

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

Characteristic 5:

Because of our low self-esteem, we used sex to feel validated and complete.

For most of us, our compulsive sexual behavior with its anesthetic qualities served as a way to shield us from feelings of deep-rooted shame and low self-esteem. Although individual circumstances varied, the sources of our pain included childhood trauma, family-shaming, family secrecy, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, emotional exploitation, neglect, isolation, or rejection by the very people we ought to have been able to expect to support us. The message we received from these experiences was that we were somehow defective and not worthy of love.

Some of us came to believe that we were unforgivable and incomplete, with little or no value as human beings. In some cases, we felt worthy only if we suppressed our emotions or performed sexually. Others may have manipulated us, convincing us that our value was conditional. Some of us experienced societal attitudes to our sexuality or other background that affected our sense of ourselves, including as sexual beings. The understanding was clear: we had been judged and found wanting.

The compulsion told us that the cure for how we felt about ourselves was sex, or romance, or love, or a relationship. In our search for esteem, we discovered power and pleasure in manipulative seduction and sexual prowess, and gained satisfaction from our growing list of sexual and romantic conquests. We soon discovered that having sex provided a short reprieve from our low self-esteem, by allowing us to feel powerful. This short-lived strategy of being sexually available worked well to convince others to validate us, even if it was only as a sexual object. When we experienced rejection, this stratagem disintegrated, thereby reinforcing our worst feelings about ourselves.

Our lives often seemed empty, except when we thought about, sought out, or were having sex. Some of us only felt real, or felt at our most real, when we were being sexual. We sought attention in sexual situations, or conversely, retreated into a world of fantasy, compulsive masturbation and isolation. Emotional scars from our upbringing compounded feelings of unworthiness, and we sought to fill the void where our self-esteem should have been. We resorted to compulsive sex for this purpose. Ironically, in acting out our low self-esteem and disconnection, some of us would routinely objectify or exploit others. Many of us shied away from friendships or relationships altogether, because contact with our peers or potential partners threatened us. We were somehow sure that others could see our lack of value. We felt intensely lonely, often left out, ignored, unseen, or even excluded completely.

Besides physical contact, we avoided being close to others because we were afraid to be vulnerable or uncomfortable. This pattern presented a significant barrier to intimacy of all kinds. Instead, some of us engaged in empty, meaningless sex that either reinforced our core belief about ourselves as undeserving of love and respect, or served as a meagre substitute for real intimacy. We went to significant lengths trying to be attractive to strangers, spending considerable time, energy, and money on efforts to make ourselves look desirable. We often abandoned our sense of self and objectified ourselves, ceding all power to others. We became people-pleasers, frequently compromising our integrity or dignity to maintain a connection with others.

The validation we received from being desired sexually allowed us to feel that we had real worth, however briefly this may have lasted. We rarely had sex with anyone for reasons of mutual attraction, or because of liking or respect. Sex was primarily about the affirmation we wanted to receive, and we could never get enough. Many of us believed at a fundamental level that our self-worth depended on our ability to please others sexually. Sex for us was serious business. Sex gave us a temporary feeling of euphoria, a false sense of satisfaction. However, when the afterglow had worn off, the shame around our behaviors compounded our feelings of low self-worth. Our search for a sexual partner who would validate us and make us "whole" therefore became all the more desperate.

Eventually, this pattern stopped providing any lasting relief from our feelings of inferiority and being "less than." After having compulsive sex, we usually felt a heightened sense of shame about acting out, and this affirmed our degradation. When these feelings intensified, we found ourselves going back for another quick "fix." When we resorted to compulsive sex, we received instant gratification that masked what we believed was lacking in our lives. Subconsciously, we knew that these behaviors were increasing our core feelings of shame and unworthiness. We were locked in a cycle that drove us to seek out others for sex, in an effort to relieve our continuous need for affirmation. The more we relied on this temporary infusion of validation, the less worthy and more incomplete we felt.

In Recovery

We no longer need to look for external sources of validation. We distinguish ourselves in healthy ways. We come to accept ourselves as we are, and others as they are. We let go of perfectionism and grandiosity, and we develop humility. We learn to forgive ourselves, and others. As we cross the bridge from our fantasy world to the real world, we gain a sense of belonging to a community. Through progress in our recovery, we come to identify causes and conditions that underlie our negative self-image and feed our low self-esteem, and we work on addressing them. In working the Steps, we learn to be "right-sized," with a self-esteem that is neither too high nor too low, but is based in reality. We find emotional balance. Sex, too, assumes its rightful proportion, purpose and place in our life.

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