

**A Qualitative study of Cybersex Participants:
Gender Differences, Recovery Issues, and
Implications for Therapists**

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ABSTRACT

In a companion study to one previously published on the effects of cybersex addiction on the family, a new, brief online survey was completed by 45 men and 10 women, aged 18-64 (mean, 38.7) who self-identified as cybersex participants who had experienced adverse consequences from their online sexual activities. Nearly all the respondents (92% of the men and 90% of the women) self-identified as current and/or former sex addicts.

Significantly more men than women reported downloading pornography as a preferred activity. As in previous studies on gender differences in sexual activities, the women tended to prefer sex within the context of a relationship or at least e-mail or chat room interactions rather than accessing images. However, in the present small sample, several women were visually-oriented consumers of pornography. Two women with no prior history of interest in sadomasochistic sex discovered this type of behavior online and came to prefer it. Although a similar proportion of men (27%) and women (30%) engaged in real-time online sex with another person, significantly more women than men (80% versus 33.3%) stated that their online sexual activities had led to real-life sexual encounters.

Some respondents described a rapid progression of a previously existing compulsive sexual behavior problem, whereas others had no history of sexual addiction but became rapidly involved in an escalating pattern of compulsive cybersex use after they discovered Internet sex. Adverse consequences included depression and other emotional problems, social isolation, worsening of their sexual relationship with spouse or partner, harm done to their marriage or primary relationship, exposure of children to online pornography or masturbation, career loss or decreased job performance, other financial consequences, and in some cases, legal consequences.

Although some therapists were very helpful, others were uninformed about the nature and extent of sexual activities available online and reportedly (1) minimized the significance of the cybersex behavior and did not accept it for the powerful addiction it was, (2) failed to make it a priority to stop illegal or self-destructive behaviors, and (3) did not consider the effect of the cybersex involvement on the spouse or partner.

INTRODUCTION

With the rapidly enlarging role of computers in homes and offices, psychotherapists and addiction counselors are increasingly seeing clients with a new problem, cybersex addiction. Cybersex can be defined as *the use of digitized sexual content (visual, auditory, or written), obtained either over the Internet or as data retrieved by a computer, for the purpose of sexual arousal and stimulation* (Schneider and Weiss, 2001). Cybersex, any form of sexual expression that is accessed through the computer, is a phenomenon unknown before the mid 1980's. As use of computers and the Internet has exploded in the United States and other countries, accessing the Internet to obtain sexual stimulation has increased exponentially in prevalence. In 2000, about one in four regular Internet users, or 21 million Americans, visited one of the more than 60,000 sex sites on the Web at least once a month (New York Times, Oct. 23, 2000).

The consequences of compulsive cybersex involvement can perhaps best be appreciated with a series of personal stories:

Man, 51, now separated after 20 years of marriage

My Internet activities are one of the direct causes of the breakup of my marriage. I left twice during my marriage, each time for another woman whom I met online. I have suffered serious depression and am currently in therapy and taking antidepressant medications. I have lost jobs due to my preoccupation with my addiction, for example, moving out of state to start a new relationship, or running from my marriage. My sexual relationship with my partner has suffered in that maintaining an erection has become a problem. My children are now not living with their father. My sex addiction was killing me.

35-year old male, divorced.

I am attracted to young boys ages 10-14. My activities primarily consisted of going into Internet chat rooms as a 13-15 year old male and having cybersex which consisted of exchanging sex talk with other teen boys and exchanging sexually graphic pictures, including boy sex pictures, and masturbating.

I am a lawyer and I lost my job with a law firm. I would spend up to 8 hours online trying to escape from my problems and trying to get a porn and sexual fix. I would not eat or drink during this time. Emotionally, I was as detached as though I was in a coma. Nothing else mattered. I didn't think about the illegality of what I was saying or doing on the computer.

My online activities created some serious trust issues between my wife and me. I got divorced so that my wife and children would not have to deal with my sexual addiction. When we were separated it was easier for me to act out with cybersex, and I continued to do so. Right now, I am at one of the lowest points in my life. I may be indicted on felony criminal charges. I don't have much contact with my

family. I feel worthless and shamed. I am in a group for sexual offenders and I am in jail. My jail does not have bars on the outside, only on the inside.

37-year old female executive, never married

When I finally bottomed out on my alcoholism and joined AA, I realized I was indeed powerless over my sex addiction. But it took three years on the Internet for me to hit bottom and get help. I lost time, jobs, friends, money, and whatever self-respect I may have had.

I would go to work, race through my appointments, and as soon as possible, I would leave and go home. I'd get online, act out, go back to work, and again go home and online as soon as I could. This went on for years. I was shut down emotionally. I'd get in a chat room looking for a man with whom I could have sex. I'd meet him at a hotel or at my house and have sex. When I traveled, I'd set up meetings in towns where I knew I would be staying. None of these meetings were ever romantic interests. I was clear from the beginning that it was about sex and nothing else. I also had pornographic sites which I frequented when online but not in the chat room. Those sites mainly functioned to add to the file footage which was continually running in my brain. I sought help only after barely surviving an encounter in a hotel room.

Based on an online study of over 9,000 people who had accessed sexually-oriented web sites, chat rooms, and bulletin boards, Cooper, Putnam, Planchon, & Boies (1999) divided cybersex users into three categories — recreational users, “at risk” users, and sexually compulsive. Recreational users accessed online sexual material more out of curiosity or for entertainment and do not have problems associated with their online sexual behavior. Sexually compulsive users were defined as individuals who spent at least 11 hours per week online on cybersex. “At risk” users were persons who had no prior history of sexual compulsivity, yet when faced with the accessibility, affordability, and anonymity of the computer, found themselves spending substantial time and energy on cybersex activities. Cybersex was for them the first expression of an addictive sexual disorder, one that lends itself to rapid progression, similar to the effect of crack cocaine on the previously occasional cocaine user.

The entire study population also replied to a 10-item sexual compulsivity scale, and the results were reported in their follow-up study (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000): Among the 9177 subjects, 83.5% were non-sexually compulsive recreational users, 10.9% had moderately elevated scores for sexual compulsivity implying some degree of difficulties with sexual behaviors, and 5.6% scored high enough to be defined as sexually compulsive. Clearly, sexual compulsivity is a problem for a large number of cybersex users.

For most users of the Internet, the ease of access to sexually oriented materials and the ability to connect with others who have similar sexual interests provides much enjoyment and enhances their lives. But for those whose cybersex activities have crossed into compulsivity, adverse consequences for the user and the family can result. In an earlier paper (Schneider, 2000) , I described the consequences of cybersex addiction for the partner and children of cybersex

addicts. These included feelings of hurt, betrayal, rejection, abandonment, devastation, loneliness, shame, isolation, humiliation, jealousy, and anger, as well as loss of self-esteem. Being lied to repeatedly was a major cause of distress. Cybersex addiction was a major contributing factor to separation and divorce of couples in that survey.

Among 68% of the couples in the earlier study, one or both had lost interest in relational sex: 52.1% of addicts had decreased interest in sex with their spouse, as did 34% of partners. Some couples had had no relational sex in months or years.

Partners compared themselves unfavorably with the online women (or men) and pornographic pictures, and felt hopeless about being able to compete with them.

Partners overwhelmingly felt that online affairs were as emotionally painful to them as live or offline affairs, and many believed that virtual affairs were just as much adultery or “cheating” as live affairs.

Adverse effects on the children included (1) exposure to computer-based pornography, (2) involvement in parental conflicts, (3) lack of attention because of one parent’s involvement with the computer and the other parent’s preoccupation with the cybersex addict, and (4) breakup of the marriage.

Those results were obtained via an online survey which was completed by partners and former partners of cybersex addicts. The results provided some information about cybersex users attitudes, and their prior involvement with compulsive sexual behaviors before their cybersex activities, but the information was obtained only from the partners.

The purpose of the present study was to obtain first-hand knowledge of the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of cybersex addicts themselves, as well as their experience with therapy and recovery. To obtain this information, I again did an online survey, this time involving a different group of subjects-- people who had had difficulties with their own computer-related sexual behaviors. This paper reports on the results. Some statistics were run to compare demographic data. However, because the purpose of the study was to learn about the experience of the addicts themselves, most questions were open-ended, the responses were analyzed qualitatively, and an inductive approach was used to develop themes.

METHODS

To learn about the perceived effects of cybersex involvement on the user, I employed the same qualitative research method used in the previous study of the effects of cybersex addiction on the partner (Schneider, 2000). A cover letter was sent to therapists who treat sex addicts, this time asking them to invite clients who were cybersex participants to e-mail me to obtain a brief online survey. The query was also posted on websites aimed at people who were seeking help for their cybersex problems, and these websites generated additional subjects. I believe that most of the responses came from the latter source. The survey questions are listed in Table 1.

Because e-mail does not generally allow for anonymity, as a return address is automatically attached, respondents were given the option of returning the survey to me via regular mail after cutting out any identifying information. Only 2 out of the 55 cybersex users chose to reply via regular mail. Months later I was still able to contact some of the respondents using the e-mail address they had provided. As in my previous online survey (Schneider, 2000), most recipients did not seem concerned about anonymity, in some cases perhaps because of the illusion that the computer is an anonymous medium of communication.

Note on Terminology:

This survey of cybersex users did not attempt to formally diagnose sex addiction. Most respondents self-identified as sex addicts. Any addictive disorder comprises loss of control (i.e., compulsive behavior), continuation despite adverse consequences, and obsession or preoccupation with the activity. By their own estimation, most of the respondents fulfilled these criteria and did indeed have an addictive sexual disorder. However, this study was not designed to ascertain this. Therefore, use of the term “cybersex addict” in this article is informal and should not be construed as a definitive medical diagnosis.

RESULTS

Demographics

Responses were obtained from 55 persons, 45 men and 10 women. The replies were obtained over a 13-month period between July 1999 and August 2000. The mean age of the respondents was 38.7 years (range 18-64 years). The mean age of the 45 men was 39.4 (range 22-64), and that of the 10 women, 35.3. (range 18-42). The number of women was too small to assess whether indeed older women are less likely than older men to be cybersex users.

Of the entire group, 63.6% were married or in a committed relationship, 14.5% were divorced or separated, and 20.0% were single (presumably never married). Among the men, 66.7% were married or in a committed relationship (including one same-sex), 17.8% separated or divorced, and 15.5% single. Among the women, 60% were married and 40% single (never married). The proportions of single men and women did not differ statistically ($\chi^2=4.28$; $df=3$).

For those respondents who were in a committed or marital relationship at the time of the survey, the number of years in their present relationship averaged 12.3 years. The men reported a mean of 11.4. years, the women 18.2 years. That is, the 6 married women in the group reported a longer average duration of their marriage than did the married or committed men. This difference was statistically significant ($p<.05$, $F=4.95$)

The cybersex involvement had been a problem for an average of 3.9 years for the entire group, with a range of less than 1 year up to 13 years.

Sexual Activities

When asked about the nature of their online sexual activities, 35 of the 45 men (77.8%) mentioned pornography, 21 (46.7%) mentioned chat rooms, and 12 (26.7%) reported participating in online real-time sexual activities with another person. Several male respondents reported assuming the identity of young teenagers in order to attract that age. Among the 10 women, only 1 (10%) mentioned pornography, 8 (80%) reported chatting, and 3 (30%) engaged in online real-time sexual activities. Significantly more men than women ($\chi^2=16.62$, $df=1$) downloaded porn. Compared with men, the women clearly preferred chats to viewing pornography.

When asked whether their online sexual activities had led to real-life sexual encounters, 15 of the 45 men (33.3%) said yes, as did 8 of the 10 (80%) of the women. Significantly more women than men ($\chi^2=6.47$, $df=1$) progressed from online to real-life sexual activities. Three women (30%) and 7 men (15.6%) reported engaging in phone sex.

Sexual Addiction

In reply to the question, “Do you consider yourself a sex addict?” among those who replied, 33 out of 36 men (92%) and 9 of 10 women (90%) said yes. They described a long history of compulsive masturbation, use of pornography (primarily the men) and other behaviors which, along with their more recent cybersex use, led them to self-diagnose as sex addicts. A couple of people said they had been sexually addicted, but now that they had conquered the addiction they no longer termed themselves addicts. Several respondents commented that only after their cybersex use had caused them significant consequences did they, in reviewing their life, realize that sex had been a long-standing compulsion antedating their involvement with the Internet.

For many people, the computer is just one more outlet for expression of their sex addiction — a very convenient, powerful, and seductive outlet. A 30-year old man with a long history of cybersex involvement centered on fetish fashion and pornographic images of group sex, lesbian sex, and fetishes, wrote, “Cybersex is only one aspect of my sex addiction. I used that route because it was easy to access and easy to hide. It was also too easy to lose track of time. It consumed my thoughts much of the time I was awake.”

A 36-year old man with years of compulsive masturbation and pornography use, agreed: “Cybersex did not cause my sexual addiction — it is just another way for me to act out sexually. I was using porn long before the ‘Net.’”

Progression of Cybersex Addiction

Because of the anonymity, affordability, and accessibility of Internet sexual resources (a phenomenon which Cooper et al. (1999) have termed “the triple A engine,”), the computer can accelerate the transition from “at risk” to “addicted,” as well as the progression of sex addiction in those with a history of prior sexual compulsivity. At-risk users without a prior history of compulsive sexual behaviors, can find themselves caught up in a rapidly progressing addiction:

A 29-year old man described what happened after he'd been married one year:

It started when we bought our first computer in 1997 and got access to the web. My cybersex addiction skyrocketed immediately and continued unchecked until one year later, when my wife found a bookmarked site. I confessed to her what I'd been doing and that I thought I needed help.

Emotionally I was in a daze for that whole year of being online. I was occasionally available to support my wife but I seemed always to be thinking about the next time I could get online, and when was my next day off that would have my wife be at work. Sometimes she'd ask me to pick her up for lunch and I would get angry, making something up about how I had errands to do, so I could stay home and surf. Our relationship became significantly strained. We'd go months without having sex. My wife said she felt extremely alone during that period.

A married 60-year old man had no history of compulsive sexual behaviors until he got hooked on the Internet 5 years previously. He wrote,

Instead of spending time with my family, I ran home and went on the computer. Even working two jobs from 6 AM to 10 PM, I'd stay on the 'Net until after midnight, doing cybersex and searching for porn sites. I had no time for sex with my wife. Eventually I got arrested for sending porn to a minor, who was in fact a police officer. I lost my job, articles were in all the papers, and I was on TV. I lost friends. My family distrust me, some don't ever want to see me. I'm facing a jail sentence."

He is now in therapy and has joined a sex addiction 12-step group.

Addictive disorders tend to have their onset in adolescence or young adulthood, but these cases, especially the second one, illustrate that cybersex addiction can arise even in later years. It is possible, of course, that a detailed history of the 60-year old respondent might reveal that he'd had other compulsive behaviors in earlier years – for example, workaholism – and that the powerful lure of cybersex resulted in his switching addictions from e.g. his workaholism to cybersex.

For those with a prior history of compulsive sexual behaviors, the Internet can escalate their addiction and the unmanageability of their lives. A 33 year old man, married for 3 years, had been involved in cybersex since the early days of the computer, long before his marriage. He reported that ever since age 10 he'd been masturbating compulsively to fantasies and pornography. On the Internet, he favored fantasy and masturbation while reading explicitly sexual stories online. After 3 years of marriage and one child, he met someone else in a sexually-oriented chat room, left his wife, and became engaged to his new partner. Now in 12-step recovery, he writes,

Cybersex addiction twists the mind. Slowly or quickly it will cause objectification, fantasy, and loss of intimacy in real relationships. Because of the progressive nature of the addiction, it will also eventually come out of the cyber area and into 'real' life."

His 3-year old son, who now lives far away, lost his father because of the addiction. When contacted again one year later, this man wrote, "Part of my recovery now is trying to see what part of the wreckage of my past I am still responsible for trying to correct." He is considering a reunification with his ex-wife.

A 30-year old man with a previous history of "porn, masturbation, and frequent sexual thoughts," wrote about his cybersex experience:

In the last couple of years, the more porn I've viewed, the less sensitive I am to certain porn that I used to find offensive. Now I get turned on by some of it (anal sex, women peeing, etc.) The sheer quantity of porn on the Net has done this. It's so easy to click on certain things out of curiosity in the privacy of your home, and the more you see them, the less sensitized you are. I used to only be into softcore porn showing the beauty of the female form. Now I'm into explicit hardcore.

A 35 year old woman, married since her teens, related a long history of compulsive masturbation. However, her life spun out of control only after she accidentally came upon a pornography site on the Internet:

I stumbled across a porn site by typing in a business address wrong. I went back out of curiosity. Within a matter of days I was doing it on a daily basis; within a matter of weeks, that is all I did. It literally took control and consumed my life. I went from joining all the free stuff, to anything I could to feed my addiction. I began to lie to my husband about working overtime just so I could continue to feed it. I didn't want to go home. I lost my mind in such a short time that I could not function at work or at home. The pictures I placed before me would haunt me day and night. I became very withdrawn and depressed. Cybersex will take a person down a road they never dreamed they would go. It sucks them into it and [there is] hell is to pay to get out."

Fortunately she was able to get help.

A 58-year old man, divorced after a 25-year marriage, was a sex addict long before he discovered the Internet. In recovery for 4 years, he wrote:

*Cybersex addiction doesn't just come from having a computer or access to the Web. In my experience, cybersex addiction comes from the **ease** at which a person who **already has** a sex addiction problem can access anything and everything sexual that one can imagine. He/she is now in the largest porn shop in the world without leaving their office or home. There is almost total safety, as no one will see you there. It's cheap, and a huge amount is free for the taking. It's*

*convenient: you can go there 24 hours a day and stay for as long as you choose. It can and will feed **any** fantasy, some that you didn't even know existed. When I disconnected from my ISP, I got clean in a very short time and maintained that sobriety for 2-1/2 years. When I reconnected I was hooked within 2 weeks and have been fighting it ever since.*

Respondents who had a prior history of compulsive sexual behaviors reported a rapid escalation of their sex addiction when they discovered online sex. Their experience is analogous to that of drug addicts who begin to use crack cocaine and find themselves suddenly out of control.

Consequences of Cybersex Addiction

Cybersex addiction can have negative consequences on the user's self-esteem and emotional state, on job performance, on couple relationships, and on the couple's children. A married man, 64, in recovery many years primarily from the use of prostitutes and sexual massage parlors, relapsed several times once he discovered Internet pornography. He provided a list of the adverse effects of cybersex on his life:

- *It drains my libido and interferes with my responding/initiating sexual relations with my wife*
- *Preoccupation with body parts on the screen spills over into increased preoccupation with body parts of real people; I feel increased preoccupation with sex, and decreased serenity in my day-to-day life*
- *It takes huge chunks of time away from my work, time with wife and family, the things that matter most to me*
- *It almost always happens late at night and therefore robs me of needed sleep, affecting my work performance the next day*
- *Keeping it secret takes much energy, and it increases my fear and anxiety*
- *It seduces me into denial about the sexual boundaries necessary around my sexual impulsivity and compulsivity; brings me to the brink of acting out once again with prostitutes; and incites in me a longing for more, more, **MORE!!***
- *It seduces me into crossing boundaries into sexual thinking, fantasy, longing and activities which I really don't want to get involved in – child porn, S&M, bestiality, incest, transvestite sex, careless sex with friends, coworkers, or relatives. When all alone, within my own home, with little chance of being discovered, with little or no cost involved, when I am hungry-anxious-lonely-tired, it is so easy to just “click” into that life-long fantasyland.”*

Other cybersex addicts related the effects on them. A 45 year old married man who masturbated while looking at pictures of nude women online wrote,

Emotionally I felt guilt and shame. This led to isolation and loneliness. This was a part of my life I could not (did not want to) share with my partner. It drove a wedge between us. I felt depressed at times because I felt I was trapped and would never be able to break free from this obsession. It was scary.

From a married man, 36:

My work productivity was cut by probably 75%. I would spend on the average 3 hours a day at work behind my closed door cybering and masturbating. I would sit there at work masturbating as secretaries were knocking on my door. I once got called to court during a cybersex encounter just as I was ejaculating. I was flushed and sweaty, but did that stop me, NO!!!

A 29-year old man who worked in a hospital:

I am an extremely punctual person, getting to work well ahead of when I actually need to be there. I never missed work because of Internet surfing, but I did on occasion cut it very close and find myself driving very very fast, sometimes dangerously, to get to work.

A 46 year old married man wrote,

I used office time and resources and was caught. I was nearly fired, and may yet be terminated for the offense. If I lose my job over this addiction, the impact will be major — possible loss of our home, financial challenges, emotional upset in the home, possibly even divorce with all its problems for the children.

Married man, 36:

I had totally turned off my emotions and was unavailable to my family. . . My sexual relationship was all about using and objectifying my wife. I used sex, any form, to detach from my feelings. She stated on many occasions that after sex she felt empty, unfulfilled, and used.

A married man, 45, wrote,

My sexual energy was 'saved' for the Internet. I lost interest in sex with my wife because I knew there were an unlimited number of pictures on the Internet that could 'get me off' any time I preferred.

He and his wife had sex only about once every 6-8 weeks.

A 38-year old man, divorced, now in a relationship:

I would rather look at porn than be with my girlfriend. Sometimes I resent her presence as it keeps me away from the Net.

Five months later, after several months of 12-step recovery, he wrote that this is no longer true, and that their relationship is "blossoming."

A 32-year old single man, in a committed relationship:

*Cybersex makes me want to do the things that I see people doing so easily on the screen, like threesomes. I really have **no** limit to what I want to do, so I push the limits of what my girlfriend wants to do. So far it's not a big problem, as she is very sexual, but I've had many girlfriends who did not experiment, so I cheated on them often with girls who did the things I like to do.*

Married man, 36:

My 15-year old daughter answered the phone when a woman called after arranging phone sex after we'd been cybering and wanted more. My daughter was devastated and could not understand why a lady would be calling me when Mom wasn't home and why I went into the bedroom to talk to her. She did me a favor, which I didn't recognize at the time, when she told my wife that 'Daddy had girls calling while you are gone.'

Women Cybersex Users

Most women are less interested than men in visual sexual imagery and more interested in romance, but in this study there were also more visually-oriented consumers of pornographic images.

Female Cybersex Romance Addicts

Women who engage in cybersex activities are relatively more likely than men to participate in chat rooms, in which there are "live" conversations, and less likely to view and download pornography. Several female survey respondents reported favoring chat rooms, where they met men for cybersex. For most of the women, these online activities led to face-to-face meetings.

A 36-year old woman, in a long-term marriage, wrote of spending over two years looking for romance on the Internet. In some cases she then met the men at hotels for sex. Regarding her online activities, she wrote,

It makes meeting men so much easier, and talking about sex is easier when you can't see them or they you. You quickly become freer with your words, then when you do meet them sex is all you have in mind. Actually, having a meaningful relationship seems impossible for me. I start to get attached emotionally and it scares men off; they just want free sex.

I want to be accepted and loved by someone who will be my "knight in shining armor," sorta'. I know that is not really going to happen, but I keep looking anyway. I goof off at work by talking to men via the Internet. I keep imagining that one day one of these men will really love me. I shut out the hurt I feel each time a relationship doesn't work out (they never lasted more than a month). I ignore my family to talk online when they need me.

My husband never seems happy, doesn't laugh, doesn't take me out to eat. We went to counseling – I'm still going – and my husband knows about the sexual encounters. He's so tired of hearing about them, he can't stand to know any more. He thinks I'm doing better. I just don't tell him anymore. It was easier to be happy with him before I found there is "life" out there.

I know right from wrong, but I have chosen to do wrong at this point. Why don't I make some real changes? Maybe because I'm afraid of being alone, without someone to play with. I love the attention, and the men's letters and phone calls. I also crave the sex – what would I do without it?

Several months later, she wrote that she was still in counseling, still having sex with several partners, and had recently been diagnosed with a sexually-transmitted disease. Although she could write logically about the effects of her actions on herself and her husband, she was continuing her Jekyll-and-Hyde existence and remained insufficiently motivated to take advantage of the available help.

A 41-year old woman, married since her teens, wrote,

I was involved with masturbation and fetishes since I was a young teenager. I engaged in sexual activities online for 10 years. Online sex filled in the missing gaps emotionally – I would get strokes from these people and that felt good. But sooner or later they too would hurt me, by avoiding me or breaking it off. My relationship with my spouse was bad, but this made it 100 times worse. I withdrew sexually, built a wall so that I wouldn't have to consider my husband's feelings, and reduced my guilt about the cyber lovers and the money spent on phone calls and trips.

She and her husband are now going to therapy. Regarding the effect of cybersex on her marriage, she relates,

I have learned that giving any part of myself away to another was taking away that part from my spouse. If I had spent the time and energy on my marriage instead of online, we would have grown together rather than apart."

Unlike the previous respondent, this woman had stopped the online activities and was trying to repair the damage to her marriage.

Hooked on Visual Images

Although women usually favor relational activities over straight pornography, some women cybersex addicts do get hooked on visual images. Two women in the survey wrote about this.

One, a married 35-year old woman, became quickly hooked on fetishistic images on the Internet. She explained, "Most of my life I have been stimulated most by touching. It was strange how pictures could stimulate a woman as much as it did me. The pictures I placed before my eyes

would haunt me day and night.” She described how the images took over her life. Her sexual relationship was adversely affected. “My husband could no longer satisfy me. I wanted what I saw in the videos and pictures, and was too embarrassed to ask him for it.” She did not engage in any offline sexual encounters, but by the time she found help she was actively looking for them. She relates having been freed of her obsessions through the help of God along with the support of her husband, pastor, and therapist.

Another respondent, a 29 year old woman who favors hard-core porn photos including sadomasochism (S&M), wrote,

The material that is written for women is usually in the “love addiction” realm and not straight sex addiction. There are women out there like myself who are aroused visually like men and have some characteristics that more closely follow that typical male sex addiction. I don’t have sex to appease the man in my life, or get his love; I have sex for the rush of orgasm, to medicate my feelings.

Progression of the Addiction

One of the female survey respondents described a rapid progression of her computer involvement, which began with a business e-mail correspondence and ended with major changes in her life and lifestyle. A 36-year old married woman with no reported history of compulsive sexual behaviors, she began e-mailing a man through her work. Their professional e-mail exchanges soon became personal. There was no discussion of love or romance, but their e-mails soon became the highlight of her day. She wrote, “This progressed and escalated in the content of the emails, IM [instant messaging, an AOL service], and led to phone calls.” When eventually they met at a professional meeting in another state, she was greatly disappointed. “The fantasy was much better than reality.”

When she returned from the trip, she became isolated, withdrawn, and depressed. She stopped working, stopped interacting with her children unless she had to, and began having more frequent, aggressive sex with her husband. She wrote,

After I met the “other man,” I didn’t speak with him or communicate again. But I found it necessary to have another source, an outlet. So I ventured into chat room. One day I stumbled into my first BDSM [bondage and discipline, sadomasochism] room. Amazing! I learned about D/s [dominance and submission] and I studied it. I binged there too — had chats and a few cyber sessions. I have become a presence in the BDSM community. My focus has been on D/s. I was molested by a pedophile as a child. It’s interesting that I would see myself as a sub [submissive] and not a Domme [dominant].

Three months later she wrote,

In retrospect, my life was so damn normal, straight, vanilla, with such high integrity. Now I have a Dom. ‘Safe, Sane, Consensual.’ So, how does one have a

sexual D/s online relationship? You take it into your life. Dom/me says “do” and you do.

She is considering meeting her Dom face-to-face. Her husband recently asked for a legal separation. She is not ready to stop her activities or leave the bondage and discipline, sadomasochism (BDSM) community she now feels a part of. Her priorities have shifted to where her online sexual activities appear to be more important to her than her marriage.

The Sexual Abstinence/Sexual Addiction Spectrum

Carnes, in his book *Sexual Anorexia* (1997), wrote about people who at different times in their life experience both ends of the sexual activity spectrum, which ranges from compulsively sexual to compulsively non-sexual (which he termed sexual anorexia). This pattern was reported by a 37-year old never-married mother of a teenager:

I had a religious upbringing and can't recall having a single sexual fantasy when I was young. But in high school I had a highly sexual relationship with my son's father. I was definitely addicted to him both romantically and sexually. After my son's birth, I had 14 years of celibacy. Then one night about three years ago I had a very sexual dream and woke up very horny. All day I could think of nothing but getting to one of those sexual chat rooms. A guy instant-messaged me a very explicit message and I responded. We had cybersex, and I quickly climaxed. Later that evening he contacted me again, and I eventually agreed to let him call me. I was consumed with lust. I couldn't get enough. Sometimes he wasn't available so I would look elsewhere. This went on for four months. I wanted to meet him in person, but I was overweight and hadn't given him an accurate picture of me. If I had felt sexy enough I would have met him. I wanted to be the only one he wanted, although I knew he was with many others.

During this time I stopped going to church, I isolated myself, I lied, I worried, I spent a lot of time covering my tracks. One morning my teenage son overheard me having phone sex. This woke me up. I was doing something I would have never done at the beginning — allowing such a phone call when my son was home. I also realized that my second main cybersex partner didn't really care one bit about me, it was just the sex. When I decided to stop, I was so depressed I was nearly suicidal. The guilt, shame, and self-condemnation I felt were unbearable. I tried various counselors, but what really helped me stop was reading the Bible daily. After two years I found a counselor who could help me heal from the shame and who understands sex addiction. I plan to start in an SLAA [Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous] group next week.

For more than 20 years, this woman experienced lengthy time periods of no sexual activity, alternating with brief periods of compulsive sexual activity. Her sex life went from one extreme to another.

Female Recreational Cybersex Participants

Two of the 10 women who responded to the survey did not self-identify as sex addicts. One was a 42-year old mother of several children, married many years, who wrote in support of her cybersex activities. These consisted of. “chatting with people online and then meeting many of them offline to fulfill mutual BDSM desires.” She used the computer only to arrange real-life meetings; she said, “Cybersex is a waste of time — I get no gratification that way and refuse to participate.” She wrote, “When I came online and discovered the chat rooms that were D/s based, my world changed, as I recognized who I was for the first time — and realized there were others like me!!!” As a result, “Marital sex improved for me — I was much happier personally because I was able to act out dominantly with men and women I met online.”

When her husband found out about some of her other relationships:

He was devastated. We attempted to have an ‘open’ relationship, where he was supportive of my meetings with submissive partners, but he could not be comfortable with the idea of ‘sharing me.’ My husband and I have become distant. There is heavy denial on his part of my sexual preferences. He often offers to find a woman for us to play with together, but he has not done so. I am depressed and angry. We sleep apart and have had minimal sexual contact for months. I don’t believe I can stay in a marriage monogamously.

For me, the extramarital sex is not about intercourse, but about alternative practices that he is not interested in being part of. My other relationships truly do not affect my marriage and the children unless he makes an issue of it. I was not happy before I found the people I found via the Internet..

I know there are components of addictive behavior in my actions. Is the willingness to leave my husband and my present lifestyle to be with a more supportive community and partners the hallmark of addiction, or simply the admission that I am not, nor am I willing to be, the person I tried to be for the time I have been with my husband? My relationships are safe, sane, and consensual interactions between intelligent, successful adults who recognize that there is more to sexuality than mainstream, Judeo-Christian marital interaction.

One year later, this woman was still with her husband, but they were now consistently sleeping apart. Her activities now included a younger man who was her “primary submissive.” She believes that the BDSM scene will always be a part of her life.

This woman did not appear to recognize the discrepancy between her statement that her other relationships do not affect her marriage, and her statement that her husband was devastated, they have become distant and sleep apart, and that she is depressed and angry. The stresses she and her husband are experiencing and the instability of their relationship make it likely that she will soon have to choose between her new lifestyle and her marriage.

The second woman who reported enjoying her cybersex activities was 18 years old and single. She described her online sexual activities as “just talking dirty until I made someone get off and then I went upstairs and masturbated.” Before she found the Internet, she said she’d been compulsively masturbating. She said, “I consider myself addicted to masturbating, thinking about sex, doing sexual things with men, and always permanently horny.” However, she did not consider any of this to be a problem, “Because I’m not involved with someone at this time.”

The key to differentiating between recreational cybersex use and compulsive use will be what happens when this young woman becomes involved in a relationship with someone she cares about. If she is still strongly drawn to cybersex activities, she may decide that she is indeed addicted.

Male Recreational Cybersex Participants

Because this survey was offered online at websites aimed at people experiencing problems with their cybersex use, it is not surprising that few respondents claimed to be recreational users. All the respondents of this survey recognized some adverse consequences, but some clearly believed that the benefits of cybersex outweighed the costs:

A 30-year old single man, quoted earlier, identified himself as a sex addict and bemoaned the tendency of cybersex use to desensitize the user to offensive pornography. He said that although he was “horny all the time,” he was trying to spend less time on the Internet. When he was re-contacted four months later, his reply suggested he had made peace with his use of cybersex: “I’m still stroking just as much as ever. However, I found a cybergal in England I chat with who is multiorgasmic and keeps up with me.” At some future time, if he continues to prefer online sex to real-life relationships, he may again conclude that he needs to make some changes.

A 37-year old gay man who identified himself as a sex addict, wrote about the isolation, loss of productivity, and his unavailability for real relationships which resulted from his compulsive use of pornography, phone sex, and promiscuous sex with partners originally met online. He began attending a sex addiction meeting and abstained from cybersex for some weeks. However, four months later he wrote that he had resumed all his previous sexual activities, despite continued attendance at 12-step meetings. He explained,

I have been downloading some photos, but recently I’ve spent much more time in chatrooms, both in “social” and “sexual” chat. I truly find that the chat room is perhaps the most satisfying source I have found for making social contact with gay men in my area, where the gay community is not especially visible. However, requests for social and sexual contact are intermixed and it is very easy for me to do both at once or go entirely into sex mode.

For gays and lesbians in small communities, the Internet may be the most efficient way to make social as well as sexual contacts. Additionally, Cooper et al. (2000) reported that “sexually disenfranchised” groups such as gays, lesbians, and bisexuals were clearly over-represented in their sample of cybersex compulsives, but not among recreational users. They concluded that homosexuals and bisexuals use the Internet more often than heterosexuals for experimentation

and the expression of a variety of sexual behaviors. The Internet also provides a venue for those who would otherwise be concerned about a host of negative repercussions to engage more freely in sexual pursuits.

A 42-year old man, in a 4-year committed relationship with a 22 year old woman, wrote that he'd spent a lot of money, wasted a lot of time on the Internet, neglected his work obligations, and spent less sexual time with his girlfriend because of his online activities. He used the computer primarily to find women with whom to have phone sex and real-life sex. He explained,

I have a tremendous sex drive, but it has to be women that are fit and very attractive to me. The thing that I like the most is new women and a variety of women. One of the things that has kept my numbers down is that I am so picky. Since I have a hard time finding anyone, I spend hours looking for women who fit my criteria. My girlfriend is totally okay with me being with other women, even encouraging me in this. She thinks I am great at sex and need a variety of women. She says I should only be shared with other women who are indeed worthy (her words). When I have been ill she has been with other men, but she tells me she doesn't see the point in her being with other men when I'm around since I am so much better than anyone else (her words). She has gained a lot of weight, and I have less sex with her now, but I would never leave her.

I read a book on sex addiction, and planned on attending a 12-step meeting. I thought it would help me in some way not be so preoccupied with sex. But my girlfriend was totally against it. She thinks I am so great sexually that she didn't want to risk the group in some way changing me.

It is difficult from the limited information given, to determine whether this respondent is indeed concerned with the adverse consequences of his sexual preoccupation, or whether he is proud and pleased with his sexual prowess. It is also difficult to determine whether his girlfriend is encouraging his extra-relationship sexual activities out of concern that he may otherwise leave her, or whether indeed she is okay with those activities.

What Helps in Recovery

Having self-identified as sex addicts, many of the respondents reported that what has helped them is attending 12-Step sex addiction meetings, daily contact with a 12-Step sponsor, doing individual and couple counseling, and initially a 90-day abstinence plan. Ideally, the spouse too was attending a 12-Step co-sex addict program and doing individual and couple counseling.

A married man, 34, did a lot of "chatting," some of which progressed to phone sex. He also participated in exhibitionism/voyeurism with a digital video camera, both real-time and through e-mail. He wrote,

It's odd. The moment I diagnosed myself as an online sex addict, it stopped being difficult to abstain. I remember feeling as though an invisible opponent had

suddenly become visible, and I could get in a couple of good punches where previously, I couldn't even see where to aim.

I came up with some safety mechanisms but only had to use them a few times. Just getting out of the house and going to a movie helped. It did "waste" a few hours of my day, but that seemed better than potentially spending an entire day online. I still spend far too much time online, but none of that time is devoted to sexual activity.

Sex with my wife has gotten better It's still not as exciting as the thrill of exploring taboos, but it's more satisfying in the sense of not always craving something. I hope it continues to improve, and that I'm able to increase my emotional connection.

Married man, 45:

In the past, I never made it past 10 days before I would at least start masturbating. Once I started that, I got the urge to go back on the Internet, and soon thereafter I would. Today I've started doing other activities to help me: I am reading about addictions, and how to overcome them. I am also keeping a journal of my progress, feelings, and emotions. I attend an SA [Sexaholics Anonymous] meeting weekly. This gives me strength and allows me to be open with he [my wife]. At first, this was difficult to do because I felt so much shame and embarrassment. The more I do this, the easier it gets.

Single woman, 39:

When I began to come out of the "fog," I first had to deal with the phone calls from men calling at all times for more. I found that I was answering the phone even though I did not want to talk to these men, but I would and then I would end up having phone sex or meeting them. I got Caller ID and if there is not a safe name showing, I do not answer the phone. The Caller ID was my first line of defense. Eventually the calls began to subside.

I have also changed friends. I go to 12-Step meetings, I watch only movies and TV that doesn't trigger me. I have a wonderful group of friends I can depend on.

In addition to the above strategies, in some cases a 30-day inpatient treatment program for sexual addiction can "jump-start" a period of abstinence and a recovery program.

The Recovering Person and the Computer

The easy availability of cybersex can pose a big challenge for the sex addict already in recovery. A 59-year old married former physician, who lost his medical license because of sexual misconduct, wrote,

I was in recovery for 2 years before I got a computer. Online porno was a big temptation, so I got a screening filter device promptly. During the two weeks until I had the filter, I felt scared and guilty. I have learned not to look at porno, because I just can't risk it. I also have a rule for myself not to use anyone else's computer.

A 64-year old man, married many years, had 15 years of solid recovery from sex addiction. When his business needs resulted in purchase of his first computer just a few years back, he quickly got hooked on cybersex use. Soon thereafter he experienced his first relapse in years involving using prostitutes.

Recovery Challenges for Women

There are particular challenges for women who perceive their cybersex involvement as compulsive and seek help. These are the same challenges faced by female sex addicts in general. A 39-year old woman wrote, "However shameful it is for men to seek help for this addiction, it is doubly so for women. For men, sex is macho; it is a badge. For women, we are sluts and tramps when we pursue for sex." This was echoed by a 37-year old woman cybersex addict:

We women feel more shame because sex addiction is a man thing. It is not considered normal for a woman to escape her pain through sex. It made it all the harder for me to get help and admit the exact nature of my wrongs. Also, there is not a lot of help out there for women. It is also harder for women to find 12-step groups.

Experience with Counselors/Therapists

Most respondents who reported having obtained counseling felt that it was beneficial. Several commented that the fact that their therapist was recovering from an addiction was a definite plus. Others were grateful that their therapist was knowledgeable about addictive sexual disorders and/or about the Internet.

A few said that therapy was useless or unhelpful. Several lamented the counselor's lack of sufficient knowledge about sex addiction, about the varieties of sexual experiences available on the computer, or about the seriousness of the problem. More than one respondent wrote that the therapist tended to minimize the significance of the cybersex activities in the client's life, and didn't seem to understand the severity of the consequences to him or her. An older man who had online sex with young boys wrote, "Prior therapy did not help with the cybersex, I think because the therapists did not really understand what goes on in the online sex world, especially the emotions involved and the ritualization."

A male, 51, had a long-standing addiction to pornography, fantasy, and compulsive masturbation. His cybersex activities cost him time at work, made sex with his wife less intimate and less pleasurable, and distanced him from his family. "I am on my third counselor. The first did not believe that sex addiction was real, the second tried to convert me to his religious beliefs. The current one is addressing core issues and has been successful with other people I know."

A 34-year old divorced man with a long history of addiction to pornography and masturbation was in therapy in part because he preferred cybersex to being with his girlfriend. He wrote,

My last therapist didn't seem to think there was a problem and that I just had a strong sex drive. This was frustrating as I know how much suffering it causes me – the cycles of acting out and guilt and shame and the desire to be free from my compulsions. I now have a therapist who seems more prepared to see that this is a huge problem area for me because it is out of control.

A 37-year old single gay man wrote about “lost time, isolation, lost sleep, unproductivity, shame,” as well being depressed and unavailable for real relationships because of all the time he spent in cybersex. He wrote, “When I eventually felt that sexual addiction was a serious problem for me and asked my therapist for help with it, he seemed to think my problem was more my self-criticism about my sexual activity than the activity itself.”

In several cases, the counselor worked with the client on obtaining insight about the behavior, but without making it a priority to stop. A young man involved in sexual chat and cybersex with underage girls reported positively about his experience, writing that although his counselor hasn't directly addressed the need to stop, she did help him understand the family origins of his behaviors and helped him to no longer feel dirty or ashamed of them. Meanwhile, he was continuing his illegal behaviors.

Cybersex Addicts in Pre-recovery

Arnold Washton, in his book *Step Zero* (1991), defines this stage as the time when a person recognizes he or she has a problem but is not yet ready to change. In their book, *Changing for Good*, authors Prochaska, Norcross, and DiClemente (1994) describe the change process as a series of stages. People who are in the second stage of change, *contemplation*, acknowledge they have a problem and begin to think seriously about solving it, but are not yet ready to do so. They do, however, recognize that their behavior is engendering serious consequences. Several respondents were in this stage.

A 35-year old man wrote that his 12-year marriage had ended a year and a half earlier, and his current wife of 6 months was in the process of leaving. He was spending “every available moment collecting and masturbating to all types of pornography, especially unusual or ‘kinky’ sex.” He wrote, “My excessive masturbation had affected my ability to have sex with my wife, and my obsession with kinky activities and pornography disturbed her.” Nonetheless, regarding making any change, “I'm not ready yet... I will eventually find a 12-step group.”

A 35-year old man, divorced after 10 years of marriage, spent the last 5 years of his marriage heavily involved in cybersex. Now that he is alone, no one else competes for his attention. He currently spends 60-70 hours a week online, and writes,

Because this has become so easy and ‘safe,’ I do not seek out real relationships and actually avoid them. There are weekends that I do nothing else but surf online. I used to have a life outside of my addiction, until I became heavily

involved in online sex and pornography. When I get tired of it, I try to give it up 'cold turkey,' but always go back. Because it is such an embarrassment I have not sought help for my problem. I have recently begun searching for help online.

The Gifts of Recovery

A 55 year old married man, who for 5 years had been heavily involved in masturbation while viewing pornography online, wrote, "I lost productivity at work. I lost a promotion. I numbed my emotions, and blocked intimacy. I was "never there" during sex with my wife. I felt resentful. I was very secretive. My children had to put up with my intolerance, irrational anger, and lack of open love." He got into 12-step recovery, and wrote after three months, "I'm developing full, real intimacy, brutal honesty, unconditional love, open communication, have written out bottom lines and a set of vows. I 'live the program' and am happier than ever in my life. I now know real intimacy and can have sex without guilt." When contacted again one year later, he wrote, "I now have 15 months in recovery. My relationship with my wife is the best I have had. Things go well."

DISCUSSION

This study supports previous studies on cybersex addiction (Cooper et al, 1999, Cooper et al 2000) which concluded that accessing sex on the Internet has the potential to escalate pre-existing sex addiction as well as to create new addictive disorders in previously at-risk users. Progression of cybersex addiction is rapid. People who reported a 10, 20 or even 30-year history of low-level compulsive sexual behaviors experienced severe life repercussions within a year or two of going online. In the users' own words, this study documents the adverse effects of compulsive cybersex use on the participant's emotions, social life, work, finances, and at times, legal status, as well as on the user's significant other and children.

Male vs Female Cybersex Addicts

Ten years ago, Carnes et al (1991), in a comparative study of male and female sex addicts, reported that male sex addicts are far more interested than are women addicts in activities which objectify the sex partner, such as viewing pornography, voyeurism, and anonymous sex. Women are relatively more interested in romance, fantasy, exhibitionism, and in activities that provide the illusion of relationships. In her in-depth interviews of 18 women sex addicts, Ross (1996) found that the most common categories of sexual activities were fantasy sex, seductive-role sex, voyeuristic sex, and anonymous sex. In contrast to men, however, the anonymous sex typically consisted of having sex with someone the woman had just met at a bar or party (as opposed to sex in an adult bookstore or bathroom).

On the Internet, these gender preferences get translated into a tendency for women to prefer chat rooms and for men to favor pornography. In their online study of cybersex users, Cooper et al. (2000) reported that women prefer relational activities, i.e., chatting online with sexual partners, whereas men, although they too are involved in chatting, are far more likely than women to spend hours viewing pornography. Among their sample of 96 persons whom they termed "cybersex compulsive" on the basis of elevated scores on a sexual compulsivity scale plus

spending at least 11 hours per week online for cybersex, 70% of the 26 women, versus 43% of the 79 men, considered chat rooms their preferred online medium; 35% of the men, but only 10% of the women, preferred the Web, an online medium used primarily to access pornography.

Although only 10 women were represented in the present small study, most indeed did prefer chatrooms to pornography. The finding that a significantly higher proportion of women than men cybersex addicts became involved in offline sexual encounters also supports the notion that women are more attracted to mutual sexual activities than are men. A man may prefer to view pornography or read stories with sexual content, whereas a woman is likely to want the relationship, the give-and-take, of a live encounter.

However, the survey also found that, contrary to stereotype and in support of Ross's (1996) observations, some women cybersex addicts do use pornography as part of their compulsive behaviors. And some women do objectify men, in that they are very clear that they are looking for a sexual encounter and not for a relationship. These women themselves identify more with traditional male sexual addiction stereotypes than with the "love" or relationship addiction more typical of women. Kasl (1989) observed that sexually addicted woman often take on male sexual values. Therapists treating women cybersex addicts should not assume that they necessarily hope to find the "knight in shining armor," as one survey participant wrote.

It was interesting that two of the women became very involved with bondage/submission, sadomasochism (BDSM) cybersex once they found it. Studies have shown that most sex addicts experienced some type of abuse in childhood (Carnes, 1991). Many were sexually abused. One can hypothesize that some women with unresolved issues related to childhood sexual abuse might be vulnerable to BDSM activities as a way to work through their traumas. A therapist with extensive experience in treating sex addicts wrote, "I have often thought that S&M sex addicts were often adults with abused 'inner children' who get to feel a sense of sexual mastery by eroticizing their victimization: 'If I choose to do this, then I am not really a victim and I feel powerful.'" (O'Hara, personal communication, June 2000).

Compared with men, women cybersex addicts have additional challenges when they seek help:

- Increased shame about the activities.
- Less societal acceptance of women's sexual (and cybersexual) behaviors.
- Fewer 12-step meetings where women feel comfortable.
- Lack of knowledge by therapists about cybersex in general, and about women's activities in particular.

Online Sexual Activities

More than any other medium of sexual expression, the Internet provides free reign for imagination and fantasy. The Internet provides the extraordinary experience of having the most secret unmentionable thoughts and images suddenly spring to view and available for easy consumption. Ordinary people are experiencing the capabilities of the human imagination and fantasy life. This is a positive experience for many, but as one survey respondent commented, "It seduces me into crossing boundaries into sexual thinking, fantasy, longing and activities which I

really don't want to get involved in." Cybersex users report getting further and further into the bizarre, losing interest in their previous sexual activities and partners, and seeking more and more unusual experiences. One example is the active online BDSM culture, a phenomenon which merits additional research.

Role playing and misrepresentation is a typical feature of online sexual pursuits, according to the data presented by Cooper et al (2000): 71% of their large sample changed their age at least occasionally, 38% changed their race, and 5% have changed their gender online. In the present study, several respondents impersonated teens, including one who was caught in a police sting talking with a policeman who was also impersonating a teen! Online pedophiles typically masquerade as young people. It is quite possible that much of the teen activity online may be adults pretending to be juveniles.

Pre-existing Sexual Addiction

Most of the survey respondents identified themselves as sex addicts, and a majority related a history of compulsive sexual behaviors antedating their online sexual activities. In many cases, this consisted of masturbation, or masturbation and pornography. I did not ask for a detailed sexual history. Masturbation is a normal behavior, especially in young people. It is possible that in some people, having self-identified as sex addicts, now view their juvenile masturbation experience as compulsive. On the other hand, it may indeed have been outside the usual. No conclusions are possible from the information available.

Implications for Therapists

In this survey, many of the respondents were very pleased with the professional help they obtained for their cybersex addiction. Those who saw knowledgeable counselors were given an appropriate diagnosis, guidance about how to stop the behaviors, referral to 12-step programs, and encouragement to involve spouse or partner in therapy. However, several respondents had less positive experiences.

The biggest problem among therapists seemed to be lack of information about the power of the online experience on the cybersex addict. Therapists lacked information about types of online sexual activities, and tended to underestimate their tremendous effect on the user. Often counselors did not appreciate the overwhelming effect on so many aspects of the user's life. This led to diversion of the therapy into attempts to make the user more accepting of the activity, or an attempt to integrate the activity into the user's life by willpower and simple decision-making. The behavior was not accepted for the all-encompassing powerful addiction it really was. Therapists need to ask probing questions which will give them a full picture of what the client is doing and how it is affecting his or her life.

A second problem was a failure to make it a priority to stop illegal or self-destructive behaviors. In some cases sessions focused on insight-oriented therapy about the underlying causes of the behavior, while the client continued activities which harmed others (children, adolescents) and risked arrest for the client. Therapists need to independently assess the risk of the behaviors. If high, sessions should urgently focus on practical ways to stop the behavior.

A third problem is failure to consider that the behavior has consequences for the spouse or partner. A previous study (Schneider, 2000) documented that two-thirds of couples experience a serious decline in sexual relations as a result of one partner's cybersex involvement. Issues of trust, betrayal, anger, decreased intimacy, and loss of self-esteem by the significant other also impact the relationship. It is helpful to involve the significant other in therapy, whether with the same or a different counselor, and to suggest attendance at support groups if such are available.

Recovery Tools

Survey respondents described some helpful tools for recovery from cybersex addiction. Seeing a knowledgeable therapist was a key tool for many respondents. Therapists can help their clients make use of other tools, which include:

- Make the computer safe to use: It is impractical for most people to give up the computer entirely. However, it is desirable to delete all files with sexual or romantic content, sexually-connected e-mail and website addresses, and any saved files that could be used for sexual acting out, such as self-descriptions or self-photos; remove any live video equipment from the computer; utilize any blocking services or parental offered by the Internet Service Provider (ISP); and purchase blocking software designed to eliminate access to sexual content. Place the computer in a public area in the home. Go online only when someone else is at home. At work, position the computer so that the screen is visible from the door.
- Include the spouse or partner in therapy, both individually and as a couple.
- Join a 12-step support group and attend meetings, obtain a sponsor, and work the steps. Contact addresses and phone numbers for various 12-step groups for recovery from sex addiction can be found on the web at the website for the National Council on Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity (www.ncsac.org).
- Become more knowledgeable about sex addiction and cybersex addiction by reading relevant books and visiting informational websites.
- Combat the isolation and physical inactivity of the cybersex user by spending more time with the partner and family, cultivating friendships, doing fun activities, and getting involved in sports, exercise, and other physical activities.

Recreational Users and Those in “Pre-recovery”

The present study did not poll any cybersex users who felt that their online sexual activities were simply recreation, without any downside for themselves or others. Just as many people enjoy a glass of wine with dinner without having a problem with alcohol, many cybersex users do indeed consider online sex as just one of many enjoyable things they do in their lives,. There would have been no reason for such persons to undertake this survey. Recreational users constitute the great majority of cybersex participants. Only those people who perceived some problem for someone at some point in time as a result of their cybersex activities asked to do the survey.

Nonetheless, the survey respondents in this study constituted a range of unmanageability – from cybersex participants who felt that their activities very much enhanced their lives, with possibly a few minor problems, to those who at the time of the survey saw only the negative side of their

behavior, for which they were facing legal or financial disasters. Also along the spectrum were people who claimed they experienced only positive consequences from their online activities – although it was clear from their account that other family members or colleagues were adversely affected. Then there were respondents who were in “stage zero” or “pre-recovery” – they were able to give a cogent account of the various adverse consequences of their actions, but were not yet ready to stop.

Mental health clinicians are likely to encounter clients from all points along the unmanageability spectrum, as well as clients who are experiencing adverse consequences from the cybersex activities of a spouse or partner. In each case the clinician needs to evaluate whether indeed there are significant consequences to the behavior. If there are, then the therapist can try to increase the cybersex user’s understanding of those consequences. If this is not possible, then the user will need to experience additional consequences before he or she will be ready to make changes.

Limitations of the Study

The chief limitation of this study is that it cannot provide a comprehensive picture of cybersex experience; rather, it is a snapshot of a small convenience sample of cybersex users who volunteered to fill out an online survey. Another limitation is that although this group overwhelmingly self-identified as sex addicts, they were not subjected to any formal diagnostic testing. The sample size of 55 is small, but in line with other research: In Cooper et al’s (2000) study of 9,265 cybersex users who over a 7-week period filled out an online survey on the MSNBC web site, only 96 were identified as “cybersex compulsive.” The small number of women (10) in the present study makes the conclusions regarding female cybersex addicts tentative, and invites study of a larger population of such women.

CONCLUSIONS

In a companion study to one previously published on the effects of cybersex addiction on the family, a new, brief online survey was completed by 45 men and 10 women, aged 18-64 years (mean, 38.7) who self-identified as cybersex participants who had experienced adverse consequences from their online sexual activities. Nearly all the respondents (92% of the men and 90% of the women) self-identified as current and/or former sex addicts, although some were not yet ready to seek help. Some described a rapid progression of a previously existing compulsive sexual behavior problem, whereas others had no history of sexual addiction but became rapidly involved in an escalating pattern of cybersex use once they discovered Internet sex. A common theme was that certain types of pornography or chat-room activities which were initially accessed out of curiosity soon became the focus of the user’s interest. One consequence was loss of interest in “ordinary” sex with one’s usual partner. This often led to conflicts in the couple relationship.

Adverse consequences of the intense use of the computer for sexual activities included depression and other emotional problems, worsening of the sexual relationship with spouse or partner, harm done to the marriage or primary relationship, exposure of children to online pornography or masturbation, decreased productivity at work and even loss of job, loss of

income, progressive constriction of one's life and abandonment of other social activities, and arrests and jail time when the cybersex involved children or adolescents.

Significantly more men than women reported downloading pornography as a preferred activity. Most of the women were more interested than men in romantic relationships with their sex partners, but some, like most male cybersex addicts, tended to objectify their sexual partners, wanted sex rather than love, and were interested in pornography. Previous studies on gender differences in sexual activities have shown that men are more interested than women in visual sexual imagery whereas women tend to prefer sex within the context of a relationship. However, in the present small sample, several women were visually-oriented consumers of pornography. Two women with no prior history of interest in sadomasochistic sex discovered this type of behavior online and came to prefer it. Although a similar proportion of men (27%) and women (30%) engaged in real-time online sex with another person, significantly more women than men (80% versus 33.3%) stated that their online sexual activities had led to real-life sexual encounters.

Although some therapists were very helpful, others were uninformed about the nature and extent of sexual activities available online and reportedly (1) minimized the significance of the cybersex behavior and did not accept it for the powerful addiction it was, (2) failed to make it a priority to stop illegal or self-destructive behaviors, and (3) did not consider the effect of the cybersex involvement on the spouse or partner. Therapists need to become more informed about the range of sexual activities available on the Internet, the powerful draw of such activities for many cybersex users, the significant adverse consequences that many cybersex users experience, the need to make stopping self-destructive or illegal behaviors a top priority in therapy, and the importance of considering cybersex addiction a family problem and involving the spouse or significant other in the treatment process.

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Table 1: Cybersex Survey for Participants

A. Demographics:

1. Age?
2. Sex?
3. Marital status? - married, in committed relationship, separated, divorced, single.
4. How long were/are you in the relationship with/married to the person who has been affected by your online sexual activities?
5. Are you still in the relationship/marriage?
6. Have your online sexual activities caused you any problems?
7. If yes, how long (years, months, etc.) were/are online sexual activities a problem for you?
8. Are online sexual activities still a problem for you?
9. Before you got into internet sex, did you have any other compulsive sexual activities? If so, which and for how long?
10. What activities did your online sex consist of?
11. Did your online sexual activities lead directly or indirectly to actual sexual encounters with other people?
12. Do you consider yourself a sex addict?
13. If you consider yourself a sex addict, are you in recovery from your sex addiction? If so, for how long?
14. In the course of your current relationship, have you had sex with someone outside the relationship?

B. Effects on You:

1. How did your internet sexual behaviors affect you? (your emotions, relationship, money, sex, work or job, health, family, etc. etc.)?
2. Specifically, how have your internet sexual activities affected your sexual relationship with your partner if you have had one?
3. Some people's online sexual activities result in actual sexual encounters with other people. Other internet sex participants never have physical contact with other people in connection with the online sexual activities. If you are/were in the latter category, how would you respond to people who say, "What's the big deal about cybersex? After all, you're not risking giving any diseases to your partner, and you're not actually cheating on your partner! What's the fuss?"
4. If you have children, how have they been affected by the cybersex activities?

C. Efforts to Deal With the Situation:

1. What have you done to try to cope with the effects of your online sexual activities on you and your relationship? What are you doing now to cope?
2. If you're still in the relationship, what are you and your partner together doing to resolve any problems with your * sexual* relationship?
3. If you have seen a counselor regarding your sexual issues and/or cybersex activities, what has been your experience with the counselor?

1. D. If you are a woman, have you experienced any particular problems or challenges as a result of your cybersex involvement and/or your sexual addiction which are different from problems or challenges which you believe male cybersex participants or sex addicts have?
2. E. Please add any other comments which you think might be helpful to us in understanding how cybersex addiction affects the cybersex participant, the couple, and the family.

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