

## **“This is My Addicted Brain on Sex”**

Everyone knows that a substance addict (heroin, alcohol, meth, any other) usually goes through a **brutal withdrawal phase** (including physical and psychological effects) when they are prevented from taking their drug. This is because the brain has been trained to crave it. A similar thing happens in the brain of sex addicts.

When a behavior produces pleasure (could be eating, could be sex, could even be chocolate) we experience it as pleasure because the brain produces chemicals that induce a type of “high;” a euphoric feeling that we call pleasure. We feel really good – until it wears off, which happens fairly quickly. Also, in the wear-off stage, we experience a sort of calming let-down: we may even experience a temporary stress relief after the behavior.

One of those chemicals is dopamine. Chemically, it is very similar in action to cocaine. (Opioids such as heroin, morphine or codeine produce a similar euphoria, but with an even stronger “numbing” after-effect.)

When the brain gets a shot of dopamine, in addition to the pleasure feeling, the brain also automatically rewires the neurons to memorize the behavior and sensations that resulted in the release of the dopamine. The neurons physically change in response to the dopamine to permanently lock a memory of the behavior into the brain, including any image, sound, smell, feeling or other sense that goes along with that memory. (Like riding a bike, the brain never forgets a dopamine-producing behavior.)

The more often this **behavior-pleasure-numbing cycle** occurs, the stronger the memory wiring becomes. Plus the brain *REALLY* likes dopamine (just like we like pleasure). So, when the brain goes searching in its memory banks for ways to get more dopamine (more pleasure) it finds a strong memory for the behavior. It calls for even more of that same behavior, or one very similar. **We experience it as a “craving.”** If we satisfy that craving, the brain gets another shot of dopamine, and the memory gets wired in even more strongly, including all the **images** and other senses that are attached to the memory, and which often then become **triggers for more behavior**. For dangerous or unacceptable behaviors we also have negative memories that are intended to keep everything in balance. For addicts, this balancing process has gotten all out of kilter.

Repeated often enough, we can become addicted to a behavior just like a drug. The brain’s insistence on dopamine-producing behavior may become stronger than any negative memories or counter-knowledge we have that says, “Enough is enough.” We are hooked. **We have lost control and no longer have the power to stop.** It’s the same process whether it’s an artificial drug like cocaine or a natural high from sex. Actually, dopamine is stronger than cocaine, we just get much smaller doses of it at any one time.

While the coke addict actually needs to do another line to get the next euphoric fix, a sex addict may simply be able to recall the images stored in the brain that are connected with the behavior. Fantasy and memory may be enough to get another fix of our drug: another shot of pleasure and relief. At least for a while.

The brain gets less dopamine each time it goes back to the same well for more. So, it calls for the behavior more often, or seeks a more aggressive behavior to produce a stronger response when the existing behavior-response cycle no longer satisfies. Thus, the heroin addict shoots up more and more heroin, until he ODs and dies. As a sex addict I progressed from porn to more intense and dangerous sexual activities: all in the pursuit of more and more sexually-induced highs. Just like the overdosed heroin addict, my sex addict, my **“sexaholic,”** wanted to get me off in a dark corner and kill me one way or another. **But if the negative consequences** of my behavior become strong enough before my acting out behavior kills me, it becomes possible, **with the right help**, to override the brain’s demand for more and more of the sex drug.

***Working the Twelve-Steps finally helped me break this deadly addiction cycle.***

*(As with any addiction, the sex addict can expect to go through a painful withdrawal process.)*