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The impact of compulsive cybersex behaviours on the family

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ABSTRACT *In the treatment of sexual addiction and compulsivity, the family unit is often neglected. Yet this disorder has a major impact not only on the identified patient, but also on the spouse or partner (the coaddict) and on the family as a whole. This is as true of the consequences of compulsive cybersex activities as of other behaviours. This paper describes the results of a brief survey completed by 91 women and three men, aged 24–57, who had experienced serious adverse consequences of their partner's cybersex involvement. In 60.6% of cases the sexual activities were limited to online sex. The survey respondents felt 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 this survey: 22.3% of the respondents were separated or divorced, and several others were seriously contemplating leaving. Among 68% of the couples 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. Partners compared themselves unfavourably with the online women (or men) and pictures, and felt hopeless about being able to compete with them. Partners overwhelmingly felt that cyber affairs were as emotionally painful to them as live or offline affairs. Adverse effects on the children included (1) exposure to cyberporn and to objectification of women, (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, (4) breakup of the marriage. In response to their spouses' cybersex addiction, partners went through a sequence of pre-recovery phases: (a) ignorance/denial, (b) shock/discovery of cybersex activities, and (c) problem-solving attempts. When their attempts failed and they realized how unmanageable their lives had become, they entered the crisis stage and began their own recovery.*

Introduction

I knew for many years that something was wrong, but could never put my finger on it. We have a great relationship except for our sex life—so I thought. I discovered my husband staying home from work downloading porn, then he would excuse himself from family outings to stay home to download. Next he started downloading porn in front of the children and other family members.

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He didn't care if anyone was around to see what he was doing, and didn't care if it hurt our feelings. He became hateful, withdrawn, and at times got violent and broke things. The phone bill for several months was huge and we fought about that.

At first I didn't care about porn, but when it became his life and nothing else mattered, I started searching for answers and what exactly he was looking at. To my horror and surprise he had thousands of pictures, and they were not at all what I thought my husband was like. I talked to him about it and tried to understand, but he wouldn't talk to me and just said the stuff he had downloaded was no big deal and he was just curious. He was always truthful in the past, but now he lies and manipulates me into thinking it's my fault. I have asked him to get some professional help but he refuses. I feel if I had not intervened, he would now be in jail for this. The children want him to stop and can't understand why their father does this and why he can't stop. He refuses to take responsibility for his actions and can't understand why I am upset.

I no longer trust what he says. I even thought if I downloaded porn for him to look at that was proper, he would stop looking at the improper stuff. I became obsessed to stop him before it was too late for him and the family. I quit my job so that he couldn't sneak home from work. Now I'm at the point I don't care. I'm depressed. I pulled away from him sexually completely. I now sleep in another room and I get sick to think of him touching me. I think he is relieved because he no longer has to do his 'husbandly duty' to me.

37-year-old woman, married 19 years

I felt betrayed, as if he'd been unfaithful, and guilty for feeling that since he was technically not with anyone else. I had a lot of mistrust, anger, resentment, and denial that it was a huge problem, an addiction. I felt very insecure and suspicious; whenever he was late coming home, I'd worry about what he might be doing. I also feared affairs because he openly flirted with other women. Financially, our world was out of control, not because he spent money on the addiction, but because he didn't have time to take care of paying bills, balancing the checkbook, etc. When I'd suggest that I would control the finances, we'd end up in huge fights. I am still very fearful he will lose his job because his addiction is usually acted out while he is at work. I never told anyone in our families about it; it's a big secret.

Woman, 28, married 3 years

Things were not getting done around the house, because he spent all his time watching porn. He escalated to spending time at work surfing porn sites rather than working, thus jeopardizing his job.

I feel betrayed. He had sex with pictures rather than be sexual with me. I felt like I was part of a harem, and the unwanted part at that. I felt insecure as a woman, about my sexuality, I felt undesired as a wife, degraded as a woman, relegated to an object to be used by him. He has lied to me about so many things to protect his addiction that there is no trust left in our relationship.

I became more and more codependent in trying everything I could to control the relationship rather than changing myself or getting out. I don't like to go out with him because he can't keep his eyes off women's body parts and I feel my presence is totally unnecessary to him.

46-year-old woman, married 26 years

I feel heartbroken, foolish, undesirable, and like I am second-rate. I feel cheated. I never ever would have thought that he would jeopardize our relationship like this. I feel profoundly sad. I feel hideous and defective. I used to feel happy and good about myself sexually, but now I don't. I feel I must be a failure as a woman. If I were the healthy, vibrant person I thought I was, why would he choose some typed words, dirty phone conversations, and masturbation with some stranger? I can't compete with something that isn't real enough to be scrutinized, just real enough to be appealing. BETRAYAL! Because of the interactive nature of this behaviour, there is an element of reality, which is why for me it is so destructive, why it is so different from pornography or normal fantasy.

35-year-old woman, married 2 years

The growth of the internet in the past decade has been phenomenal. Before 1993 the internet was used by only a few persons in laboratories and universities. In 2001 there were over 94 million users (*Computerworld*, 1998). As of February, 2002, 54% of all Americans used the internet, more than half of all households in the US had an internet subscription from home, and 9 out of 10 school-age American children had access to computers either at home or at school (*Arizona Daily Star*, 6 Feb., 2002). Also increasing is the number of people who are drawn into using internet access to obtain sexual satisfaction. Most of these people are 'recreational users,' analogous to recreational drinkers or gamblers, but a significant proportion have pre-existing sexual compulsions and addictions which are now finding a new outlet. For others, with no such history, cybersex is 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.

In contrast to pornographic bookstores and theatres, involvement with prostitutes, exhibitionism and voyeurism on the street, purchase of pornographic magazines, and anonymous sex in hotels and parks, the internet has several characteristics which make it the ideal medium for sexual involvement (Cooper *et al.*, 1999). It is widely accessible, inexpensive, legal, available in the privacy of one's own home, anonymous, and does not put the user at direct risk of contracting a sexually-transmitted disease. Unlike print, video, and film pornography, computer sex can be interactive, through real-time exchanges of words and video pictures. It is also ideal for hiding the activities from the spouse or significant other (SO), because it does not leave obvious evidence of the sexual encounter. It takes some computer savvy on the part of the spouse to retrace the user's online adventures.

Other articles in this issue address the problem of compulsive cybersex involvement. The goal of this paper is to describe how such behaviour affects the SO and the children.

Methods

To learn more about the effects of cybersex on the SO and family of the user, I employed the same qualitative research method used in previous studies of the effect of sex addiction on couples (Schneider *et al.*, 1998; Schneider & Schneider, 1990, 1996). The only difference was that the research was done entirely via e-mail, as I assumed that the target population would have access to a computer. A cover letter was sent to approximately 15 therapists who treat sex addicts, and they were asked to forward the letter to any persons they knew who were dealing with cybersex involvement in the family. The letter explained the nature of the research and invited the client to e-mail me to obtain a brief survey. The survey questions are listed in Table I.

Because e-mail does not generally allow for anonymity, as a return address is automatically attached, I gave respondents the option of returning the survey to me via regular mail after cutting out any identifying information. Only three of 94 respondents chose to respond via regular mail.

TABLE I. Cybersex survey for partners.

-
- A. Demographics:
1. Your age?
 2. Sex?
 3. How long were/are you in the relationship with/married to the sex addict?
 4. Are you still in the relationship?
 5. How long (years, months, etc.) were/are online sexual activities by the addict a problem for you?
 6. As far as you know, what activities did your partner's online sex addiction consist of?
 7. To your knowledge, has your partner's online sex addiction led to actual sexual encounters with other people?
- B. Effects on you:
1. How did your partner's internet sexual behaviours affect you? (emotions, relationship, money, sex, family, codependent behaviours, etc. etc.)?
 2. Specifically, how has your partner's internet sexual activities affected your sexual relationship with your partner?
 3. Some sex addicts' online sex addiction leads to actual sexual encounters with other people. Other internet sex addicts never have physical contact with other people in connection with the online sexual activities. If your partner is 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 catching any diseases from your partner, and your partner isn't actually cheating on you! What's the fuss?'
 4. If you have children, how have they been affected by the cybersex addiction?
- C. Efforts to deal with the situation
1. What have you done to try to cope with the effects of your partner's online sex addiction 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?
- D. Please add any other comments which you think might be helpful to us in understanding how cybersex addiction affects the couple and the family.
-

When reading the overwhelmingly pained, discouraged and negative comments of the SOs, it is helpful to know that many of the same writers later describe recovery from their codependency and their pain, whether or not they are still in the relationship. In a number of cases, the cybersex user subsequently took positive steps towards recovery from the addiction, and the couple's relationship improved significantly

Note on terminology

This survey of partners of cybersex users did not attempt to formally diagnose sex addiction in the (mostly) men described by the respondents, and by its nature represents only the perspective of the respondents. Any addictive disorder comprises loss of control (i.e. compulsive behaviour), continuation despite adverse consequences, and obsession or preoccupation with the activity. It is likely that the vast majority of the cybersex users described in this study fulfill these criteria and indeed have an addictive sexual disorder. However, this study was not designed to ascertain this. Therefore, use of the term 'cybersex addict' in this paper is informal and should not be construed as a definitive medical diagnosis.

Results

Demographics

Responses were obtained from 94 persons whose spouse or partner was heavily involved in cybersex activities. These comprised 91 women and three men. One woman and two men reported being in a homosexual relationship. The 94 cybersex addicts were 92 men and two women. The mean age of the 94 respondents was 38.0 ± 7.9 years, with a range of 24–57. They had been in the relationship for a mean of 12.6 ± 9.2 years and a range of 0.5–39 years. In response to the question, 'Are you still in the relationship?' 74 (78.7%) replied yes, 9 (9.6%) no, and 11 (11.7%) were separated. That is, 21.5% were living apart. Several partners who were still living with the spouse stated that the marriage was essentially over and that they were planning divorce.

The cybersex involvement had been a problem for the partners for a mean of 2.4 ± 2.0 years and a range of one month to 8.5 years. Several, however, commented that although they had learned about the behaviour very recently, they now recognized that it had been going on for a long time and was probably responsible for problems in the relationship whose nature they had not previously understood.

What partners told about the cybersex addicts

Sexual activities When asked about the addict's sexual activities, all responses included viewing and/or downloading pornography along with masturbation. Other behaviours were reading and writing sexually explicit letters and stories, e-mailing to set up personal meetings with someone, placing ads to meet sexual partners, visiting sexually oriented chat rooms, and engaging in interactive online affairs with same- or opposite-sex people, which included real-time viewing of each other's bodies using electronic cameras

connected to the computer. Related activities included phone-sex with people met online, and online affairs that progressed to skin-to-skin sex. Several SOs knew that the addict was participating in unacceptable or illegal online activities such as sadomasochism and domination/bondage (5 reports), bestiality (2), viewing child pornography (1) and pornographic pictures of teenagers (6), and having sex with underage persons (1). One man reportedly signed on as a teenage girl and solicited lesbian sex, and another man posed as a teenage boy in teen chat rooms. Because the partners reported only those activities of which they were aware, it is reasonable to assume that the actual prevalence was higher.

Live or offline sexual activities. One might hypothesize that offline or live sexual encounters would be more problematic for a relationship than virtual encounters. Table II summarizes the responses to the question, 'To your knowledge, has your partner's online sex addiction led to actual sexual encounters with other people?'

Compared with the 57 people who had reportedly not had offline affairs, the 28 who did have live affairs were on the average older (41.1 ± 8.3 vs. 36.5 ± 7.3 years) and had been in the relationship longer (15.2 ± 10.0 vs. 10 ± 8.8 years). Table III analyses the relationship between marital status and offline involvement with other people. The percentages were calculated separately for each marital status group.

Because of the small numbers in the separated and divorced group, the differences are not statistically significant using the chi-square test, but the data do suggest that the likelihood of divorce is increased by this behaviour. To the extent that the decision to divorce was related to the compulsive sexual behaviours, the data also show that cybersex even when others are not involved can have a significant negative impact on the viability of the marriage.

Online sex is a continuation of a pre-existing addictive sexual disorder. In 29 reports (30.9%) the cybersex activities were said to be a continuation of other compulsive sexual

TABLE II. Cyberaddicts' live sexual encounters? $n = 94$.

No	57	(60.6%)
Yes	28	(29.8%)
Unsure	9	(9.6%)

TABLE III. Effect of having live sexual encounters with others on current marital status $n = 94$.

Marital status	Live sexual encounters with other people			Total
	Yes	Unsure	No	
Married	22 (29.7%)	7 (9.4%)	45 (60.9%)	74 (100%)
Separated	4 (36.4%)	1 (9.1%)	6 (54.5%)	11 (100%)
Divorced	4 (44.4%)	1 (11.1%)	4 (44.4%)	9 (100%)

behaviours. Because some SOs may not have known about other behaviours, or may not have thought to mention them, this figure is very likely an underestimate. Behaviours included phone sex, voyeurism, seeing prostitutes, and going to massage parlours. Most common was heavy involvement with pornography (magazines, videos, movies, etc.), often since the teen years.

Progression, including to live sex with others. A well-known characteristic of addictions is *tolerance*, which is the need to do more and more to get the same results. This may involve an increase in the quantity of the drug or behaviour, or an escalation in the type of activity. For sex addicts, this may mean more hours on the internet, a larger number of partners, more bizarre or riskier activities, or going from virtual to actual sexual encounters.

Cybersex really accelerated the addiction on his part. It went from just magazines and movies (after his credit card was maxed out with phone charges) to spending hours on end on the computer looking at images, to hours on end chatting with anyone who would 'talk.' It took only 3 months to go from simple e-mail to all this, and he said it would have only been a matter of time before he did start to meet women in person had I not found the disk.

30-year-old woman who found a porn disk in the drive

Sixteen respondents (17.6%) reported that their partner's cybersex activities had indeed progressed to live encounters with other people. In some cases these were people they met online in chat rooms or via e-mail. In other cases, the computer sexual activity triggered other addictive behaviours that involved other people. For example, a gay man wrote that his partner's bathhouse activities with other people had increased. Women wrote that their husbands had begun new activities such as a sexual massage parlour, visits with prostitutes, the first real affair, or an additional affair.

Denial, minimization, and blame. Some SOs wrote that their spouses were now attending 12-step meetings for sex addicts and/or going to counselling. Many others, however, explained that their spouses did not believe they had a problem, or even if they did recognize this, were not motivated to do anything about it. Several SOs had separated, divorced, or were planning to leave because of their spouse's refusal to recognize the problem, go to counselling, or seek other help

Effect of addict's cybersex involvement on partners

On the partner's emotions. Most SOs described some combination of devastation, hurt, betrayal, loss of self-esteem, mistrust, suspicion, fear, and a lack of intimacy in their relationship. Other responses were: extreme anger or rage, and two became physically abusive to their husbands; feeling sexually inadequate or feeling unattractive and even ugly; doubting one's judgment and even sanity; severe depression, and, in two cases hospitalization for suicidality.

He put the porn and masturbation as a priority to sexual relations with me. I felt totally degraded, not much of a woman, 'not good enough' for him. I felt betrayed, that he conned me into marrying him. He knew his actions were destroying our marriage, yet he lied to me continually. After I moved out, he swore to me that he would never 'do porn again,' only to continue it within a week of my returning. Without a doubt, the lies have been the worst. The second worst was seeing it happen.

41-year-old woman, still married

I felt rejected, worthless, ugly, abandoned, insecure. I suppressed my anger, and only in the past few months was I able to start working through it. I shut down emotionally toward my husband, and was left with numbness. Loneliness clouded my days. I was confused. I struggled with despising my husband and was very irritated. And I became skilled in suppressing my sexuality.

41-year-old woman, married 12 years

Trust was a major casualty of the secrecy of cybersex addiction. Many SOs felt that this was at least as harmful to the relationship as the sexual activities themselves. Partners reported losing all trust in their mate and in anything he/she told them. Many reported that despite the addict's promises, 'behaviour has continued, but he has learned to be much more secretive about it.' With each discovery, trust is further eroded. 'Every time I walk into our 'office' area, I am fearful of what might appear on the screen.' A common theme was, 'The lies he told me concerning his whereabouts, while he looked me straight in the eye, have hurt worse than his having sex with them.'

Three women reported having engaged in extramarital affairs or encounters, either to shore up their own self-esteem or else to get revenge on their spouses.

Effect on the sexual relationship. A 34-year-old woman who had learned of her husband's cybersex involvement only weeks earlier, described the effects on the couple's sexual relationship:

I realize now that many of the things he most liked and requested when we made love were re-creations of downloaded images. He is unable to be intimate, he objectifies me, he objectifies women and girls on the streets, he fantasizes when we're together. I feel humiliated, used, and betrayed, as well as lied to and misled. It's almost impossible for me to let him touch me without feeling really yucky and/or crying. I tried to continue being sexual with him initially (and in fact, being 'more' sexual, trying to fix it by being sexier, better than the porn girls), and I couldn't do it. We have now been consensually abstinent for 3 weeks.

This description contains various themes that were brought up recurrently by survey respondents: a feeling of being objectified, comparing herself with the cybersex women, initial attempt to increase the quantity and/or variety of sexual activities, and a decreased

desire to have sexual relations with the addict. This woman did not experience the most common complaint: Loss of interest by the addict in having sex with the partner.

Two-thirds of respondents (68.1%) described sexual problems in the couple relationship, which were generally related to the cybersex addict's sexual activities. In some cases these problems had resulted in decreased interest by the cybersex user in relational sex. In others it was the SO who had lost interest, and in some cases both partners had a decreased interest. As shown in Table IV, in only 30 (31.9%) coupleships were both partners still interested in sex with each other.

When asked about the effect of cybersex on their sexual relationship, fully half of the 94 respondents (49, or 52.1%) said that their husbands were not interested, or hardly interested in sex with them. Note that 32 of the 49 partners (65.3%) of those who had decreased sexual interest (34.0% of the entire group of 94 SOs) stated that they now have less sex than they want. The remaining 17 partners (18.1% of the entire group) reported that they too had shut down sexually, so that the lack of sexual activity at the time of reporting was mutual in 17 couples. *Now I'm at the point I don't care. I'm depressed* Additionally, 15 of the 94 partners (16%) reported that they were no longer interested in sex, although the cybersex addict was. In this group, it was the cybersex user who was still interested in relational sex, and was experiencing less sex with the partner than the user wanted. In summary, 34% of the SOs complained that they were feeling deprived of relational sex, and another 17% of SOs reported that it was only the cybersex user who was unhappy with the lack of relational sex. In other words, according to the respondents, twice as many SOs as cybersex users wanted more sex with their relational partner than they were getting.

The SOs who were not interested in sex with the cybersex user attributed their loss of interest primarily to their negative reaction to the internet user's sexual activities. In total, half of the addicts and one-third of the partners were no longer interested in marital sexual relations. This was reportedly not a problem for the addicts, who had substituted cybersex for sex with SO, but was definitely a problem for the partners, who felt angry, hurt, rejected, and often sexually unfulfilled.

I have no desire. I feel 'forgotten' in our lovemaking. He doesn't know I'm there. He's not present to me in lovemaking, it's just about him getting his 'high' and I feel used, neglected and unloved. We went over a year with VERY infrequent sex, only 4-6 times the WHOLE year, because it was so painful for me. It's hard to

TABLE IV. Loss of interest in relational sex $n = 94$.

	Partner's relational sexual interest		
	Decreased	Not decreased	
Cybersex user's relational sexual interest:			
Decreased	17 (18.1%)	32 (34.0%)	49 (52.1%)
Not decreased	15 (16.0%)	30 (31.9%)	
	32 (34.0%)		

think about sex with him when I know he's recently been lusting and masturbating over other women. I want to be the only one in his mind and heart.

28-year-old woman, married 3 years

Respondents who reported that the cybersex addict had been sexually compulsive (print pornography, phone sex, etc.) even before the internet era often stated that the couple's sexual relationship had been infrequent in those days as well. Some added that the problems in the sexual relationship had intensified since the cybersex activities began. Below are some examples of the reported problems:

Cybersex addict alone has lost interest in couple sex. Thirty-two respondents (34%) reported that although they still wanted a sexual relationship, the cybersex addict had withdrawn his sexual (and general) attention from the partner and family and devoted his (or her) time and energy instead to computer sex. Recurrent themes here were:

- The partner felt hurt, angry, sexually rejected, inadequate, and unable to compete with cyber-images and sexy online women (or men) who were willing to do anything.
- The addict made excuses to avoid sex with partner (not in the mood, too tired, working too hard, has already climaxed and doesn't want sex, the children might hear, his back hurts too much).
- During relational sex, the addict appeared distant, emotionally detached, and interested only in his/her own pleasure
- The partner ended up doing most or all of the initiating, either to get her/his own needs met, or else in an attempt to get the addict to decrease the online activities.
- The addict blamed the partner for their sexual problems.
- The addict wanted the partner to participate in sexual activities which she/he found objectionable.

Currently we have sex once every three months, usually only after I blow my stack and I suppose he feels obligated. Although I know that I am bright and attractive, emotionally I feel ugly, worthless, and unwanted by him or anybody else. For me the issue has not been the difference between him having e-mail sex or actual physical contact, it is that someone else is receiving his attention and I am not. I do many mental gymnastics in order to cope with this. In order to prevent becoming irritated with my partner because he rejects my sexual advances, I masturbate daily with the hope that it will prevent me from becoming 'horny.' Sometimes it works. I would not care at all if he masturbated online with a host of others, as long as I was an active part of his sex life.

33-year-old gay male

Since my husband was living in a fantasy world of internet porn, I was the only one who initiated sex. I thought if I didn't we would never have sex and this would cause him to go elsewhere. He would respond but always seemed to be in

another world during sex. When confronted with why he was not interested in sex, he said that ‘it was not as important to him as it is to other men.’

28-year-old woman, married 8 years

He’s not interested in sex with me and blames me. He told me it’s his way or no way. He wanted me to participate with him on the net. He is up all night on the net and then is tired and unavailable. I feel like I’m making love to a corpse—he doesn’t really participate.

34-year-old woman, married 10 years

Partner alone has lost interest in couple sex In 15 cases, the cybersex addict maintained his/her desire for sex with the SO, but the partner was less interested. In some cases the partner refused to have sex; in others, the partner didn’t want to, but continued out of fear of driving the addict further into online activities. Major themes reported were:

- The partner’s initial response in some cases was to increase the sexual activities in order to ‘win back’ the addict. This early response was only temporary.
- The partner felt repelled and disgusted by the addict’s online or real sexual activities and no longer wanted to have relationship sex.
- The partner could no longer tolerate the addict’s detachment and lack of emotional connection during sex.
- The partner’s anger over the addict’s denial of the problem interfered with her/his sexual interest.
- In reply to pressure or requests by the addict to dress in certain ways or perform new sexual acts, the partner felt angry, repelled, used, objectified, or like a prostitute.
- Partner fears sex with the addict because the partner fears catching a disease from the addict, or has already caught one.

At first we had sex more than ever as I desperately tried to prove myself, then sex with her made me sick. I get strong pictures of what she did and lusted after, and I get repelled and feel bad. I used to see sex as a very intimate loving thing. We always had a lot of sex and I thought we were intimate. Now that I found out my wife was not on the same page, I can’t be intimate or vulnerable—sex is now more recreational or just out of need.

44-year-old man, married 26 years

I was afraid of losing him. I began to try to compete with the images, being a sex toy. Then after a while, I began to feel like I didn’t want to have sex anymore. I felt like I had to, but didn’t want to.

27-year-old woman, married 3 years

I have felt for some time that I am not a part of his sexual activity, even while I am having sex with him. I feel cheap and used. I have no emotional connection with him except for the feelings of resentment, anger, and hopelessness.

40-year-old woman, thinking of leaving the marriage after 20 years

Both partners have lost interest in couple sex. In 17 cases (18.1% of the 94 respondents), loss of interest by both partners put a virtual end to sexual relations between them. Typical dynamics were a man who was more interested in sex with the computer than with the wife, and a woman who felt rejected, angry, and unable to compete—i.e., a combination of the individual themes described earlier:

There was a time where we went 4 years with no physical contact, and right now it has been almost 6 months. The part of me that still feels a desire for him has a hard time overcoming the fact that he has to have these disgusting images in his head. I feel used and dirty, while at the same time I feel guilty because I know he is going through the motions because he does love me and he is trying to make me happy even though he'd rather not have sex with me.

Comparison with online sexual partners. The knowledge that the addict's head is full of cybersex images inevitably produces in the SO a comparison between the spouse and the fantasy women in terms of appearance, desirability, and repertory of sexual behaviours. Both addicts and partners were reported to make such comparisons. The SO feels she/he is competing with the computer images and people. ('If only I was perfect like his porn, then he would want the real thing and love me.') The result is often confusion—on the one hand, desire to emulate and better the cyber-woman (or man), on the other revulsion at the lack of intimacy and mechanical nature of the sex. Survey respondents reported vacillating between these two polarities:

His cybersex activities made me angry. They made me want to be more sexy and desirable, then at other times made me not want to have anything to do with him. It made me feel that when we were having sex and he closed his eyes, he was viewing some other person's body and therefore was not really 'with' me.

48-year-old woman, married 4 years

He's never been physically unfaithful, but he has had experiences from others. I feel cheated. I never know who or what he is thinking of when we are intimate. How can I compete with hundreds of anonymous others who are now in our bed, in his head? When he says something sexual to me in bed, I wonder if he has said it to others, or if it is even his original thought. Now our bed is crowded with countless faceless strangers, where once we were intimate. With all this deception, how do I know he has quit, or isn't moving into other behaviors?

34-year-old woman, married 14 years to a minister

Partner increases sexual activities to combat the problem. Some partners attempted a sexual solution to the cybersex addiction problem, typically either increasing the frequency of sexual activities with the addict, or else joining with the addict in his preferred activities:

I tried to initiate a variety of things I have seen in Penthouse. I feel ashamed of the things I've suggested, which I thought would change his behaviour. I have to

remind myself every day that that wasn't my normal behavior, and am trying to forgive myself. It's extremely difficult.

39-year-old woman, married 8 years, now divorced

My husband is a minister who was stationed overseas for a year. We chatted daily, but never sexually. Then I learned about his cybersex activities, and felt cheated. Why wouldn't he ask *me* to have cybersex? I wasn't comfortable with this, but I thought I could rescue him. So we began a cybersex relationship. But much to my horror, he never quit with all the anonymous partners. So he lumped me together with all the online whores. When he returned, he continued his cybersex even though we were reunited.

34-year-old woman, still in a long-term marriage

What's the big deal about online sex? This is the most common question that is asked by persons who focus on the absence of skin-to-skin contact during cybersex activities, and cannot understand why marriages actually break up over this issue. This question (see Table 1 for its language) elicited the most emotional and eloquent responses of the survey. Several themes were evident in the replies. These were:

Concern about escalation. Tolerance—the need to do more to get the same results—is a common feature of addictive disorders. Online viewing which begins as harmless recreation can become an all-consuming activity, and it can also lead to real sexual encounters, either with sexual partners met online, or escalation of the sex addiction in general. Even when the sex involves only the computer, there is often escalation of conflict in the relationship:

I might say to those who say, 'it's only cyber' that it's so easy to go on to more from there!! I never thought the cyber addiction would be so hard to control, and I nearly went on to meet individual men myself. If I had, I think I would be dead right now because I was becoming so lackadaisical in personal protection issues.

51-year-old woman who is herself recovering from sex addiction
and is married to a sex addict

It's demoralizing to have one's partner constantly focused outside the relationship for sexual stimulation and gratification. It leads to increasing dissatisfaction on the part of both parties, as the addict begins to feel that what he or she really wants sexually is 'out there,' and not in the relationship, and the partner feels he or she cannot get the addict's attention and affection. Destructive anger and resentment build on both sides.

It's still cheating/a mental affair/adultery because it involves lying, and emotional unavailability. Thirty respondents explained why they consider online sex activities the same as adultery. The most important reasons were

- (1) Having interactive sex with another person is adultery, whether or not they have skin-to-skin contact.

- (2) Cybersex results in lying, hiding one's activities, and covering up, and the lies are often the most painful part of an affair.
- (3) The spouse feels betrayed, devalued, deceived, 'less than,' abandoned—same as with a real affair.
- (4) Cybersex takes away from the sexual relationship of the couple. As one woman wrote, I may not be getting a disease from him, but I'm not getting anything else either!
- (5) A real-life person cannot compete with fantasy. The cybersex addict loses interest in his spouse because he has 'ideal' relationships where there is no hassle.
- (6) Cybersex takes the addict away from his partner—in terms of time and emotions. It results in emotional detachment from the marriage.

The anonymous yet interactive nature of this addiction is so insidious because the distinction between fantasy and reality is so blurred. Unlike traditional pornography, there is actually someone there. In my opinion it requires a lot of courting, mental creative energy to get a woman off. He gave this energy to a lot of other people. He was not searching for new ways to express his love or even lust with me. How can this not be betrayal?

35-year-old woman, married 2 years

He did have affairs, although not physically. He had affairs of the mind and that to me is as much a violation as if he actually had a physical affair with someone. Due to my religious beliefs, he committed adultery just the same as if he had another partner. Moreover, in one sense I feel that having an affair of the mind is worse than having an actual partner: My husband can, at any time, have an 'affair' without leaving the house or seeing another human being.

39-year-old woman, married 14 years

Effect on self-esteem The reason some respondents gave for why cybersex is so destructive is the adverse effect on their self-esteem.

True, you don't have the risk of the diseases, but it is still an emotional thing. It's hard to think that the sex addict wants to do it without the actual touch—how can it be better for them? Especially since they have to do all the work themselves!! Plus, when the sex addict is with you, they are not really there emotionally. They are thinking about and picturing the 'others' that they were with, what they were saying to them, etc. So: the sex addict is getting off on something that has nothing to do with you. It really hurts your self esteem, and most of us don't have a very good self-esteem as it is.

37-year-old woman, married 17 years

I can't compete with fantasy/can't measure up/comparison with. Cybersex taps into partners' deepest insecurities about their ability to measure up. The need to compete with interactive sex online pressures them into unwanted sexual activities. 'Sex with the fantasy leaves practically nothing left to be desired when compared with the all too

human and flawed spouse,' explained one woman. Another wondered, 'When he closes his eyes when we are together, what is he thinking of? The babe on the screen? Is he happy with my body? Is he grossed out?'

He does not have an actual human mistress from the internet, but the internet pornography is the 'mistress' that is coming between us. The idealized images of perfect women make me feel inadequate. Conversely, the kinky and perverted behaviors shown all over the internet fuel his beliefs and give him ammunition to say that I am the 'weird one' for not wanting anal sex—'See all of the women out there on the internet who are just crazy about it!'

31-year-old woman married 3 years

On the internet it is possible to find groups of people who are interested in all kinds of unusual or even deviant sexual practices. Interacting with these people desensitizes the user to these activities and 'normalizes' them. Some cybersex users eventually come to blame their partners for being unwilling to engage in these behaviors.

It has adversely affected our relationship. Some SOs focused not on the adultery aspect of cybersex, but rather on the overall effect on the couple relationship:

What's the fuss? I tell them that not everyone who looks at pornography is an addict, that some are merely curious. But when the addict never admits to viewing pornography, when he goes to great lengths to hide it, when he lies about his whereabouts and what he's doing, when he lies about his use of pornography to the marriage counselor he's agreed to go to because he wants to save his marriage, that's when it becomes a problem. I tell them I knew something was wrong in our intimate relationship and I always wondered who he was making love to, because it never was me.

39-year-old woman, divorced after an 8-year marriage

Partners who have experienced both. Several partners who had dealt with both cyberaffairs and live affairs said they hurt the same:

They should try it for themselves one time, and see how it feels to be less important to their partner than a picture on a computer screen! They should see what it feels like to lie in bed and know their partner is on the computer and what he is doing with it. It's not going to do much for the self-esteem. My husband has actually cheated on me and it FEELS NO DIFFERENT. The online 'safe' cheating has just as dirty, filthy, a feel to it as does the 'real-life' cheating.

38-year-old woman, married 18 years

Effects on the children

Twenty-two respondents (23.4%) reported having no children. The themes expressed by the others are shown in Table V, in order of frequency. The numbers reflect how

TABLE V. Effect of cybersex addiction on the children ($n = 70$).

The kids have lost parental time and attention /lost their 2-parent home.	(26, 37.1%)
The children have seen us argue, see the stress in the home.	(21, 30.0%)
The kids are grown up and/or outside the home.	(13, 18.6%)
The children have seen pornography and/or masturbation and I'm worried for them.	(10, 14.3%)
The kids are too young to be affected/were unaffected.	(9, 12.6%)
The children have seen the pornography and have been adversely affected.	(8, 11.4%)

many times each theme was mentioned. Two respondents failed to answer the question, and several others expressed more than one theme, so that the total (87) is somewhat greater than 100%.

The most commonly reported adverse consequence was that one or both parents were unavailable to spend time or pay attention to the children. Respondents complained of the addict's unavailability to the children, and failure to fulfill family responsibilities: 'One afternoon he was so caught up in the computer that he failed to meet my daughter coming off the school bus.' 'I told my husband that the only way the kids recognize him is by the back of his head.' The other parent may also be unavailable because of preoccupation with the addict. SOs who got divorced or were separated mentioned that their children had lost their two-parent home.

Our children (ages 19 and 21) are torn up about it. Our daughter is uncomfortable in her own house and would like him to be gone. Both kids found his sites, and they included lots of teen porn. They will not bring friends home because they won't subject them to their Dad's leering.

46-year-old woman, married 26 years

Even if children did not see the online sexual images, they observed arguments and stress in the home; this was the second most-commonly mentioned adverse effect. Two women wrote of the children witnessing episodes of domestic violence. Thirty percent of those with children believed that their young children, and adult children who were out of the home, were not significantly affected by the family problems related to online sex addiction.

Other adverse effects were related to viewing pornography (and occasionally masturbation) and to exposure to the cybersex addict's objectification of women. Some SOs reported that their children had found pornography that had been left on the computer, had walked in when the cyberaddict was chatting in a chat room, had overheard the addict having phone sex, or had observed the addict having interactive sex online. As a result, one woman wrote, 'One daughter became promiscuous, the other wants me to leave him. My son now thinks that hurting or objectifying women is normal.' Other consequences were that the children became 'horrified, ashamed, and embarrassed,' got angry at the father, and/or lost respect for him. Teenage children began viewing online pornography themselves. Others began selling it: 'My son found old porn movies I was told had been disposed of, and he and a friend

copied them and were selling them at school. My 14-year old baby had a porn ring going!’

Several mothers were worried because their husbands surfed the net while supposedly watching younger children, who got to view the pornography and sometimes the masturbation.

My daughter caught him masturbating once and told me about it. I felt sick. I am scared that someday, when she gets to the age of the women that he likes to look at, that he will hurt her. I try not to dwell on this. I am also confused about how to talk to my children about love, sex, and masturbation. What do I tell my son? What do I tell my daughter

27-year-old woman, married 3 years and still in the relationship

When both partners are cybersex users. There are many legitimate dating services on the internet which have facilitated single people meeting each other. The risks and advantages of meeting in this way have been discussed before (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). However, when two people meet online specifically for sex, then later attempt to convert the relationship to a more traditional one, there are predictable risks. A 46-year old woman met a man online in a sexually-oriented chat room. They participated in cybersex for many months, then finally met in person:

I met him online 5 years ago. I thought he was ‘faithful’ to our online relationship. I found out a few months ago that he has been non-monogamous from almost the very first time we met in person. He was into porn extensively, and into meeting ‘swingers.’ I assumed he was honest with me, but I found out otherwise. We had an amazing, exciting, and satisfying sexual relationship until he disclosed to me a few months ago. Then it turned sour . . . I felt used and unsafe. Now he has ‘shelved the relationship’ on his therapist’s advice. I met him on online, and now I know . . . it is no different than meeting someone in 3D. People are people, and sickness and addictions are everywhere.

She reports that currently she is experiencing major depression, related to the sense of betrayal and the ending of the relationship.

Both men and women, many of them sexually compulsive, engage in online sexual activities. Not surprisingly, a sexually addicted couple can get drawn into cybersex activities. One of the survey respondents wrote that she and her husband had both been actively involved in cybersex activities with other people. Her marriage is in trouble because she is now sexually sober but her spouse is still acting out on the computer. If one member of such a couple recognizes that his or her life has become unmanageable and seeks recovery before the other, the relationship will become destabilized.

Discussion

In this study, one-third of respondents volunteered the information that their partner’s online sexual activities had been preceded by years of other compulsive sexual

behaviours; as stated earlier, the actual numbers are likely to be significantly higher. Cooper *et al.* (2000) reported that 4.6% of a large sample of cybersex participants were sexually compulsive, as determined by their scores on a sexual compulsivity scale. The present sample, in contrast to Cooper's cohort, was selected specifically because the cybersex use had caused significant problems for the partner. It is likely that the majority of the remaining cybersex users in the present study belonged to the 'at risk' group, those with prior vulnerability to compulsive internet involvement.

Regarding sexual orientation, only two gay men and one lesbian woman responded. Cooper *et al.* (2000) suggest that homosexuals have different profiles in terms of online sexual acting out. However, the three *partners* of gay and lesbian cybersex users described very much the same dynamics, feelings, and adverse consequences as did partners of heterosexual cybersex users.

Online addiction in general vs. cybersex addiction

Some of the most troubling effects of a person's compulsive cybersex involvement result from the large amount of time spent on the computer. Young (1998) wrote in detail about the problems of living with a partner whose major preoccupation is computer games, making friends online, etc. Cooper *et al.* (1999) reported that compulsive sex use on the internet occupies an average of 11 hours/week, time that clearly decreases the user's availability to the family. In the present study, some complaints resulted from the time element rather than from the specific content of the on-line material accessed:

- Partner feels, lonely, ignored, unimportant, neglected, or angry because the user prefers to spend so much time on the net.
- Children are neglected or ignored because of the parent's involvement with the computer.
- Many users lie repeatedly about the sexual activities; in response, their partners feel distrust and betrayal.
- The devastating emotional impact of a cybersex affair is described by many partners as similar if not the same as that of a real affair. The partner's self-esteem may be damaged; strong feelings of hurt, betrayal, abandonment, devastation, loneliness, shame, isolation, humiliation, and jealousy are evoked.
- The couple's sexual relationship suffers, not only generally because the user stays up much of the night, but specifically because the spouse (and often the user) compares her body and her sexual performance to that of the on-line women, and believes she can't measure up.
- Online sexual activities may be followed by physical contact with others; the partner may retaliate or seek solace in extramarital affairs.
- Children may be exposed to pornography and may develop unhealthy attitudes towards sex and women.

Divorce and separation were two other consequences of cybersex addiction which were common in this survey. We may speculate that more couples get divorced over cybersex addiction than over excessive time spent on the internet in general. Also, it is probable

that workers who use company time to access the internet are more likely to get fired if the content of their internet activity was sexual than if it was not.

The stages of prerecovery of the cybersex co-addict

In this study, SOs were aware of the cybersex user's online activities for time periods ranging from 8 years to just a month or two. It is possible to infer from the survey responses the time course of responses by the partner to the cyberaddict's ongoing involvement with online sex.

Stage 1: Ignorance/denial. The partner recognizes there is a problem in the relationship, but is unaware of the contribution of cybersex to the problem. ('I knew something was wrong the first two years of our marriage, but I could not identify it.') The SO believes the user's denials, explanations, and promises. She tends to ignore and explain away her own concerns, and may blame herself for the sexual problems. When cybersex addiction is present, a frequent problem is lack of interest by the user in marital sex; in response the SO may try to enhance her own attractiveness to him/her. Self-esteem is likely to suffer, but the partner is unlikely to seek help at this point.

Late in this stage, suspicions may increase and 'detective behaviours' begin. However, snooping or detective behaviours are accentuated at a later stage.

Stage 2: shock/discovery of the cybersex activities. At some point the partner learns of the cybersex user's activities. In some cases this occurs accidentally, either because the partner comes upon the activities in progress, or because the SO turns on the computer and discovers a cache of pornographic pictures. In other cases, the discovery is the result of deliberate investigations by the SO. No matter how the discovery occurs, the result is that the partner's ignorance and denial are over.

Discovery often leads to strong emotions of shock, betrayal, anger, pain, hopelessness, confusion, and shame. Because the pull of the computer is so strong and its availability in the home and at work is so great, there is a great tendency for the user to return to cybersex activities even after discovery by the spouse, no matter how sincere the initial intention to quit. The result is that many respondents described a cycle of discoveries, promises made and broken, and additional discoveries and promises.

I took my engagement ring off several times, each time I found out about his on-line activities—and each time I believed his promises not to do it again. I coped by blaming myself, by not looking too closely at it. I thought because he admitted he had a problem that things would get better, but he was still in denial. I am coping better with it now that I am not in the relationship.

29-year old woman who eventually ended her engagement

Isolation

Feelings of shame, self-blame, and embarrassment often accompany the early days of dealing with a partner's cybersex addiction. These feelings may prevent the SO from

talking with others and appealing for help, and the resultant isolation worsens the situation. Covering up for the user is part of this stage:

We have only told our therapists about this problem. It's so hard to go to family events and everyone thinks we're doing great. I don't want to tell them because I don't want this to be all that they think of when they think of my husband. And we don't feel like we can trust any of our friends with our 'secret.' So we're dealing with this alone and that hurts.

25-year-old woman, married 2 years, just recently discovered the cybersex addiction

I was in counseling for codependency issues, but I couldn't bring myself to tell the counselor what the real problem was, I was so embarrassed.

33-year-old woman, married 11 years, dealing with cyberporn for 2 years

I withdrew and was in emotional turmoil I never shared it with anybody. Nobody knew—not even my closest friends, because I knew the judgment against people who used pornography and what the Christian community would do if they knew.

41-year-old woman, reborn Christian, married 12 years

Stage 3: Problem-solving attempts. The partner now begins to take action to resolve the problem, which is perceived as the cybersex behaviours. At this stage the classic sexual coaddictive behaviours peak—snooping, bargaining, controlling access to the computer, giving ultimatums, asking for full disclosure after every episode, obtaining information for the addict on sex addiction and addiction recovery, and (early in this stage) increasing the frequency and repertory of sexual activities with the addict in hopes of decreasing his desire for cybersex.

The breaking point became his willingness to lie to me to cover his activities and his shame. At some point I had asked that if he acted out that he tell me right away so that we could work with it. My preference of course was that he come to me when he felt like acting out, but that didn't happen. I could deal with the addiction if it were out in the open, because we would both begin to gain insights into the why's of this complicated issue.

38-year-old woman, married 8 years

This type of agreement rarely works for long. It provides a measure of comfort for the wife to know what is going on and gives her the illusion of control. But the result is to establish a parent-child dynamic between the couple, engenders resentment in the addict, and typically ends up in continued lying.

I was angry, hurt, offended, I couldn't trust him. I would try to control his behavior, I would sneak around to see if he had accessed the internet without me

knowing, I would try to delete his files, cancel the internet, plead with him to stop, you name it.

26-year-old woman, separating after a 4-year marriage

A sexual solution to the sexual problem seems to make sense in this stage. SOs may agree to sexual practices with which they are not comfortable, have sex even when tired, and think about improving their appearance by undergoing breast enhancement surgery or liposuction. For the cybersex user, none of these methods are likely to diminish the lure of the internet.

The partner at this stage believes that additional information will enhance her or his ability to manage the situation. This leads to 'snooping' or 'detective' behaviours. Coaddicts who are computer-savvy learn how to trace the addict's activities, and in some cases may even try to entice him by logging on into the same chat rooms themselves:

I found myself making up screen names to get him to chat with me to see how far he goes with his cyber sex. I have also answered his personal ads with made-up information, only to find him asking for my phone number. I also keep my screen name blocked and at times (when I wasn't with him at night) I would log on the computer at 2 or 3 AM only to find him on line in a chat room. I have also logged on to his computer to check what areas he had visited, what new pictures he had downloaded.

35-year-old woman who found out about the cybersex 6 months earlier

Contracts about computer and cybersex activities

When the cybersex activities come to light, the couple tries to come to some agreement to try to limit the addict's use of the computer. This may consist simply of promises not to use it, or to restrict usage to legitimate needs. Often, the SO, with the addict's agreement or at least knowledge, assumes control of the access. In addition, the SO or the couple may purchase filtering software (e.g. Net Nanny) which prevents access to sexually-oriented sites. None of these 'negative' methods tend to be successful for long if they are not accompanied by 'positive' recovery-oriented activities.

I have spied on his e-mail. I am computer proficient and he is not. I have deleted his screen name when he could not handle the smorgasbord of women online, as he puts it. I am in control of the parental controls on AOL and when I gave him a screen name back, I have him locked out of chat rooms and have his instant message access restricted to certain people. This prevents his anonymous cruising.

47-year-old woman, married 30 years

The above three stages—ignorance/denial, shock/discovery of the cybersex, and problem-solving attempts—are specific applications of the phases of pre-recovery of sexual coaddicts described by Milrad (1999). She found that the pre-recovery stage,

lasting approximately 4–8 years, was divided into two phases—a denial phase, when partners recognize there is a problem but remain in denial about its cause, and a more active phase, when they come out of denial about the addict's problem and seek active solutions, but remain in denial as to their own issues.

The findings of this survey support Milrad's phases. As she observed in her study, the end of the pre-recovery phase and the beginning of recovery is an awareness by sexual coaddicts that they are in crisis and need help. In the present study, SOs entered the crisis stage when they realized that their problem-solving efforts were unsuccessful and when the costs of remaining in the status quo became intolerable—depressive symptoms, isolation, loss of libido, a 'dead' marriage, their own dysfunctional behaviours in some cases (affairs, excessive drinking, violence), and awareness of the effects on the children of the family dysfunction. This is the stage when the SO seeks help for herself/himself rather than in order to fix the addict, and learns that she/he did not cause the problem and cannot solve it. Once the SO is in therapy and getting help, the chances increase that the marriage or relationship will end unless the cybersex addict too becomes committed to recovery.

Sexual anorexia and cybersex addiction

The concept of sexual anorexia, essentially a synonym for sexual aversion disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 1994: 499), has been presented as part of the continuum of addictive sexual disorders. Carnes and Moriarty (1997: 1) defined sexual anorexia as 'an obsessive state in which the physical, mental, and emotional task of avoiding sex dominates one's life.' Sexual anorexia is analogous to food anorexia, a disorder in which food occupies an obsessive place in the person's psyche, but the goal is to avoid it. Food, or sex, becomes the enemy, to be feared and avoided.

The concept of sexual anorexia is a very valuable one, but it is often misused and misunderstood when a person is labelled sexually anorexic because he does not engage in sex in one particular context (e.g. within the couple relationship). More than one SO reported that a therapist or counsellor, after hearing about the lack of relational sex between the two, had labelled the cybersex addict 'anorexic.' Cybersex addicts do not avoid sex; on the contrary, they engage in sex compulsively. However, they often redirect their sexual interest away from the SO and towards the computer. A therapist who does not ask the right questions, or is lied to by the addict, may assume that no couple sex is the same as no sex at all. It is crucial for the therapist to get a thorough sexual history, and, especially, to inquire at length about the presence of on-line sexual activity in the life of a client who appears not to be interested in sex with the partner. SOs need to recognize that repeated statements such as 'I'm too tired, I've been working too hard,' 'I just have a low libido,' 'If you were sexier . . .' may indeed represent sexual anorexia, but they may instead be a sign that the person is too involved with other sexual activities.

When a SO loses interest in sex with the cybersex addict because the SO feels objectified, ignored, and 'just a body,' this also should not be termed sexual anorexia. Rather, it is appropriate self-care for someone who is interested in a caring, mutually enjoyable sexual relationship.

Implications for therapists

In my survey, several people consulted counsellors who apparently failed to obtain an adequate history and therefore missed the diagnosis. Some counsellors urged the SO to initiate sex more frequently. Some had never heard of sexual addiction or compulsivity. Others were so committed to being nonjudgmental that they missed the big picture:

It scared me that my fiance went to internet sites to see young girls [14 and up]. I talked with my pastor about it, and he told me he thought it was just curiosity, and that once we were married, my husband's curiosity would be filled by me. Now that we *are* married, and I find that he has continued his acting out, and lied to me so much, I am afraid of what could happen if we have children and one is a girl.

29-year-old woman, newly married

My husband was impotent for most of our honeymoon. Shortly after we bought our first computer, my husband began using it for his pornography addiction. He would tell me, I would forgive him, and he would do it again. That was our pattern. We went to many counseling sessions but what we received was the general Christian teaching: Women, submit to your husband, forgive him, and spend time together and that will increase intimacy. We spent 12 years fighting for our marriage with wrong understanding, wrong teaching, and wrong counseling methods. We settled for a nearly sexless marriage, only about 3 times a year after our child was born.

41-year-old woman, married 12 years

A client's complaints about her spouse's cybersex use may simply reflect her own discomfort with pornography, or else may be a sign of a significant cybersex addiction problem in the family; each of these requires a different treatment approach. Where sexual compulsivity is in fact present, potential mistakes by the uninformed counsellor are:

- (1) to underestimate the adverse consequences of the behaviour,
- (2) to diagnose the couple's problem as poor communication, the SO's frigidity, or a need by the SO of greater acceptance of the internet user's activities,
- (3) to diagnose the addict's problem as sexual anorexia, and
- (4) to recommend that the cybersex user limit the time devoted to cybersex activities to some predetermined number of hours, or to have the SO join in the addict's cybersex activities.

The first step for the counsellor is to gather information, preferably from both partners. Ask specific questions—what is a typical day in the life of each partner, hour by hour? Are there large chunks of time that are unaccounted for? Have there been changes in the couple's sexual relationship? In the amount of time the family spends together? In the time spent with children? Is there evidence of cybersex involvement? Is there a history of

other compulsive sexual behaviours? Ask about the SO's beliefs regarding sex, pornography, and masturbation. Obtain a thorough sexual history from both partners, and a history of their sexual relationship with each other.

An early step is for the cybersex user to disclose to the partner the compulsive behaviours in which he or she has engaged. This complex process, which needs planning is discussed in detail by Corley and Schneider (2002).

If cybersex addiction is indeed present, the basic principles are the same as when any form of sex addiction: Initially, the addict needs to be helped to break through the denial that a problem exists and to recognize the impact of the behaviours on the partner and family; to stop the behaviours and associated lying; to stop blaming the SO; to learn problem-solving in ways other than escape through cybersex activities; to develop strategies for dealing with sexual urges, support through membership in 12-step programmes such as Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA), Sexaholics Anonymous (SA), or Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA) is as useful as with any other addiction. Strategies specific to the computer are discussed in other papers in this issue of the journal and include limitations on use of the computer, acquisition of blocking software, and avoidance of the internet.

For the spouse or SO, the negative consequences detailed in this article constitute a lengthy list of issues to explore in therapy. Although the presence of the computer in the home gives the problem an immediacy and visibility which are absent when the addiction can be better hidden, counselling is basically the same as with any other form of addiction: Early on, the SO needs validation of her belief that a real problem does exist, and of her perception that cybersex addiction can be as damaging to the relationship as more traditional sexual affairs. She needs to feel 'heard' by the counsellor, and encouraged to state her needs. Other early goals of therapy are to help the client accept that (s)he did not cause the problem, cannot control it, and cannot cure it, and that the belief that having enough information will allow control of the situation is an illusion. The focus needs to be moved from fixing the other person to working on oneself, especially one's damaged self-esteem, and learning to pay attention to one's own needs and desires. Education about appropriate boundaries is useful, along with development of appropriate boundaries regarding the presence of the computer in the home and conditions for its use. Except perhaps very temporarily, however, it is not generally useful to have the SO be the 'keeper' of the computer or to control the cybersex addict's use of it; this is better left to the addict's therapist or sponsor. Like the cybersex addict, the SO can be greatly helped and supported by membership in a 12-step programme such as S-Anon, COSA, or AI-Anon.

Limitations of this study

The chief limitation of this study is that it includes only a self-selected population of people who have experienced significant adverse consequences as a result of their partner's cybersex addiction. It can provide no information about (1) the nature of the consequences, if any, to families of recreational or occasional cybersex users or (2) the prevalence among all cybersex users of significant consequences to the family. A

random sample of partners of all cybersex users would be needed to provide such information.

Conclusions

The present study was based on a brief survey completed by 91 women and three men who believed they had experienced serious adverse consequences resulting from another person's cybersex involvement. In 60.6% of cases the sexual activities were limited to cybersex and did not include offline sex. Although not specifically asked about this, 31% of partners volunteered that the cybersex activities were a continuation of pre-existing compulsive sexual behaviors. Open-ended questions yielded the following conclusions:

- (1) In response to learning about the partner's on-line sexual activities, the survey respondents experienced strong 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 for the respondents.
- (2) Cybersex addiction was a major contributing factor to separation and divorce of couples in this survey: 22.3% of the respondents were no longer living with the cybersex addict, and several others were seriously contemplating leaving.
- (3) Among 68% of the couples one or both of the pair had lost interest in relational sex; only 32% of respondents did not report an adverse effect on the couple's sexual relationship. Partners related that 52.1% of the addicts had decreased interest in sex with their primary partner, as did 34% of the partners. Some couples had had no relational sex in months or years. Partners and therapists sometimes labelled these addicts as 'sexually anorexic,' but in fact they were very active sexually—but with the computer rather than with their spouses.
- (4) Partners tended to compare themselves unfavourably with the online women and pictures, and to feel hopeless about being able to compete with them.
- (5) Partners overwhelmingly reported feeling that cyber affairs were as emotionally painful to them as live or offline affairs and that virtual affairs were just as much adultery or 'cheating' as live affairs; this was equally true of partners who had experience of their cybersex addicts having both types of affairs. Cybersex activities were considered particularly destructive in that (a) they took place right in the home and (b) were so time-consuming.
- (6) Adverse effects on the children of cybersex addicts included (1) exposure of children to cyberporn and to objectification of women, (2) involvement of the children in the conflict between the parents, (3) lack of attention to the children because of one parent's involvement with the computer and the other parent's preoccupation with the cybersex addict, (4) breakup of the marriage.
- (7) In response to their spouses' cybersex addiction, partners went through a sequence of prerecovery phases which consisted of (a) ignorance/denial, (b) shock/discovery of cybersex activities, and (c) problem-solving attempts. When their attempts failed and they realized how unmanageable their lives had become, they entered the crisis stage and began their own recovery.

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