

# Women Sex Addicts and Their Husbands: Problems and Recovery Issues

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*Previously published materials about married sex addicts have directed their main attention to male sex addicts and their wives. This study obtained information about married female sex addicts and their husbands. Twelve women and 8 of their husbands separately completed lengthy anonymous questionnaires, and an additional twelve women and nine husbands were interviewed by telephone. All 24 women had attended some twelve-step program for recovering sex addicts, and most husbands had also attended a twelve-step program. Of the 24 women, ages 24 to 51 (mean age 36), 5 (21%) were also recovering from chemical dependency. Of the 17 husbands, ages 25 to 57 (mean age 38), 10 (59%) were chemically dependent and 8 (47%) were sex addicts. Only 29% were neither chemically addicted nor sexually addicted.*

**S**everal women married to male sex addicts identified their own sexual addiction only after attending 12-step programs for spouses of sex addicts. Unlike most male sex addicts, almost all women, whether married to sex addicts or not, were aware of their coaddiction and codependency; and many recognized that their codependency interfered with their recovery. Several found it difficult to request an abstinence period or to set boundaries on sexual activities for fear of displeasing the husband. Attending the same 12-step meeting brought out the wife's codependency and interfered with open sharing. Sex addicts married to each other had to learn how to avoid triggering each other's addiction.

The two most important factors determining a husband's reactions to his wife's sexual addiction were his own identification as a sex addict and the extent of his partner's sexual activity outside of marriage. Husbands who were not themselves sex addicts were more likely to minimize or explain away their partner's sex addiction and tended to be less accepting of the need for an ongoing recovery program.

Although only five years ago the concepts of sexual addiction/compulsivity were unfamiliar to most clinicians, there is now an increasing number of publications that address this problem.<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> Despite the fact that approximately 25% of the membership of self-help programs for sex addicts is female,<sup>5</sup> the early discussions of sexual addiction focused primarily on male addicts. One publication examined female sex addicts and coaddicts<sup>6</sup> but did not address recovery issues of married female sex addicts. Studies that specifically focused on couple recovery were

oriented primarily toward the male sex addict and his female spouse.<sup>7,8,9,10,11</sup> Mental health professionals thus far lacked information to help them counsel couples that include a female sex addict.

Our prior discussions with female sex addicts had suggested that, in comparison with male addicts, women were more in touch with their underlying codependency. Consequently, they tended to be 1) more confused about their primary addiction (asking "Am I an addict or a coaddict?") and 2) more influenced by their partner's expectations and reactions than male sex addicts. We had also observed that women sex addicts often chose male sex addicts as marriage partners, which led to another series of questions:

- How do such women balance their own recovery with that of their partner, and with the needs of the relationship?
- Do husbands who are themselves recovering sex addicts react differently to having a sexually addicted spouse than do husbands who are not themselves sex addicts?
- What happens when both members of the couple attend the same 12-step meeting?
- How do they avoid triggering each other's addiction?

To assist clinicians working with couples that include a female sex addict, and to test our informal observations and answer our questions about female sex addicts, we sought information about the problems specific to recovering women sex addicts and their husbands.

## METHOD

In preparation for a book about couples recovering from sexual addiction,<sup>12</sup> we distributed approximately 400 fourteen-page anonymous questionnaires across the U.S. over a one-year period to married couples attending support groups for sexual addicts and coaddicts. Each survey was completed individually by husband and wife and returned by mail. The surveys were coded so that it was possible to put together the responses of the members of each couple. Among the 67 men and 75 women who completed the survey, there were 75 addicts, of whom 12 (16%) were women; 8 of their husbands also returned surveys. In addition, we found 12 married female sex addicts through the "snowball technique" (one person leading us to another) and interviewed them and 9 of their husbands at length by telephone. In all cases, the husband was interviewed by the male researcher and the wife by the female researcher. One goal of the separately-completed questionnaires and the separate telephone interviews by the two researchers was to assure the subjects of

Abstract

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confidentiality so that they would feel comfortable divulging information that they might wish to conceal from their spouses.

This study thus examined 24 marriages in which the women identified themselves as sexually addicted. All had attended 12-step programs for sex addicts: Sexaholics Anonymous (SA), Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA), or Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA). Some had also attended a 12-step program for spouses of sex addicts: S-Anon or Co-dependents to Sex Addicts (COSA). Several women had attended AA, OA, or ACOA. Most of the husbands had attended some 12-step program. In addition, almost all respondents had undergone some type of psychotherapy or counseling, often both individual and couple.

## RESULTS

The 24 women studied averaged 36 years of age (range 24-51 years); their husbands 38 years (range 25-57). The women were employed as nurses, teachers, saleswomen, artists, counselors, and psychotherapists; two did not work outside the home. The demographics of the women who were interviewed by telephone appeared similar to those who completed the written questionnaire. The husbands' careers ranged from blue-collar workers to professionals. Five (21%) of the women also identified themselves as chemically dependent, as did 10 (59%) of the husbands. All were sober at the time of the study. Six of the 8 men completing the survey were recovering sex addicts, a finding expected in view of the way they were ascertained. Of the 12 women addicts found by the snowball technique, 2 had husbands who were sexually addicted. Among the 17 husbands in this study, only 5 (29%) were neither sexually addicted nor chemically dependent; 8 (47%) were sex addicts, of whom 6 (35% of the men) were also chemically dependent.

Half the women believed they had been sexually abused in childhood. This figure is most likely an underestimation, since childhood molestations tend to be repressed.

### *Sexual behaviors*

The compulsive sexual behaviors included extramarital affairs (58% of the women), prostitution (one woman), excessive masturbation, excessive fantasizing or obsessing about other men and women, flirtation with other men, exhibitionism, or a combination of all these. The women all considered themselves heterosexual, but several had been attracted to other women. A 34-year-old woman reported, "The only way I knew how to be close to people was to have sex with them. I had sex with lots of men, and then I decided I wanted to get close to women, so I had sex with them. I discovered I wasn't bisexual, so I stopped this behavior."

Several women reported a great deal of sexual activity before marriage, in contrast to infrequent sexual activity after marriage. This phenomenon was described by Klausner and Hasselbring,<sup>13</sup> who studied adult children of alcoholics. They wrote, "'Splitting,' in which we're either sexual or affectionate, but not both, is a common adaptation for many of us who have experienced some type of abuse or serious neglect in childhood. Unable to combine sex with affection because it stirs painful incest memories, we may opt for one or the other. In our study, the women said they either had nonsexual relationships with men or women they genuinely valued or loved, or engaged in frequent

sex with strangers—which allowed them to avoid partner intimacy."

### *Relationship between sexual addiction and coaddiction in women married to male sex addicts*

Several women who were married to recovering sex addicts identified their own sexual addiction only after recognizing their coaddiction and attending 12-step programs for spouses of sex addicts. This was particularly true of women who had not had affairs in the current marriage. For example, a 28-year-old woman realized she was a sex addict only after two years in S-Anon, when she found herself stuck in the recovery process and looked more closely at her own sexual behavior. She reported:

I never had an actual affair, but I had emotional affairs constantly. I was inappropriate with people—I talked about my personal sexual life, trying to shock them. I was always pursuing my husband sexually. I can remember numbing out with sex. If I had a hard day at the office, I wanted to have sex. Any excuse at all. I was able in S-Anon to get away with it for a long time. I said I watched pornography because he wanted to. Well, he did want to, but I also watched it when he wasn't home and then the minute he came home I would seduce him. If he wouldn't have sex with me, I was furious. I never had enough. I used to call men on the phone, men I barely knew, and talk for hours about intimate details. I would act drunk although I wasn't, so it was acceptable. I would stay up until 3:00 A.M. or 4:00 A.M. in the morning on the phone. I wasn't getting enough sleep and my work performance was showing it. I wasn't present for my husband, I was so involved with the telephone. My life was unmanageable.

Women married to male sex addicts reported they justified their own sexual behavior on the basis of wanting to please their spouses. They were quicker to recognize their coaddictive behaviors (taking responsibility for the spouse's behavior, attempting to control the spouse, obtaining their self-esteem from the spouse, etc.) than their sexually addictive behaviors. The majority of women sex addicts were aware that their behavior was influenced by their coaddiction or codependency.

On the other hand, fewer than half the male sex addicts married to female sex addicts were aware of their coaddiction. Among the male sex addicts in the larger survey whose wives were not sexually addicted, an even smaller minority (12%) identified themselves as coaddicts—this despite the fact that 36% of the larger survey sample had at least one parent who was sexually addicted, which made them sexual coaddicts (persons affected by a family member's sexual addiction). It is likely they were adversely affected as children by sexual addiction in the family.

### *Husband's reaction to disclosure of the wife's sex addiction*

Our study found the two most important factors determining a man's reaction to the disclosure of his partner's sexual addiction to be 1) his own identification as a sex addict and 2) the extent of his partner's sexual activity outside the dyadic relationship. Husbands who were not themselves sex addicts reacted with anger to the disclosure of their wives' affairs. A man with no identified addictions stated:

After she told me about her affairs, I felt angry at being betrayed, but most of my anger was from feeling ripped off and left out. I had given up open sexual relationships in order to be married to her, and then she went out and had affairs. I decided maybe I needed to be sexual with other women, and I thought about it—but I couldn't do it.

Men's reactions differed from women's in that the men were generally more able to express their anger and more inclined to lash out. A recovering alcoholic reported:

After she told me about the other men, I really started to feel bad. I had a sinking feeling in my stomach, that everything of importance or value had just got burned up. I wanted to strike back at these people who I felt had stolen something from me that I valued highly. I felt I'd been irreparably damaged. Getting even with them was justified, if I could only find out who they were....I went through three or four weeks of very intense emotional swings between my normal self and some real homicidal behavior....I told me wife that under no circumstances should she tell me who this guy was, no matter what I did, because I honestly thought that if I found out his name I would have to kill him....The urge was even more powerful than the last time I felt an urge to drink. It finally died down, and hasn't come back.

Another man recalled:

When she told me about her affairs during Family Week, I went into a jealous rage. One night in a parking lot I tried to run down a man she'd been with.

Some husbands who were not themselves sex addicts rejected the idea of their wives' sex addiction. A man whose wife had had multiple affairs related:

I accept the therapist's explanation that she had a compulsion for relationships more than for sex. I think that if my wife had been really interested in sex she'd have had more than five partners in seven years.

Another man told us:

I think she got depressed over a relationship that ended long ago, and her addiction was just a way of handling the feelings of the depression. Now that she's on medication for her depression, I think she's cured. I don't think she needs to continue going to meetings.

The husband of a woman who made inappropriate phone calls and fantasized about other men stated:

At first I thought I might not be a good lover. I fell immediately into my coaddict mode. I started asking her a lot of questions about it, the same as she asked me when I came home from my first meeting. I felt the roles changing very fast when she told me she was a sex addict! Now I realize she is and I'm behind her 100%.

Another wife of a recovering sex addict told him she had a problem with emotional affairs and fantasizing about other men and women. He said:

My first reaction was not to believe she had an addiction. She certainly didn't have it as bad as I did, and I certainly didn't want her going to my meetings. But after a while I realized that if I expect her to understand and accept my addiction, then certainly I need to understand and accept hers.

In some ways it's made me feel less guilty about my past behaviors, because she's done some of those things too.

#### *Recovering from sexual addiction within a marriage*

Some married women recovering from sexual addiction were sidetracked by the desire to please their husbands.

When I first got out of treatment and did not know what healthy sexuality was, I still felt the obligation to my husband to have sex, and each time it would bring back the addict in me. We went through a sixty-day celibacy period recommended by the treatment program, but it was really hard for me because I felt I was depriving my husband. After that 60 days, my husband wanted to have sex all the time. Although I felt very violated at times, I couldn't open my mouth and say anything.

Some women reported that their husbands minimized or denied the problem and did not support them in their efforts to recover. A woman with several years recovery reported:

Married women have some extra burdens. What they often talk about is how their husbands don't want them to go to meetings. Their husbands don't want to believe they really have a problem. It's too threatening to them. The husbands want them to babysit the kids rather than attend the meeting. Codependency is the biggest problem the women have; they're still into pleasing their husbands.

When both partners were sex addicts, they reported concern over triggering each other's addictions. According to one woman

I don't share details with my husband. I might say to him, 'I'm really having a hard time here at the mall. I can't keep my eyes to myself. I need to go home.' But I don't go into detail about who the person is and what I'm having troubles with. With both of us being addicts, those are real triggers for each other. And then that brings out the coaddict in the other person. I've asked my husband not to share his stuff with me. It makes me want to go to bed with him because I'm scared because he's interested in somebody else. It's just not healthy for us.

Another woman reported:

When my husband first shared with me some of his acting out, it was a trigger for me. When we made love, I began fantasizing about some of the things he had told me. I now had new fantasies instead of the same old ones.

Although recovery from addiction involves honesty, some couples found it best to share details with their self-help group, or sponsor, or therapist rather than with each other.

#### *Attending the same 12-step meeting*

Some respondents reported problems because of a scarcity of 12-step meetings. Addicts married to each other found it necessary to attend the same meetings. Most found this was not comfortable. "I've had a hard time going to meetings when [the people there] are my husband's friends. It's very shaming for me to go to mixed meetings," a 28-year-old woman related. Because her partner had already established relationships with others at the meeting, she

felt she was in "enemy territory," hardly a setting conducive to open sharing. The same woman felt invaded when her husband began attending S-Anon, where she felt supported:

For a long time, S-Anon was my meeting. I had gone there for two years. These were my friends. For the first time in my life I had an identity. They liked me because I was me. I didn't want my husband coming into that meeting.

When a couple attended the same meeting, one or both of them felt reticent. A couple reported:

Husband: When she is at my meeting, it inhibits me. For example, there might be times I might have made a comment or have said, 'Yes, I know what you mean,' which I might not now. Wife: I don't feel comfortable sharing in the same meeting as my husband. It's like I have to look for his approval about what I'm saying. My coaddiction is still a lot harder to deal with than my addiction. I think that coaddiction is the addict's underlying problem.

This couple agreed to alternate-week attendance at SA and S-Anon meetings. In this way, they were each able to attend both meetings, but not at the same time. Another couple, both recovering alcoholics as well as sex addicts, attended the same SA meeting together. However, each also went to separate AA and Al-Anon meetings. The wife stated:

I don't have a problem attending the same SA meeting. We both know so much about each other's history that there are no real surprises. I guess the only problem would arise if one of us were having serious cravings, or if one of us was contemplating having an affair. That would be rough. I believe that if that were to happen to my husband, he would come to me and say, 'I'm really having a problem and I need to go to the meeting without you.' I hope so.

One couple reported not only attending the same meeting but actually sponsoring each other. A man whose therapist wife served as his SA sponsor for a while described his experience this way:

When I bottomed out and had to go to someone for help, the one person I knew who had recovered was my wife. There was one big problem with using her as a sponsor: When the obsession would hit, my shame would keep me from going to her and I would eventually act out. It didn't work out. Don't sponsor each other.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In a married person, codependency (which can be briefly defined as obtaining one's self-worth from the outside, specifically from another person) can be seen as a pathological extension of a nurturing and supporting role within a dyadic relationship. Women in our society are raised to be the nurturing and supporting marriage partner, so it is not surprising that we found that female sex addicts tend to be more influenced than male addicts by their codependent role within the marriage relationship. This problem was exacerbated by the finding that the great majority (71%) of married female sex addicts were married to men who were sex addicts and/or chemically dependent, so that they also played a coaddict role within the relationship. Problems of codependency tend to make

early recovery more difficult for the married female sex addict than for the married male sex addict—or for the female addict who is not in a committed relationship.

Recovering women sex addicts were usually aware of the impact of their coaddiction on the relationship. It was often difficult for them to put their own needs first, especially their sexual needs. When both members of the couple were sex addicts, attendance at the same 12-step meetings exacerbated the problems of coaddiction and interfered with recovery. Couples were freer to share their struggles in separate meetings. Having one member of the couple sponsor the other should be strongly discouraged. In such a situation, the sponsee is least likely to ask for help at the very time it is most needed.

When a man's sexual behavior is out of control, his wife's first reaction is often to blame herself. On the other hand, if a woman has affairs, the usual assumption is that it is also her fault. This societal double standard works against the rebuilding of marriages in which the wife is the sex addict. The result is that husbands of sex addicts are more likely to divorce their spouses than are women whose husbands are sexually addicted. Husbands of women sex addicts are also less likely to examine their own coaddiction than are wives of male sex addicts.

The men in this study were not a random sample of husbands of women sex addicts; rather, they were men who chose to remain in the relationship despite societal support for leaving, especially when other sexual partners were involved. Because they experienced powerlessness over their own addictions, they tended to be more understanding. Ten were sex addicts and several others were recovering alcoholics. Most had attended 12-step programs and were or had been involved in therapy.

The way the husbands dealt with their wives' sexual addiction depended primarily on whether or not they themselves were sexually addicted, and whether or not the wife had had extramarital sex. Husbands who were sex addicts tended to be the most supportive of the wife's recovery program. Husbands who were neither sex addicts nor alcoholics were the most likely to minimize and discount the wife's addiction. Husbands of women sex addicts were more likely to accept their wives' sex addiction if they themselves were recovering sex addicts. When they were not, they tended to deny the problem, to attribute it to underlying issues, or to assume that because the behavior had stopped it was no longer a problem.

These findings have important implications for clinicians treating married women sex addicts. As for all recovering sex addicts, the clinician needs to encourage attendance at 12-step programs. However, sex addicts married to each other need encouragement to attend separate 12-step meetings and help in understanding the potential problems that can arise from attending the same meeting. However, individual 12-step meetings alone are rarely sufficient. Therapy can give the recovering woman a cognitive understanding of the role of coaddiction in her relationship and how her coaddiction and codependency can interfere with her recovery. If the husband tends to minimize the reality of the wife's sexual addiction, the therapist can provide a reality check and help her set the boundaries she needs for her recovery. In the early recovery period the therapist can help the woman to recognize that her individual recovery, which may include a period of sexual abstinence to which her husband may object, cannot be sacrificed in order to please her husband. Couples

therapy can help the husband accept his wife's addiction and her need to make different choices about her sexual behavior within the marriage. The clinician can help him deal with his feelings of anger, concerns about his masculinity, and fears about what others might think. Weekend retreats for recovering couples, and attendance at 12-step groups that focus specifically on the couple relationship (e.g., Recovering Couples Anonymous and S-Anon Recovering Couples) provide opportunities to share problems, experiences, and solutions with other couples who are dealing with similar problems. Although several women sex addicts stressed that male and female sex addicts had more similarities than differences because "an addict is an addict," this study showed that married women sex addicts face particular challenges in their recovery, especially when dealing with problems related to their codependency. Clinicians working with such women and their spouses need to recognize these challenges so that they can prepare their clients for them and provide effective counseling.

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