

The Life-Altering Realities of Sex and Love Addiction

By Jessica Wakeman. July 14, 2017 11:30 am



PHOTO: Leah Schrager

An ex Charlene deGuzman had slept with wasn't texting her back. For most of us, this would be annoying—a reason to wallow for an evening while blasting Beyoncé. But for deGuzman, who was in the throes of love and sex addiction at the time, not getting a response from an "unavailable" man lead her perilously close to suicide.

"That was my first moment seeing that I had really become unwell," the 33-year-old from Los Angeles recalls. "I seriously wanted to kill myself—like, in a very serious way," she says, because of "a guy who never liked me to begin with not texting me back."

The term "sex addict" might call to mind a male celeb who just got busted with the nanny: His face is plastered on the front page of a tabloid, eyes averted, the term "SEX ADDICT!" blaring on the cover in 72-point font. This is most people's impression of the addiction: tawdry, pervy, sad, an excuse for laddish behaviour. As Gwyneth Paltrow's character jokes in the 2014 film *Thanks for Sharing*, when she learns the guy she is dating is a sex addict, "Isn't that just something guys say they're doing when they get caught cheating?"

In reality, sex addiction is much more complicated—and it doesn't only affect men. Just as an alcoholic continues over-drinking even when it does her harm, a sex and love addict seeks out emotional and physical fulfillment from others, even when it hurts her.

Some addicts say they primarily have a sex addiction, while others lean toward the love addiction side of things. Either way, explains Linda Hudson, LSW, co-author of *Making Advances: A*

Comprehensive Guide for Treating Female Sex and Love Addicts, a sex and love addiction describes a pattern of relationship behaviour that is compulsive, out of control, and continues despite the consequences.

Addicts tend to zero in on whoever's available—no matter how married, engaged, far away, or otherwise inappropriate he or she might be. “[With sex addiction] it’s not really about the person,” Hudson says. “People become objects to be used and not people to be related to.”

Our society mostly focuses on guys with sex addiction because, well, from the outside their spiralling-out looks pretty juicy. Male sex addicts are more likely to pursue commercial sex, explains Hudson, so they’ll turn to massage parlours, strip clubs, or online relationships to get their fix. Often, they don’t get caught until they do something illegal and/or incredibly stupid (paging Anthony Weiner), which makes the sex addict tabloid stereotype all the more salacious.

Men with sex addiction are more inclined to “just want to have sex and then move on” as opposed to becoming entwined in the emotional aspects of the relationship, Hudson explains, but sex addicts of both genders need continuous hits of attention and affection—women just go about it more privately.

Despite the name, sex and love addiction is the opposite of sexy—it is a deeply anguished and often isolating affliction. Charlene deGuzman says her sex addiction started as a “hunger for love and attention and validation.” For her, the confusion came from misplaced messages about her self-worth. “I had this story from a very early age that a woman who was sexually desired, a woman who was sexual, a woman men wanted to have sex with, was of value,” she told Glamour. “I believed that that was all I was good for.”

Throughout her 20s, she assumed other straight women were reacting or feeling the way she did with men and that “all that guys would want from me” was sex. So she used sex as “a tool,” in her words, to keep men close to her. The trouble was, DeGuzman chose men who couldn’t or wouldn’t commit to her. When she got to the place where she felt suicidal over the guy who wouldn’t text back, “I wanted crumbs from guys at that point.”

It’s a story that sounds familiar to Lee Riley*, a 60-something woman (she declined to share her exact age, preferring to identify as “old enough to know better”) living in Los Angeles who is also a sex addict. “From as early as I can remember, I would be what was called boy-crazy by anybody who was watching,” Riley says. But this “boy-craziness” didn’t stop in her teenage years, or her 20s, or even her 30s. She described her addiction as “having sex with people I would not have lunch with” and “sitting and obsessing and fantasizing and making up scenarios in these big complex romantic fantasies.”

SUMMER OF SEX

Riley thinks her sex addiction flew under the radar in part because society sort of expects—if not outright encourages—obsessive relationship behaviour in women. After all, it appears frequently in rom-coms and pop songs, she says. But while movies and music nearly always have a happy ending, Riley's reality was much different: "I was spending much too much time balled up on the floor in the foetal position, clutching my belly, just wanting to die because some guy hadn't called me back."

At age 42, after getting clean from a cocaine addiction, Riley eventually realized the anguish she felt over parting ways with a man was lasting "longer than the so-called relationship," she says. "I would date someone for six weeks and I would suffer over it for six months. It was just becoming unbearable." Her obsession with sex and relationships affected her daily life, including her career in Hollywood: "You're sitting at your desk fantasizing about having a relationship with your married boss. Or [actually] having a relationship with your married boss—[I've] done that more than once!"

Married men were a particular problem for Riley. "Running around with married men was just, like, 'This is so fun! I don't have to make any commitment! I just get all the good, fun parts and they treat me like a princess and we don't have to argue about bills or any of the dull parts!'" The expansion of women's sexual freedom made it easier for Riley to justify her harmful behaviour as "rebellious" or "antiauthoritarian," she said, because it's more palatable to consider yourself "free-spirited" than, say, a homewrecker. "I look back on it now and I think, Wow, I was really hurting a lot of people."

But as with any type of addiction, the addict in question probably isn't thinking clearly about who her behaviour could hurt. Addiction is a brain disease, and the illness is in control. "The experience of the addict is way more about the let-down than the high," says Riley. "We don't do it because the addictive substance feels so good, but because nothing else in life feels at all."

Recovery for deGuzman and Riley came from joining Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA). Like Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous, it's a 12-step group that provides a support system for anyone seeking to control an addiction, though individual therapy can be helpful as well, explains Linda Hudson, the counsellor. In particular, she says, addressing sexual trauma from childhood or teenage years may help sex addicts gain perspective on their behaviour.

An enormous part of recovery for sex addicts is establishing healthy boundaries. "One of the most important things in the treatment process is learning that you have rights, you have limits, you get to say no," says Hudson. Sex and relationship addicts can be so accustomed to accepting

“crumbs,” as deGuzman put it, that they may not know how to leave a relationship that doesn’t feel good.

There’s also the need to stop sexualizing any kind of nurturing and instead give platonic friendships or professional relationships with the opposite sex room to breathe. Sexualizing every relationship “frequently happens if you don’t have good boundaries and you learn that sex is love,” Hudson explains. “Then you start sexualizing everything—affection or appreciation or admiration turns into sex.”

DeGuzman went to her first SLAA meeting when she was 27, at a friend’s suggestion. “I thought it was bullshit, I thought everyone was crazy there, and I thought I was fine,” she recalls. But three years later, after the suicidal thoughts, she found herself back at the meetings and on a path to recovery.

“The first step for me—which was the hardest and seemed impossible—was to completely withdraw,” she recalls. “So that meant getting out of this relationship with this guy, which took months because I really wasn’t willing to do it.” When deGuzman finally committed to kicking her addiction in January 2015, she still suffered through the physical and emotional pain of withdrawals just like any other addict.

Wrestling control of her sex and love addiction meant going cold turkey from everything she once loved. “I refrained from everything: dating, guys, contacting my ex, flirting, masturbation—which was really hard,” she says. “I went a year off masturbation and then I went like a year and a half without sex. “

No sex—with herself or anyone else—was an eye-opener for deGuzman, who found herself exploring new interests. She became hugely productive as a writer, actress, and YouTube performer. In fact, she penned a screenplay for Unlovable, a film about sex and love addiction, which has raised over \$60,000 on Kickstarter and has Patton Oswalt as a producer.

In sobriety, says deGuzman, “I realized I had no idea who I was. I had always just tried to be whoever [the boy I was with] wanted me to be. I had never said no before because I was always so eager to be with any guy who gave me attention.” In March 2016, she introduced a healthy dating plan into her life, and she now carries a list of “red flags” on her phone.

Lee Riley has been sober from cocaine for 29 years and in recovery for sex addiction for about two decades. She currently dates, but has no plans to marry again. For her, the status of sex and love addiction in terms of how it’s viewed by the public is somewhat “like where alcoholism was in the 1950s, or drug addiction was in the 1970s.” That is to say that the addiction is treated as “very shameful, being very mentally ill, being [an] outlier.”

“I think one of the reasons it is such a big deal when an Anthony Weiner is ‘caught’ is because this is a very successful person. He’s not, like, some gutter dweller. This a successful person who is doing these crazy things.”

She adds, “You know what? Lots of successful people are doing these crazy things.”

**Names changed where indicated.*