



L A K E F R O N T
W E L L N E S S C E N T E R , S . C .

161 West Wisconsin Avenue, Suite 2B Pewaukee, WI 53072
Phone 262-695-8857 www.lakefrontwellness.com

Abundant Living... Discover the Possibilities!

INFIDELITY: ONLINE

Recovering Couples Anonymous
(12-step recovery groups for couples in which one partner is a sex addict)
www.recovering-couples.org

Sex Addicts Anonymous
(12-step groups for sex addicts)
www.sexaa.org

A Threat to Relationships

Over half of all U.S. households have Internet access, making the 40 million sexually explicit Web sites, chat rooms, bulletin boards and interactive games completely available to anyone who cares to partake. An estimated 20 to 33 percent of Internet users go online for sexual purposes; most are male, about 35 years old, married with children, and well educated. As many as 17 percent of users become addicted to online sexual activity. In the coming years, as the number of households with Internet access grows, it can be expected that more and more couples will suffer a variety of problems related to online infidelity.

Sexual behavior over the Internet can easily threaten relationships because it is extremely accessible, affordable, and the ability to hide one's identity helps people feel they can escape being caught. Online sexual behavior is proving to be highly addictive to some users and serious relationship problems are reported in almost all marriages in which one partner is cybersex addicted. Even if the user does not become addicted, problems can still exist between partners.

How Does Online Sexual Behavior Start?

Online chatting or e-mailing can begin simply as a distraction from boredom or emotional distress. Behaviors that were once off limits in a face-to-face situation with strangers are suddenly available through the Internet. Individuals seeking to connect with a potential partner via the Internet can present themselves in any way they choose, and can omit information they don't want others to know. What started innocently can easily advance to a real life emotional and/or physical extramarital affair. However, even if the behavior never advances to meeting in person, many partners view cybersex chatting and/or pornography viewing as a form of infidelity, a threat to the marriage, and as emotionally distressing as a "live" affair.

What are the Signs?

Problems that arise include loss of trust, a decrease in self-esteem, and a sense of isolation. Some users begin to have difficulty becoming aroused by their partners, avoid sex, and experience emotional distress in their relationships. In fact, 52 percent of cybersex users lose interest in relational sex. Or, to the other extreme, the user may request or demand sexual behaviors that the partner finds offensive. The partner may notice a significant change in sleep patterns, the demand for privacy, and the user may make excuses for spending time alone.



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To be in a secure love relationship is to be desired and thought of as special. It is our main source of security, emotional safety, and comfort. Infidelity of any kind disrupts this special bond and one or both partners no longer have the sense of being connected in a secure, safe haven. In the case of Internet infidelity, when a partner suspects the user is engaging in cybersex behaviors, he or she may become overly sensitive to the partner's activities and whereabouts, searching for evidence of wrongdoing.

One or both partners may obsessively think about the other's behavior, have problems sleeping, have difficulty focusing at work, and dealing with other tasks requiring attention to detail such as driving.

Likely Reactions to Confrontation

After a confrontation, both partners may agree there has been a betrayal and the goals are to move beyond it, recover, resolve what led to the betrayal, and repair the relationship. Other times, the partner experiences the situation as a betrayal, but the user is hesitant about giving up the Internet behavior because he or she believes no real harm has been done; then the couple is stuck. In some cases, the situation is worsened if the user has lost a job, been arrested, or has a health concern (such as worry over sexually transmitted diseases after a physical affair).

Some times after confrontation, the user is fearful of losing the relationship with the partner (and children, pets, finances) and at the same time also fearful of loss of the online behavior. He or she usually only discloses what he or she thinks the partner has already discovered, or is likely to discover, or be told by an outside party. Sometimes the user will even say that he or she reached a sexual Web site by accident or that it happened while looking for or chatting about something else. He or she wants to avoid having to admit any wrongdoing at all costs. Users in this mindset are reluctant to change or seek help.

Some users try to blame the partner for not engaging in sexual behaviors requested, which "forced" him or her to seek satisfaction by viewing pornography or chatting with someone online. Partners feel betrayed because the user has been sharing information that has been thought to be private within the relationship, especially if the dialogue contains emotional intensity or sexually suggestive flirtations, or if the user has arranged to meet with the other person face-to-face.

Seeking Help

Reluctance to change must first be resolved. Any hesitation should be replaced by a desire to make a plan and take action to improve the relationship. In some cases, the betrayed partner may be so disgusted or angry by what the user has done, that a period of separation may be useful to cool down or reduce feelings of shame. A trained mental health professional can assess your particular situation and recommend the best course of action and treatment.

A therapist will likely want to determine if the user is addicted. If so, the therapist will offer support and assistance in the development of a plan, which might include restrictions on further computer use, accountability measures, and finding a 12-step or support group meeting. Some tips for changing behavior include:



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- Use pictures of spouse, family or other important people as a screen saver so the user can see what is important to him or her each time the computer is accessed.
- Move the computer to an open area in the home.
- Do not use the Internet alone; go online only when family members or supportive friends are present.
- Use the computer only for specific, planned tasks that have been reviewed with someone who will hold you accountable.
- Have periods of time when no online behavior happens.
- Control Internet access with filtering or blocking software, or use an Internet Service Provider that already filters Internet content. You can also use monitoring software that e-mails reports of visited sites to a chosen person.

With help, the couple moves toward re-establishing trust and their sexual relationship. In the end, the couple will have strengthened their ability to repair problems, look for the good in each other, and find ways to successfully discuss and resolve long-standing issues.

Books

In the Shadow of the Net: Breaking Free of Compulsive Online Sexual Behavior, by P. Carnes, D. L. Delmonico, E. Griffin and J. M. Moriarity, 2001. Hazelden.

Disclosing Secrets, by M. D. Corley and J. P. Schneider, 2002. Gentle Path Press.

Cybersex Exposed: Simple Fantasy or Obsession? By J. P. Schneider and R. Weiss, 2001. Hazelden.

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