

# Sexual Behavior Problems Stimulate Work for Area Healthcare Professionals

By Robert M. Schwartz, Ph.D.



Despite the great promise of the “sexual revolution” beginning in the 1960s, we still face more sexual challenges than ever. Over a lifetime, 40%-60% of women will experience desire and orgasm problems and 30%-40% of men will report problems with erection and ejaculation. More alarming, the growing frequency of alleged or actual sexual misconduct by people associated with high-profile organizations (e.g., U.S. military, Catholic Church, Highmark, Pittsburgh Steelers, Penn State University) shows how pervasive inappropriate sexual relationships have become. This fact, combined with increased access-

sibility, anonymity and affordability of Internet-based sexual content, puts the need for professional treatment of destructive sexual behavior at an all-time high.

Such dysfunction cuts across all socio-economic classes worldwide. Although our “new morality” tolerates permissiveness in unprecedented ways, it fails miserably in fostering a healthy sexual climate. Instead, the “anything goes” attitude has led to the proliferation of activities that costs society billions of dollars annually, destroys families, weakens our sense of community and wreaks havoc on productivity.

Traditionally, problems related to abnormal sexual behavior have been treated through psychoanalysis (Freud) or behavior modification (Masters & Johnson). In more than 30 years of clinical practice, I have found that an integrated, cognitive-dynamic approach combining behavior change strategies with a resolution of deep-seated problems from childhood or adolescence is the most effective way to treat people’s sexual difficulties. Most sexual abusers have themselves been abused, resulting in emotional wounds and a “vandalized lovemap” that impels them toward inappropriate sexual feelings and behaviors, but these wounds can generally be healed through intensive cognitive-dynamic therapy.

Sexual dysfunction remains common, and today’s stressful dual career marriages are contributing to make low or inhibited sexual desire the primary complaint of most couples. Dr. David Schnarch, one of my mentors, has revolutionized the sex therapy field by demonstrating that sexual problems are not unnatural, but surprisingly are part of nature’s way of challenging people to grow and develop a more mature and well differentiated sense of self. When not medically caused, the source of low sexual desire, according to Dr. Schnarch, is a weak sense of self and a lack of ability to manage emotions that leads people to fear intimacy and put up walls that interfere with sexual desire and functioning. A strong and stable sense of self is the essential ingredient for good sex. The powerful, universal drive to connect sexually provides a challenge and opportunity to grow strong enough to tolerate true intimacy and, consequently, to enjoy passionate sex. Historically, our culture has misunderstood the nature of sexuality and naively expects sex to be “natural” and free of problems, which it never is.

My colleagues and I work with clients to integrate their feelings of sexuality with those of self-respect so individuals feel strong enough psychologically to engage in sexual relationships without the fear of being hurt or losing their individuality. By feeling secure and comfortable with themselves, individuals can then relax sufficiently so inherent biological processes occur and result in the development of fulfilling, long-term monogamous relationships.

Fitting well with our region’s steelmaking heritage, Dr. Schnarch calls the sexual union of two individuals into one unit, a “crucible.” Although participants have chosen to become a single entity in the relationship, they must also retain their individuality if the relationship is to flourish. Many people can be themselves, but not be in a relationship, or they can be in a relationship but not be themselves. These two types will, respectively, either avoid intimacy so they can maintain their sense of self, or seek intimacy but lose themselves in the process. The crucible approach to therapy shows the couple how their sexual interactions are really about deeper issues of self and how the naturally occurring sexual problems can be the impetus to strengthen their sense of self as well as their sexual satisfaction. The crucible of sex therapy is the container that holds things together while the partners break down barriers, grow stronger and discover their full sexual potential.

Putting theory into practice, it’s important to note that women more than men need to feel an emotional connection in a relationship. If they have a weak sense of

self they will depend too heavily on the man to validate their self-esteem rather than validating themselves. This neediness causes them to be overly pleasing and to control their partner in an attempt to get what they need, eventually leading to protective withdrawal by both that dampens sexual desire or impairs sexual functioning.

A woman I treated in my practice was involved with a man who was clearly addicted to Internet pornography, and often gratified himself in front of her despite her wish that he change his ways. She came to me for help, wanting to know if her partner was a sex addict and what she should do to improve her well-being and save the relationship.

Our sessions revealed that the client had been in a previous long-term relationship with an alcoholic who compromised her self-worth and personal safety. Additionally, the client told me she had been teased as a child because of her body type and had a poor self-image as a result of those experiences, so she felt she had no choice but to be victimized by men’s bad behavior because she felt she was “undesirable and unlovable.”

Further discussion enabled the woman to see that she did not deserve to be treated disrespectfully. Her growth in self-respect challenged her partner to grow in self-control, and only then were they both strong enough to engage in emotional intimacy and more passionate sex.

Fortunately, the Pittsburgh region has considerable resources for helping to treat and prevent sexual problems. By taking advantage of that expertise, western Pennsylvanians can continue to make this area one of the country’s friendliest and most livable (and lovable) places.

*Dr. Robert Schwartz is director of The Kurtz Center for Love & Intimacy, which helps couples achieve healthy relationships and satisfying sexual lives. It also trains and certifies sex therapists, educates physicians and conducts workshops in sexuality and sex therapy.*

*The Center is based in the Oakland offices of Cognitive Dynamic Therapy Associates (CDTA — [www.cogdyn.com](http://www.cogdyn.com)) and was named in honor of Dr. Shirley Kurtz, a student of Masters and Johnson and a pioneer of sex therapy in Pittsburgh. CDTA has one of the world’s largest concentrations of AASECT-certified sex therapists (American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors and Therapists).*

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