

When You Become an Acting Out Partner..... But Don't Know It. PART 1



This week we are going to talk about a phenomenon that is most frequently experienced by partners of sex addicts, though individuals dealing with other forms of sexual betrayal (porn use, affairs, etc.) may also recognize pieces of this phenomenon in their experience.

When most people think about sexual compulsivity/addiction, they think about the ways in which someone is being compulsive *outside* of his or her primary relationship. And for many sex addicts, this is the way that compulsive sexual behaviors manifest. However, some sex addicts are compulsive with sex *inside* their relationship, seeing their partner as another source of the sexual high and the emotional escape provided by that high.

As we discuss this topic, I want to give you a word of caution. It can be easy with this issue to get triggered into reviewing every nuance of your sexual life with your partner to determine if this topic applies to you. In my experience, the betrayed partners who have had the experience of being used as an unwitting sexual acting out partner do not have to search for nuances or hints about it. It is a very clear and overwhelming behavioral pattern in the relationship.

So, if this does not apply to you, do not let your fear cause you to start to believe that it does. I have had clients who have heard this material go home and accuse their spouse of using them sexually when the spouse has actually been avoidant or compartmentalized. So be careful with this issue. I want to validate and support those who have had this experience, while preventing those of you who have not from “borrowing trouble” based on fear rather than facts.

OK, back to our discussion.

When betrayed partners are in a relationship where their sexually addicted spouse is using them to act out sexually, the betrayed partner is often confused or unclear about what is happening. The betrayed partner views sex as a mutually loving, bonding, emotionally intimate experience. The addict, however, can view sex as a way to “get high” and escape from stress, anxiety, depression, and other forms of emotional discomfort. This dichotomy is perplexing to the betrayed partner.

Often, the addict completely loses sight of his or her partner as a loving companion and sexual partner. The emotional intimacy and connectivity disappear from the sex act. In this dynamic, sex eventually becomes a central conflictual topic in the relationship as the addicted partner becomes more demanding and manipulative, sexually. Objections from the betrayed partner are seen by the addict not as an indication that something is amiss, but as obstacles to overcome in pursuit of the drug.

Betrayed partners in this type of relationship express feeling dehumanized and objectified by their spouse. They often say they feel used as a “receptacle” or “tool” rather than connected with and loved as a person.

Once these betrayed partners enter therapy and begin to learn about sexual addiction and to sort through their relationship, their stories of heartbreak come spilling out, even though these tales are difficult to tell. These betrayed individuals often feel enormous shame and confusion, and they are uncertain about what is healthy, what is unhealthy, what is addiction, and what is normal. In addition, they may have been coerced into sex (or sex they’re not comfortable with) by the sex addict. Many times, betrayed partners feel alone and ashamed, believing no one else has ever had this same experience.

Here are a few stories of heartbreak:

Joy sat in my office and slowly, quietly, while looking at the floor, told me about years of sex with her spouse where he viewed pornography while having sex with her, often never breaking eye contact with the pornography to even acknowledge her presence.

Stacy angrily talked to me during a session about how her husband insisted on having sex with her three days after the birth of their second child, causing her intense physical and emotional pain.

Amber stared at the whiteboard on the wall behind me as she told about her spouse requiring sex one to three times per day, every day, and withdrawing in angry silence or erupting in rage and taking out his anger on the entire family when she wasn’t willing to provide it.

Callie sat with tears streaming down her face and told me about figuring out that her husband had been drugging her and then having sex with her (raping her) while she slept.

Lucille told me about years of discussions about her supposedly low libido and visits to doctors as a result of pressure from her husband to try to get her to find a solution to why she didn’t want as much sex as he wanted.

These are stories of bodies being used, physical pain being caused, and shame being experienced. Each of these women told her story with sadness in her voice and confusion in her eyes as she tried to sort out how the person who claimed to love her and spoke the language of wanting to *make love* to her was actually using her the way a drug addict uses his drug.

If you see yourself in one of the stories above, please know that you are not alone. Others have experienced the pain, confusion, shame and anger that can result from finding yourself caught up in your significant other’s addiction. Next week we are going to continue looking at this topic and the emotional impacts to the betrayed partner.

PART 2



A few weeks ago, we began a conversation about sex after betrayal. In my first post on this topic we discussed how some betrayed partners experience no sex or a lack of sex in their relationship even though their partner is highly sexual with porn or other people. Last week, we talked about what it feels like to be used as a sexual acting out partner by a sex addict. We will continue that discussion here, looking at the emotional and relational dynamics of that behavior.

The simple truth is that sex addiction does not just disrupt sex. It disrupts all aspects of the relationship. When sex addiction hijacks and distorts the sexual relationship, it is accompanied by emotional and relational dynamics that are also damaging to the relationship and the betrayed partner.

I have examined four of these dynamics below:

The addicted partner's sexuality becomes the organizing force in the relationship.

Because sex has become the central organizing experience for the addicted individual, he or she can elevate the importance of his or her sexual needs and desires above any and all needs of the betrayed partner. The addict might do this through playing the gender card: "I'm a man and need more sex," or, "I'm a woman and need to be romanced a certain way." The addict might also play the uniqueness card: "I have a high libido," or, "I have special sexual needs that you need to take care of." Either way, the relationship begins to revolve around the addicted partner's sexuality. The betrayed partner is thought of only in service to the addict's sexuality, not as a separate entity in the relationship worthy of attention and respect.

For women, this can be particularly challenging to deal with. Women are socialized to believe that they are responsible for men's sexuality. They are taught that they are required to please and take care of men sexually. Women's sexuality—what they want, what they enjoy, who they are sexually—is seen as secondary or non-existent. Learning to have a voice sexually and to take responsibility for their own sexuality is an enormous recovery task for many betrayed women. It can also be an enormous task for male betrayed partners.

Manipulation and coercion are used to induce guilt in the betrayed partner and gain sexual cooperation.

Sexually addicted individuals who are using their partner to act out can badger, cajole, and nag until they wear the partner down. The betrayed partner will often give in sexually as a way to stop the badgering and manipulation and to alleviate feelings of guilt. This type of coercion can take many forms in the relationship. Here are a few examples:

- The addict pressures or hounds the partner to provide sex more frequently than the partner desires.
- The addict asks, manipulates, or pressures the partner into doing sexual things the partner is uncomfortable with.
- The addict forces the partner to be sexual or is sexual with the partner when the partner is unaware of it (rape).
- The addict criticizes the partner's sexuality as a form of pressure and manipulation (telling the partner he or she is cold, unadventurous, prudish, unavailable, etc.)
- The addict insists that something is wrong with the partner's sex drive and badgers the partner to see a doctor about it.
- The addict criticizes the partner's body, clothing, hairstyle, sexual performance, personality, sexual preferences, etc., as a form of manipulation.

The betrayed partner is threatened with some form of abandonment if he or she doesn't provide sex.

Some sexually addicted individuals will use the (sometimes unspoken) threat that if the partner doesn't cooperate sexually, the addict will abandon the partner in some way, either by walling off and distancing emotionally or by going outside of the relationship sexually. This dynamic keeps the addicted partner in a one-up position and the betrayed partner in a one-down position in the relationship. The addict is asserting power and control over the betrayed partner by threatening the withdrawal of relationship if the partner does not agree to sex on the addict's terms.

One of the most common dynamics reported to me by betrayed partners is that they (and sometimes their children) have received the silent treatment for days on end, or they've dealt with ongoing anger and irritability, or they've been emotionally walled off, or they've dealt with a generally uncooperative spouse until they gave in and provided sex. This dynamic is more than just sexual addiction in play; it crosses over into a form of emotional manipulation and abuse within the relationship and household.

The betrayed partner loses his or her sense of a sexual self.

When sex addiction has hijacked and distorted the sexual relationship, there is often significant injury and damage to the betrayed partner's sense of sexuality as a result. In fact, many partners in this situation report trauma symptoms similar to those experienced by survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

Below is a list of common sexual trauma symptoms described by therapist Wendy Maltz in her book, *The Sexual Healing Journey*, written for survivors of childhood sexual abuse. See if any of these items resonate with you regarding the impact of your partner's sexual addiction to your sexuality:

- Avoiding or being afraid of sex
- Approaching sex as an obligation
- Experiencing negative feelings such as anger, disgust, or guilt with touch
- Having difficulty becoming aroused or feeling sensation
- Feeling emotionally distant or not present during sex
- Experiencing intrusive or disturbing sexual thoughts and images
- Engaging in compulsive or inappropriate sexual behaviors
- Experiencing difficulty establishing or maintaining an intimate relationship
- Experiencing vaginal pain or orgasmic difficulties

Do you see yourself in this list? Do you recognize yourself in the stories and descriptions we looked at last week and this week? If so, you are not alone. And you are not alone in feeling the effects. When sex addiction hijacks the sexual relationship and you as the betrayed partner become an unwitting source of sex for the addiction, it can create enormous damage and injury to you and to your relationship with your partner.

The impacts of this type of injury require skilled help and support to heal. But even before that, they must simply be acknowledged. We often do not provide space for these stories to be told—for the pain, shame, anger, and confusion to be spoken and heard. Too often, the sexual injuries caused by betrayal and addiction have been addressed only as a side issue if at all. Or perhaps the betrayed partner has talked in his or her individual therapy about it, but it has not been introduced as a central topic in need of deep healing within the couple.

My hope is that these blog posts on the sexual injuries caused by betrayal will be a step in the direction of bringing this topic into the light of day so that both betrayed partners, and the partners who have hurt them, can begin to heal.