

Most people have difficulty understanding the concept of sex addiction. Their first thought might be, "Yeah, right, aren't we all?"

But listen to the experiences of Steve (not his real name), and you'll realize this is no laughing matter. He is actively involved with Portland's chapter of Sex Addicts Anonymous, a 12-step program based on the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Steve's story is personal, and he's quick to emphasize he doesn't speak for the support group. Although fewer than one-quarter of the men who attend the meetings are gay, he says SAA is open to all orientations.

Steve admits homosexuals often have legitimate concerns about their comfort level with straight people in the room. But research actually points to a higher level of effectiveness in mixed groups, something he attributes to the bond they feel around their common problem.

"Straight or gay, man or woman, it makes absolutely no difference," Steve says. "Openness needs to be both ways, and the issue really needs to be telling the truth."

Steve belies the profile one might expect of a sex addict. He is handsome, in his mid-40s and articulate. Social stigmas contribute to the shame and fear sex addicts privately endure.

Steve has been there and back and, like most recently converted, is enthusiastic. However, he readily admits it's an ongoing battle.

Although much of the literature for SAA is filled with buzzwords like "acting out," "triggers" and "slippery behaviors," one factor seems to define sex addiction: lack of control. Whether it's masturbation, cruising or prostitution, Steve explains, the problem starts when we become "powerless over our behavior."

Unlike alcoholics, who have the option just to "put the plug in the jug," sex addicts cannot necessarily put the behavior away completely. This isn't substance abuse.

## HARD HABIT TO BREAK

Support group reaches out to sex addicts by Richard Bray

Steve likens sex addiction to an eating disorder. "Food and sex are both normal—we gotta have 'em."

Steve's behavior included public sex, bookstores, sex clubs and, well, just lots of promiscuous sex. "When I came out, promiscuous sex was the way to go. I was a young gay man, I was very promiscuous and had a great time. What happened to me was that I started crossing lines of behavior I said I would never cross. I was sex-

ual when I didn't feel sexual, and my career was affected by it. More and more I was using amyl nitrate and alcohol."

But in the end, Steve says it's about powerlessness, "saying we're going to change, saying we're going to stop...then not being able to, even when the consequences are getting really bad. Some of us risked arrest."

The subject of AIDS comes up, of course. Despite years of promiscuous, often unsafe sex, Steve is HIV-negative. He attributes this to dumb luck, like winning a game of Russian roulette.

Steve has had trouble maintaining solid relationships because of both his infidelity and a lack of genuine intimacy. He also laments one of the greatest costs of his addiction: lost time.

"It's no fun to be an old queer in a bookstore," Steve reveals. "When I was young I used to pity those older men in those places. I was this young man in a candy store, but when I got older, everything turned around."

The fear, the secrets and the lies eventually became too much for Steve. "I'd see people who said, 'I saw you the other day,' and I would just cringe, thinking, 'Oh my God, where had they seen me?'"

Finally, Steve hit rock bottom. "I was exhausted. All my unstructured time was spent acting out, years of my life wasted."

After spending a great deal of time trying to stop his compulsive behavior on his own, Steve discovered SAA, and the recovery process began. He attends meetings regularly, counsels others with similar problems and works to overcome his own demons, one day at a time.

During a recent SAA meeting, about 25 people formed a rough circle. The addicts, mostly men ranging in age from their early

20s to their 60s, came in all shapes and sizes.

The mood in the room was relaxed but with a definite serious undertone. These people were here for a reason.

The loosely structured meeting began with a few readings about SAA, its goals and the program itself. Someone read the "12 Steps of Sex Addicts Anonymous," very similar to the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Most of the hour was devoted to five-minute segments in which various attendees took turns talking about their behaviors and how they felt about them. These small confessionals always start with the familiar refrain, "My name is...and I'm a sex addict." Last names never are used.

Similar habits were mentioned repeatedly: pornography, phone sex, public sex, masturbation and extramarital sexual activity.

Internet addiction was another recurring theme. Steve says cyberspace is the "crack cocaine of the sex addict's world." It is readily available, is relatively cheap and can be accessed 24 hours a day. Add to that the benefits of complete anonymity, and you have a recipe for disaster.

Divorces were cited. Prostitution was mentioned more than once. It's obvious these people no longer had control over the content, quality or quantity of their own sex lives.

Unlike the somewhat similar Sexaholics, SAA does not necessarily reject any sex outside of marriage nor masturbation—something Steve acknowledges is "a little bit impossible for most gay people or, for that matter, people straight or gay."

Steve says the group doesn't take a stand on what is healthy or unhealthy sexual behavior, instead choosing to focus on loss of control and sharing support. "If people are hurting, we just want them to know there's a place they can go." □

SEX ADDICTS ANONYMOUS can be reached at its Portland hot line, 503-452-5961. The national Internet site is [www.saa-recovery.org](http://www.saa-recovery.org).



PHOTOS BY MARY DAVIS

## SELF-ASSESSMENT QUIZ

According to Sex Addicts Anonymous, if you answer yes to more than one of these 12 questions, you might need help.

1. Do you keep secrets about your sexual or romantic activities from those important to you? Do you lead a double life?
2. Have your needs driven you to have sex in places or situations or with people you normally would not choose?
3. Do you find yourself looking for sexually arousing articles or scenes in newspapers, magazines or other media?
4. Do you find that romantic or sexual fantasies interfere with your relationships or are preventing you from facing problems?
5. Do you frequently want to get away from a sex partner after having sex? Do you frequently feel remorse, shame or guilt after a sexual encounter?
6. Do you feel shame about your body or your sexuality, such that you avoid touching your body or engaging in sexual relationships? Do you fear that you have no sexual feelings, that you are asexual?
7. Does each new relationship continue to have the same destructive patterns that prompted you to leave the last relationship?
8. Is it taking more variety and frequency of sexual and romantic activities than previously to bring the same levels of excitement and relief?
9. Have you ever been arrested or are you in danger of being arrested because of your practices of voyeurism, exhibitionism, prostitution, sex with minors, indecent phone calls, etc.?
10. Does your pursuit of sex or romantic relationships interfere with your spiritual beliefs or development?
11. Do your sexual activities include the risk, threat or reality of disease, pregnancy, coercion or violence?
12. Has your sexual or romantic behavior ever left you feeling hopeless, alienated from others or suicidal?

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