Within the addictive system, sexual experience becomes the reason for being—the primary relationship for the addict. For the addict, the sexual experience is the source of nurturing, focus of energy, and origin of excitement. It is the remedy for pain and anxiety, the reward for success, and the means for maintaining emotional balance. Outsiders, especially those who care about the addict, witness the unmanageability and maybe even the behavior. They see the addict's personal loss, the self-degradation, and the abandoned hope and values. It would seem so simple to just stop—even for a while. For the exhibitionist, for example, who may spend up to seven hours a day cruising and another four thinking about it, the task is not so easy. The addiction is truly an altered state of consciousness in which "normal" sexual behavior pales by comparison in terms of excitement and relief from troubles.

In the addict's world, there is an on-going tension between a person's normal self and the addicted self. A Jekyll/Hyde struggle emerges. The addictive system is so compelling that to stop would be like death. Yet, as the system continues, the person's values, priorities, and loved ones are attacked. Sometimes, only a major crisis can restore perspective. Such was the case of Carrie.

Carrie was a music teacher. She was known for boundless energy and creativity in music. She served four elementary schools, carrying heavy equipment from school to school in her old red Volkswagen bus. The kids loved her and she loved them. Colleagues admired her skills. Parents were grateful and attended her concerts in masses.

Carrie had another life as well. Her singing was true and compelling. She received regular engagements at local night spots. She dreamed of being a star. Her singing career, however, never got beyond the local piano bar circuit. No matter how hard she tried, her professional singing career
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was stymied. As she approached the age of thirty, her disappointment grew into panic that her dream might not happen.

Carrie's sexual addiction started to flourish at the point when she began panicking about her career. In the beginning there were occasional one night stands with hotel customers in bars in which she sang. Then it became every night she worked. The ritual started with her looking over the patrons, selecting the most interesting. Animated conversations during the breaks followed. After finishing, she would go to his room and have sex. Leaving at three or four in the morning, she would return home for a few hours of sleep before school started.

She did not like what she was doing. In the morning, looking at the trusting faces of the children, she would feel the profound incongruity of where she had been but a few hours before. Also, her teaching was slipping as the addiction progressed, though no one really noticed but her. The children were still excited and everyone she worked with was convinced she was great. Still, she knew. She even discovered that being at four different schools made it easier for her to cover when she overslept. She had simply “stopped at one of the other schools.”

Carrie also had ceased dating and started singing on weekends. Since she lived alone, her only human contacts were the children and her piano bar customers. What she really wanted was a husband and a family. As her addiction progressed, she began to believe no man would want to be with her if he knew about her life.

The consequence which brought Carrie help was an unexpected heart attack at the age of thirty-three. The short nights had taken their toll. Finally, sitting in a hospital bed, Carrie told her story to a woman chaplain. Amidst deep sobs, she talked of her loneliness and her love of the chil-
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dren. Through her conversations with the chaplain, Carrie acknowledged that the number of men she had slept with in a three-year period was in the hundreds. It was a miracle she had not contracted venereal disease or been injured. The damage to her self-image was penetrating enough.

Carrie, like all sexual addicts, lived in two worlds. One was a world of piano bars, musty hotel rooms, and nameless faces. The other had music, laughter, and faces of children and colleagues — whose names she knew. The co-existence of the two worlds continued until Carrie’s body refused to live up to the strain.

Other Addictions and Emotional Illness

One other aspect of the addictive system is that the belief system and delusional thought patterns may support more than one addiction. Overeating, for example, is a way to minimize pain. The sexual addicts who become overweight add shame concerning their body image to their repertoire of pain. The two addictions start to reinforce each other. When the addicts believe that people are not attracted to them, their sexual addiction is partially rooted in the fear of rejection. Then they eat compulsively to kill the pain due to the fear of rejection, and as a result put on weight. The added weight, by their standards, makes them even less desirable. Also, one way to avoid the depression after sexually binging is to binge again—with food. The two processes become interdependent. Addicts who have both addictions report that at the height of their sexual addiction, they had their greatest weight problem.

All types of compulsive behavior may be woven into the scenario of sexual addiction. Shoplifting, gambling, spending are frequent counterparts. Physical violence is a way to
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Although Hefner was approaching forty-five, and had been involved with hundreds of photogenic women since starting his magazine, he enjoyed female companionship now more than ever; and perhaps more significant, considering all that Hefner had seen and done in recent years, was the fact that each occasion with a new woman was for him a novel experience. It was as if he was always watching for the first time a woman undress, rediscovering with delight the beauty of the female body, breathlessly expectant as panties were removed and smooth buttocks were exposed—and he never tired of the consummate act. He was a sex junkie with an insatiable habit.

Gay Talese
Thy Neighbor’s Wife

Del was a lawyer. Brilliant, charming, and witty. He had a special breakthrough in his career when he was appointed as one of the governor’s special aides. His wife and three children were proud of his accomplishments. However, Del’s public visibility was creating a problem because he was also a sexual addict. His double life included prostitution, porno bookstores, and affairs.

Del would initiate relationships with women, feeling that he was “in love.” After the initial sexual contact, he would desperately wish to be free. These relationships became characterized by his ambivalence. He wanted to be sexual, but
he did not want the relationship. Yet he couldn't say no clearly without fear of hurting the women's feelings, so he never quite broke off the relationships. Instead he hoped their frustration would force them to give up. The result was that he had a series of relationships at the same time in various stages of initiation and frustration.

There was not only the juggling act of keeping his relationships straight. Some of these women were vital to him professionally. He exploited relationships to receive cooperation. His problem was that the women would believe that he cared for them. The professional complications were extreme. One time, he was involved with a colleague and her secretary at the same time. The secretary went in to talk to her boss about this "problem" she had. Del had to face two very angry women.

His other behaviors were also problems. In porno shops, he was sexual with a number of men in the movie booths. Worse, the shops he frequented were near the capitol where he was liable to be recognized. He vowed to stop when, sitting in a meeting in the attorney general's office, a plan was described for a raid on a local porno shop—the one he had patronized two days before. But he did not stop.

Neither were his visits to massage parlors without peril. One night his masseuse was a young girl quite high on some form of drug. Del decided to have his massage anyway, including a "hand job." When she masturbated him, she hurt his penis. Del was too shameful to complain or even to tell anybody. When he got home, he was so upset, he masturbated—despite his penis being sore.

Late one evening, Del pulled up next to a young woman at a stoplight. He had always had the fantasy of picking up a woman on a street. He looked at her and she smiled at him. Del became very excited. They drove side by side for several blocks. She returned his stares at each stop sign. Soon she
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pulled ahead of him, turned off the road, and pulled to a stop. He followed and pulled up behind her. She waved towards him and pulled out again. Del thought she wanted him to follow.

Del’s mind raced ahead to where she could be leading him. She drove in the direction of a well-known local restaurant with a popular late night bar. Convinced that was where they were headed, he speculated that after a drink, they might end up at her apartment. His mind filled with fantasies, he pulled up behind her when she stopped. As he was opening his door, she leaped out of her car and dashed into the building. Surprised, he looked up to see that he was not in front of the restaurant. Rather, she had stopped at the police station three blocks away.

Horrified, Del got back in his car and raced home. While driving, he was in shock at how out of touch with reality he was. She had not been encouraging him to follow her, but was in fact frightened. He, on the other hand, was so caught up in his fantasy, he failed to notice that she was parking at a police station.

He felt a flood of remorse for subjecting the woman to a frightening ordeal. Also, he was terrified that she would accuse him of attempted rape and that he would be arrested. When Del arrived home at 1:30 a.m., he was so scared that he sat and prayed. At 2:00, there was a sound of a siren in the distance. He promised God that he would change. He fantasized about what it would do to his wife and kids. Truly, it was the most desperate moment of his life. Finally, he went to bed.

When he awoke in the morning, he felt tremendous relief. He knew he was not to be picked up. He went to work and put enormous energy in his job that day. At the end of the day, he felt the need of a reward. He stopped at a massage parlor.
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Del was a man who valued the law. He also prided himself on his honesty with people—a fact he often parlayed into seduction. His children and wife were central to his life. He had worked hard in his career. His addiction, however, violated his own values and the law, as well as jeopardized his career and family. His story—of which just a few pieces are related here—is one of constant predicaments. Del’s addictive behavior put him in situations in which he was vulnerable to tremendous consequences. His degradation was only exceeded by the violation of his own principles. Because of Del’s sexual addiction, his fantasy became more real than the nightmare he created.

What Is Sexual Addiction?

A way to understand sexual addicts like Del is to compare them with other types of addicts. A common definition of alcoholism or drug dependency is that a person has a pathological relationship with a mood-altering chemical. The alcoholic’s relationship with alcohol becomes more important than family, friends, and work. The relationship progresses to the point where alcohol is necessary to feel normal. To feel “normal” for the alcoholic is also to feel isolated and lonely since the primary relationship he depends upon to feel adequate is a chemical, not other people.

The sexual addiction is parallel. The addict substitutes a sick relationship to an event or process for a healthy relationship with others. The addict’s relationship with a mood-altering “experience” becomes central to his life. Del, for example, routinely jeopardized all that he loved. His vows to quit were lost against the power of his addiction. The only thing which exceeded his pain was his loneliness.