

# Treating Females with Sexual Addictions

Dr. Mark Bird, LMFT-S and  
Laney Knowlton, LMFT Associate

## What is Addiction?

An escalating pattern of out of control behavior over time (6 months or longer) that continues despite negative consequences and significantly affects your life

## What is Sexual Addiction?

A pattern of out of control behaviors involving sexual arousal or sexual behaviors, which has existed for at least six months, negatively impacts your life, and continues despite negative consequences

## Sexual Addiction is NOT . . .

- Homosexuality
- Child molestation/sexual interest in children
- Being sexually active
- Enjoying sex
- Experimenting with different positions/behaviors with your partner that do not put either of you at risk of being hurt, physically or emotionally
- Using sex toys
- Cross-dressing
- Fetishes

The opposite of addiction is . . .  
**CONNECTION**

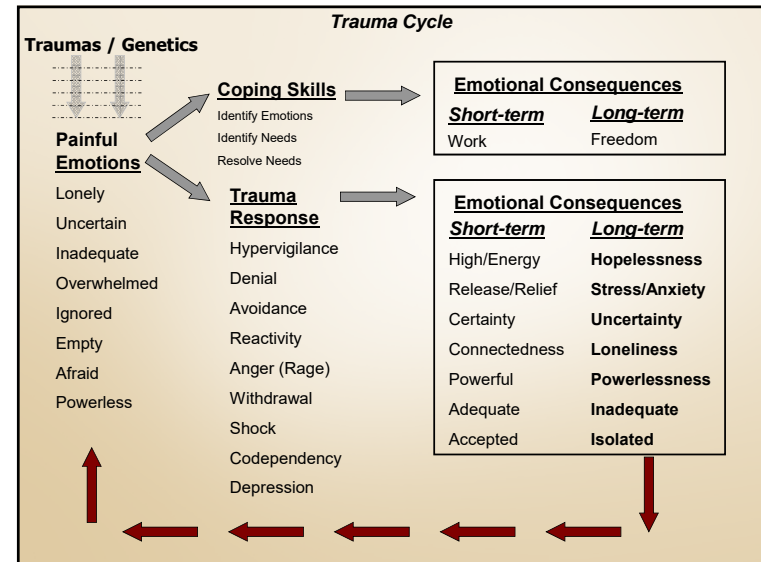
Treating  
Females with  
**Connective  
Disorders**

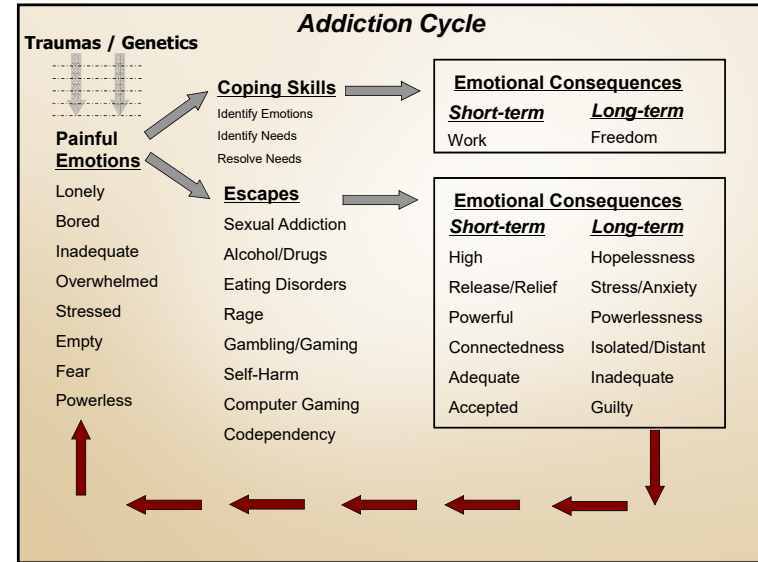
**What is a Connective Disorder?**

An inability to form healthy connections with other people.

Individuals with connective disorders are unable to foster and maintain relationships in which appropriate levels of connection are possible.

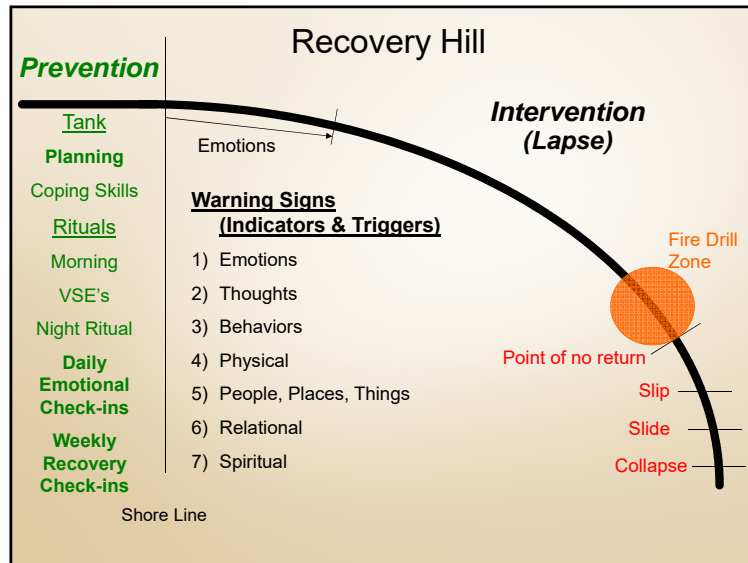
Unable to form connections, they seek connection in unhealthy ways.





## Treating Connective Disorders

- Individual Counseling (for both partners, but with different therapists)
- Couples Counseling (Cotherapy)
- Group Counseling (both individually and as a couple)



## Addicts

### Female

- Emotionally based
- Usually starts at puberty
- Significant break (often 10+ years) at time of marriage
- Addictive behaviors often appear to fill desires for natural relational connection (looking for support)
- Exposure to sex often through sexual abuse
- More likely to be taken advantage of by mental health professionals

### Male

- Physically based
- Usually starts at puberty
- Short break (6 months-1 year), if any, from addictive behaviors at time of marriage
- Addictive behaviors often fill desires beyond natural relational interactions (looking for a high)
- Exposure to sex often through pornography
- More likely to take advantage of mental health professionals

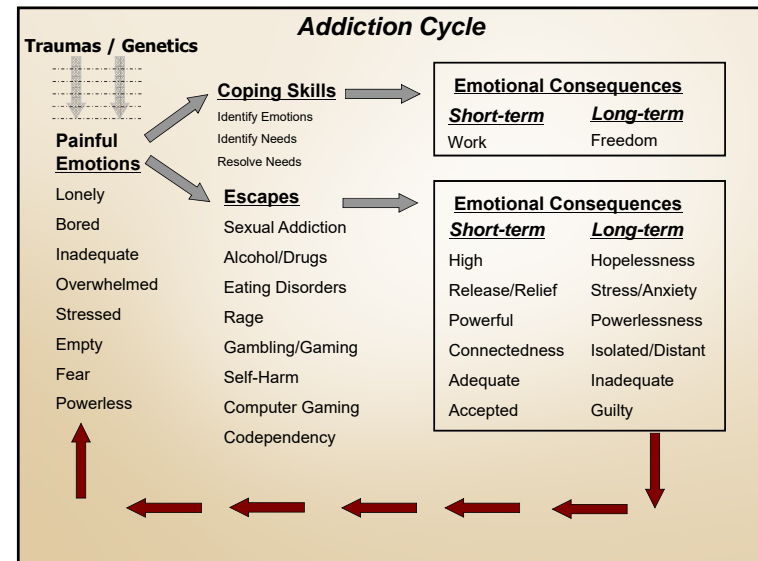
## Addicts (cont.)

### Female

- Often viewed by society as unnatural female responses
- Therapy usually driven by fear of being alone (viewed as long-term loss of self)
- Tends to vacillate between victim and rescuer roles
- More likely to have changes in sexual orientation as a symptom of their addiction
- Sex is the means to the end

### Male

- Often viewed by society as natural male responses
- Therapy usually driven by fear of divorce (viewed as failure, abandonment)
- Tends to vacillate between victim and persecutor roles
- Less likely to have changes in sexual orientation as a symptom of their addiction
- Sex is the end



## Specific Challenges for Female Addicts

- Significantly higher chance of abuse from partner
- Confusion around differentiating between abuse and normal relational interaction
- Confusion around differentiating between abuse towards them and acting out behaviors
- Strong belief in their ability to be attractive, combined with low self-esteem

## Specific Challenges for Female Addicts

- Often trapped in relationship due to circumstances (financial, educational, maternal)
- Higher chance of co-occurring eating disorder (50-75%)
- More to likely be married to an addict
- Sexualizes emotions (stress, loneliness, fear)
- Sexualizes any feeling of connection

## Sexual Addictions

"Of course they wanted to have sex with me. I can have any female in the company that I want. I am a VP."

"I seem to be utterly unable to be completely faithful."

"I sat down to watch porn for 30 minutes and realized hours later that it was 4am and I had completely missed dinner and had to be at work in 3 hours."

"I love my wife, but the urges come and I can't seem to stop having sex with prostitutes. I know that she might leave me if I act out again, but I don't know how to stop."

"The fact that they don't even know that I'm watching them turns me on as much as seeing what they are doing."

"I couldn't even make it through the 20 minute drive. I had to pull over and masturbate. I didn't even want to, but I couldn't stop myself."

"I'd call women listed on Craigslist and make them want to set up a meeting with me. I never showed up for any of the meetings. Just setting them up was my high."

## Love Addictions

"I just want to know I'm attractive. It's not like I do anything with them."

"I can't stand the thought of never having another 'first kiss'."

"He is everything I've ever wanted; everything I've ever looked for. I know now why none of my other relationships worked out."

"I just want to run. I know this is what I always do when things get bad, but I don't see any point in staying."

"She is trapped in a horrible relationship. She's not strong enough to get out on her own. I know I can save her."

"If he ever finds out who I really am, he'll leave, so I need to keep my backups ready just in case."

## Love Addictions (cont.)

"I know my husband loves me, but my affair partner made me feel beautiful and wanted. He'll always remember me that way."

"No one is being hurt. I'm not actually doing anything wrong. It's not a real affair because I've never touched her."

"If only I was thin enough, then I would be good enough and people would love me."

"I know he's meant to be with me. He really loves me, not her, and I can tell he knows that when he looks at me."

"I had sex with him again. I know I wasn't supposed to, but I just felt so alone."

"It makes me sick to even think about having sex or even having a boyfriend. I don't see how people could like sex."

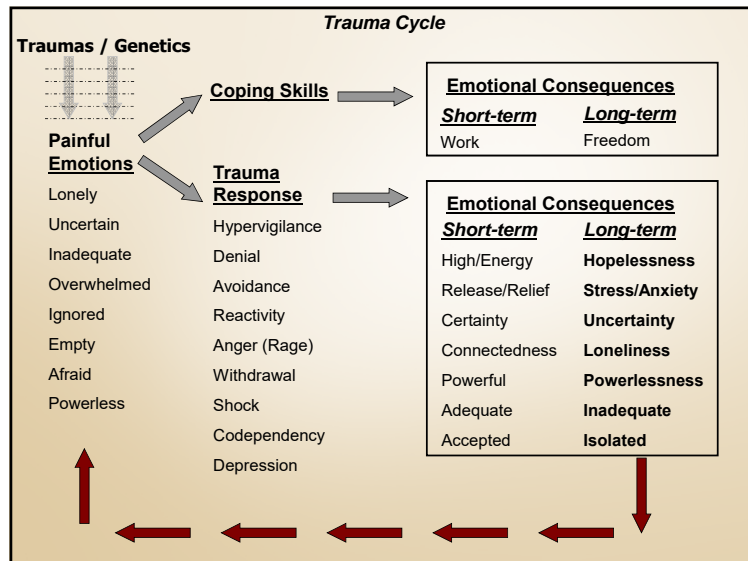
## Partners

### Male

- More likely to end relationship at time of disclosure
- Limited willingness to attend or participate in therapy
- Strongest reaction to physical acts of betrayal (sense of ownership)
- Trauma response more likely to be expressed physically
- Takes much longer to forgive; doesn't trust enough
- Tends to vacillate between victim and persecutor roles

### Female

- More likely to stay in relationship at time of disclosure
- Often the driving force behind therapy
- Strongest reaction to emotional acts of betrayal
- Trauma response more likely to be expressed emotionally
- Forgives more easily; trusts too much
- Tends to vacillate between victim and rescuer roles



## Specific Challenges for Male Partners

- Two general types – "I'm done!" and "Typical partner response" (trapped in trauma responses, inability to advocate for self)
- Lack of support available
- Social mores around males expressing emotion

## Therapeutic Differences

- Relationships with female addicts and male partners tend to be more likely to have abusive behaviors by the partner that necessitate amends
- Female addicts tend to have stronger triggers around safety – past traumas are often triggered by male therapists

“One of the most amazing things I’ve learned about myself is that I’m not trash – there’s something important inside of me. I’ve been like this my whole life, but just called it rebellion, then just dating experiences, then I just felt bad about the thoughts I had, like I was a bad person for thinking them. Once I heard there was a title to my experiences and a category that I actually fit in and symptoms that I actually had, it made me feel like I was not a bad or rebellious person with twisted sexual thoughts. I finally knew there was something I could work on to be healthier and happier. And that I could finally learn what a healthy connections felt like and how to work on having them. I finally had some value and I wasn’t just a twisted mess of impure thoughts and actions.”

“I actually believe now that there is something to be seen and heard from me. I am not just my body and my choices. I’m worth fighting for and there is someone who will fight for me with me.”