anorexics, such events merely confirm their original premise of being unlovable. Figure 2.3 compares the addictive system and the anorexic system.

Sexual Anorexia and Sexual Addiction Compared

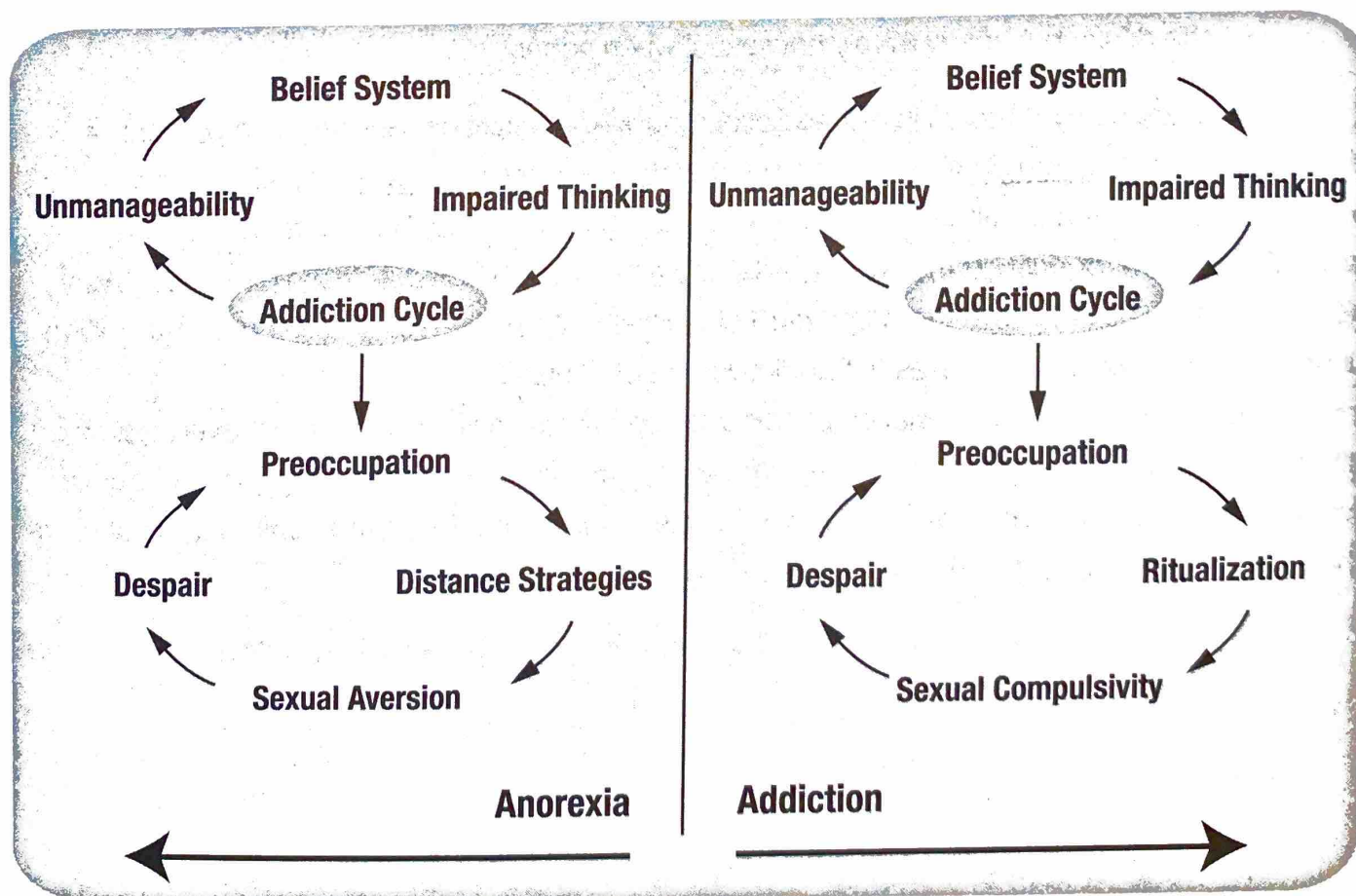


Figure 2.3

Belief System

Many sex addicts are also sexually aversive. The following are examples of ways aversion fits with sex addiction:

- When sex addicts act outside of their relationship easily but find themselves avoiding sex with their partner. (Many anorexics find it difficult to be sexual with people they really care for or are vulnerable to.)
- When addicts binge and then go through a period in which they avoid all sex. (Addicts feel so bad about the binge, they “diet.”)
- When addicts compartmentalize their lives so that one part is out of control while the other is under “super” control. (Think of a clergyman who preaches against promiscuity and pornography, yet in private, his life is out of control sexually.)
- When long periods of acting out are followed by long periods of sexual deprivation, the addiction has simply switched to the anorexic mode.
- When sex addiction and anorexia switch with other addictions. (An example would be a sex addict, who is also a food anorexic, who gets married and then begins to overeat compulsively and becomes sexually anorexic.)
- When the use of one addiction switches sexual behavior from addictive to anorexic. (For example, the sexual abuse survivor and alcoholic who is compulsively sexual when she drinks but compulsively nonsexual when sober.)

There are many patterns in sex addiction and sexual anorexia. Seventy-two percent of addicts can identify some degree of binge-purge behavior in their sexuality. Fifteen percent do addiction and anorexia simultaneously. Some people are so driven by both patterns that they will mutilate, harm, or destroy their own genitals as a way to stop living in these extremes. Many addicts say they have considered some form of permanent self-harm as a solution. It is crucial to understand the aversive as well as the addictive part of yourself.

The contradictory combination of addiction and aversion is a potent, often overwhelming affliction, especially because it causes extreme shame and guilt on both ends of the spectrum. I would reassure you that there is hope. Many people, once having faced the conflicting demons in their life, use the tools outlined in this book to find hope and healing.

Sexual Anorexia List

You may still think this situation does not apply to you. Do the following exercises and see if it starts to make more sense to you.

List five examples of times you have become aversive to sex. Think of times when you have avoided sexual contact, felt sexual self-hatred, or have entered into a period of extreme deprivation.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Describe three examples of ways your sex addiction and sexual anorexia go together.

1. _____
