

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

### **Characteristic 7:**

#### **Sex was compartmentalized instead of integrated into our lives as a healthy element.**

Discovering how we wanted to express our sexuality and establishing boundaries was an essential part of growing up and maturing. However, those of us who struggled with sexual compulsion often explored our sexuality using behaviors inconsistent with our values, and had poor boundaries. Few of us had solid role models to demonstrate healthy sexuality to us. Often, we were negatively affected by depictions of sex we encountered in pornography and the media. Many of us found we used sexual acts to get attention and validation, instead of finding affirmations of our worth in healthier ways.

We launched ourselves into sex in a faltering, secretive and compulsive way. We were often in denial about our behavior's harmful effects on our lives – we deluded ourselves about the negative nature of our actions. We tried to protect ourselves from the painful reality we had created where our sex lives were concerned. We often felt an intense need to hide our sexually compulsive behaviors from both ourselves and others. We believed that if others saw us as we were, they would have judged us as defective, perverse, and unworthy of love and respect. This belief created a conflict within us, leading to shame about our sexual activity and few positive experiences to relate. Some of us kept our sex lives in a box, believing that it bore no relevance to our regular lives. Within that box, some of us often further separated sex from emotion. We often compartmentalized our sexual activities and feelings into these discrete boxes in order to contain and conceal them from ourselves and others. The more our sexual activities diverged from our values, the more effort we put into segregating and hiding them.

Our hidden sexual life made our everyday existence increasingly uncomfortable for most of us, with it eventually becoming unmanageable. The feeling that our sexuality was different from that of others may have started with trauma or even our identity: perhaps we had been victims of sexual abuse; perhaps we agonized over how we felt about our body and its perceived image. Some of us struggled to accept our sexual orientation. Keeping our sex lives secret and lying about our activities often required some mental agility – we had to keep track of the lies we told to keep our stories straight. This need to separate our sexual behaviors from the rest of our lives kept us from being honest with others in matters both great and small. Our dependence on secrecy increased our stress, and contributed to our burgeoning belief that we were manipulative, deceitful, and unlovable.

Compartmentalization allowed some of us to balance and reconcile disparate sexual desires and activities, as well as conflicts in sexual orientation we had not resolved.

We were fragmented beings who partitioned different areas of our lives— especially sex and sometimes romance—as if they belonged to different people.

We operated a secret life. Some of us even developed “double lives” by creating an alternate persona for our acting out fantasies and compulsive sex. This split in our identity helped us hide our sexual activity and made it easier to deny its impact on our lives. Since we now had an alter ego, whose behaviors were somehow separate from our own, we compromised any sense of integrity we may have had. We reinforced barriers between our acting out and our “real” life to keep our guilt and shame from contaminating the image we presented to others.

Living a double life became painful and complicated, especially in our relationships with family, friends, or potential romantic partners. Most of us did not believe that anyone could love and accept us as we were. We could not allow anyone to know us intimately for fear that they would discover our secrets. The fragmentation of our identity often accelerated if we engaged in a relationship with a partner. The possible discovery of our acting out life created tremendous anxiety and fear. We feared exposure and humiliation. We worried we would lose the connections we had if our web of deceit unraveled. If we had agreed to a monogamous relationship, our secret life increased our feelings of fear, anxiety, regret, or resentment. Our promises were empty. We were able to rationalize any sexual activity, no matter how extreme, dangerous or even illegal.

Deception and secrecy became a way of life, and maintaining them only increased our guilt and shame. We found that whatever aspect of integrated sexuality we imagined, our compartmentalized life usually put it out of our reach. Others showed us by their example that healthy sexuality included honesty, openness, willingness, acceptance, compassion, affection, and physical connection. However, as long as we engaged in compulsive sex and spent our energies compartmentalizing and hiding our sexual behavior, it was almost impossible to see ourselves as whole people, capable of a healthy sexuality.

The more separate we kept our identities, the less available any integrated sexuality seemed to be. Sex had become a ritual, something we could dissociate from even while engaging in it. We often had a sense of ourselves as being hypersexual, entitled to have more sex than others. Some of us imagined ourselves as superior to the average person whose sexual needs and abilities could not rival ours. For many of us, healthy sexuality sounded boring, or an ideal that we could never achieve. The integration of sex as a healthy element seemed foreign, entirely at odds with our sexual activities. Sexual intimacy, genuine affection, and emotional closeness were far from where we found ourselves – most of us had no idea what those experiences looked or felt like, nor what actions might help us move toward them.

## **In Recovery**

We strive to become whole, and to integrate the compartmentalized parts of our lives. We let go of our obsession with secrecy and strive for integrity in all areas of

life. Rather than playing roles, we bring our true selves to situations and choose to share ourselves appropriately. The honesty of being who we are reduces our shame. We develop the ability to recognize and capitalize on our character assets, and learn ways of minimizing or removing our character defects. We integrate sex into our lives as a healthy element. As we become the people we actually are, each of us often finds that this is the person we actually want to be.

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