

# **SCA Online Intergroup – Commentaries on the Characteristics Most of Us Seem to Have in Common**

## **Introduction**

The Characteristics Most of Us Seem to Have in Common were developed by the early members of Sexual Compulsives Anonymous in New York, and first written in 1983. They describe in a general way how most of us coming to SCA have experienced sexual compulsion.

Early on, SCA's New York fellowship sought to identify which traits its members had in common. A Literature Committee grew out of spontaneous group discussions. These efforts resulted in an initial draft of what we now know as *The Characteristics Most of Us Seem to Have in Common*. The individual Characteristics were reorganized and further edited before their publication in *SCA: A Program of Recovery* in 1996.

These commentaries expanding on The Characteristics Most of Us Seem to Have in Common developed from individual writing followed by a series of workshops. The resulting text was further refined and developed by an SCA literature committee.

Many members of our fellowship have described their reaction to hearing The Characteristics read at meetings. While it may have been uncomfortable to listen to the unmanageability reflected in these descriptions, they also gave hope. If others could understand the pain reflected in The Characteristics, then there was a sense of finally being in the right place to get help. Many members have described their identification with The Characteristics as a feeling of belonging. The reading of The Characteristics further signifies that meetings are places where there is the potential for the healing process to begin. It also indicates that there can be a definite move toward spiritual growth.

Each of the following commentaries expands on the core Characteristic and describes how those of us coming to SCA have manifested sexual compulsion in its many forms of expression. It also summarizes how our behaviors and lives can change as we work the SCA Program and pursue recovery.

## **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.

## **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.

### **Characteristic 3:**

**We tended to become immobilized by romantic obsessions. We became addicted to the search for sex and love; as a result, we neglected our lives.**

As sexual compulsives, our notions of sex, romance, and relationships often became distorted. Romance and the prospect of romance exerted a mysterious and powerful pull over many of us, as did the allure of sex and love. Our feelings of shame and unworthiness increased our fear of physical or emotional intimacy. We continually searched for ways to get out of ourselves, and to escape from our feelings. Fantasy provided a diversion to distract us from what was actually going on in our lives. We often allowed the world of fantasy to spiral into obsessive

thinking, leading us to project “ideal” values onto situations or people. These situations or people could be real or imagined. We found targets for our compulsive desires who were often unrealistic or unattainable. This obsessive behavior provided us with temporary respite from the pain of real life.

Obsessions became a coping strategy that allowed us to overlook what was lacking in our lives, complete with their day-to-day drudgery. The false reality we created sometimes developed consciously, but often it was a pattern of which we were initially unaware. Ultimately, our tendency to objectify and romanticize others became habitual. We lost ourselves in fantasies involving people we found physically attractive, admired, or even envied. Sometimes, our feelings towards the objects of our obsessive desire were ambivalent. Social media provided online avenues for unnoticed or plainly fervent adoration. In the physical world, we may have seen someone at a distance, or perhaps met them at a social or work event. Sometimes, the focus of our attention was a colleague we worked with every day. A look, a word, a touch, and we felt captivated, feeling a sense of exhilaration. If we had a chance to talk to them or spend some time with them, our fantasies intensified. Whatever the level of our involvement, the elation we initially experienced began to permeate our consciousness, and we became obsessed. We were often rejected by those we desired in this way, and our euphoria vanished, leaving us with our stress and anxiety, and feeling abandoned. All too frequently, though, the obsession continued long after it became clear to us that our interest was not reciprocated.

Often, if we lacked another person to obsess over, we focused our energies on finding one. We searched for that idealized person whose attentions would affirm us. The pursuit itself became compulsive, with its potential to create an escape. While we were on the lookout for our obsession, we were sometimes numb to the everyday problems in our lives, including difficult feelings. However, with our experience of seeking sexual gratification compulsively, we often found ourselves looking for this idealized love in all the wrong places. Some of us genuinely believed that the same behaviors we had used to seek out objectifying sexual encounters would result in us finding “the one” who could magically relieve our pain. Sometimes, the paradigm included seeking out makeshift, temporary sexual contact as we pursued our romantic obsessions, romantic intrigues, and “love.”

During periods of romantic obsession or love addiction, many of us set aside or even ignored our other relationships. Our inability to be present made us unavailable to our friends and families. Friends became mere sounding boards for our ruminations about the object of our fantasies. Obsession and love addiction may have led to us neglecting our careers, or other aspects of our daily lives. Our work and home lives suffered. This intense infatuation became our top priority: endlessly fascinating, often painful, and always urgent.

Sometimes, we stopped taking care of ourselves altogether; our everyday routines became less important to us, or were all too easily disregarded. Our non-sexual talents remained unexplored or even suppressed, and we couldn’t seem to live up to our potential. We put our energy into doing what we hoped would make our

obsession respond to us. In some cases, our obsession with another person may have induced us to violate their boundaries. Our emotional development may have suffered as a result of our focus on winning the attention of another. We quickly lost track of ourselves and reality, molding our personalities to fit our obsession. Sexual compulsion expressed as romantic obsession put our lives on hold for months, years, even decades.

The intensity of our fixation and the stress of maintaining it often led to severe anxiety. We feared we would never get what we wanted from our obsession. This fear of rejection or abandonment might trigger us to seek out other avenues of compulsive sex. Alternatively, some of us abstained from sex with others completely, because other people never lived up to our expectations or fantasies. Our unrealistic approach to romance sometimes meant that we forsook opportunities for actual and available relationships, and became mired in a kind of sexual anorexia. Or, even while romantically obsessed, some of us continued "the search," using compulsive sex to cover up our emotions. It was addictive; we could never put aside the obsession with sex for long. Whichever way the desire was expressed, we were constantly seeking out sex, and looking for love, in one form or another.

### **In Recovery**

We become aware of our obsessive thinking and behavior and strive to participate in life. We take care of ourselves and stay connected to family and friends, because seeking a romantic partner is no longer our main focus. We discover that we can be social without being sexual, and that we can enjoy our own company. We pursue everyday life without seeing it only through the veil of romantic obsession. When we use the Tool of Dating, we do not look for a partner to fix us, but rather seek out people who are in real relationship with us, and who nourish our desires. We stop obsessing over people and fill our time in healthier ways. Our values are realigned so that we experience balance. We come to realize as we work the Program that our Higher Power provides us with spiritual, emotional, physical and economic security.

### **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.

## **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.

## **Characteristic 6:**

**We tried to bring intensity and excitement into our lives through sex, but felt ourselves growing steadily emptier.**

When sex first came into our lives, we felt excitement about it like anyone else. However, as sexual compulsives, our relationship to sex and the intensity and excitement it brought with it seemed to be different from the start. Sex added itself to our already addictive thinking and emotional processes, nestling among such feelings as anxiety, loneliness, anger, self-hatred, shame, envy and unworthiness.

In our active compulsion, many of us also experienced dissatisfaction with our lives. Especially when compared to others, we easily found the lives we were living uninteresting and frustrating. As addicts, we all too readily formed resentments against others, or against our circumstances. We had a sense of entitlement, but also felt that we were inadequate, that our lives were empty, or that they lacked adventure. Whatever the source of our discontentment, we developed an intense craving for excitement to dull its effect, and as a foil to the other emotions we were experiencing. At some point, we discovered that acting out sexually could provide us with a refuge—short-lived though it might be—from both our malaise and the various ills we perceived to be present in our lives.

We found that we generally sought out sex for its arousing and intoxicating effects like we would a drug, rather than relating to it as an expression of our God-given sexuality. In acting out our compulsion, we may have used innumerable ways of finding sexual connection, such as by frequenting bars, clubs, hookup spots or any place where sex was available. Some of us used online dating sites or apps to connect with others. We loved the excitement of being wanted and desired without having to go to physical lengths to get acquainted. We jumped from one relationship to the next – seeking connection, but ultimately unable to sustain it. We may have cheated on our intimate partners, never satisfied, and craving the “rush” of a clandestine encounter.

In our downtime, we also often recalled times in our past when sex and fantasy had brought us excitement. This served in part to relieve the boredom that plagued us. Some of us experienced intense euphoric recall of past sexual exploits. Many of us constantly looked for ways to experience this excitement again, to fill the emotional void and quiet the disturbance we felt within ourselves.

In attempts to transcend what we saw as our bland and unrewarding existence, some of us engaged in sexual activities that were not in keeping with our personal sexuality. The pursuit of excitement pushed us into violating lines we thought we would never cross, pursuing fantasies and activities that violated our values, morals, and integrity. We found that dangerous or forbidden activities activated our adrenaline.

Some of us used pornography to fill what seemed to be a growing void. The list of possible sexual activities was as diverse as our imagination. Many of us already had an extensive history of using sex in compulsive ways, so choosing a sexual outlet from among the many possible was familiar and routine. No matter what we did, the purpose was to bring intensity and excitement into our lives through sex. However, we soon found that the thrill of our sexual behaviors began to fade.

We often pursued sex without thought for our personal safety. Some of us told ourselves that using protection or prophylaxis was inconvenient, unnecessary, or that it ruined the experience. What counted was the “hit.” In some cases, other factors came into play that caused us not to concern ourselves with how our behavior might affect a partner. As we ventured further and further into extremes,

residues of shame made us feel unworthy, and alienated us from other people. With each new degradation, we lost another piece of our souls.

No matter how much we engaged in these activities, the disenchantment with our lives often remained. The rewards became intermittent. By repeating the same behaviors without any further benefit of excitement, we felt a sense of emptiness and futility. The sex failed to relieve the dissatisfaction and unhappiness we experienced in our everyday lives. We still felt incredibly empty. Some of us chose to abstain from sex completely as an answer to these feelings. However, most of us found ourselves unwilling or unable to make that choice. For the majority of us, it wasn't a choice at all. The emptiness we felt compelled us to seek more intensity.

If we were having sex outside a committed relationship, we felt ever-more-isolated from our partners, and ever-more-distant from true intimacy based on honesty. If we were single, we might have rationalized that we were merely "sowing our wild oats," but our actions left us hollow and unprepared for building a relationship with anyone. We were locked into a relentless loop of exhilaration followed by feelings of fear, remorse, dread, and self-loathing. Our inability to break this cycle resulted in abject despair, and whittled away at our spiritual self. The insistent need to remedy this "hole in the soul" we could not properly identify compelled us to try to use sex and excitement to alleviate what was, in fact, a spiritual emptiness.

Many of us doubled down and tried to find more and more intense sexual activities. The hookups became more dangerous, as more risk temporarily increased the adrenaline-high we experienced. The regular pornography no longer worked, so we searched for something edgier. For some of us, pornography use might have included illegal images, or perhaps the viewing of excessively graphic or violent scenes. No matter what or how much we did, we had to keep chasing the next "high" – hoping to find that elusive "perfect" sexual experience. As the compulsion deepened, many of us escalated our activities to the point of compromising our basic decency and most fundamental principles. The hookups became sessions filled with unbounded humiliation, unsafe sexual decisions, and other physical dangers.

Eventually, these sexual activities stopped working to bring us intensity and excitement altogether. We had run out of options. Our sexual behavior had reached the point where it was making unreasonable demands on our time and energy, placing us in legal jeopardy, or endangering our mental, physical or spiritual health. Perhaps we lost jobs or sabotaged relationships by introducing an intensity to our sex lives that others couldn't tolerate. Many of us suffered physical health consequences, sometimes contracting sexually transmitted infections. Some experienced arrest, in the process possibly becoming designated as a sex offender or sexual predator.

The deepening spiral of injecting intensity and excitement into our lives through sex had left us emotionally and spiritually drained. The emptiness of our lives was still there and, in fact, had deepened with shame. We had trapped ourselves in a spirit-breaking ritual. We finally realized that no amount of sex would fill the emptiness

we felt, or make our lives miraculously free of the everyday irritations we had so strongly chafed against, and sought to soothe with compulsive sex.

## **In Recovery**

Through the grace of our Higher Power, we no longer need to seek intensity and excitement to escape pain — our spirituality fills us. As we heal, we develop a fulfilling relationship with ourselves, our Higher Power, and outwards to others. We come to value and respect ourselves and others, and change our behaviors to reflect that. We find contentment in previously unappealing activities. We find intensity through sheer joy, which can take many forms, such as getting in touch with nature, participating in service to others, and creating or appreciating art. By living a full and balanced life, we become satisfied.

## **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.

## **Characteristic 8:**

**We became addicted to people, and were unable to distinguish among sex, love, and affection.**

Just as compulsive sex became a drug for us, so too did people. For many of us, romantic obsession and love addiction count among the more subtle and insidious forms of our disease. When we were young, we often found it hard to distinguish an innocent crush from an intoxicating attraction which could activate our compulsion. We may have convinced ourselves that our latest infatuation had to be "the one," and confused the resulting obsession with love. We craved the overwhelming feeling of being in love as we imagined it – the racing heartbeat, the weak knees, the sense of elation and extreme focus on another person. Eventually, a pattern emerged, and we developed detrimental behaviors around these infatuations. Many times, the addictive sexual and romantic attractions we had to people triggered codependent responses in us. Ultimately, the emotional highs and lows we experienced made our lives unmanageable.

Often, trauma and distress from our childhood were the foundation for these unhealthy obsessions. A range of issues – alcoholism in the family, neglect, physical and emotional abuse, incest – possibly contributed to experiences in which our needs were ignored or minimized. The boundaries around sex, love and affection became blurred, and the nature of healthy sexuality and intimacy confusing to us. Some of us came from families that were either unwilling to give us the affection we needed, or were incapable of it. In these ways, our families confirmed our worst fears – that we were indeed unlovable.

We began trying to fill the void where acceptance and self-esteem should have been. If we did not have the opportunity to learn healthy boundaries as children, we had difficulty setting or maintaining them as adults. If another person paid us attention or showed us the slightest affection, it could cause us to obsess about

them. We interpreted the smallest kindness as more meaningful attention. Many times, we ignored the actual signals we received from the other person. Instead, we projected our fantasies and needs onto them. We wanted them to conform to our image of what they should be, or what we needed them to be.

We often sent mixed messages and misinterpreted responses. We easily blurred the lines between sexual and non-sexual relationships, often mistaking sex for love, and affection for sexual attraction. Many of us came from family backgrounds where sex was viewed and spoken about negatively (or not spoken about), where love was transactional and conditional, not unconditional, and where affection was rare, or not shown. It was easy to confuse sex with love and affection. We lacked a reference point. We found we needed sex or romantic intrigue to feel loved. These exaggerated ideas continued into adulthood. We sought love and affection the only way we knew, through an all-consuming focus on another person, wanting to possess them, and to consummate our desires with sexual activity. In essence, we sought deeper connection through sex. When we violated sexual boundaries with our friends, they often withdrew from us, and the relationships suffered or disintegrated entirely, leaving us feeling rejected. People rotated in and out of our lives. Sometimes it seemed that the only friends we had were the people with whom we were sexually involved.

Some of us developed a well-worn habit of engaging in sexual activity as a means of attempting to find love and affection. Yet, the very act of having casual or anonymous sex compulsively thwarted our efforts to build intimate relationships. We found ourselves repeatedly frustrated and let down, blind to the fact that the sex act itself was an exchange, and not genuinely intimate. We were often confused – unable to see the difference between what we wanted and what we were getting. Our sexual encounters frequently left us with a feeling of emptiness and the need to satisfy ourselves in some other, better way, but we didn't know what that would be, or how to go about it.

If we tried dating, many of us found it difficult to establish any real connection with another human being. Often, we chose to be sexual right away, but doing so seemed to forestall any further momentum in building an intimate relationship. The sex became yet another superficial experience, and we were discouraged: we still seemed to be missing out on a deeper, more intimate connection. Still, our addiction told us to do it again – convincing us that the next sex partner would be our best hope for fulfillment.

Some of us became obsessed with strangers, or people we barely knew. We could quickly become "hooked" on another person, and build an intricately-conceived fantasy life about our future with them. These fantasies felt real and possible for us, regardless of whether we knew the person. We objectified them, putting them on a pedestal, convincing ourselves that only *they* had the qualities that would make us happy and solve all our problems. Sometimes these obsessive thoughts remained only fantasies, but they distracted us and made it difficult for us to function well. At other times, we pursued the objects of our desires like any addict would a drug. In

our compulsive hunger, some of us saw people as possessions, conquests, or trophies to add to a collection.

In some cases, our perception of a person's overwhelming attractiveness led us to suppress our own personality. We idealized the object of our obsession, with the result that the person held power over us much as an addictive substance would. We found ourselves compelled to pursue people we were interested in to all extremes, even violating our dignity if necessary. Morals, values, integrity, and prior commitments fell by the wayside during our relentless quest. If we achieved our goal and connected with the targets of our desire, we immediately and compulsively immersed ourselves in their lives. Sometimes this was only to discard them when we became obsessed with the next person. As these patterns repeated, we grew more confused about sex, love, and affection. We had crossed wires in this area, and did not know how to separate out the different elements of our confusion.

### **In Recovery**

We receive the gifts of non-sexual love and non-sexual affection. We learn how sex, love, and affection differ, and we express them appropriately. We set our own boundaries and proceed at an appropriate pace in getting to know people. We are skeptical of instant intimacy, knowing that true intimacy takes time to develop. We let go of the idea that sex or people can somehow cure us of our ills, and seek recovery for our individual circumstances and behaviors.

### **Characteristic 9:**

**We searched for some "magical" quality in others to make us feel complete. Other people were idealized and endowed with a powerful symbolism, which often disappeared after we had sex with them.**

For some of us, the need for validation drove our obsessive and compulsive search for sexual and romantic partners. We sought out people who would make us feel like we mattered, provide us with what we felt was missing, and somehow complete us. We idealized people to whom we were attracted, fantasizing that they were perfect, and we often sexualized our admiration of them. We were entranced by their mystique, which was largely of our own making.

We desperately looked for a way to feel better about ourselves and our lives through others. Instead of building up our sense of self-worth by working on our problems and possible solutions to them, we directed our attention and energy outward, developing attractions to people and idolizing them. For some of us, these tendencies began in adolescence and increased as we grew older. We often imagined and focused on romantic partners whom we idealized and endowed with almost magical qualities. We believed that if we could somehow get the attention of and merge with these "perfect" figures, their seeming ease of being would be ours as well, and we would feel complete.

We got lost in the lives of our idols, and felt whole around them. It was as if we needed them to feel fulfilled. We became fixated not on the reality, but on the fantasy that we associated with their lives and beings. The more we focused on these other people, the more attractive they seemed to us. This fixation blinded us to any romantic or relationship possibilities we had with available people – individuals who genuinely wanted to connect with us – and we continued our search for an idealized person who could make us feel whole.

Many of us had spent years feeling incomplete as human beings. The reasons for this varied, but the result was the same - we felt inadequate, defective, unworthy and unlovable. We discovered that sex, fantasy or romantic obsession could bring temporary relief from these feelings, and compulsive sex soon became a way to escape them. As our addiction escalated, we directed more and more energy into the prospect of a perfect sexual and romantic partner who would complete us. While we waited for our dream, we often settled for sex with people who didn't really matter to us, but whose attention temporarily eased our pain.

We often believed that if only we could spend time with the object of our fantasy and ultimately have sex with them, their idealized qualities would fill the emptiness we felt. We also hoped that the people we had endowed with this powerful symbolism would help us escape our negative feelings about ourselves. We sometimes imagined that they would rescue us from the banality of our lives and the repetitive, meaningless cycle of sex which some of us pursued. Our actual sex life could never measure up or be fulfilling as long as we held on to the fantasy of our idealized relationships. Sexual activity with others felt like settling for less, and as if we were making compromises, reinforcing how undeserving we were of what we truly wanted.

If we eventually had sex with someone we had idolized, our image of them frequently shattered as reality set in. Their humanity and the sex act itself were at odds with the unattainable fulfillment we sought. We were disillusioned to discover that those we had idealized were not perfect. When we touched our idols, the guilt rubbed off on our hands. Any spiritual uplift we had hoped to find did not materialize, or failed to last. Our negative feelings about ourselves and our lives remained. If anything, they increased as we realized our error where the focus of our desire was concerned. We felt cheated out of the time and energy we had spent in the pursuit. For most of us, sex with our idol had not changed our feelings of emptiness and isolation. In fact, oftentimes, the need to find a new object of our attention became more desperate. Though painful to admit, the reality was simple; the issues of identity and spiritual incompleteness we were dealing with could not be resolved by sex, or by another human being.

## **In Recovery**

We let go of unrealistic expectations and impossible standards. We take off our "sex-colored glasses." We see people for their human qualities and allow them to be imperfect. We pay attention to red flags and hear what people are saying about who they are and what they want. We use the Tools of the Program to develop

acceptance of ourselves and build a relationship with our Higher Power that makes us feel whole. We come to realize that the true magic is the wonder of reality, genuine relationships, a sober life, and the rewards of sexual sobriety.

### **Characteristic 10:**

#### **We were drawn to people who were not available to us, or who would reject or abuse us.**

Because of our addiction to sex or romance, unavailable people continually gleamed like shiny new objects never quite within our reach. For many of us, low self-esteem and a deep-rooted sense of unworthiness were familiar aspects of our lives. We sought validation through sexual and romantic liaisons with others and were frequently rejected, ultimately feeling worse about ourselves than before. We often ignored signs that a person was unavailable, leading us to feel hurt or abused. We may have had no experience with healthy relationships and few positive role models to emulate, so when we engaged with others, we often made poor choices, many times settling for someone who would merely tolerate us. For some, these choices seemed acceptable, since we felt we were defective and needed to settle for whatever kind of relationship we could get. For others, it was less conscious. We may have found ourselves drawn to those who represented someone from our past, someone who had abused or hurt us, hoping the experience would be different this time. Regardless, we often gravitated toward people who affirmed our feelings of unworthiness by demeaning, disregarding, or abusing us. In some cases, if someone rejected us, it only increased our desire.

Finding a relationship became a kind of mission. Many of us sought out relationships believing that another person could somehow "fix" or "rescue" us, or that we could do the same for them. We often found ourselves attracted to people who were inappropriate as relationship partners in one way or another. If we became aware of character flaws, such as aggressive or abusive tendencies, addictions (including to drugs, alcohol or sex) or a history of infidelity, we tended to ignore or minimize them. Somehow, we believed that only someone with defects would accept us, given how unworthy we felt ourselves to be. Those of us with a history of abuse, or of being treated badly, may have responded to the familiarity of these problems. We often saw abuse as part of the price we must pay to be in a relationship. Part of our sexual compulsion enabled us to deny these flaws, glossing over them as the means to an end in securing a desired relationship.

Another type of attraction sometimes included people who were in committed relationships and who were ultimately unavailable. The fact that someone was married or in a relationship only seemed to add to the allure. In addition, the clandestine nature of an affair often fed our desire for risk and excitement. At the same time, it left us free to pursue other sexual activities, and further enabled us to avoid true commitment. Having an affair sometimes provided affirmation, because we reasoned that if the object of our attraction was willing to endanger their relationship for us, then surely that meant we were worth something. In many

instances, these situations could become abusive if the person strung us along, promising commitment, but not delivering in the end.

Sometimes, the object of our desire ignored us and seemed to be unaware of how much they meant to us. That person's unavailability gnawed at us and made us yearn for them all the more. If they did respond to us, and if we did have sex with them, our sense of self-worth immediately soared, but we also became anxious to hold onto what we had gained. We felt unworthy of anyone's affection, love, and respect. At deep levels, we were convinced that we did not deserve these things, and we may have secretly believed the other person either already knew it, or would soon discover it.

We found ourselves to be magnets for unavailable or abusive people, including active addicts. Nevertheless, our need to be in a relationship with another person caused us to overlook any of the character traits in them that made us feel uncomfortable. Sometimes, we found ourselves allowing a person to behave in ways that violated our personal boundaries. We would make allowances or pretend to ignore their behavior, sometimes hoping that by doing so, we were showing our devotion and commitment, thereby strengthening our connection.

However, we often found that no matter how many concessions we made, our relationship interest only became more demanding, dismissive or abusive. Perhaps they behaved unreliably or were physically or emotionally aggressive. Perhaps they became uncaring, distant, or even absent. Our need to hold onto them gave them power over us, which was sometimes a license to mistreat us, both in private and in public. This abuse hurt us, but we became inured to it and somehow felt it was no more than we merited. Ultimately, most of these relationships failed: in large part because their foundations were unstable.

Eventually, we began to resent these unavailable or abusive people for mistreating us. Often, we blamed ourselves for ignoring the warning signs and our lack of boundaries in our desperate quest for a connection. This pattern of seeking out unavailable people, then of being rejected or abused by them, fueled a destructive cycle of shame. Instead of learning from our mistakes, we found ourselves continuing to pursue the same types of people. We didn't know how to let go of the need for this dysfunctional kind of attachment, and we somehow couldn't accept ourselves as worthy of being treated with honesty, kindness, dignity and respect. Nor could we see ourselves as having a right to intimacy. If we did find a "normal" relationship with another, it seldom lasted. We tended to sabotage it when our sexual compulsion resurfaced, convincing us to take the next risk, or find someone better. To an extent, these patterns reflected the dichotomy in us: we were not available to ourselves, and we were not accepting of ourselves. Deep down inside, many of us simply believed we did not deserve happiness.

## **In Recovery**

We follow a dating plan or pursue healthy relationships, and we gradually find ourselves attracted to appropriate people. We seek to have a healthy relationship

with ourselves and our Higher Power so that we can relate healthily to others. We are not afraid to view first dates as experiments that lead to us asking ourselves, "Do we want a second date with this individual?" We find that it often helps to ask ourselves about a potential new friend or romantic partner, "Is this person truly available to me?" "What is this person saying that I don't want to hear?" "What is this person revealing that I don't want to see?" We take time to get to know the person we are developing a relationship with, and pay heed to potential warning signs. We also take stock of our existing relationships. Is there some deep-rooted incompatibility? We work on our self-esteem and self-respect so that the need to take care of ourselves and safeguard our sexual sobriety outweighs any unhealthy attractions, and other considerations. The former allure of having any relationship with any person just to have sex, or to bolster our sense of self, fades, and comes into proper perspective. We see people clearly as they are, our conception no longer damaged by compulsive fantasy. We respect the boundaries of the committed relationships of others, and of people who do not return our interest.

### **Characteristic 11:**

**We feared relationships, but continually searched for them. In a relationship, we feared abandonment and rejection, but out of one, we felt empty and incomplete.**

Relationships, even friendships, triggered the fear of enmeshment or the fear of abandonment in many of us. Relationships of all sorts were anxiety-provoking. This included work relationships and family relationships, as well as romantic relationships. Nevertheless, many of us felt that having a romantic relationship might provide the validation and sense of comfort that had continually eluded us. However, we often had little experience in finding and sustaining healthy bonds with another person. Those experiences we had often involved romantic obsession or perhaps inappropriate relationship partners whose abuse we had tolerated. We settled for scraps of attention, fearing abandonment if we asked for more. We had deep-rooted issues around our shame, self-esteem, and acting out behaviors. We sometimes struggled with the sense that we did not deserve a lasting connection.

We were frequently conflicted: we desperately wanted an intimate relationship that would both meet our need for companionship and assuage our feeling of emptiness, but our fear of rejection was ever-present. Often, childhood trauma made us fear abandonment, and we brought this fear into any relationship we engaged in. We may have felt defective and unlovable, and our fear seemed justified in the face of our experiences. Parental neglect sometimes resulted in both the need for approval and the fear of rejection in us, which shaped how we acted within relationships. Our desperate need for another often drove us to seek out relationships despite our fear of them. We searched relentlessly for another person whose attentions we hoped would fill our feeling of emptiness and resolve our sense of incompleteness.

We believed that being in a relationship with another person would somehow make us feel whole, relieving us of our isolation and self-doubt. Nevertheless, we also had

fears which limited closeness with another person. Fully sharing our lives felt threatening to our inner selves and our need for control. We feared that by revealing our true selves, we might lose any chance of gaining the love and respect we imagined others having, which had only been a dream for us. We still wanted the people to whom we were attracted to cherish us and hold us in high esteem, so we tried desperately to please them, hoping to win their approval.

Often, the need to control and conceal our feelings made us reluctant to cultivate anything but casual relationships. For many of us, habitually searching for sex or retreating into isolation became a way of life. We kept our distance from others, even as we were having sex with them. We often lied about ourselves, trying to hide the details of our lives and possibly even creating a fictional alternate persona. Many of us had minimal experience with being honest and present in a sexual encounter, and we were equally unprepared for a relationship. We were afraid to share any more of ourselves than necessary to get what we wanted from our relationship interests. These conditions made it nearly impossible to maintain any close bonds. Inevitably, these relationships ended, leaving us feeling more desolate and defective than before.

Many of us had a relationship as the ultimate goal of our search for a meaningful expression of love, affection, and our sexuality. However, our issues with trust and low self-esteem interfered with our objective. How would we share our lives with another person while continuing to project our fiction of self-worth? Our need for validation easily led us to allow unsuitable, insincere and even abusive intimate partners into our lives. We wanted a partner to like us, even while we had doubts about whether or not we deserved it. We felt like an impostor, a kind of hollow shell, having nothing but negative qualities at its center. We feared that if the person we were interested in began to share in these misgivings, they would quickly reject us.

We wanted the other person's attention and affection but often found we could not reciprocate, more than superficially. We somehow felt we had very little to bring to the relationship, that we took more than we were able to give. This sense of a lopsided arrangement created a strain. We tried to make the other person happy, but feared they would soon abandon us after becoming tired of our emotional unavailability. Our need to hold onto the relationship sometimes forced us to compromise our values to satisfy our partner's demands. We often felt humiliated by allowing our boundaries to be ignored, but we did not know how to prevent this from happening. We often settled into a pattern where our desire for closeness collided with our fear and anxiety about being exposed for the people we were, and the accompanying risk of losing what we had in the relationship.

We generally avoided commitment since it would magnify our feelings of neediness, fear, and self-loathing. Often, relationships of this kind ended painfully. No matter how deep the involvement had been, we felt its absence like a chasm in our lives, leaving us with a renewed sense of emptiness. We found ourselves no longer half of a couple and, facing that void, we often searched for another relationship. Many of us began the sexually compulsive cycle again. This meant isolating while we

searched for just the right person, with all that entailed. If we were not in a relationship, to us it meant no one wanted us. Feeling empty and incomplete turned out to mean the same as feeling abandoned and rejected. We lacked the self-esteem, openness, and other intimacy skills we needed to support an honest relationship. We were looking for emotional and spiritual wholeness from another human being, rather than working on our spiritual condition and finding healing ourselves.

## **In Recovery**

Our relationship with our Higher Power is our foundation. We learn to look on our Higher Power as our divine matchmaker. We no longer fear rejection. There may be times when we feel that we do not want to be in a relationship. Recovery allows us to accept that reality. We feel okay about ourselves, whether we are in a relationship or not. We work on ourselves, and our lives. We find that the more we grow, heal and become whole, the more fulfilling our life is, and the better our spiritual condition, then the better our relationships with others will be.

## **Characteristic 12:**

**While constantly seeking intimacy with another person, we found that the desperate quality of our need made true intimacy with anyone impossible, and we often developed unhealthy dependency relationships that eventually became unbearable.**

In the same way that we continually searched for relationships, we were drawn to and craved intimacy. The quest for intimacy was an integral and pervasive part of our constant and compulsive search for sex, romance and relationships. In our confusion and inability to distinguish among sex, love and affection, we did not recognize this. Many of us also found that our need for validation was a driving force in our lives. We had become obsessed with finding another person who might "complete" us, or cure what ailed us by providing their approval. Our feelings of inadequacy tormented us: we felt we were undeserving of real love or affection. Our fantasies about ourselves and others were at odds with our reality but provided some measure of comfort. We found that, if revealing ourselves to another person was required for "intimacy," it seemed beyond our reach. However, we continued to crave intimacy, with its promised possibility of wholeness, as something to relieve the emptiness at the core of our being.

In seeking to fill this void, we pursued compulsive sex and unhealthy relationships. We repeatedly sought out a healthy relationship but we lacked the emotional courage to be open about ourselves. We had long-standing issues of low self-esteem and a history of sexual compulsion that we feared to disclose. There was always the unremitting need to be wanted, appreciated, and valued that governed our interactions with the other person. This situation created a paradox – we wanted to be loved unconditionally, almost like a child, but respected on our merits as an adult partner. Even as we went about this, we knew that we were deceiving

ourselves. As a fallback, we often hoped that we could trade sex for a sense of closeness that would make up for what we found ourselves lacking emotionally.

We had little understanding of what it would take to sustain a relationship based on honest and open communication, affectionate closeness, and seeing our partner as a real person, rather than a fantasy. Our sexual relationships rarely developed emotional intimacy, which would require honesty, acceptance, respect, and openness. No matter how much we wanted to be close to another person, our defenses made us wary and withholding. In a relationship, the obsessive intensity and demands we brought to it were often suffocating.

For some of us, our insecurities kept us from revealing things about our lives that we were ashamed of, including aspects of our sexual desires and past sexual experiences. To protect ourselves from exposure, we carefully controlled information within any relationship, only giving of ourselves what we felt safe in revealing. Often, we were afraid our partners would lose interest in us if we didn't satisfy their needs, sexually and emotionally. Fearing their disapproval often made us suppress our desires and feelings, which in turn led to resentments and distrust.

Our compulsive need to please others often drove us to do things we did not want to in order to stay in a relationship. Sometimes this involved financial and domestic arrangements we might otherwise have rejected. We would make concessions to various requests that were not consistent with our values but which we were willing to overlook for the sake of maintaining the appearance of closeness. Often, we felt so pressured by our need for "belonging" that we sacrificed our principles just to maintain the appearance of it.

Such pressures made us want to cut our dependency ties, but our fears held us back. We felt we had too much to lose by ending the relationship. We were dependent upon the other person. The prospect of losing our domestic arrangements, rupturing our finances, and giving up the physical connection kept us trapped. We could not stand the prospect of another failed relationship, no matter how dysfunctional. If we were the financial provider, we feared we would bear the blame for our partner's hardship. Our already low self-esteem fed our anxieties about appearing insensitive, selfish, and ungrateful.

Our dependency began to consume us: we felt trapped, but were afraid to let go of what little we had. Our dependence in part stemmed from our lack of ability to take care of ourselves. We needed the other person to keep our emptiness at bay. However, the price we paid for this was an escalating demand to perform our dependency role in the relationship. The strains caused by these conflicts made any semblance of intimacy unsustainable. At heart, we were terrified to be who we really were, including sexually, and to share that with others. Instead, we sought to merge with, or subordinate ourselves to, another human being, using sex as the gateway to dependent relationships.

## **In Recovery**

We learn to take care of ourselves and to create genuine intimacy in relationships that are interdependent, and therefore sustainable over the long term. We get to experience healthy and fulfilling love. We work on our intimacy and abandonment issues, seeking to be an independent, integrated person who is looking for healthy intimacy as part of a healthy relationship with a similar person. We consciously seek to let go of old dynamics, including codependency, and take appropriate action to accomplish this. We have faith that, with our Higher Power's help and working the Program, following the example of others, we can transform our life of desperation and clinging need into one of hope, fulfillment and happiness, one day at a time.

### **Characteristic 13:**

**Even when we got the love of another person, it never seemed enough, and we were unable to stop lusting after others.**

The nature of addiction is never to be satisfied, but always to want more, no matter the cost. Our sexual compulsions, obsessive fantasies, secrecy, and low self-esteem had many consequences in our everyday lives. One of the most damaging was the reinforcement of the feeling that we were unlovable. Some of us decided to pursue intimate relationships because they seemed to offer more lasting relief from the pain we experienced from feeling inadequate, flawed, and unworthy. However, believing that no one would or could love us only increased our shame, isolation, and hopelessness. We used our compulsive behaviors as a means of getting validation and sexual gratification, but still could not escape our feelings of emptiness and unworthiness. Emotional connections, including love, were subordinate to the lust and relentless pursuit of sex that the compulsion generated. For most of us, the ability to love and accept love in return seemed entirely removed from our well-worn habit of objectifying and using people as part of our sexual compulsivity.

Despite our behaviors, there were times when someone we were interested in responded lovingly to us. Perhaps the person fell in love with the carefully-crafted image we had worked so hard to project. In other cases, they may have seen through our pain and recognized our vulnerability. They found qualities in us that we were unaware we had. Sometimes this came as a surprise since many of us had convinced ourselves that we had no intrinsic worth. We only needed to examine our past histories of sexual compulsion to find evidence of how flawed we were. Some of us were uncomfortable with the expressions of affection, caring, and love that came our way since we believed that anyone who felt these things for us must somehow be defective.

Some of us were terrified at the prospect of real closeness and began to pull away when we felt vulnerable, sometimes sabotaging the intimacy we had with sex outside the relationship. Our need for intimacy triggered sexual feelings, and our

desire for sex, love, or affection was insatiable. Some of us expected that having attained the love of another, we would be free of our emptiness and finally become whole. When this failed to happen, we were disillusioned and looked for something or someone to blame. Whether we blamed ourselves or our partners, we did everything we could to extricate ourselves from the relationship that was no longer happening on our terms, or under our control.

Our need for control of any relationship conflicted with the equal exchange that most intimate relationships require. We craved closeness but also feared the possible exposure of our lies and compulsive behaviors. In a committed relationship, some of us found, to our frustration, that we no longer desired our partner sexually. Intimacy caused anxiety, which often led us to act out with others to escape our feelings. Many of us had limited boundaries, or none at all, so as we sought validation from others, we were unable to maintain appropriate limits in our relationships. We were uncomfortable in ourselves, spiritually and emotionally empty, and believed that sex with yet another person might fill the void within us. The idea that we had to love and accept ourselves first before truly bonding with someone else had never occurred to us.

Many of us continued to lust after and fantasize about others, even when we were in a committed relationship. Sometimes we did this under the noses of our partners. We divided our attention between the person we were with and our potential next sex partner. Many of us continued to have sex with others, even when doing so was clearly inappropriate and hurtful, sometimes with friends or people known to our partner. We became proficient in deceiving ourselves and others. We felt entitled to have the sex we wanted, even as we tried to achieve the appearance of intimacy with our partner. Sometimes our indiscretions or infidelities with others cost us our relationships. We often failed to recognize that in trying to have everything, we ultimately had nothing.

For many of us, there was never enough. No amount of sex or validation, not even the love of another, could relieve our pain and emptiness. Yet we carried on with our sexual compulsion, returning to familiar patterns that had worked for us in the past. No matter which way we turned, we eventually found ourselves seeking our next sexual or romantic "fix," knowing almost from the start that it would never satisfy our compulsive needs. In this process, some of us took steps to end our current relationship, leaving us free to pursue the greener grass that we always hoped would be on the other side of the fence. These breakups were painful, but we persuaded ourselves that they were necessary in order to move on with our lives. However, with every relationship we discarded, some portion of shame remained, adding to our feelings of unworthiness, emptiness, and hopelessness.

## **In Recovery**

We build a strong relationship with our Higher Power, filling the hole in our soul. We lose our sense of inadequacy, making it easier to have boundaries. We learn to value others, and full relationships including love. We are able to commit, and accept that any relationship has its ups and downs, ebbs and flows. We learn to

appreciate and be satisfied with what we have, and recognize if it is our addiction that is creating dissatisfaction. We let go of “the disease of more.” We abandon sexual intrigue, and inappropriate flirtatious or seductive behavior. We learn to recognize the siren call of the compulsion for what it is: a false promise leading only to more of the same heartache that brought us to recovery in the first place.

#### **Characteristic 14:**

#### **Trying to conceal our dependency demands, we grew more isolated from ourselves, from God, and from the very people we longed to be close to.**

Many of us are from backgrounds where fusion, enmeshment and codependency were present in our families of origin. Whatever the origin, we became dependent rather than independent individuals, emotionally at least. We carried these dependency traits into our adult lives and relationships. As sexual compulsives, our pressing need for validation also made us dependent on others for a temporary feeling of self-esteem. This drove many of us into a familiar way of life which was habitual but seldom satisfying. We became adept at concealing our sexual activities from others. Hiding our behaviors and lying about them became second nature to most of us. We felt the need to conceal anything we thought might cause us embarrassment or shame. Most of all, we feared that if others saw our character defects, it would lead to humiliation and rejection.

Many of us went to great lengths to conceal our sexual behaviors, sometimes even disguising our daily activities. We tried to cover our tracks, hiding our pursuits from partners, family, friends, and work colleagues. Some of us created false personas, or fabricated identities, trying to convince others that we were more than we were, mysterious and fascinating. Perhaps we became social butterflies seeking to be the person everyone wanted to know. We hid behind this curtain, determined to make sure that nobody knew who we truly were. We found ourselves avoiding difficult situations instead of negotiating to get our needs met. We were loners but pretended not to be. These coping mechanisms developed gradually in support of our sexual compulsion. We failed to understand that concealing our true nature from others would isolate us from ourselves.

Many of us compartmentalized our lives in the search for sex, concealing our deficiencies and compulsive demands. Projecting a false image, and the maintenance required to sustain it, increased our separation from ourselves and others. We often walled off our behaviors in an attempt to disguise them, showing one side of ourselves to the world while veiling our secret life. We spent more time and energy searching for fleeting excitement by acting out sexually. Those sexual moments, however brief, provided temporary validation that soon disappeared after the sex was over.

We often felt shame about our compulsive behaviors, but were powerless to stop them. We had no innate skills to help us resolve this conflict. We chose to hide

things from ourselves and the notion of taking a personal inventory, thereby getting to grips with our reality, was too painful to contemplate. Yet, we lived in fear that something or someone would expose us.

Our search for sexual connection and affirmation often became more of a ritual and less of a choice. As long as friends and family were not aware of what we were doing, we felt we could continue our deception and somehow manage our lives. We may have pushed other people away, whether it was a long-time friend, parent, or partner. Our increasing and unceasing efforts to find connection solely through sex, our continuing inability to form healthy relationships, or our ever-growing avoidance of sex and true companionship, left us more and more disconnected, isolated and alone.

Our unreliability and unavailability eventually led to the breakdown of our friendships and ties to our community. The demands of friendship got in the way of our having sex whenever we wanted. Seeking out sex was second nature to us, and we became less interested in non-sexual relationships. The people, places, and things that once brought us joy, no longer did. Our isolation continued to increase, separating us from family and friends. Any time and availability we may have had for God, a Higher Power or our spirituality diminished as we grew more and more self-absorbed. Many of us instinctively knew that our acting out was taking us further away from any spiritual connection. We may have told ourselves we were too far gone, and we didn't believe anyone could help us, not even a Higher Power. Our obsessive attempts to apply a sensual cure to a spiritual disease left us separated from God, and in dire spiritual condition.

Meeting the demands of our compulsion and the fear of being exposed as a fraud kept us trapped in a repetitive cycle of acting out. No matter how much sex we had, we felt a growing emptiness – a “hole in the soul.” Most of us failed to recognize that we had few boundaries regarding our sexual activities. This lack of boundaries had created barriers that separated us from family, friends, and community. In short, we had orchestrated our own abandonment. We were avoidant personalities, unwilling to address our problems, even though we disliked their symptoms and could foresee their consequences. As long as we were acting out and lying to just about everyone in our lives, we would never attain the connection, love, and acceptance we so desperately needed.

## **In Recovery**

Our needs are no longer so insistent as we develop fuller relationships with our Higher Power and our fellows. We take responsibility for ourselves and our lives. We become present in our lives and available to others. We come to value our independence as individuals, even when in a relationship with another. We repair our relationships with ourselves, our Higher Power and those close to us. We resume or develop healthy hobbies, pastimes and activities. We restore or improve our work, home and social lives. We find healthy and wholesome connection. We live with integrity and project an honest image of ourselves, with sex as but one element of our existence, not its center.

## Conclusion

The Characteristics Most of Us Seem to Have in Common show us the nature of sexual compulsion, and remind us of where we are in our recovery, or of where we have been in our compulsion. They contribute to our self-awareness and understanding of our fellow members of Sexual Compulsives Anonymous. This insight helps us to develop humility and compassion, and enables each of us to find a personal path to sexual sobriety and healthy sexuality. The Characteristics invite us to do a thorough, honest and soul-searching review for the presence and effect of each one of them in our lives. In reading and reflecting on them, it is important to remember that The Characteristics Most of Us Seem to Have in Common are a general description, and not a form of criticism, or an inescapable destiny. They are both a map **of** our problems, and a map **out of** our problems. Recovery is a journey, and working on ourselves takes time, patience, perseverance, understanding and compassion for ourselves. We are not alone on the journey. Others who are with us and further along the road can support and guide us as we experience the miracle of recovery, and become the very different people we assuredly can be.

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