

COMMENTARIES ON THE CHARACTERISTICS MOST OF US SEEM TO HAVE IN COMMON

Characteristic 1:

As adolescents, we used fantasy and compulsive masturbation to avoid feelings, and continued this tendency into our adult lives with compulsive sex.

For many of us, masturbation began in childhood as a temporary escape for anything and everything that ailed us. Masturbation may have started as an exercise in self-discovery, but the pleasurable sensation we experienced made us want to repeat it, again and again. During these early days of exploration, most of us remained sexually innocent. We masturbated to distract ourselves from tension caused by family, school, or other issues. We masked our painful feelings with a gratifying activity we could control. It was something we typically did alone, although some of us may have experimented by masturbating with others. As our bodies developed, we became more sexually aware. We began to associate masturbation with sexuality, and to fantasize about people and sexual activities we found appealing. Images we encountered through television, movies, magazines or pornography, often at an early age, became part of our masturbation ritual. Social media and the online world also provided us with abundant materials. The reward of receiving physical and emotional pleasure from our self-stimulation and fantasies made masturbation a habitual and repetitive activity.

Such behavior helped many of us cope with the daily struggles and emotional turbulence of dysfunctional families. Some of us experienced neglect during our childhood. Others had families that discouraged emotional expression. Still others came from families with either weak or ignored boundaries. In these, feelings were sometimes sexualized either through sexual abuse and overt incest, or through relationships that included emotional, covert incest. Whatever the source, we needed a way to suppress or avoid the feelings we were not allowed to express, or found difficult to process. We sought refuge from these kinds of empty, repressive or abusive environments by resorting to masturbation, which brought us immediate, intense pleasure and temporary relief. This relief, and the need to avoid our feelings, made self-gratification our default option to deal with stress. Our masturbation habits had little or nothing to do with intimacy. They were secretive, and often became a hindrance to engaging in healthy sexual activities with others. Our persistent reliance on masturbation inevitably led to feelings of shame and low self-esteem. These feelings may have begun in childhood and intensified during our adolescence. Through our families, some of us may have inherited a shame-based, often secret, relationship to sex which carried itself over to, or expressed itself in, compulsive masturbation. For many, masturbation became associated with anti-social or "bad" behavior, accompanied by the fear of being caught by someone, especially a family member. Yet we couldn't stop, which made us even more ashamed. We may have masturbated at unsuitable times and in inappropriate

places, careless of our privacy, and to the point of causing ourselves physical pain or damage. Our parents, teachers, or religious leaders might have told us of the terrible things that would happen to us if we continued to masturbate. This scolding shamed us, and frequently made us see ourselves as defective. In response to this humiliation, we may have masturbated even more, and so the cycle intensified. These repeated efforts to avoid our feelings and escape our reality only made us feel worse.

As young adults, conflicting feelings often accompanied this new stage of life, and our sexual and romantic fantasies evolved as we imagined new possibilities. Our compulsive masturbation ultimately made our lives unmanageable. Using a coping mechanism that had worked for us in our youth kept us from learning how to deal with our feelings as adults. Our masturbation and sexual fantasies interfered with organizing our time and planning for the future. Many of us failed to learn other ways of handling our feelings and the pressures of everyday life. The qualities of our compulsive masturbation often translated into similar patterns when we had sex with others. We used sex to numb ourselves in stressful situations and to convert unpleasant feelings to more pleasant ones. We used compulsive masturbation, casual sex, anonymous sex, and other activities to avoid feelings. These behaviors provided the means to escape from reality into a fantasy world. The pain of life prompted us to seek the relief that compulsive sex seemed to bring, even as we came to understand that our behaviors were problematic, harmful and self-defeating.

In Recovery

We strive to feel our feelings, no longer avoiding them, and to be capable of sharing our feelings with others. Through prayer and meditation, and by working the Twelve Steps, we learn to become present in our own lives, and in the lives of others. We develop a sexual recovery plan that enables us to achieve freedom from compulsive sex, to bring sexuality into our lives that is integrated, and that enables us to deal with life on life's terms. We examine masturbation as an element of our sexual behavior, and develop individual boundaries around it. In the process, we often take a masturbation inventory, and sometimes make a specific masturbation plan. We let go of unhealthy fantasy and euphoric recall. We avoid allowing emotions to propel us into being sexual as an escape. We develop a connection with our Higher Power, and connect with others through empathy. We learn to enjoy the here and now, keeping busy and engaging in healthy activities.

(Extract from "The Characteristics Most of Us Seem to Have in Common"
© SCA-OIG)