

# When Cybersex Replaces Intimacy\*

by Robert M. Schwartz, Ph.D.

**S**o you bought your husband a new, speedy computer for the holidays. He loves online investing, trading on eBay, and surfing the latest news sites. You're happy that he is less glued to the TV, but he seems to be away from the family more than ever. Worse yet, he doesn't come to bed until after Jay Leno, and your sex life has ground to a dead standstill.

Like many women, you're beginning to wonder whether the seductive allure of Cybersex lurking within the benign beige box has taken hold of your husband. "No, that's impossible," you think. "He is so conventional, middle of the road, even a little square." But your suspicions haunt you as you fall asleep alone once again.

Jake just turned 40 and was in the midst of a job transition because his company was downsizing. His marriage to Lois began traditionally enough, putting her career aside to raise their three children. But beneath the surface, both Lois and Jake were insecure and overly dependent on one another. They cared for each other and used to feel sexually attracted, but both had lost parents early in life and were fearful of being abandoned. Their attraction was partly love, but too much was based on unhealthy dependency because neither Jake nor Lois felt they could exist as independent individuals.

Jake's forced smile and outward cheerfulness masked a deeply, sad and lonely man, angry with women because they had disappointed or abandoned him.

## Another Form of Addiction

Even people with less complex backgrounds can develop sexual addictions. Most people react strongly to the intense physical pleasure from sexual arousal and release. But if a person learns to rely too much on this 'sexual high' to regulate negative emotions such as sadness, anger, and loneliness, they are at risk for becoming sexually addicted.

Sexual addicts compulsively use sexual arousal the way other addicts use chemicals to reduce emotional pain or get high. Sex addicts may get addicted to having many superficial sexual encounters with willing partners, to paying for sex in message parlors or strip clubs, or most recently to activity on the Internet. Internet addiction is often the first time that compulsive sex behavior comes off the 'street' and into the home. The majority of sexual addicts are men, although women also can suffer from this problem.

Sexual addicts, like alcoholics, defend their behavior with rationalizations and, when pressed, lies. But the modern technological age has brought a wealth of evidence, such as cell phone bills and computer memories of Internet sites visited, for detectives and suspicious wives to



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use in discovering destructive sexual behaviors.

When Lois confronted Jake with proof of his unfaithfulness, his instinct was to deny, blame someone else, and devise another clever lie. With the hard evidence before him and Lois' uncharacteristic attitude of strength, Jake had nowhere to hide. He broke down in tears for the first time since his mother's death, admitted his Internet addiction and decided at that moment to tell the whole, ugly truth.

It took Lois a long time to believe that he was now being honest after the years of deceptions, half-truths and outright lies she had accepted. She didn't want to be fooled and hurt again. Jake started to see the path of reality more clearly. He didn't want to end up a "dirty old man" compulsively chasing after younger women.

When Jake began psychotherapy, he was finally motivated to change. We measured his mood and self-esteem, and found it was about as low as the scale allowed. With the help of mood medication and actively changing his negative, distorted thinking, Jake elevated his mood and began to feel better about himself, reducing the compulsive need to seek pleasure only through sex.

## The Path to Progress

Jake also learned a variety of self-control strategies to reduce his sexual preoccupation. He effectively used the technique of shouting 'HALT!' when he felt an unwanted

sexual impulse. This acronym, which stands for Hungry-Angry-Lonely-Tired, reminds the addict that when he feels unwanted sexual impulses, he is experiencing these negative moods and needs to learn new, non-sexual ways to control them.

Nothing solid can grow on a foundation of falsehood. Jake pursued honesty with a vengeance, replacing vague, waffling statements like, "I suppose I hurt Lois a lot," with, "I did hurt her a lot and I'm truly sorry." He monitored everything he said to make sure it expressed reality as precisely as possible.

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Gradually, Jake began trusting himself to see things more clearly. Slowly, Lois felt she could let down her guard and trust again. Jake came to realize that his compulsive sexual encounters never involved real intimacy or commitment.

Jake also developed the courage to join Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA), a heroic step for this socially anxious and avoidant man. During meetings, he practiced his direct, truthful communication and learned to express genuine feelings. He became less avoidant of others and broadened his network to include new, healthier relationships.

In addition, Jake and Lois underwent marital therapy, where both worked to restore trust, develop a

greater sense of independence and self-esteem, and learned to relate to each other with greater intimacy.

Lois learned that she could live without Jake, and that she couldn't control Jake's behavior directly, but was free to establish the conditions she needed to stay in the marriage.

Finally, Jake and Lois worked together to experience sexual interaction as a way of expressing love physically, not as a way of controlling and dominating the other person, or as a mere outlet for physical tension. In sum, Jake and Lois took the difficult but rewarding steps needed to save their marriage.

*\*This "case" represents a composite of work with sexual addicts over the past 20 years. Any similarity to actual individuals is purely coincidental.*

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