

Are you using sex for comfort?

Addictive behaviour comes in many forms. Professor Sarah Niblock, CEO of the UK Council for Psychotherapy, and psychotherapist Paula Hall explore the effects of sex and porn addiction



Sex and/or porn addiction is a controversial subject and largely

unexplored in terms of research – we just don't know enough about the number of people it affects. What is clear from my conversation with UKCP psychotherapist Paula Hall in the accompanying podcast is that the number of people seeking help is rising. So, what is sex addiction and how we do recognise if we are dependent?

Sarah
CEO of the UK Council for Psychotherapy

Therapist Paula Hall discusses the psychology behind compulsive sexual behaviour and how therapy can help

As with any addiction, there is a significant psychological component to compulsive sexual behaviour. It has little to do with sex and is more about regulating how you feel and self-soothing.

The world is undergoing a time of heightened anxiety and restrictions on our freedom may mean people's access to their usual support structures, such as family, friends and hobbies, may be curtailed. Their inability to self-soothe has led some to find comfort in compulsions.

But how do you know when healthy sexual behaviour becomes problem behaviour? Unlike other

addictions, compulsive sex and porn use may have very few side effects at first. For example, someone could watch pornography for several hours a day without much impact on their usual routine under lockdown.

Disproportionate need

However, they may find it encroaching on other aspects of their life. They may cancel plans with friends in order to watch porn, for instance, or endlessly use dating apps or escort sites to find their next sexual partner. This is when we start to see an impact on relationships, attachments, levels of anxiety and the ability to control habits because compulsive behaviour begins to take priority over everything else.

If you are worried about someone, you could try to open up a conversation about it. But remember there is a lot of shame around sex. You can express your concerns

and ask them if they think it is an issue. Bear in mind there will be some people who enjoy sex and watching porn more than you do and it is not compulsive for them.

If you feel it is taking over your life, seek the support of a specialist who won't dismiss your concerns. A psychotherapist can ask questions that put things into perspective for you, even if you are just questioning whether you're addicted, and provide a safe, trusting environment to enable you to explore making changes.



The podcast

The taboo around sex and porn addiction means a person can battle its effects in secret for a long time. UKCP's Sarah Niblock and Paula Hall discuss how sex dependence can affect those around us and how therapy can address and allow us to understand compulsive sexual behaviour. Listen at psychologies.co.uk/psychology-sex-or-porn-addiction-podcast-ukcp

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HOW I BECAME A THERAPIST



Her fascination with what makes people happy drew Paula Hall into psychotherapy

I BEGAN TRAINING as a psychotherapist almost 30 years ago. I trained with Relate as a couples counsellor, then as a psychosexual therapist, which is how I became a psychotherapist through the College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists.

With a previous career in marketing, I had always been fascinated by psychology, what motivates people and makes them content. Perhaps it's not surprising that I specialised in helping those who struggle with compulsive sexual behaviour and porn addiction.

Training to be a therapist was one of the best decisions I've ever made. The work isn't easy, but it's hugely rewarding. One of the most enjoyable aspects is facilitating groups, and being part of the birth of new, supportive and caring relationships that continue long after therapy has ended.

paulahall.co.uk

Assess your sexual behaviour

Ask yourself these questions if you are worried that your desire to watch porn or your need for sex is bordering on compulsive

1 Are you spending more time watching porn than you would like? There is no right amount of time, but you may find that you are doing less of the things you would usually do because you would rather watch porn.

2 Do you feel that your sexual needs are greater than you'd like them to be?

Again, there is no right measure, but if you are straying from your partner or spending more time on dating apps or escort sites to find a sexual partner, then you may want to ask yourself if your behaviour is compulsive.

3 Is your porn usage or sexual behaviour getting in the way of other things? You may want a relationship but are struggling to find someone with your current habits; or perhaps you are hiding your porn use from your partner because you don't want them to know what you are doing.

4 Are you distancing yourself from your support structures? It may be that the desire to watch porn or have sex has led you away from other activities. Has your behaviour affected the balance of your life?

About the UKCP and how to find a therapist

• **The UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)** is the leading research, innovation, educational and

regulatory body working to advance psychotherapy for the benefit of all. We have a register of more than 8,000 individual members, who offer a range of therapy approaches for couples, individuals, families and groups. We also have more than 70 training

and accrediting organisations for those who wish to become psychotherapists.

• **To find the right therapist for you** or learn how to become a therapist, visit psychologies.org.uk

