

# Understanding Sexual Addiction

By Ben Bennett

## What Is Sexual Addiction?

James 1:14-15 says “14 But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. 15 Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.” Here James gives us a stark image of the result of sin in our lives. When we are tempted, enticed, or lured by our desires, we may give in to sin. As we continue giving in to sin, it breeds death, destruction, and bondage or addiction in our lives.

The term addiction can bring to mind images of individuals struggling with extreme cases of entrapment or chemical dependency. For most of my life, I thought very few people struggled with addictions, and that the term was reserved for someone struggling with alcoholism or substance abuse issues. In reality, addiction can be defined as continuing to repeat a behavior that you know is harmful to both yourself and others, despite negative consequences.<sup>1</sup> Using this definition, we can refer to many habitual sins as addictions. An easy way to determine if something is an addiction is if you have tried over and over to stop a behavior but have continued to return to it despite knowing the harmful effects. Sexual addiction is an umbrella term that can take many different forms. Compulsive use of pornography, masturbation, acting out sexually, and fantasizing can all fall under the category of sexual addiction. In our day, sexual addiction is one of the fastest growing addictions.

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As an insight into how rampant sexual addiction is, here are some statistics developed from one study. A sexual addiction recovery ministry called Pure Desire recently conducted 3,000 surveys throughout evangelical churches in the U.S. Their survey included a clinical Sexual Addiction Screening Test. The results they found were astounding. 66% of the men, 40% of the women, and 55% of the pastors qualified as having a sexual addiction.<sup>2</sup> In my experience in working with college students, many more are struggling with these issues than the percentages expressed across the wide demographics of the survey.



## What Are The Causes Of Sexual Addiction?

In the Christian community we tend to talk about getting to the root of the sin or the sin beneath the sin. Or we say that we are sinning due to a lack of faith or trust in God, and while that is true, the issue is much deeper. We don't just need to get to the root of the sin, we need to get to the soil surrounding the roots that have influenced those roots and need the gospel to heal us at a deep level.

We sin because we are sinful, but we also sin because we were sinned against and we have developed ways to cope with the pain that others' sin has caused us. Clinical research supports 3 issues that lay at the foundation of most addictions, which are family dysfunction, personal trauma, and an addictive society.<sup>3</sup> As a result of pain in life and our broken nature, individuals develop sinful coping mechanisms to medicate painful life experiences. Let's explore these three core issues.

### Family Dysfunction

Most people come from families that are dysfunctional in some way. This could include physical or emotional absence of a parent, abuse, alcoholism, divorce, or not discussing emotions, feelings, or pain. We live in a sinful fallen world, and



no family is perfect so there are many ways a family can be dysfunctional. Blaming a family member for the way they treated you or hurt you is not the solution, nor is it Biblical. But, we must identify how we have been hurt, forgive others, and understand how the gospel can heal us over time.

Coming from a dysfunctional family does not excuse individuals' actions but it does bring understanding and must be faced. This can be very difficult to identify because we have no other family to compare ours to. What we know is normal. When we think of dysfunctional homes, we may think of the most extreme cases involving intense physical or sexual abuse, or multiple marriages and divorce. In reality, not getting some of your needs met growing up, or being hurt by actions or words of a family member can leave deep wounds. These wounds cause us to have faulty core beliefs and views of ourselves, God, and others, leaving us to medicate that internal pain.

## **Personal Trauma**

Trauma is severe stress that leaves deep emotional scars requiring special coping techniques.<sup>4</sup> A common example we may think of is Vietnam Vets. Vets have a divorce rate of 90 some percent. 50 to 75 percent have drug and alcohol abuse problems. 40 percent are unemployed and 25 percent earn less than \$7,000 a year.<sup>5</sup> It is easy to see why veterans struggle as a result of the trauma they experienced, but there is another war that is harder to understand and most of us are victims of it. It is the war that comes from painful relationships, especially related to our families. We tend to think of trauma as short moments of high intensity like Vets experienced, but subtle emotional or physical abuse, pain, or neglect over time has been found to impact individuals just as severely as trauma faced by veterans.<sup>6</sup>

Abuse can seem like a strong word or bring up intense images in our mind, but many of us as kids growing up experienced this to some extent. Whether it was being bullied, made fun of, criticized, not affirmed by others, being ignored by parents, spanked in an aggressive way when parents were angry, controlled, or manipulated, all of these things can cause trauma.<sup>7</sup>

## **An Addictive Society**

We live in an addictive society with a consumer mentality. We can get what we want, when we want it, and the biggest example of that is pornography and masturbation. These promise sexual fulfillment and satisfaction, but they only gratify and don't satisfy. They provide the pleasure without the commitment, vulnerability, and possibility of being vulnerable but rejected by someone in the most intimate act. Our culture says porn is harmless and everyone looks at it. But we know from scripture this is not true and even secular counselors are beginning to join in the war against pornography. We are constantly at battle between God's design for healthy sexuality and our culture's view of sexuality. Renewing our understanding of sex as a good gift of God in the right context is crucial.<sup>8</sup>

## **How Does Someone Become Sexually Addicted?**

A lot of understanding has occurred through scientific research over the past few decades. Recent research has revealed that as we make similar decisions on a daily basis, our brains created fixed ways of thinking. As we make decisions, our brain neurons, or nerve cells, fire together. Over time, the neurons that fire together will actually wire together creating fixed super highways of thinking patterns. These fixed ways of thinking and responding to pain in life explain why someone becomes addicted and has a lot of trouble stopping. Their brains have been physically changed and must be renewed physically.<sup>9</sup>

We see this struggle clearly in Romans 7:15-19, where Paul speaks of returning to sin over and over despite his greatest

efforts to stop. He says in verse 15, “For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” There are different views on what exactly Paul is speaking about in this passage, but in my opinion, he is talking about an addiction. He is talking about wanting so badly to be free from a struggle but returning to it despite his best efforts.

## How Do We Know If Someone Has A Sexual Addiction?

If there is a consistent struggle with sexual sin, it's a pretty good indication that there is an addiction, but this can be determined by using a free Sexual Addiction Screening Test (<https://www.puredesire.org/images/resources/sast-test.pdf>). And as many women also struggle with sexual fantasies, relationship addictions, and Love Addiction, the following test can also be helpful (<https://www.puredesire.org/images/resources/love-addiction-evaluation.pdf>). Although some of the questions on the tests are stated in the present, answering each question based on an individual's entire life experience gives the best indication of the addiction.

## How Does Someone Heal From Sexual Addiction? Is There Hope?



In John 10, Jesus said that He came to bring us life and to bring it abundantly. Our lives must be marked by repentance to Christ and forgiveness. Repentance involves a turning from trusting oneself and their coping mechanisms to trusting God. We must help individuals understand why they do what they do and how they can truly turn from their coping mechanisms to dependence on God. Yes, we sin because we are sinful, but we also sin because we are sinned against. Because we live in a fallen and broken world, we experience pain on a daily basis. Sometimes this pain leaves us with lasting wounds. Our tendency can be to run from the pain, or try to move on without processing our pain. Things are not the way they were supposed to be. We need to understand how the gospel applies to our lives and how Jesus can heal us at a deep level. We are wounded experientially and we need to be healed experientially. This is a process with no quick fixes. Addressing the underlying pain in life that drives individuals to medicate with sinful behaviors is key to growth and healing. This is something we have to get, or there will be little hope and lasting change in the lives of individuals.

Healing from this addiction involves addressing the underlying factors that drive the addiction like trauma, pain from circumstances in life or our family of upbringing, and seeing the faulty core beliefs we have about ourselves healed in light of how Jesus sees us. The majority of individuals I take through sexual addiction recovery have extremely low self esteem due to the way they were treated by others and the things communicated to them throughout their lives. Although this is often masked by pride, arrogance, and anger as a way to compensate. So they feel worthless and initially turn to porn as a way to cope but then quickly become hooked. Intellectually they know they are loved by Jesus and that He is proud of them, but they don't truly believe that due to their painful experiences in life. So a key part of healing is dwelling on past experiences where they've seen something happen that reassured them of the truths of how Christ sees them.

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Something interesting to note is that our pain in life and experiences are stored in our limbic system which is associated with the right side of our brain. This is what the bible refers to as our heart and is where our core beliefs are stored. However, our reasoning and decision making in life takes place in the prefrontal cortex which is associated with the left side of our brain. This is what the bible refers to as our mind. The issue is that we need the truths of who God says we are to sink into the depth of our hearts (or the right side of our brain) where our painful experiences are to combat those faulty beliefs about God, ourselves, others and to heal us, but this happens experientially, hence why dwelling on past





experiences of experiencing God is so powerful. This is why someone can want so badly with their mind (or the left side of their brain) to conquer sin and be set free but will return to it over and over.

Because most individuals have been involved in their sexual addiction for years, we need to have a shift as far as our understanding of the time involved in healing. As porn and other types of sexual sin affect the brain similarly to cocaine and are just as, if not more addicting, the issue needs to be treated with the same level of seriousness. Someone struggling with a cocaine addiction for over a decade probably can't just stop cold turkey, they need intense rehab, therapy, a support system, and to address the underlying issues that caused their addiction. Similarly, we need to do the same with the individuals we work with who are struggling with sexual addictions.

Three things must be in place to create a healthy recovery environment from sexual addiction. First is a commitment to a life of no secrets. Due to the shame of addiction, individuals learn to hide their behavior at all costs due to fear of judgment. One must commit to complete transparency and vulnerability moving forward. Second, is a lifestyle of healthy accountability. Accountability does not stop at installing a blocking or reporting software on the computer or a weekly confessional meeting with a friend. Accountability is a lifestyle of reaching out for help to process the pain, stress, and sin in an individual's life. Accountability is a daily choice to move forward in healing. Third is a daily lifestyle change of recovery with a healthy structure. Daily choices in life determine our destination in the future. Having in place a good gospel-centered recovery program that includes support, accountability daily, and material that dives into the pain from an individual's past that drives their behavior and how the gospel transforms them is crucial to seeing healing.

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The good news is that our brains are extremely pliable. We must understand that sexual sin (masturbation, pornography, fantasy, sexual acts etc.) starts out as an immoral problem but quickly becomes a brain problem and an addiction for many people. Despite our minds being physically changed as a result of addiction and the neurological pathways that have been enforced, we know that the He promises to conform us into the image of Christ (Romans 8:29) and He can change us. We also know from Romans 12:2 that we can be transformed by the renewal of our minds. Recent scientific research has proved what God has been telling us in scripture for 2,000 years by discovering something called neuroplasticity, which proves just how moldable our minds are and that we can change over time.<sup>10</sup> But renewing the mind is a 2-5 year process according to Dr. Ted Roberts, founder of Pure Desire, with active choices every day.<sup>11</sup>

A common lie we may believe is that we just have to let go and let God, meaning we have no role to play in our own healing or sanctification. But God designed the world in such a way that we have active choices on a daily basis. Romans 8:13 says, "For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" This speaks so clearly of a combined effort between ourselves and the Holy Spirit. We must actively make choices moment by moment to live life on God's terms, to surrender to His design for our lives, and to move toward renewing our minds and addressing our pain from the past.

When we actively apply the gospel of Jesus Christ to the areas of our lives that have been wounded, true freedom and healing takes place. As someone begins to heal from the pain of their past, they no longer need to act on sinful coping mechanisms because the pain that they have been medicating diminishes. But only Jesus makes this possible. As a

result of Jesus' finished work on the cross, God looks at you despite your sin and brokenness, and says what He said to Jesus in Mark 1:11, "this is my son (or daughter) with whom I am well pleased." He gives us a new identity, where we are not defined by our deeds but defined by our royal standing as His sons and daughters. This identity and His view of us lays at the core of transforming the way we see ourselves as a result of the pain we have experienced in life. We may view ourselves as worthless, inadequate, unlovable, or a constant failure, but Jesus looks at us and says loved, cherished, righteous, worthy, son, daughter.

## **Summary Insights And Shift In Thinking**

- Shift from seeing and referring to sexual sin (masturbation, pornography, fantasy, sexual acts etc.) as just a moral problem to an addiction if the behavior is consistent.
- Recognize the majority of Christian men and women struggle with sexual addiction and that there are varying degrees of addiction.
- Shift from wanting a quick solution to understanding it takes 2-5 years to renew the mind and see the underlying issues healed, although ceasing to relapse can happen immediately.
- Recognize abstaining from sexual addiction for a period of time is not necessarily an indicator of freedom or healing. Often individuals just put their willpower to the test for up to a year but soon return to the addiction.
- Recognize that sexual addiction is healed by Christ through getting involved in a recovery group (in addition to therapy with a Certified Sexual Addiction Therapist the majority of the time) where an individual is no longer isolated on a daily basis, lives a life of no secrets, addresses the underlying pain/trauma from family, friends, and our broken world with the gospel.

## End Notes

- 1 Michael Dye, *The Genesis Process* (N.P., 2012), 21.
- 2 Pure Desire, "Pure Desire Promo", PureDesire video, 6:11. May 18, 2016. <http://puredesire.org/images/resources/pure-desire-promo.mp4>
- 3 Ted Roberts, *Pure Desire* (Regal, 2008), 52.
- 4 Patrick J. Carnes, "Abused Children Addicted Adults," *Changes*, June 1993, p. 81.
- 5 Chuck Dean, *Nam Vet* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1992), p.37.
- 6 Ted Roberts, *Pure Desire* (Regal, 2008), 66.
- 7 Ted Roberts, *Pure Desire* (Regal, 2008), 67.
- 8 Ted Roberts, *Pure Desire* (Regal, 2008), 68-69.
- 9 Ted Roberts, *Seven Pillars of Freedom* (Pure Desire Ministries International, 2015), 229.
- 10 Ted Roberts, *Seven Pillars of Freedom* (Pure Desire Ministries International, 2015), 137.
- 11 Patrick Carnes, ed., *Clinical Management of Sex Addiction* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2002) 14-18.