

This article was contributed by Dr Kit S. Ng and published in Women's Weekly for the September 2008 issue.

"I AM ADDICTED TO SEX"

It sounds like a joke, but a constant screaming desire for sex can lead to humiliation, not highs. Picture this: "One time, I put my arms around my lover's legs and begged him to have sex. But he walked to the door, dragging me along the floor with him. He left me there, crying.

This is the story of Giselle*, 29, a Singaporean executive in a legal firm – one of a growing number of sex addicts in Singapore. She explains why her secret became unbearable – and how she's breaking free.

"I craved sex all the time"

"When I can't have sex, I feel like curling up and crying. I crave for it every waking moment. I fantasise about it. I dream up scenarios where I'm enjoying mind-blowing sex. In fact, one of my biggest fears is that I will die without knowing what lung-shattering, explosive sex is. I'm obsessed with finding it."

For Giselle, a 29-year-old executive in a law firm, describing her sexual needs is not dirty talk – it's part of her therapy for recovering from sex addiction. "There are still times when I feel like this. Before I went for therapy a year ago, my need to have sex many times a day almost gave me a nervous breakdown."

Good-looking and smart, her addiction was creating problems between her and her fiancé, sales manager Ryan, 30. "When I first started going out with Ryan, he was thrilled that I wanted sex all the time. Every moment we spent together was exhilarating and fun.

"Ryan liked to be in control in bed. Like any other normal guy, he had his fantasies too. In the beginning, he was very turned on when I was the aggressive one. He got a big ego boost when I wanted him so desperately."

"But as the months passed, he went from loving and attentive to not even wanting to touch or see me."

During one episode, Giselle said she was so sad and wanted to have sex so badly, she put her arms around Ryan's legs and begged him to have sex with her. "He actually walked to the door, dragging me along the floor with him. He left me there, crying. I'd never felt so pathetic in my life."

That was a wake-up call for Giselle. She wanted to regain her self-esteem, so she tried looking up "sex addiction" on the Internet – and was surprised to find that she wasn't alone in Singapore.

"I found out that sex addiction is very real – it's not an imagined or dirty secret. Many locals even described their feelings and need for sex in a way that I could definitely relate to."

She then gathered enough courage to take an online test at the website of the Community Addictions Management Programme (www.camp.org.sg/sexTests.cfm), which is funded by Singapore's Ministry of Health. The test confirmed she was a sex addict. Shocked, yet comforted in a way by the realisation, Giselle called Ryan and poured out her tears. She told him she wanted to change and asked him to help her. "Ryan appreciated my honesty. He was supportive and signed up for the Institute of Mental Health's Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA) treatment with me."

Today, Giselle attends SLAA's private support group twice a week. She has tossed out all her sex toys and even cancelled her Internet connection at home so she won't be tempted to indulge in sexual thoughts. She is reading books on how to cope with sex addiction, and has taken up yoga and meditation.

"The support group encourages us to find ways to re-focus our energies and thoughts to transform our body, mind and spirit. The experiences, strengths and hopes of other people in my support group have given me many tips, such as taking up yoga, which has provided me with an alternative way to use my body to express and calm myself. I attend the women-only meetings because I can open up more.

"Before, I chose to believe that my problem was 'love addiction' and not 'sex addiction', because I didn't want to be associated with the negative connotations. But I've learnt that my addiction was as compulsive and obsessive as any other. The group's 12-step programme has given me practical solutions, like teaching me to consciously take stock of my actions and admitting that I feel powerless. It has also taught me to integrate healthy sexual behaviour into my life."

A Real Addiction?

- Statistics show that three to six per cent of people may be addicted to sex. Around 20 per cent are women.
- It's likely the Internet, with its vast range of sexual services and porn, increased sex addiction.
- Experts say sex addiction is a compulsion that can cause great distress, so it should be classified in the same way as alcoholism or eating disorders.

Adds psychologist Dr Kit S. Ng, "Some sex addicts live in denial, emotionally distancing themselves from others. They are prone to secrecy, with phone calls and SMSes done in clandestine environments; obsessive sexual thoughts; and a compulsion to indulge in sexually explicit magazines, porn and objects of pleasure. It begins to affect work and relationships with friends and family. Depression, anxiety related to sex, marital problems and isolation are common effects."

6 Signs of Trouble

1. Feeling your sexual behaviour is out of control.
2. Feeling unable to stop your behaviour, despite knowing that the consequences could be bad.
3. Using sex and sexual fantasies as a way of coping with, or blocking, difficult feelings or situations.
4. Needing more and more (and wilder) sexual activity to feel the same high.
5. Experiencing extreme mood swings around sex.

6. Spending an increasing amount of time planning or having sex, or regretting and recovering from sexual activities.

“He watched porn for hours”

Shanti, a 34-year-old housewife, is married to a recovering sex addict. During her five-year marriage, she has had fierce fights with her husband over his addiction.

“He used to spend night after night in front of the computer, looking at porn for three to four hours at a stretch. He also said he wanted sex five to six times a week at the very least, no matter how I felt. Luckily, when I finally told him how awful I felt about his constant demands, he was willing to see a sex therapist. Because he hasn’t been physically promiscuous, the therapist diagnosed him with mental sex addiction.”

That was a year ago. Since then, the therapist has helped Shanti learn more about sex addiction so she can understand her husband’s mental struggles. “Before, my husband treated me like an object, using me when he felt the need. I had problems with my self-image, I felt lonely and I couldn’t trust him. These feelings turned inward into physical ailments – I had migraines and suffered from insomnia.

“I’ve learnt sex addiction is like any other addiction; there is no overnight cure. Like taking drugs, you need a lot of determination and support to overcome it.”

“My husband and I now have a healthy sex life. I’m not afraid to be intimate with him anymore, and when we have sex two to three times a week, we both feel good.”

*Names changed to protect privacy.

Where To Get Help

The Institute of Mental Health runs a Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous treatment programme (Tel: 6732 6837), which includes support group meetings twice weekly. Dr Kit S. Ng’s Center for Psychology (www.center4psy.com) runs a specialised treatment programme for sex addicts that includes weekly group therapy, couple therapy, individual therapy as well as after-care groups.

Dr Ng says, “Recovering from sex addiction is a long and difficult battle. Statistics show that 60 per cent will continue to struggle with their addiction for life. It’s like treating a cancer patient – once he or she is in remission, the patient has to have follow-up checks for a long period to ensure he or she doesn’t suffer a relapse.”