

Helping You Heal

A Partner's Guide to Understanding
Sexual Addiction, Recovery
and Healing

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Introduction:

What's the purpose of this booklet?

If you are reading this booklet, you are probably in a lot of pain. You feel confused, angry, hurt, and alone. You may be saying to yourself, “How did I get here?” and “This isn’t what I signed up for.” If your partner has a problem with his/her sexual behavior, reading this booklet may answer some of the many questions that you have about what sex addiction is. Our Intention is to provide guidance on how you and your partner can get help.

How could I not know what was going on?

Your world has just turned upside down. We are taught that trust is essential to an intimate relationship. So when you began to suspect that something wasn’t right, you probably gave your partner the benefit of the doubt. Maybe you confronted him/her and were told not to worry, or worse—not to act crazy. Addiction thrives in secrecy, and addicts will go to great lengths to conceal their behaviors and shame. Part of your journey will include regaining your sense of trust in the world and in your own intuition.

I feel like I'm going out of mind. Is that normal?

You probably feel traumatized, devastated, and confused by your partner’s cheating. Partners often report anger, confusion, feeling isolated, and feeling unloved. Some common ways in which partners or spouses may react or cope with the disclosure or discovery process are:

- **Shock:** initial paralysis; inability to identify feelings
- **Traumatized:** extreme distress and inability to regulate your emotions, sleep disturbances, or panic attacks
- **Anger:** understandable emotion fueled by hurt, sadness and fear
- **Depression:** sadness and immobility
- **Isolation:** not seeking help or trying to cope alone
- **Stress:** feeling overwhelmed or overloaded emotionally and physically
- **Denial:** trying to avoid or minimize the problem
- **Preoccupation/obsession:** ruminating thoughts and behaviors
- **Fear:** mistrust of others, feeling unsafe
- **Repeatedly checking:** hunting for information to “prove” you’re right
- **Physical Symptoms:** loss of sexual desire, difficulty concentrating, dissociation, or physical pain
- **Acceptance:** desiring and seeking a way to move forward



Where do I go from here?

Deep betrayal can be immobilizing and you may question your ability to move forward. Many partners self-blame or feel shame about the sex addict's behavior and may try to manage on their own instead of finding healthy ways of sharing and expressing their feelings with others. *The importance of not isolating and seeking emotional support during this time period cannot be emphasized enough.* Human beings need one another in order to flourish, function and heal. The first step in reclaiming yourself is to reach out for help; this can sometimes feel painful or even humiliating. However, once you do you will probably feel better, particularly if you reach out to others who know what you're going through because they've gone through it themselves.

Should I get tested for STIs?

Yes. It is important to tend to your health immediately and rule out any sexually transmitted infections (STI). You may also want to insist your partner get tested as a condition of recovery.

Do we tell the children?

While you may be tempted to tell your children because you are hurt, remember it is not in their best interest to know. You should consult with a qualified mental health professional before disclosing potentially distressing information to children. In general, however, disclosure to children is not made if the child knows nothing about the parent's sex addiction, is not at risk for discovering it, and is under 16 years old. Parents must recognize boundaries for children and respect their innocence. The majority of children do not want to know about their parents' sexuality, let alone their sexual acting-out behavior.

Should I separate from my partner?

For partners who are uncertain about whether to end the relationship or not, we generally recommend any major decision like divorce is best postponed until the feelings have been processed, some healing has taken place, and the addict has some sober time. Sometimes separation can be a useful short-term intervention, referred to as a *therapeutic separation*.

If done in the right way, therapeutic separations with structure, agreements, and healthy boundaries can ultimately strengthen a marriage. Planning a therapeutic separation can happen at any time, but may be best after your disclosure session. If you have already asked your partner to leave the house, you should try to agree upon a time frame with them. If you are currently considering a separation, you can arrange to have your therapist present to support you.

Prior to the separation, decide what type and amount of contact you want during the separation and what your specific parenting and financial obligations will be. One of the purposes of separation is to spend time discussing your various issues in a therapeutic setting in order to get clear about your boundaries. At the end of separation, you and your partner can come together to renegotiate the terms of the relationship.



Treatment and Recovery From Betrayal:

Why am I feeling physical pain in addition to emotional pain?

One of the primary purposes of a monogamous, committed relationship is safety and security. Human beings bond for many purposes but a secure relationship keeps all parties in the system, meaning both partners and children, safe. Betrayal by a significant other is a direct threat to safety and when discovered, there's a physical attack on the attachment system by the fear system. This explains your physical pain; the pain of betrayal can feel searing or like you've literally been wounded.

Make no mistake, you've experienced a horrendous trauma, which may have you engaging in uncharacteristic behaviors in service of trying to restore safety to your world. This is natural survival behavior. Be careful about further traumatizing yourself when you start to go through email accounts, cell phone records, or consider calling his/her affair partner. It's unlikely that these behaviors will give you the relief, peace, or explanations you're seeking.

Get help. Call a therapist and go to a 12-step meeting for family members. Consult with others who have gone through this so you don't have to make decisions on your own. If you're in crisis, you need a trusted other who can guide you to make sound decisions for yourself and for your family.

Am I "codependent"?

Codependency is a form of relational trauma, and it's a common enough trait in modern relationships. The term has developed a negative stigma, but many, many people exhibit codependent behaviors. Codependency is commonly defined as chronic self-neglect in order to maintain a relationship and is often based in early childhood trauma. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Did you ever make excuses for your partner's bad behavior?
- Did you ever try to protect him/her from the consequences of his/her actions?
- Did you find it easier to be more concerned with your partner than yourself?
- Did you often say "yes" to your partner when you wanted to say "no"?

While these gestures may have felt like loyalty, they may have been prolonging the inevitable realization of the addiction. Your partner's behavior is never your fault; but there may be steps you can take to heal yourself and how you engage in relationship.



As the partner of a sex addict, do I need to be in recovery, too?

Many partners of sex addicts feel that the problem is with the addict and it is the addict's responsibility to "clean up their own mess." This is a very common and understandable point-of-view among partners. While on the surface this may appear to be true, the reality is that there are no easy fixes to repair the damage that the addict has inflicted on the system of trust within the relationship and within the psychology of the partner. Without the participation of the partner in the process of understanding and healing his or her own betrayal trauma, the relationship certainly has less of a chance of surviving, and the possibility for healthy, trustworthy relationships in the future may have been contaminated for the partner. All this points the way towards engaging in your own journey of personal healing.

There are many ways in which you can get help for yourself and your relationship. Many partners find that *individual therapy* is an important part of their healing where they can create a safe space to process their thoughts and feelings and focus on their own needs. *Couple therapy* is an important intervention to work through the crisis and towards a plan for the future. As a spouse, participating in your partner's therapeutic process can be beneficial for you both. It is normal to feel torn about promoting your relationship when your immediate pain and suffering have not been acknowledged or processed fully. You may wonder how you can possibly move forward after so many lies, so much betrayal. How can you begin to heal? Finally, treatment in the form of *group therapy* to help address issues unique to your own and your partner's challenges would encourage you from not isolating and allow you to find support and connect with others who are facing similar challenges.

Research has shown that couples have the greatest chance of recovering from sexual addiction when both partners are engaged in a program of recovery.

Does recovery mean celibacy?

Recovery from sexual addiction, unlike recovery from substance addictions, does not necessarily require the addict to become completely celibate from all sexual behavior. Sex alone is not the problem; rather it is the harmful ways that sex is used that is problematic. Put another way, sex is a problem if it causes problems.

However, it is often recommended that the sex addict agree to a thirty to ninety-day celibacy period in early recovery. In recovery, the addict will create a sexual sobriety plan, which details the specific addictive behaviors to abstain from. It also includes dangerous behaviors, places, and states of mind that might lead to acting out. In couple's therapy, you and your partner can establish what kind of intimate contact will be allowed during recovery. It will probably start off limited and expand as you and your partner recover. You must be very clear about your boundaries and state only what contact you are willing and comfortable to engage in.



How can a 12-step program help me?

A 12-Step Program consists of a support group of people who are family members of addicts, people who are seeking to recover from a similar addiction, compulsion or behavioral problem, and is based on the Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step model. There are no dues or fees and the only requirement for membership is a desire to stop the problem behavior. The programs are not allied with any religion, sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; and they do not engage in controversy.

Many people shy away from the idea of sharing their secrets with a group of strangers. First, you don't have to share; you are free to sit quietly and listen. Second, scary as it may seem, it is the very experience of joining with supportive others who have shared struggles similar to yours that will bolster you in this rocky road to recovery. *In recovery, support is essential.*

Is finding spirituality necessary for me?

You may ask yourself what spirituality has to do with recovery. If so, you wouldn't be the first! 12-step groups are full of atheists and agnostics who will testify to the importance of finding a higher power. While you may or may not believe in God, it's useful to find something to believe in that can help you – spirituality has to do with *your* spirit. Spirituality means finding all the ways you help your spirit feel alive and happy.

Which 12-step program would be appropriate for me?

There are several 12-step programs that could be appropriate for partners of sex addicts; those where partners feel most "at home" would be any of the following:

- POSA: Partners of Sex Addicts
- COSA: the partners program for Sex Addicts Anonymous
- S-Anon: the partners program for Sexaholics Anonymous
- CODA: Codependents Anonymous
- Al-Anon: family groups for alcoholics/addicts
- RCA: Recovering Couples Anonymous

Rebuilding Trust:

How do I know he/she told me everything?

Being told everything is referred to as disclosure. Addicts often disclose information about their sexual behavior to their partners either from being caught or from their own feelings of shame and guilt. Usually, this disclosure is done in an impromptu manner without any professional or recovery guidance.



Unfortunately, in most cases, addicts do not completely reveal their behavior. If an addict is not in recovery, then his/her thinking is most likely informed by the addiction. It is important to consider that you may not be able to trust a person who has been lying and now asks for your trust. In recovery, however, trust can gradually be rebuilt through a process of healing, which can include a formal disclosure.

Do I need to know everything he/she has done?

No, you do not. You are, however, entitled to know the truth about your relationship and the person with whom you have chosen to share your life. A therapist can help you prepare a formal disclosure. This is an important step, even when your partner has “told you everything,” because information previously revealed can often be incomplete. The decision to participate in a formal disclosure is entirely yours. *It is recommended that the disclosure process be facilitated with the help of a mental health professional.*

A formal disclosure is a therapy session during which the addict reveals to his/her partner information about their addictive behavior. It includes such factual details as types of sexual behaviors, frequency, locations, money spent, people at risk, lies told, and secrets kept. There is a protocol to guide this process, and therapists work diligently with recovering addicts to ensure the most complete and accurate disclosure possible. If you decide to participate in a formal disclosure, you will be asked to attend several individual “prep” sessions both before and after the disclosure. The formal disclosure can be very powerful in rebuilding trust and healing in the relationship.

What if I still can't believe what he/she says?

When deception has been profound, you may have little faith in the truthfulness of the information provided in the formal disclosure. In these circumstances, a *polygraph* can be incorporated into this process. Polygraphs are sometimes integrated as part of the formal disclosure and can be helpful in rebuilding trust for partners of sexual addicts.

How do I decide to stay in this relationship?

This can be an agonizing decision, and no one can make it for you. Only you know whether or not staying or leaving is the right choice. Difficult though it may seem, you should consider postponing major decisions about the status of your relationship, namely whether to stay or not, until after you and your partner have had a chance to engage in recovery. This would include going to individual therapy, attending a partners group, and attending recovery meetings. Working through the initial shock, grief, and anger can set you up to make an informed decision when the time is right.



If there is a slip or relapse, does that mean recovery isn't working?

Slips are a part of recovery and generally considered a “stumble on the path of recovery.” There is no such thing as a perfect sobriety or recovery. The important thing is that you and your partner communicate and are clear about what you do and do not want to hear. This includes agreeing on what your time frame is for hearing about slips, how much detail you want to hear and an action plan for addressing the slip.

Relapses are considered more severe than a slip and require that the addict put more effort into their recovery. If your partner relapses, meaning he/she does not tell you or anyone in their program about acting out and continues to do so over time, then you have to be clear about your boundaries and consequences. Boundaries and consequences are developed with your therapist and your program of recovery. Often a relapse requires a higher level of care like an intensive outpatient program (IOP) or inpatient treatment. Like a slip, it is important that you and your partner communicate and are clear about what the action plan is for addressing the relapse.

When is it time to have sex again?

A better way to look at this question is, “When can I trust *myself* again?” When can you trust that you are being true to yourself and not wanting to have sex out of fear or a need to take care of your partner? Have you really done the work to forgive yourself first, for not having known your partner was acting out, for not thinking you were good enough or for not asking to get your needs met?

First, take loving care of yourself; then consider whether your desire to have sex with your partner is really a desire for him/her or for your need to try and put things back together again. Do take the time you need to make decisions to ensure that you are safe, loved, and wanted by your partner and that you really *want* your partner. Don't compromise yourself or your integrity by jumping the gun and returning to sex before you are ready.

The main point is to slow things down. Imagine how you would feel if you jumped into sex with your partner, only later to decide it was the wrong thing to do. Give yourself the dignity of your own process and wait until your intuition tells you it's the right time.

The period following a disclosure can be confusing and disorienting. Take this time for celibacy as a time-out for yourself, your partner, and your coupleship. Use this opportunity to begin to heal from the pain and destruction of the past in your own therapy and 12-step fellowship. When you are both ready, couple's therapy will be essential for your healing, too.

How do I know if our sex is healthy and intimate?

Healthy, intimate sex comes from restoring trust and is a main goal of your recovery. This means you must take time to define what healthy and pleasurable sex means to you. Most addicts associate sex with intensity—the higher the better. Healthy sex is intense and connected—



through honest and tender experiences with your partner, sex can be arousing and fun in a way you may never have known before. Guidelines to remember when you reengage in sex are:

- Healthy sex is not *secretive* or *shameful* to yourself or the other person.
- Healthy sex is not *abusive* in any way.
- Healthy sex is not used to ignore or escape your *feelings*.
- Healthy sex requires an *emotional connection* of some sort with the other person.
- Healthy sex is about love, respect, mutual caring, giving and receiving pleasure, and a desire to know yourself and your partner in a deeper way.
- Healthy sex should serve to connect you over time.

How can I forgive this behavior?

For a couple to heal broken trust and fractured bonds, the forgiveness process needs room to breathe. It requires mutual support, attendance in therapy, and patience while you work through the steps of recovery. Recovery takes time, especially for a couple. So hold steadfast to your commitments to support each other's processes as you work through your own program.

Forgiveness is not something you "should" do, but something that comes to you when you're ready. Forgiveness arrives in stages, shows up differently for different people, and may never be complete. For example, glimmers of forgiveness may emerge after your disclosure discussion when both of you have begun to move through the grieving process. Forgiveness can be seen as a personal choice and an opportunity for healing.



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- Reid, R., Carpenter, B., Draper, E., Manning, J. (2010). Exploring Psychopathology, Personality Traits, and Marital Distress Among Women Married to Hypersexual Men. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, 9:1-20.
- Wildmon-White, M.L., & Young, J.S. (2002). Family-of-origin characteristics among women married to sexually addicted men. *Journal of Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity*, 9 (4), 263-273.

Recommended Reading:

What can I read to help me through this process?

- Black, Claudia(2009). *Deceived: Facing Sexual Betrayal, Lies, and Secrets*. Minnesota: Hazelden.
- Black, C., Tripodi, C. (2012). *Intimate Treason: Healing the Trauma for Partners Confronting Sex Addiction*. Nevada: Central Recovery Press.
- Carnes, Patrick (1992). *Out of the Shadows*. Minnesota: Hazelden.
- Carnes, S., Lee, M., Rodriguez, A., (2012). *Facing Heartbreak: Steps for Recovery for Partners of Sex Addicts*. Arizona: Gentle Path Press.
- Carnes, Stefanie (2008). *Mending a Shattered Heart: A Guide for Partners of Sex Addicts*. Arizona: Gentle Path Press.
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- Mellody, P., Miller, A.W., Miller, J.K. (1992). *Facing Love Addiction: Giving Yourself the Power to Change the Way You Love*. Harper One.
- Owens, G.(2021). *The Betrayed Husband's Survival Guide*.ABL Enterprises.
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- Schneider, J., Corley, D. (2012) *Surviving Disclosure: A Partner's Guide for Healing the Betrayal of Intimate Trust*. Recovery Resources Press.
- Steffens, B., Means, M. (2009) *Your Sexually Addicted Spouse: How Partners Can Cope and Heal*. New Jersey: New Horizon Press.
- Tidwell, Palmer, V. (2016). *Moving Beyond Betrayal: The 5-step Boundary Solution for Partners of Sex Addicts*. Central Recovery Press.

Recovery Resources:

Where can I get more information online?

www.CenterforHealthySex.com	Out-patient treatment of sex addiction
www.sexhelp.com	Patrick Carnes, Ph.D. website
www.sash.net	Society for the Advancement of Sexual Health
www.iitap.com	International Institute for Trauma & Addiction Professionals

What 12-step groups are there?

12-Step sexual recovery group meetings exist in most major metropolitan areas. Below is a brief description and contact information for each. Attendance at these groups is free -- small donations are encouraged. The group meetings can be a unique and invaluable way to gather information, hope and understanding.

- SAA - Sexual Addicts Anonymous (713) 869-4902
- SCA - Sexual Compulsives Anonymous (800) 977-4325
- SLAA - Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (781) 255-8825
- SRA - Sexual Recovery Anonymous (212) 340-4650
- S-Anon (615) 833-3152
- COSA (866) 899-COSA (2672)
- POSA info@posarc.com
- RCA - Recovering Couples Anonymous (314) 830-2600

What internet filtering systems are there?

- www.covenanteyes.com
- www.gustodio.com
- www.netnanny.com
- www.puresight.com
- www.webwatcher.com
- <http://www.mobicip.com>