

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

### **Characteristic 2:**

#### **Compulsive sex became a drug, which we used to escape from feelings such as anxiety, loneliness, anger and self-hatred, as well as joy.**

As adolescents and young adults, many of us attempted to avoid our feelings by masturbating, later turning compulsively to various forms of sex or pornography. We found it difficult—even overpowering—to feel and process our emotions. With no healthy means to manage our feelings, we saw them as unpredictable and beyond our control. When these emotions surfaced, we often felt an urgent, nearly overwhelming need to numb or change them. We turned to compulsive sex, which may have worked for a while, until fresh feelings arose, causing us again to look for more sex to deaden them.

Sex became our drug of choice and, like many other drugs, it was highly habit-forming. The more we got, the more we needed, putting us on a seemingly endless quest for the next “fix.” Like the chemically-dependent drug addict, we often strained our finances or neglected our everyday financial commitments in order to further our compulsive sexual activity. Our bodies responded to the neuro-chemical effects of sex at a physiological level. If we felt shame, guilt or remorse after our compulsive sexual activities, the only remedy seemed to be more sex. On and on we went, from one acting-out session to the next, turning to compulsive sex during good times as well as bad. Eventually, any strong feelings led us to our drug.

When anxiety gripped us and wouldn’t let go, we frequently turned to sex as a means of escape. While sex seemed like the perfect antidote to these anxious feelings, it couldn’t address the underlying causes that made us anxious in the first place – insecurity, trauma, pain, and fear. Sex shielded us for the moment from life’s challenges and frustrations. Inevitably, though, when we came down from the high of compulsive sex, our pain and anxiety were still there, often more powerful and unmanageable than before.

A general sense of loneliness plagued many of us. We may have felt ignored, forgotten, or dismissed by others as uninteresting, or just not good enough. These feelings of alienation and inadequacy often led us to isolate in an effort to protect ourselves from others hurting us in these ways. This behavior compounded our unhappiness, because at the same time we couldn’t stand being alone. Compulsive sex became the only relief from this unbearable sense of loneliness.

Sometimes feelings of anger – at ourselves or toward others, became overwhelming. Some of us were from families where anger and rage were continually present and we took it on, using compulsive sex as a way to displace it. Or, as children, we had caregivers who never let us express anger. These patterns

made it difficult for many of us to communicate or process our anger constructively as adults. Instead, we turned it inward, where it often took the form of self-hatred. These feelings were overpowering at times, and we sought the numbness and escape we found in ever-more-extreme compulsive behaviors.

As our acting out behaviors increased and became more intense, they made our sense of isolation and loneliness more acute and painful. We couldn't see the paradox – that the more physical contact we had, the less connected to others we felt. We battled with low self-esteem, and our feelings of worthlessness, as well as shame, would frequently make the search for sex even more desperate. We longed for validation to soothe our raw feelings, and sought comfort through sexual encounters with others. Many of us thought so little of ourselves that we would do almost anything, with just about anyone, to get the validation we craved. Even those of us who had achieved sobriety in other areas of our lives found that we still turned to compulsive sex to escape feelings and reality.

We desperately needed to evade our emotions. Over time, this need intensified, and relentlessly proceeded to overpower us. Yet the more we pursued the high of escape and oblivion through compulsive sex, the more it seemed to elude us. Recklessly, we chased our fix, ignoring the ever-worsening consequences. We were frequently distracted from taking care of our normal priorities by the opioid-like pull of our sexual and romantic intrigues. For some of us, risk fueled the high, so we put ourselves in jeopardy - physically, emotionally, financially, or legally. We may have acted out our compulsion for entire nights, days, or weekends at a time. Sometimes we acted out in public places, risking arrest. Some of us invited strangers into our homes, disregarding our physical safety. Safe sex became an afterthought, or was even purposely avoided to increase the danger and amplify the high we sought.

Ironically, it wasn't just negative feelings that we tried to avoid or could not process. We were equally ill-equipped to handle positive ones. A celebration, some recognition, or even a gesture of affection could impel us to act out. Self-loathing often crept in, telling us we didn't deserve the accolade or attention – that we had no right to feel good and happy. Even joy could have this effect. Every situation in which we found ourselves, and every feeling that accompanied it, could send us rushing headlong to our drug of choice. However, despite our attempts to medicate our feelings, we ended up lonelier, angrier, and sadder than before.

## **In Recovery**

We go through the rigors of withdrawal from compulsive sex. Withdrawal that is not only mental and emotional, but also physical, as our bodies have become used to the sensory and metabolic effects of compulsive sex almost like they would to a chemical drug. We engage with reality rather than seeking to escape it. We strive no longer to use feelings as an excuse or trigger for compulsive sex. Instead, we use *The Tools That Help Us Get Better*, including abstaining from unhealthy behaviors and learning to be social. We seek out the company of our recovery fellows and supportive people, instead of compulsive sexual partners or addictive and harmful sexual outlets. We recognize and remind ourselves that "feelings are

not facts,” and process our emotions in positive ways. We invite our Higher Power into our lives, and into romantic and sexual situations. We learn to feel our feelings, and discover that we can experience or handle them—all of them—without resorting to compulsive sex.

(Extract from “The Characteristics Most of Us Seem to Have in Common”  
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