



Sexual Addiction Recovery
For Men

We Need to Talk About Sexual Addiction—Paula Hall

Transcript



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We Need to Talk About Sexual Addiction—by Paula Hall

Paula Hall - Sex addiction is a growing problem in our society today. A problem that affects ordinary people. And the biggest barrier to getting help is the secrecy and the shame that surrounds it. My hope during this talk is to give you a bit more of an insight into the problem of sex addiction, and also to encourage you to start talking about it so we can begin to break through that secrecy and shame.

I'd like to start by telling you a little bit about Mark. Mark is 28 years old, he is a good looking guy, he is intelligent, a good sense of humor, and a great group of friends. But Mark is lonely, desperately lonely. Mark is a sex addict. It started with porn in his teens, as it does for so many. But since then, it has escalated to visiting sex workers. And no one knows, absolutely no one.

He dreams of having a normal life, you know getting married, kids, the usual stuff, but he doesn't believe that anybody could love him. Indeed he doesn't believe anybody would like him, let alone love him if they knew about his secret life. Even if he beats his addiction and stops, he can't change the past. So he'd always have to lie about himself. He doesn't believe that anyone could ever really understand, and that's why he feels so desperately alone and isolated.



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Sex addiction is controversial. Many people think it's a myth, others think that it's just a joke. Some think it's an excuse for low sexual moral behaviors, perhaps used by people who don't want to take responsibility for the people that they hurt. Some might think it's a term that could describe anyone with a high sex drive or maybe someone with unusual sexual tastes. What do you think about sex addiction? Perhaps you've never really thought about it before. We often don't consider our views on things until it actually affects us. But maybe it does actually affect you a lot, lot more than you know.

Conservative estimates say that 1 in 20 people struggles with sex addiction. So actually in this audience here today, that means there's about six or seven sex addicts.

Sex addiction is a real problem, but professionals can't agree if addiction is the right name for it, or if it should be called an impulse control disorder, or hyper sexuality, or sexual compulsivity, and a whole host of other names. And until we do get an accurate clinical diagnosis, chances are that doubts and misunderstandings will continue. But professionals do agree that more and more people are struggling with sexual behaviors that fell out of their control.

For most, that includes internet pornography, but for some it's also cybersex, visiting sex workers, cruising, multiple affairs, dating sites. The type of behavior is not what defines it as an addiction, but the dependency on it. When we talk about alcohol addiction, we don't differentiate between those who drink whisky or beer or tequila. Alcohol addiction is defined as a dependency on alcohol to make life feel more manageable. And of course, there are a lot of people who can drink alcohol recreationally, maybe even a little too much at times, but they don't become dependent on it.

You know you're addicted to alcohol if it's causing significant problems in your life, but in spite of those problems, you still can't control your drinking or stop. And the same is true for those who become dependent on internet pornography or any other kind of sexual behavior. The reason that many people prefer the name "addiction", including myself, is because that's actually how people who struggle with it say that it feels. It feels like an addiction.

There's also a growing body of research that is showing that compulsive pornography use impacts the brain in a very similar way to chemical dependencies. And like people dependent on alcohol and drugs, many people with sex addiction come from difficult backgrounds, and they unconsciously use their behaviors to forget the pain of the past, as one is numbing out, difficult emotions in the present, but that's not true for all. Since the advent of the internet and smartphones, anyone can get hooked. Easy access and no education of risk means that more and more people are getting addicted without even knowing that it's happening.

You can't drink alcohol for eight hours a night every night and not notice the physical consequences, but you can view porn. And you couldn't go out and get high on drugs five times a week without those closest to you suspecting that something is going on, but you could probably go and visit a massage parlor. Unlike any other addiction, sex addiction often has no physical consequences until it's too late.



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Pornography, is of course a very real part of our world now. Search engines deal with about 68 million requests for porn every single day. That's about 25% of all search terms. And the porn industry is estimated to be worth a staggering 97 billion dollars. There is certainly no shortage in demand.

I'm not suggesting that we have to ban internet porn, nor am I saying that we need to censor what consenting adults choose to do with their private lives. But when you combine that easy access with no education of risk, then you're paving the way for an epidemic.

Did you know that 260,000 members of online support groups are trying to give up porn because of the impact it's having on their life, or that 27,000 people google "sex addiction" and "porn addiction" every day?

To be honest, I don't care what you call it, whether it's addiction, compulsion, or whatever. What I care about is Mark, and people like him. Sex addiction is a real problem and it affects ordinary people. Mark is not a fictional character, he's not a made up case study to try and illustrate a point; he's an ordinary guy, who came to me for help. Obviously I've changed his name to protect his identity, so if anyone out there's got a friend called Mark who's 28 years old, I promise you I'm not talking about him.

But Mark's story is real, very real. And unfortunately so is the story of Jim and Lucy. Jim and Lucy had been happily married for 18 years, they've got three children, Jim's an accountant, Lucy is a teaching assistant. An ordinary couple. The kind of couple you'd be having for dinner tonight if you weren't stuck here at a Ted Talk.

But eight months ago, Lucy found a video on Jim's phone of him having sex with another woman in their living room. Her world fell apart. When she confronted Jim, he confessed that he's recently joined an adult hookup site. He said that he had no intention of meeting anybody, it was just something he did out of curiosity. And initially, he said he'd only ever met that one person, but over time, the truth came out. Twenty years hooked on porn, and hundreds of casual sexual encounters. Their world is in shreds.

Lucy feels as though her whole marriage has been a lie. She just can't believe that Jim would do this to her. "He's just not that type," she said to me. Something that partners of sex addicts often say. And like most of the partners I meet, she's in shock. "How could I not have known?" She said. "How could I live with somebody for 20 years and not know him?" Remember, this addiction often has no physical side effects.

Jim's struggling to explain why he did it. He's a sex addict, but he swears he loves Lucy, and he's never stopped loving her. And in spite the anger and the rage that Lucy feels at Jim's betrayal, she still loves him.

But like Mark that I was telling you about earlier, Lucy feels desperately alone and isolated. She doesn't want to tell any of their friends about this, what are they going to think of Jim? But also, what are they going to think of her? What assumptions are they going to make about her and their life together?



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Well, final story. Mary rang me the other day about her son. He's just dropped out of university, he's back home, suffering from depression, and saying that life isn't worth living. Mary was tearful on the phone as she was describing what a lovely young man he is, and how he'd always dreamed of having a medical career.

But, apparently he's messed up his GCSEs and didn't get the A-level grade he needed to be on the degree course that he really wanted to do. Mary is desperate to get help for him. Up until now, they just haven't understood what was wrong, but it turns out he's had a chronic problem with porn since he was 14.

When they thought he was revising in his room, clearly he was using the computer for something else. But her son says he's too embarrassed to talk to anybody. Apparently he's saying he knows that most lads his age look at porn, but not to the extent that he does. And certainly not to the extent of turning down real life partners, and finding himself still a virgin at 20, an age which apparently he thinks he's embarrassingly old.

And like most moms, Mary is blaming herself. "Why didn't I see what was going on?" "Why couldn't I have helped him?" "Why didn't I know?" And you'll notice the theme here. She feels desperately alone and isolated. In spite of the good group of friends she's got, she's just too scared of what they'll think of her son. She wants to protect him from their judgment.

If you're not someone who's struggling with sex addiction, then you probably know someone who is. A partner, a parent, a sibling, a child, a friend, a work colleague. Someone you trust, someone you work with, someone that you respect and care about. Or, if not, you certainly know a partner or a friend of somebody with sex addiction.

But the question is, would they confide in you? Would they trust you not to judge? Might you say to yourself, "I didn't think they were that type?" If you're completely honest, what words do come to mind when you think of a sex addict? I suspect, like most people, the words that come to mind are someone who's a bit of a creep, or a freak, or maybe someone who is a bit sleazy. Or you might think of somebody below moral standards, you might think of someone who's selfish and greedy. Or worst, you might think that a sex addict was a risk to society, a potential rapist, or child molester, a sexual pervert.

Or you might just think they're a bit pathetic, sad, and desperate. Or, of course, if you don't believe in sex addiction, you might just think they're making a fuss about nothing, they're just being a bit crazy. But none of those words would describe Jim, or Mark, or Mary's son. Well, except perhaps sad and desperate, but not in the derogatory sense. Nor would they describe any of the hundreds of people that I've worked with over the years--men and women. Ladies, if you thought you were off the hook for this condition, I'm afraid not.

It's estimated about 30% of people with sex addiction are women, but the stigma for women is even



worse. A man might be a "player" or a "bit of lad," but a woman that has many sexual partners is still called a "slut" or a "whore."

Sex addiction is an equal opportunity condition. It affects men and women, young and old, straight and gay, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, married, single, the wealthy, the poor, ordinary people.

Sex addiction thrives in secrecy and shame. And until we as a society can start talking about it openly and non-judgmentally, the problem is going to continue to grow. We need to stop making moral judgments about people with sex addiction do, and start listening to why they do it, and trying to understand why they become so dependent on it.

I believe, as a society we have got a responsibility to educate people about sex addiction especially our young people. And we desperately need more services for those who do get hooked. We need to stop quibbling over what it should be called and start seeing the devastation that it is causing in people's lives. Ordinary people like Mark, Jim, Lucy, Mary, and her son. Until we do, ordinary people like you and me, and the people that we love and care about won't dare to reach out for help, they will suffer and struggle alone.

We need to start talking about sex addiction, and break through the secrecy and shame that continues it. Sex addiction is not a myth, or a joke, and it's certainly not fun. It is a devastating condition that is seeping through our society and you can help that to change.

I think the most important thing that I've learned in my 20 years as a therapist is the phenomenal power of compassion. When we can embrace the fact that we are all fallible, vulnerable human beings, we all make mistakes, we all have regrets, we all struggle with difficult emotions, and sometimes we don't always handle them well, then we can start talking about issues like sex addiction with compassion rather than judgment.

I'm delighted to say that Mark did, eventually, reach out to a friend and confide in a friend. And the compassion and the care that that friend showed him gave Mark the courage, the strength, the hope and the motivation to finally overcome his problem and leave his past behind him. And maybe there's someone in your life that you could do that for today.

There are three things I'd like you to take away from this talk. Firstly, sex addiction is a real problem. Secondly, it affects ordinary people. And thirdly, by talking about it with compassion, we can begin to break through the secrecy and shame that fuels it.

The topic for this conference is Courageous Creations, and I'm here today talking on behalf of my clients, those with addiction and those who love them. Because they don't have the courage to speak for themselves because of the shame they feel and the fear that even those closest to them won't understand.



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I'd like to ask you to have the courage to start talking about sex addiction and create compassionate spaces in your relationships, where the people that you love and care about can reach out for help. Thank you.

Tell me what you think – Leave a comment or Question

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