

Transcript Talking Therapies Episode 36:

How do you recognise compulsive sexual behaviour?

Suzy:

Hello and welcome to Talking Therapies, a podcast made together with Psychologies magazine and the UK Council for Psychotherapy, or UKCP for short. I'm Suzy Walker, and I'm the Editor-in-Chief at Psychologies. Each month on Talking Therapies we will be talking to a UKCP therapist about a range of topics. Addictions can be life consuming, not only impacting the person experiencing it, but also those around them. And sex and porn addiction, due to its more secretive nature is often minimised.

Paula:

I think that the key difference, of course, between sex and porn addiction and any other kind of addiction is that abstinence is not the goal. It may be abstinence from certain types of problematic behaviours and that needs to be defined by the client. But it is not about abstinence. It's about changing your relationship with sex and sexuality. It's actually about reclaiming your sexuality from compulsive behaviours.

Suzy:

That was UKCP psychotherapist Paula Hall. Paula has been working in the psychotherapeutic field for over 26 years. She specialises in helping people affected by sex and porn addiction, has helped develop national and international services geared towards helping those affected. Paula is also an author and public speaker on the subject of sex addiction. In this episode, UKCP CEO Sarah Niblock talks to UKCP psychotherapist Paula Hall to better understand how sex and porn addiction affects a person's day to day life.

Sarah:

So, Paula, sex and porn addiction is often viewed as a controversial subject. And I'm wondering if you can explain why that is from your point of view as a sex and relationship therapist.

Paula

I think frankly, the first reason why it's controversial is it's got the word sex in the title. And I think ever since Adam and Eve we have struggled with human sexuality and accepting it and understanding it and quite often talking about it. So yeah, my initial training was as a psychosexual therapist, and being able to talk frankly, openly about sex, whatever type of issues client would present, is difficult for a lot of people, it's difficult for a lot of therapists. I think many would agree with me, it's an area that we don't have a lot of training in. When you then accompany it with the word addiction, I think then it gets even more challenging. And I think one of the reasons it's so controversial, is partly because of the roots, where it came from. So, we started talking about sex addiction back in America, back in the late 70s, early 80s. And it was framed quite differently then, it was very much framed as there being certain kinds of behaviours that were, sexual behaviours that were more addictive than others. And it was all rather pathologising, to be honest, it really was. And there was quite a backlash to that. It started initially in the States as a term that came from the addiction community. So, they were kind of addiction-ologists if you like, saying that sex and pornography could become addictive, and you should go to 12-step groups, and this is the treatment approach, and you should have abstinence, and so on and so forth.

But it's different over here in the UK, I'm pleased to say, so the people doing the training in the UK, myself being one of them, all come from a psychosexual background. And I think that the key difference, of course, between sex and porn addiction and any other kind of addiction is that abstinence is not the goal. It may be abstinence from certain types of problematic behaviours, and that needs to be defined by the client. But it is not about abstinence, it's about changing your relationship with sex and sexuality. It's actually about reclaiming your sexuality from compulsive behaviours. So, there's a lot of history to the debate. But the main problem is that it can be seen to pathologise what is healthy sexuality. And also, frankly, we just don't have enough research yet.

Sarah

Yeah, I mean, that's so interesting, because we hear those terms, as you say, and the danger is that that casts some kind of aspersions on the person who is experiencing those behaviours. Is that how your view of sex and porn addiction differs from other schools of thought then?

Paula

I mean, other schools of thought are very much evolving, and in some parts of the world, addiction is very much still seen as a medical model. So it's seen as a medical model, a disease model of addiction. And the principle of that is addiction is a brain disease. It's caused by faulty wiring in the brains, to put this in very layman's terms, and that faulty wiring affects your capacity to make wise decisions about your consumption. So, if you're thinking about, you know, alcohol or drugs, it's kind of framed in that way. But actually, a lot of people in the field of addiction are changing their view now anyway. We do know that there is certainly a medical component to it, there is a biological component. But the position we take broadly in the UK, and certainly I take is looking at it from a bio-psychosocial approach. So yes, there are biological components to addiction. So, understanding the neuroscience is important. But we also know that there is a significant psychological component. And this isn't just around sex and porn, this is around any addiction. What is the function of this behaviour? What is it trying to regulate? And being able to understand that like most compulsive behaviours, it's actually to regulate some kind of emotional state. But there's also a social context. We live in a world, certainly in a part of the world, that believes in sexual freedom and sexual experimentation. And we believe that people have a right to express themselves sexually in the way they do. We have the smartphone, we have access to sexuality in a way that we just didn't have 20 years ago, 30 years ago. It's a very, very different world now. And hence, the decisions that we have to make are quite different. I don't think you'd become addicted to pornography when it was paper porn, because you probably wouldn't be able to buy enough magazines or turn the pages fast enough to actually develop the novelty that's required to kind of maintain addiction. But the internet has been a complete game changer.

Sarah

One would imagine the scale then is quite large. Have you got any sense of how common sex and porn addiction is?

Paula

No, not really. I mean, again, this is one of the real problems with this field is the lack of research and the lack of reliable statistics. And unfortunately, there are many people who misdiagnose sex and porn addiction. There are many sort of worried-well, or, you know, 'I believe that I shouldn't really look at pornography, because it's against my moral values and because I do, that means I must be an addict'. And of course, that just can't be the case. If you're somebody who's against alcohol, the fact that you have a glass of wine on a Sunday lunchtime does not make you an alcoholic. The definition is much greater than that. We don't really know how widespread it is. The latest piece of research, I believe, was back in 2018 and it was suggesting, I think it was something like, gosh trying to remember now, it's something like 30% of men and 18% of women, something like that, struggle with compulsive sexual behaviour of some sort.

But it was such a small sample size that I have to say I'm a little cynical of that. So, we don't know. Sorry, inconclusive answer, but certainly I can say anecdotally, that it is a problem that is growing. Over the last six months of kind of locked down six, seven months, lockdown COVID, that we've been going through, our inquiries have increased by 50%. So, we've gone from having you know, approximately 60-70 inquiries a month, to having, you know, 100-110 inquiries a month. So, I have no doubt that the problem is, is rapidly growing. And as a practice, we've gone from me, you know, as an independent psychotherapist working on my own, to being a team of 20 over the last seven, eight years, and all of that growth has been because of demand. So, there's no doubt the problem is growing.

Sarah:

What do you think it is about the COVID pandemic, and lockdown that might have caused people to become more aware or seek support?

Paula:

I think that the problem has escalated for some people. So, you know, for many people, the function of an addictive behaviour, and the world is going through a time of heightened anxiety, anxiety about health, of course, about loved ones, but also economic anxiety as well. And for many people, their usual support structures, so the support structures of being able to have a social life, meeting friends, family, and engaging in sports activities, hobbies, that kind of thing, are taken away. So, we have increased social stress and anxiety, and reduced resources for self-soothing. Add to that the fact that many of us are spending even more time online than we used to, because it's the only way to communicate. And I think unfortunately, you've got the perfect recipe for some people who may have been predisposed to this problem, for it to actually escalate.

Sarah:

How does it affect someone on a day-to-day basis?

Paula:

What's interesting about sex and porn addiction is that initially you may not notice any side effects at all. This isn't like alcohol. If you were to spend five hours one evening drinking alcohol, you would know it the next morning. And the people around you would probably know it, they'd smell it, they'd see the hangover. If it was gambling, you're going to notice it in your bank account. If it was compulsive overeating, you're going to notice it on your waistline. But with sex and porn addiction, you may be watching pornography for four, five hours on webcam sites, on chat sites, on adult hookup sites. And actually, there's very few side effects that you will see immediately, assuming that you're able to do this in a way that others around you, a partner, for example, that you know, isn't aware of. But that will happen gradually over time. So, the kinds of effects that we see is certainly a kind of withdrawal from other people, loved ones, withdrawal from other intimate relationships. For many people, sex and porn addiction, the roots of it are in attachment disorders anyway and often it will exacerbate those attachment problems. We see increased anxiety, feelings of depression, feelings of hopelessness, not being able to control the habit. An impact on the ability to sort of engage in other important functions, you end up with a choice, do I spend the day with a friend? Do I go away for the weekend? Do I go out with friends in the evening? Or shall I stay at home and be online? And beginning to prioritise the compulsive behaviours over other things that would have been more important. So gradually, over time, you start seeing a significant impact on other social relationships, on intimate relationships, often on sexual functioning within intimate relationships as well, but also on some of the ability to maintain kind of work, so employment. For some, if money's being spent, of course, there can be a financial impact, so it gradually erodes every other area of life.

Sarah:

And does that mean that when people approach services like yours, they tend to be a quite an advanced stage? And perhaps it's crept up upon them?

I would imagine it's quite difficult to identify whether you have an addiction or not during the early stages.

Paula:

Yeah, absolutely. And I think that really is one of the challenges. So often people have been struggling this problem for a long time. A typical scenario, for example, might be somebody who's, you know, enjoyed pornography recreationally, in kind of adolescence and teens, go through a particularly difficult period, perhaps, perhaps period of unemployment or relationship breakdown. So, pornography use accelerates, it becomes a lone hobby, as it were. And it may be a few years later that that person is trying to get into a partnered relationship again, and finds that actually, they're not as interested in being in a relationship anymore. They kind of want to be, but it all seems a little bit too much hassle, they're turning down sex and deciding they'd rather actually just go home and look at pornography instead. So, it can be an inability to either maintain a relationship or get into a relationship that will get a lot of people coming forward for help. For others, it's the rock bottom of a partner finding out, so we do see a lot of people where the partner has found out. What's really interesting, so I've been working in this for about 15 years, and probably exclusively specialising it for about the last 10 years. And what's interesting is, as we're beginning to talk about it more and more as a society, and there are more and more resources online, there are more sort of stories in the media, there's been more kind of films made about it, more storylines on television and drama about it. People are beginning to come forward sooner. And I'm heartened by the number of inquiries we get from young people in their sort of mid-late 20s, saying, 'actually, I noticed that I'm using a lot of pornography, I'm noticing that it's beginning to get in the way of the kind of life that I really want to lead, but I'm struggling to stop. Can you help me?' So, people are beginning to notice it and recognise it sooner because we're beginning to talk about it more.

Sarah:

You mentioned partners there. How does sex and porn addiction affect them or family or friends?

Paula:

I think it is that withdrawal from relationships. And one of the things that's really important to understand about this addiction, which again is slightly different from the others, is the amount of shame that is often experienced around it. And the shame isn't necessarily about the behaviour. So, it's not that someone thinks 'oh my goodness, pornography is morally wrong. I shouldn't be looking at pornography. I do and therefore I feel shame,' it's the amount of time that is spent on it. It's knowing that actually I made a decision to leave the party early, so that I could go home and watch pornography rather than spend it with friends. Knowing that actually I lied about needing to spend more time doing work, rather than visiting a family member. So that gradual withdrawal into kind of a secret world and prioritising, for example, pornography use over other relationships, so it's that withdraw. And often partners begin to notice that. For many people who use a lot of pornography, there is less and less interest in partnered sex. Which makes it a huge shock for partners, when they discover there's been this other secret relationship, if you like, with pornography, because they've assumed it was low sex drive, or stress at work, or whatever. But yeah, the sex certainly hasn't been coming their way. But for other partners, of course, the impact can be absolutely devastating. If the activities have gone offline, then you've got all of the hiddenness, the secrecy, the pain, the damage, that comes from finding out that a loved one's got a compulsive behaviour. And on top of that, you've got infidelity, you've got finding out that actually your partner has had sex with, you know, however many other people. And you know, for some partners, it's hundreds, and discovering their partner's been seeing sex workers for the last 15-20 years and has slept with hundreds and hundreds of people outside of the relationship. And the shock is traumatic, and I don't use that word lightly. But if you discover that your partner is somebody completely different from who you thought they were, and they have been managing to lead this complete double life under your nose, and remember, there's often no side effects of this one, if your partner was an alcoholic, you'd probably know it. If they're a gambler, unless you're very, very rich, you would probably know it.

Any other kind of addiction, you would get some kind of hint. This one, perhaps not. So, for partners, it leaves them unable to trust the ground they're walking on, because the person they trusted the most and thought they knew the best, turns out they don't. So, they start challenging and questioning their own kind of reality of the world, as well as that of their partners.

Sarah:

To the partner, it must feel just like a huge betrayal, and how does that affect how they respond to those who are addicted?

Paula:

Yeah, absolutely. It's a massive, massive betrayal. The first thing we do with partners is actually working on the trauma, is helping them actually get a sense of safety and stability. And anybody that does trauma work knows that actually that's the most important thing to do. So, that's the first thing we do, is help them to kind of stabilise, get some sort of self-soothing strategies in place. Some partners, of course, will decide that is definitely the end of the relationship. And they will decide that, you know, they need to work on their own trauma, they need to learn to manage that, they need to rebuild their faith and trust in themselves, and in the world, and they will move on. Others decide they want to stay in the relationship and because they, apart from this absolute massive secret they knew nothing about, they may have been very happily married. The relationship may have been everything they wanted, apart from this a big secret. And then it's a case of working with each other in recovery. And really how partners cope and move forward will be hugely dependent on how the person with the addiction recovers. If they are committed to recovery, and they are committed to honesty and openness moving forwards, then perhaps the relationship can heal.

Sarah:

Somebody listening to this possibly will have some suspicions that their partner or another family member might be addicted to sex or porn. Is there any think that they should do to perhaps initiate a conversation or respond to this in some way?

Paula:

I think it's important to really understand that shame that's often around this. Critically, you need to recognise there are many people who enjoy pornography recreationally and are not addicted. It may be more than you think is appropriate, or right, or whatever. But that in itself does not mean they're addicted. But yeah, absolutely, you need to have that conversation. And I guess the conversation starts with being able to honestly say, you know, 'I noticed that you are doing whatever it is. It concerns me. This is why it concerns me. I'm wondering whether this is an issue?' If the answer instantly is 'no it's not an issue,' then the next question might be, 'how would you know if it was?' And there are a lot of parents that are very worried about their young people's access to the internet and the amount of pornography they may be viewing. It's difficult conversations to have and sometimes people aren't ready to get into recovery. But also, sometimes it genuinely isn't a problem. But I think often it's helping people to consider, 'how would I know if this really was a problem? What are my boundaries here?'

Sarah:

What stops people from seeking help? I'm just worried there may be people listening to this, who don't feel comfortable about coming forward and talking to a psychotherapist. But from what you've said, there's nothing that can shock you, is there, Paula? You've probably heard everything. Do people tend to feel worried about speaking to you about this?

Paula:

I'm not sure there's nothing that could shock me, although sometimes what shocks me is how embarrassed some people are about things that may seem actually quite normal to a lot of other people. It is difficult, what I would say is, you really do need to talk to someone who's specialist in this field. I suppose I'd like to think that at the moment, perhaps that's a little bit easier, with so much therapy happening on zoom. I suspect that it is easier for a lot of people to click on a zoom link, and speak to a therapist, then walk into a therapy office. But it still takes courage to do it, to make that first step. But it's worth finding out and the sooner you do it, the better really. And I think the other thing is, a therapist will help you to ask yourself the questions you haven't thought of. So, often, it's the questions that a therapist asked that are really helpful, 'oh gosh, yes I hadn't thought about it like that', or 'well I hadn't really considered it like that'. So particularly, I think, in the early stages of therapy it allows you to get a different perspective on the problem and to sort of step back a bit and look at it from another angle. Sex addiction actually has nothing to do with sex. It's just another way of finding comfort, of finding soothing. Thinking about sex addiction and comparing it to like chronic overeating is a good way of looking at it. Somebody who chronically overeats is eating for comfort. They're not eating because they're hungry. They're not eating because it comes from appetite. They're eating for comfort. And whatever that sexual behaviour might be, whether it's pornography, whether it's hookup sites, whether it's some kind of kink behaviour, it really doesn't matter. What it is, at the end of the day, what you become kind of addicted to if you like, is the way it makes you feel. It's the comfort that you get from it. But at the end of the day, it's got nothing to do with sex. So, it's not saying anything about you sexually at all.

Sarah:

Paula, it's been really interesting getting this insight into your work. It's an area that seems to still carry so much mystique, and yet you've done a huge amount to demystify and to destigmatise a subject area. I hope people come forward whether it's to talk about their own situation or that of loved ones they might be concerned about.

Suzy:

That was your UKCP psychotherapist Paula Hall speaking to Sarah Niblock, the CEO of the UK Council for Psychotherapy. If after listening to that, you feel you could benefit from some talking time with a psychotherapist then go to the Find a Therapist section of the UKCP website and have a look through. The website address is www.psychotherapy.org.uk and look for the Find a Therapist tab. We'll also be discussing sex and porn addiction in Psychologies magazine this month, or you can find us online at psychologies.co.uk. We'll be doing a podcast each month with some of the UKCP psychotherapists, so remember to like, subscribe to our channel, to hear it first. It also helps others to find us, too. So, join us again next month. Till then thank you for listening and take good care of yourselves.