

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

Characteristic 4:

We sought oblivion in fantasy and masturbation and lost ourselves in compulsive sex. Sex became a reward, punishment, distraction, and time-killer.

Many of us used fantasy early in our lives as a way to escape painful situations over which we had little or no power. We wanted to “check out” – to become oblivious to our thoughts, feelings, and surroundings. We retreated into a fantasy world, a world where we were in control: a place where no one could hurt us and our lives were idyllic. Losing ourselves in this fantasy world was often our first addiction.

Once sex entered our lives, many of us quickly integrated it into our fantasies. Thoughts of being sexual or romantic with others became a thrilling new way of escaping our reality. Masturbation was often the first sexual experience we had. We adopted and used it as a “security blanket” when we felt anxious or upset. The surge of physical pleasure was a great payoff, and enhanced the euphoria we felt many a time in fantasy.

Sexual activity was often a source of shame for many of us. We craved the physical gratification of masturbation, but after engaging in it, felt a deep sense of guilt. This guilt often brought up other painful feelings: of a loss of innocence, a loss of integrity, and sometimes the sense that we had lost our true selves. Diving deeper into our fantasies and engaging in more masturbation then seemed like the only course of action we could take.

However, all our attempts at escape from our everyday lives were ineffective and fleeting. We may have escalated our sexual behaviors in frequency and intensity in an effort to find oblivion. We nevertheless found ourselves in a deepening, downward spiral of compulsivity and illusion. These avoidant efforts frequently created drama in our lives, distracting us from our problems, and deferring any constructive action we might take to address them. We wasted time that we could have spent working on ourselves indulging our fantasies, and on serial masturbation. Fantasy and masturbation interfered with us taking positive steps to enhance our lives. We sexualized feelings, using compulsive masturbation to cope with life and even to manage our sexual compulsion. In some cases, we avoided healthy relationships with others by retreating into fantasy and masturbation. We found that, once this pattern was in place, we had truly lost our way, with every turn we took leading back to where we began.

Initially, our sexual experiences with other people may have provided some solace. We got an adrenaline rush from acting out that strengthened our desire for more sex. As that desire increased, we began to believe that being sexual, alone or with

someone else, was something we just had to do – that we had no choice in the matter. We felt more and more shame about our sexual activities until we reached the point of simply giving up and giving in to them - we desperately and urgently needed the relief that sex provided. Fantasy and masturbation became tools to mediate the conflict between our real and imaginary lives and relationships.

We felt powerless over our behavior, and our lives became unmanageable. We sometimes neglected everything else in our lives, avoiding friends and family, social events, even work assignments. We didn't really care if we put ourselves at risk or harmed others with our acting out. Many of us were so self-absorbed and self-centered that we failed to connect our actions with their consequences. We only wanted to satisfy our urge for more of the same, and to find the oblivion we so desperately sought.

With some of us, our view of the world narrowed until compulsive sex was all we could see. We lost sight of our true selves and any hopes we had once had for the future. In our fantasies, we may have imagined ourselves with a better job, better relationships – a better life. However, they were just that – fantasies – and our compulsive pursuits in many instances made us incapable of taking any concrete action to improve our lives.

As addicts, we often had extreme difficulty processing our feelings, whether positive or negative, and turned to compulsive sex as a coping mechanism. If something went right, we rewarded ourselves with sex. If something went wrong, or when we judged ourselves harshly, we may have engaged in harmful sexual behavior as a form of punishment, telling ourselves it was all we deserved. Sex was our response to anything and everything. When we were bored, or had time on our hands, we often indulged in fantasy and masturbation to occupy and lose ourselves.

Many of us used any available sexual behavior to distract ourselves. We filled any spare time we had with compulsive sexual activity, searching for sex, or fantasizing about sex. Sex and fantasy were our anesthetics, numbing our pain, and sheltering us from the realities we didn't want to face. Often, too many of our waking hours—including worktime—were spent lost in addictive binges of sexual thoughts, fantasy, masturbation, and compulsive sex.

Eventually, for most of us, sex became devoid of pleasure or any real feeling. Compulsive sex became an overused and ineffective tool to help us deal with life's ups and downs. It became automatic, a habitual act, and we forgot or gave up on other ways of living. The worst realization of all for us was that our sexual acting out and acting in no longer relieved our suffering, but instead became the source of it. The more we escaped into compulsive sex and fantasy, the more we left behind the things that once had meaning, or gave us real satisfaction. We had built up a tolerance for compulsive sexual behaviors, and the result of our repeated use of them was to render life all but meaningless.

In Recovery

We strive to discard destructive fantasy and seek healthy rewards. Following a spiritual path, we stay connected to the world and others, and participate fully in life. Our sexual recovery plan sets out parameters to keep us from compulsive sexual expression and in the terrain of healthy sexuality. We establish sound goals, objectives and rewards for ourselves. We reclaim neglected pastimes and hobbies, or develop new ones. We fill our time with meaningful activities, including service. We learn to take care of and be good to ourselves. We face and embrace reality. By acting with honesty and integrity, and being comfortable with intimacy, we find a life-affirming sexuality that assumes its rightful dimension in our lives.

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