

# Erotic Intelligence: Igniting Hot, Healthy Sex While in Recovery from Sex Addiction

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## Chapter 1

### The Dance of Intimacy and Sexuality

*You count, I don't. I count, you don't.  
Neither one of us count. I count, and  
I'll try to make room for you.*  
—Virginia Satir (1916–1988)

At forty-three years old, Jay had never been in a long-term, committed sexual relationship. In fact, that's what brought him into recovery; he was scared that he would end up a lonely old man. After a solid year of working a program in Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA), he was ready to find a serious relationship.

His first step toward preparing for an intimate relationship was finding ways to be kind to himself, to nurture himself. Jay started taking regular yoga classes, cleaned up and remodeled his house, spent time with other recovering people on the weekends, and created a social life he enjoyed. He had learned through his relationships in the program that he could be a good friend, loyal and trustworthy. He realized that his relationships with others and his family had meaning to him, that he “counted” to others. He felt more creative both at work and at home, even designing a beautiful backyard garden.

Jay was learning to “dance” intimately with himself and, in the process, preparing to be in a relationship with another. At this point, having a partner to “dance” with would be a strong addition to fulfilling his life. More important, it would represent a critical shift away from believing he needed someone to (presumably) make him feel good, share a social life, or clean up his house.

## What Is Intimacy?

As a therapist working with clients recovering from sexually addictive behaviors, I've noticed how scared people are to approach having sex again after treatment. Often they have lost touch with themselves. Clearly, one of the most difficult things for people in recovery from sex addiction is discovering what intimacy really means.

If you're in that situation, *Erotic Intelligence* will guide you through reorienting your sexuality toward a richer, fulfilling experience with yourself and especially with a partner. It's meant to help you learn to "dance"—whether it's going with the flow in a relationship or exploring your own sexuality as a single person or both. Throughout this book, the term "intimacy" refers to your ability to be close and have a deep, honest rapport with another person. The term "sexuality" refers to your capacity for sexual feelings. More than that, the concepts provide the foundation on which you'll build, explore, and develop a healthy, erotic sex life.

The prospect of having an intimate relationship and healthy sex life may seem inviting to you, or it may seem daunting. Either is okay. Know that you have the courage to change because you've made it this far, proving you have resilience and staying power. Your journey also requires knowing that the dance of intimacy and sexuality changes music often. As soon as you find the rhythm within a relationship, you might need to adapt and shift. That's why you have this book in hand!

## Four Cornerstones of Intimacy

People toss around the word "intimacy" euphemistically to mean sex, but it goes beyond experiencing the results of the sexual act. Rather, it's knowing who you are in relationship to another person as you grow and change together. Your commitment to living with intimacy allows you to confidently learn how to create deeper relationships.

Understanding the "Four Cornerstones of Intimacy" can help you conceptualize what it means to be truly intimate. They are:

### Cornerstone No. 1: Self-knowledge

All relationships start with knowing and accepting yourself. What do you like and dislike? When do you become anxious or frightened? Where are your growth edges? When you are out of your comfort zone, do you want to play it safe? When you are out of your comfort zone, how can you create an environment that allows change? Knowing the answers about yourself—and accepting them as your truth—enables you to do the same for another. Self-knowledge is crucial, given that sober addicts often talk about losing themselves to their

primary relationship.

Self-acceptance means that you know who you are and are comfortable with that knowledge at this stage of recovery. It means that you are able to take input from those closest to you and decide what is in your best interest. This is not about making unilateral decisions or being selfish, but about making intelligent choices. The challenge of self-acceptance means *you know who you are and take a stand for what's true for you in order to create change, even when it's uncomfortable*. An example of this is setting appropriate personal boundaries. You can think of your boundaries as your own personal limits. You define those limits to your partner by saying “yes” or “no” in such a way that protects and maintains your integrity. Once you know what you need, you and your partner will be free to grow and change into more solid adults.

## **Cornerstone No. 2: Comfort and Connection**

Sex addicts often find and create families out of a need for comfort and connection. People who come from difficult family backgrounds commonly have a desire for normalcy. Yet setting up a family is easy, but maintaining, nurturing, and attending to a family require diligence and discipline—two traits sex addicts don't typically possess. However, by *building connections to yourself and others, you can develop the capacity to comfort your anxieties and connect to your partner without reacting to his or her feelings*. Paradoxically, addicts might turn away from comfort and connection to seek sexual novelty and intensity, which seriously disrupts the family in the process. Then, if the sexual object gets too close, they may run again. Addicts often bounce from family life, where they tolerate minimal connection, rebound to their addictive behaviors, and then bounce back home. One man in my therapy group stated, “In my addiction, I wanted intimacy everywhere but in my house.”

Sex addicts who are single typically avoid connection altogether. Although they are seeking comfort and connection, they often report fears that being with one person will limit their options in life. Their inability to hold on to their individuality can have them acting in a reactionary way to another's needs, which may make them feel like they want to run away. Overcoming these fears, in part, involves *listening* to their partner's response rather than reacting to it.

## **Cornerstone No. 3: Responsibility with Discernment**

Responsibility within intimacy requires discernment, which means *being assertive, speaking up for yourself, taking responsibility for your actions, and telling the truth*, even though it may be difficult for your partner to hear. To avoid conflict, most sex addicts find themselves accommodating their partners, meaning they adapt to what their partners want. They then “act out” their unexpressed feelings sexually as a way to feel a sense of power and control.

Deciding to avoid conflict becomes easier than dealing with interpersonal conflicts.

In recovery, you become assertive as you face conflict head-on. Specifically, you discern the difference between saying things that are mean and hurtful and stating the truth about your preferences. An old adage states that addicts would rather ask for forgiveness than permission. But consider this: In a healthy relationship, people don't avoid conflict. They show responsibility by being direct and assertive about what they want and need. They choose to be accountable for their feelings and whereabouts.

As a recovering addict, you might use another adage that advocates you "stay on your side of the street." That requires *taking responsibility for your part in your interactions in healthy ways* on the way to reaching your goals.

## **Cornerstone No. 4: Empathy with Emotion**

*Empathy is your ability to recognize, feel, or experience another person's thoughts and moods.* Reading your partner's thoughts and moods accurately is essential to building intimacy. Sex addicts often find it difficult to have empathy for their partner's feelings. They don't accurately listen to their partner and can get defensive when their partner expresses hurt, anger, or upset. Why? Because they may feel shame in the face of another's pain and make inaccurate assumptions about themselves and the other person. So in recovery, your challenge is to listen accurately by focusing on what your partner is saying about his or her feelings without defense or judgment. There are two types of empathy: emotional empathy and cognitive empathy. Emotional empathy involves a bodily based feeling in our hearts or guts in relation to another. We can read the experience of another as if we had it ourselves. For example, if we see someone stub a toe, we wince. If our partners delight in eating their favorite ice cream, we delight in their joy. If our children cry because they fought with their friends, we feel sad along with them.

The second type of empathy, cognitive empathy, arises out of how we think we are *supposed* to respond. Cognitive empathy does not have a bodily based feeling to it. Rather, it's an idea born out of what we know to be socially polite, kind, and thoughtful. For example, if you see your dentist after learning that his grandmother died the previous week, you would say something like, "I'm so sorry to hear about your grandmother's death." You convey this because you genuinely like your dentist and imagine him feeling sad. Therefore, you offer your condolences even though you may not feel sad yourself.

## **The Need for Empathy in Your Relationships**

Showing empathy in your relationships helps you be comfortable with another and even helps you anticipate someone else's needs. Can you empathize with how your partner feels? Can you understand and validate how those feelings affect him or her without making

them about you and having a shame reaction?  
You will look through an accurate empathic lens when you:

## Four Cornerstones of Intimacy

Make a commitment to use these Four Cornerstones of Intimacy as your guide.

- **Self-knowledge:** You take a stand for what's really true for you, even when it's uncomfortable, in order to create change. You know who you are, and you allow space and respect for your partner to do the same.
- **Comfort and connection:** You develop the capacity to comfort your anxieties and connect without being in reaction to your partner's feelings.
- **Responsibility with discernment:** You are assertive, speak up for yourself, take responsibility for your actions, contribute to all interactions, and tell the truth even though it may be difficult for your partner to hear.
- **Empathy with emotion:** You use your emotional ability to recognize and feel another person's thoughts and moods.

## The Need for Empathy in Your Relationships

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You will look through an accurate empathic lens when you:

- know who you are and take a stand for what's true for you;
- comfort your anxieties;
- stay connected to your partner without overreacting; and
- take responsibility for your feelings.

In active addiction, sex addicts are often self-centered and not oriented to others' needs. That's why they rarely take into consideration their addiction's impact on the needs and feelings of other people. Yet in early recovery, you discovered that having compassion for yourself was important. Now, developing empathy for another is a key component for intimacy.

Going through disclosure with your partner—meaning you've been rigorously honest in your communications about your history in the presence of a professional—is essential in recovery. It's also a major step toward regaining your integrity and living without secrets or lies. In fact, what you went through in early recovery gave you a head start on empathy after making restitution to your partner. If you haven't made a full disclosure to your partner, do it before going any further. It's crucial to ask for professional help from a qualified sex addiction therapist when going through the disclosure

process. Doing so will rebuild trust in your relationship and foster everyone's safety and well-being. Alternatively, if you do not have a partner, write a letter to someone you've harmed with your behavior. Write it from the vantage point of the effect you had on that person, not a groveling "so sorry" approach. Doing this will help you to take responsibility for the choices you've made and practice having empathy for those you may have harmed.

## **Where Attachment Comes From**

Developing intimacy-building skills resulting in attachments to others starts in infancy through bonding between a child and parent/caregiver. Attachment done well results in that baby growing to regulate emotions and manage behaviors; done poorly, it's the basis of disconnection and a likely predictor for forming sexually addictive behaviors.

What bonding is necessary for nurturing a secure personality? For infants and children to bond with significant adults, they need eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, and touching, all of which are associated with powerful feelings like empathy and acceptance.<sup>1</sup> This bonding creates the neural circuitry for how the child will learn to connect with people, tasks, and emotions. Similarly, the imprint of sexual awareness on the infant is influenced by interactions among the infant, mother, and father. Later in life, this can affect the adult's attitudes toward sex.<sup>2</sup> The early attachment period sets up a child's ability to respond to and integrate all environmental stimuli. Through the primary caregiver's loving touch and responsiveness, a child learns to feel secure and experiences his or her body as a safe place to be. If there's excessive stress in the environment, it inhibits the child's brain from developing properly, hindering physical growth and the capacity to connect. Eye contact, touch, empathy, and bonding help a child's heart, limbic system, and nervous system adapt to people and circumstances. This is one reason why the concept of "attachment" parenting has grown in the last twenty years and why learning self-regulation has emerged as a main task in childhood.

## **What Is Self-Regulation?**

As children develop, they learn to *self-regulate*, which means they have the ability to be aware of, control, and monitor emotional reactions, impulses, and behavior. More specific, self-regulation is the ability to repair emotional distress, usually through taking control and renegotiating the environment. A child who can self-regulate is motivated to respond to life and willing to change what doesn't work. Typically, the self-regulation skills for a sex addict were impaired during childhood. Learning these skills later in life can empower them to be adaptable and respond in more positive ways. Usually, sex addicts have limited ability to self-regulate their behavioral patterns. The most common source of such disruption is being

emotionally disconnected from their families of origin for a long time. Thus, going through recovery involves learning new ways to cope with the world and change old behaviors. Those who go through

## How We Cope with the World

Depending on how we are wired for attachment in infancy, we develop different ways of coping with the world around us and relating to adults. Here are four general ways people learn to cope:

1. **Unhealthy passive coping skills** include escape, avoidance, chronic sexual fantasies, isolation, and withdrawal from others. Unhealthy passive coping can engender helplessness, hopelessness, obsession, anxiety, and/or depression. This unhealthy, non-relational set of skills is referred to as *auto-regulation*.
2. **Unhealthy active coping skills** can run the gamut from using substances like drugs and alcohol to engaging in process addictions such as sexual addiction. These behaviors include, but are not limited to, excessive masturbation, viewing pornography, patronizing strip clubs and sexual massage parlors, frequenting sex clubs, hiring prostitutes, cruising restrooms, voyeurism, exhibitionism, and the like. The relationship is with the substance or the experience.
3. **Healthy passive coping skills** include solitary activities such as journaling, reading, meditation, and contemplation. Physical activities such as skiing, swimming, and hiking as well as high levels of creative expression such as composing music, writing, making art, and solving mathematical equations render a flow state in the brain. This healthy set of auto-regulatory skills is a form of *self-regulation*. These activities can be done alone or include other people.
4. **Active coping skills** include engaging or acting upon the environment, such as seeking support or solace from others and getting help to generate possible solutions. Active coping, another form of self-regulation, seeks control of the situation using productive methods to build resilience. Examples include going to 12-step meetings, asking your partner for a hug, reaching out to people in the program, forming friendships, and/or seeking comfort from friends and family. Getting comfort and support from relationships or other people is called *interactive regulation*.

## Role of Attachment and Autonomy Growing Up

Successful infant attachment and continued bonding lead to establishing emotional pathways in the brain and body for intimacy. They form the basis of heartfelt qualities people feel when engaged with their partners. Children who have developed healthy personalities are comfortable striking out on their own, taking risks, experiencing the logical consequences, and soothing themselves. The more they

explore, achieve, and succeed, the more secure and assured they tend to feel. The result? They grow up to be autonomous adults who are competent in their interactions and confident in their decisions. They are able to soothe their own anxieties.

Attachment feeds autonomy, therefore autonomous people seek the connection and comfort of attachment in their relationships. They represent the yin and yang of life, meaning the equal and opposite values of control and nurturing, power and virtue. They experience the human bonding process to grow into independence, capable of negotiating people and tasks.

Yet people don't live independently; they seek heart-to-heart relationships to know themselves at deep levels, thus developing the biochemistry for intimacy. Fortunately, those who didn't experience intimacy in a strong way can learn to ignite it by going through the steps outlined in the pages that follow.

## **Fostering Autonomy Within a Relationship**

Autonomy within a relationship means being committed to making choices that foster togetherness while also discerning what's in one's own best interest. This process is called *differentiation*, which is the ability to maintain your separateness and identity while in close connection with others. It's also the balance between individuality and being together without depending on the other's approval or acceptance to function. Together, they are relaxed, not driven by fear of abandonment or, alternatively, by fear of being smothered and dependent.

Differentiated people can tolerate the shifting rhythms of closeness and distance without being threatened. They are flexible, meaning they have the ability not to overreact to a partner's upset. They can operate autonomously even though their partners may want them to do things their way.

Differentiated people can also tolerate the tension inherent in every relationship. In contrast, addicts have to learn to soothe themselves so they can live with the tension and anxiety that accompanies loving their partners deeply. Paradoxically, they also have to reach out to people such as a sponsor or other group members in a program and ask for soothing from their partner when they need it. Turning to others for comfort is how we learn to soothe ourselves.

But let's be clear here on priorities. A person's first level of being intimate is with *oneself*. To be intimate—to love yourself and eventually another person—requires growing up. Growing up can be painful because it means grieving the loss of your sexually addictive behaviors. You have to be willing to give up your old ways to secure commitment with another. This means that you take a leap of faith and trust that your commitment will bring you more pleasure, in a different way, than your sexually compulsive behaviors did. That's when the real work of intimacy begins.

Know that the relationship game is about you making you okay. Get real—no one is in your life to save your day. Your partner can



love and support you. However, whatever goes wrong is up to *you* to fix. For example, you have to first identify and then change your fundamental responses that don't work in relationships, then you have to get uncomfortable. That's a radical change from what addicts typically do. They don't repair old disconnecting patterns; they replace their partners, and then they reenact their patterns again in new relationships.

## **Risk Taking Leads to a Healthy Dependency**

So how about a change? Why not create a fabulous relationship while maintaining a clear sense of yourself in recovery? To create a healthy dependency, you need to take risks while connecting closely with the one you love. That means stating your preferences without blaming or shaming your partner or yourself. By making choices like these, you can honestly explore sexuality with each other to the depth of your hearts and spirits.

Remember, intimacy is finding new ways to know your partner, share struggles, ask for your needs to be met, be willing to change, and keep dreams alive. Your journey includes proceeding from healthy sex to intimate sex, and then to erotic sex—all while developing a spiritual base for your relationship. Don't lose sight of that in this stage of recovery.

Sexual energy between two people is a primal force comprised of power (energy that moves toward another) and virtue (knowing the energy between the two is right). When the intention to come together is to experience attachment and autonomy, then these energies create a balance between two people. As Roy Grigg states in *The Tao of Relationships*, "Togetherness includes separateness. Separateness includes togetherness. Within each there is the other."<sup>3</sup>

## **Romantic Love Is a Primary Motivator**

Sex involves different moods and varied purposes, one of which is romantic love—a primary motivation system that resides in the brain. Romantic love combines the drive for sex and the desire to build an attachment with another. This drive is a selection process through which we seek another person for the purpose of having sex. We are programmed genetically to do this.

Here's what happens. When we fall in love, our sex urges go into overdrive because the novelty increases the production of dopamine in the brain. That then stimulates the release of testosterone. So as the novelty wears off, we have to rely on different, more mature mechanisms to become sexually interested in our partner.

People have sex for many reasons, but ultimately, *how* we have sex is a reflection of how we grow and change throughout our life span. For most of us, the kind of sex we had in our twenties was driven by hormones and high levels of dopamine. We were seeking intensity and looking for the perfect mate. If we rely on this picture as a sexual ideal, then we may have problems with our sexuality in

our thirties, forties, fifties, and sixties. Bodies, preferences, and interests change over time. If we don't explore our sexual changes with them, the sex act will become boring, rigid, and routine. As we age, sex is no longer driven by our biology but by our desire to define ourselves as sexual adults.

## What Is Healthy Sex?

Because the goal in your recovery journey is to experience healthy sex, how is it defined and what does it mean to you? In my experience, most addicts hold an adolescent view of sex, meaning they frequently associate sex with intensity—the higher the better. Healthy sex does include intensity, but “intensity with connection” is where you're heading now.

As you experience in detail the characteristics involved in healthy sex throughout these chapters, keep in mind these key points:

- 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

## What Sexual Health Involves

Experiencing healthy, erotic sex is where you want this journey to take you. But what will that eventually involve? Consider these actions that make up some aspects of sexual health:

- Talking about sex (the act) and sexuality (your capacity for sex)
- Exploring your sexual identity through the rules and culture you grew up with and through the culture we live in today
- Knowing the functions of the sexual anatomy for both genders
- Cultivating good self-care habits
- Accepting your body without shame
- Cautiously integrating masturbation and fantasy
- Focusing on positive sexuality
- Maintaining a sense of spirituality

receiving pleasure, and a desire to know yourself and your partner in a deeper way. Sex can be intense, but the afterglow and heat remain, not dissolving into the next rush. It's the simple pleasures that express or celebrate the love you share that will connect you over time.

## Dynamic Dance of Intimacy

Human beings have the unique capacity to be highly individual while simultaneously being part of a group or community. This paradox is part of living and working closely with others while tolerating the varying degrees of tension that naturally occur when

together.<sup>4</sup> Intimacy, in part, includes being close to another person while tolerating the tension of being in relationship.

The closeness is not always tense, though. What you feel toward each other can be a highly comfortable connection that lets you value the closeness or the “heart bond” with each other. The term “heart bond” barely hints at the richness of a safe relationship in which you and a partner cherish each other. However, the nature of the relationship and the closeness it brings will inevitably create conflict. Relationships are not fairy tales but real-life, dynamic systems that force people to grow and change.

Every time you risk talking with your partner about your changing sexual preferences, you risk having to calm your nerves while your partner reacts with possible discomfort, which can be scary. However, your partner’s discomfort should not stop you from giving voice to what is true for you. In addition, sex addicts usually don’t give voice. They are often not assertive, and will instead act out their resentment toward their partners by having sex outside of the relationship.

Yet, you are changing now, and through intimacy, you’ll learn to tolerate your partner’s response by not reacting to him or her. *Your new skill is listening with an open mind and heart and calming your own beating heart.* You notice that you’re involved in a dynamic, ever-changing dance!

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