

Sexual Abstinence Period

These concepts about being accountable to a sponsor are tools to help you maintain sobriety. Hopefully, by this point in your progression through this *L.I.F.E. Guide*, you've achieved some length of sobriety from inappropriate sexual behaviors.

Obviously, sexual sobriety begins when you stop acting out sexually. At first glance, this "sobriety" definition seems straightforward. We addicts, though, tend to justify whatever it is we want to do, and we prefer to operate within a wide margin of behaviors we choose to view as not acting out. Being committed to a program of rigorous honesty (as well as being willing to go to any lengths to get well) demands we scrutinize all our actions.

A healthy recovery program with transformation as the goal requires a total, absolute abstinence period from all sexual activity and intentional sexual thoughts. Abstinence could be for any period of time, but I recommend at least 90 days.

Neurochemical Benefits

An abstinence period serves several purposes and has a variety of benefits. First, by abstaining from sexual activity and fantasy, you'll experience a cleansing of your brain chemistry. Just like an alcoholic needs to be sober for a number of days before the alcohol is completely out of his system, the same principle applies to those recovering from sexual addiction. A sexual time-out is a form of detoxification. Remember, we addicts have a constant supply of our "drug," because even fantasies produce chemicals in the brain that cause us to feel pleasure. These chemical reactions are a natural part of life, but sex addicts have used this chemical reaction to medicate and escape their feelings. Stopping all sexual activity and sexualized thoughts allows the brain chemistry to return to normal.

Another benefit of abstinence deals with the addictive characteristic called tolerance. Tolerance means the addict requires more of the addictive agent to achieve the same result. An alcoholic, for example, develops tolerance so that he requires more alcohol to become intoxicated. In similar fashion, you may have built up a tolerance for sexual activity. You may find that you need a greater amount of sexual stimuli than you once did, which has led you into more frequent sexual activity or more dangerous sex. If you're married this tolerance factor may also have affected your ability to experience sexual pleasure with your spouse. The need for more and more may even have created an inability to experience orgasm during marital sex. Being abstinent for a period of time will help to reverse these symptoms. After an abstinence period, you may find that the joy of sex with your spouse may return. If it doesn't, you may need more specialized counseling to unearth the sexual or (more likely) the relationship difficulty.

Correction of False Core Beliefs

An additional reason all addicts need to experience a fairly lengthy period of abstinence is for the purpose of changing your core beliefs. We addicts hold the (unconscious) core belief that sex is our most important need. Based on our history of sexual abuse or on the “false intimacy” we achieved through our sexual liaisons, we concluded that sex or a relationship was the way to get our needs met. Indeed, because we all are “needy” – the result of our abandonment trauma – we discovered sex was our most important need, for it was our best (though false) solution to the pain of our abandoned hearts. A period of abstinence exposes this core belief and gradually reverses it.

A period of abstinence will counteract another false core belief: that sex is equal to love. (Again, our trauma of abuse and abandonment created this lie.) If you’re married, when you abstain from sex and still receive love from your spouse, you eventually learn a new definition of love. If you’re single, through abstinence you’ll discover that you can find love from intimate friendships that you couldn’t find in acting out sexually or through unhealthy relationships.

Suggested Boundaries for the Abstinence Period

You should observe specific boundaries during a 90-day timeout period to help you abstain from sexual activity and thought. Following are some suggestions:

- **No Internet use, except when necessary for work or to connect with your sponsor or support group.** If the Internet has been part of your addictive behavior, disconnect and lock up the computer for 90 days. (If your spouse or someone else in your household needs Internet access, she can have the key). If the Internet is necessary for your work, discuss with your sponsor ways to avoid temptation. Using a filtered server or one of the accountability reporting programs are two ideas.
- **No alcohol.** Next to sex and relationships, drinking is one of the best ways to alter your mood. Don’t drink.
- **No TV.** You may choose to make an exception for news shows, history or sporting channels, or similar appropriate fare, but avoid soap operas, talk shows, sit-coms and night-time dramas, which are full of sexual situations and unhealthy relationship examples.
- **Only G-rated movies or videos.** If you go to a family movie arrive after the movie previews.
- **Minimize fantasizing.** Many things can prompt a fantasy, but it’s prudent to avoid those triggers that you know are problematic. As an example, music elicits powerful responses for many of us. If you’re one who’s strongly prompted by music, listen only to tapes or CD’s, where you have control over what you hear. Review your list of acceptable music with your sponsor.
- **No reading of personal ads in newspapers or singles’ publications.** Cancel any ads you’ve placed yourself.

- **No one-on-one conversations with women**, even “innocent” ones. You don’t have to be rude, but do your best to avoid any personal exchange with women (or men if you have acted out with the same-sex).
- **No objectifying.** Keep your eyes on the road, sidewalk, or whatever is in front of you. Attend to business and “bounce” your eyes away immediately if you see someone that triggers lust. (Another way to describe this suggestion is to avoid “public voyeurism.”)
- **Change the routes you normally drive.** If certain roads bring you close to places that are triggers for you (e.g., where an affair partner lives or works) then choose another way to go.
- **Establish a defensive protocol when alone at home for 2 hours or more.** Call your sponsor or an accountability partner before, during, or after extended periods of time alone in order to eliminate the “dead zones” of time when you’re not accountable. Report what you’ll be doing to stay out of trouble.
- **Connect with your spouse or an intimate male friend every day.** Interact specifically each day on more than a superficial level. Share thoughts, feelings, and communicate concerns.

Withdrawal

Just as the alcoholic or drug addict goes through withdrawal when he stops using drug of choice, the sex addict similarly experiences withdrawal symptoms when he stops acting out. Remember the neurochemical effects of compulsive sexual or relational behavior? The brain reacts when there is no longer that influx of chemicals, and that reaction may be noticeable.

Some addicts report genuine physiological symptoms of withdrawal including headaches, body pains, sleeping and eating difficulties, or gastrointestinal distress. All are stress-related reactions that may come from stopping the medication you’ve historically used. (These may also be symptoms of depression, which might be an underlying condition.)

It’s important to remember that “this, too, will pass,” as an AA slogan promises. You won’t always feel so miserable physically. (I promise that no body parts will be harmed if you stop acting out. Orgasm is, indeed, optional, not necessary for life.) When you sense that familiar craving to act out, remind yourself that it’s temporary and it will pass. Compare the craving sensations to running up a steep hill. The feelings will intensify and resisting will get harder, but if you choose not to give up and give in, you’ll soon be over the crest of the hill and the going will be much easier.

Emotional reactions are another typical part of withdrawal. During abstinence intense feelings may surface - feelings you’ve kept bottled up for years. One principle of Alcoholics Anonymous is, “You can either drink or deal with your stuff. You can’t do both.” I believe the same standard applies to the sexual addict. Our sexual and relational behavior has been our way of “dealing with our stuff,” and a sexual timeout often raises core issues that have been buried under the obvious symptoms of sexual sin. I predict you’ll discover these foundational issues have little or nothing to do with sex. Instead, they probably involve your central woundedness and shame. An abstinence period allows you a chance to recognize and deal with these issues instead of medicating them through acting out.

Sexual Abstinence for the Married Man or Woman

For the married sex addict, the issue of sobriety becomes more complicated. Certainly they must abstain from any extra-marital involvements, including those that are “only” emotional affairs. However, I believe it’s vital for the married addict to observe the same total abstinence period as those who are single, including a time-out from sexual activity with their spouse. Because of neurochemistry, this abstinence period is important even if your acting out has involved “merely” pornography or masturbation.

Reasons for Marital Abstinence

In addition to the neurochemical benefit, the most obvious advantage of an abstinence contract for the married addict is to take the sexual pressure off the relationship. For many couples, marital sex has been full of conflicts, arguments, and emotional pain. Perhaps you’ve avoided sex with your spouse and have preferred your acting out behaviors over connecting with them. In that case the pressure is from the absence of sex, but it’s still pressure. Even if there’s been little or no sexual activity in your marriage for a long time, you need to commit to an intentional period of abstinence. *There’s a vast difference in deliberately choosing to abstain from sex and in avoiding it because of your addiction.*

Almost all sexual addicts (of either gender) are unable to be “present” during sexual activity, especially with their spouses. Instead of authentically making love with your spouse, you likely are lost in fantasy about some other sexual experience, either real or imagined. You pretend you’re with another partner or engaging in different sexual practices. You insist on darkening the room or you close your eyes to avoid being in the moment, because your fantasies are more pleasurable than what’s happening right now. In effect, you’re still having “addict” sex, even though the partner is your spouse. Sexual addiction is an intimacy disorder, remember? Taking a break from marital sex gives you the chance to start over in your marriage relationship and learn to be present mentally, emotionally, and spiritually before you add sexual intimacy. Abstinence provides a chance to create *true* intimacy in your coupleship.

A bonus reason for abstinence is outlined by Paul in the following verse:

“Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”

1 Corinthians 7:5

Abstaining from sexual activity allows a couple to devote themselves to prayer and spiritual renewal. Time spent with God reminds us that our love relationship with God is our most important relationship and deserves first place in our lives.

Spouse’s Response

To achieve the desired result in terms of your marriage, abstinence must be a mutual agreement that is very specific in its intent and plan. Never begin an abstinence period without prayerful discussion with your spouse. (Getting help from a counselor may also be necessary, especially if your spouse hasn’t started to deal with their co-addiction.) In my experience, spouses’ reactions divide into two basic categories:

- **Some spouses welcome a period of sexual abstinence.** Sex has been emotionally painful for years, either because too many demands have been placed on them, or the sexual activity has been unpleasant, or because the addict wasn't interested in marital sex. Whatever the case, a deliberate period of no sex is a welcome relief. These couples will have to work extra hard to overcome their intimacy disorder and connect on emotional and spiritual levels.

- **Some spouses, however, fear abstinence.** These spouses need the assurance of a sexual relationship. They worry that their sexually-addicted partner will continue to act out if sex isn't present in their relationship. They may suffer from the belief that if they were more attractive or performed better, their husbands wouldn't have a problem. Obviously, as addicts, we know this belief isn't true. Our spouse's looks, sexual willingness, or sexual prowess aren't related to our sexual sin. For these couples, the abstinence contract teaches them to base their marital relationship on spiritual and emotional intimacy, not sexual.

A married couple should only attempt a period of abstinence if they also have a plan for working on their relationship in other ways. *Almost always, a couple needs to be in marriage counseling.* The intimacy disorder of sexual addiction is simply too deep and distressing for most couples to heal on their own. Issues of pain, betrayal, and mistrust will be paramount. Often other longstanding relationship problems will surface, as well, such as finances, parenting, household roles, etc. The wise couple will take their time and address each issue before considering a return to sexual activity, which can mask problems or create a false sense of resolution.

An addict/co-addict couple should plan specifically for their abstinence period. This blueprint might include a variety of strategies for developing healthy intimacy without relying on sex. Perhaps the couple goes to marriage counseling each week in addition to their individual L.I.F.E. Recovery Groups. Maybe they commit to working through the *L.I.F.E. Recovery Guide for Couples* or a similar resource to aid their healing. A wide range of marriage enrichment materials are available that could significantly bless your marriage. Take advantage of as many as possible during an abstinence period.

The following page provides a sample abstinence contract for a married couple. Note that it has a place for a witnessing couple to sign. Meet with that couple, explain your goal and your plan for working on your relationship, and pray with them before asking them to sign your contract. Use this "sponsoring" couple for support and accountability as you go through the abstinence period.

Marital Sexual Abstinence Contract

We, _____ and _____, agree that we will be sexually abstinent for _____ days beginning on _____.

We also agree that during this time we will do the following activities to increase our emotional and spiritual intimacy:

Husband's signature

Wife's signature

We have asked for support and prayer as we undertake this new step to increase the total intimacy in our coupleship. This covenant has been witnessed by a man and a woman who are important to our recovery and relationship:

Man's signature

Woman's signature