

# International Association of Marriage & Family Counselors

Webinar: November 18, 2022

11:00 – 12:00 pm CST

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# Betrayal in Marriage Counseling:

Holding a  
Comprehensive  
Trauma-Focused Lens  
in Treatment



# Agenda

- ▶ Do No Harm
- ▶ Betrayal and Context Defined
- ▶ Definition of Compulsive Sexual Behavior Disorder (CSBD)
- ▶ Intimacy disorder/Sex Addiction
- ▶ Symptoms of Partners
- ▶ Contraindications to Couples Therapy
- ▶ Attachment Relationships

# Agenda Continued

- ▶ New Model: APSATS Multidimensional Partner Trauma Model
- ▶ Old ideas: Co-addiction
- ▶ When to refer for Trauma treatment
- ▶ Value of Community
- ▶ Treatment for Partner
- ▶ Treatment for Sex Addict
- ▶ Process of Disclosure
- ▶ Couple Healing
- ▶ Posttraumatic growth

# Do No Harm

- ▶ In doing marriage and couples counseling, we hold the ethical mandate to do no harm (ACA, 2014, A.4.a., p. 4).
- ▶ A.4. Avoiding Harm and Imposing Values A.4.a. Avoiding Harm Counselors act to avoid harming their clients, trainees, and research participants and to minimize or to remedy unavoidable or unanticipated harm.
- ▶ As Emily Brown (2001) stated: “The therapist’s responsibility is for the process, and the clients get to make the decisions about the outcome” (p. 53).

# Betrayal and Context Defined

- ▶ Marriage/Couple
  - ▶ Monogamous expectation
  - ▶ Fidelity
  - ▶ Sexual exclusivity assumption
- ▶ Betrayal Context Defined
  - ▶ Betrayal of above expectations
  - ▶ Partner engaged in Compulsive Sexual Behavior

# Definition of CSBD - ICD-11

## Under Impulse Control Disorder

- ▶ **Compulsive sexual behaviour disorder is characterised by;**
- ▶ Persistent pattern of failure to control intense, repetitive sexual impulses or urges resulting in repetitive sexual behaviour.
- ▶ May include repetitive sexual activities a central focus of life and neglecting health, personal care or other interests and responsibilities;
- ▶ Many failures at efforts to reduce repetitive behaviour, and continuing despite negative consequences or finding little satisfaction.
- ▶ This pattern of failure is over an extended period of time (ex. 6 mo+) and causes marked distress or significant impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
- ▶ Distress that is solely related to moral judgments and disapproval about sexual impulses, urges, or behaviours is not sufficient to meet this requirement.

▶ (WHO, 2022)

# Characteristics of Sex Addiction

- ▶ Sex addict was victim
- ▶ Intimacy disorder
- ▶ Wounding in Family of Origin
- ▶ Lack of empathy
- ▶ Lies to protect
- ▶ Healing takes place in context of a relationship
- ▶ Much shame

(APSATS, n.d.)

# Often, the Problem is not the Problem

- ▶ What is the problem?
- ▶ Affair? Types
- ▶ Is it a repetitive sexual addiction "affair?"
- ▶ Discovered, not confession
- ▶ Hard to find the truth
- ▶ What to do when things are not progressing

## ...the Problem continued

- ▶ Thorough assessment
- ▶ Historical treatment of partner as co-addict
- ▶ Betrayal by a known person contributes to emotional regulation problems
- ▶ Betrayal traumas have a harmful effect on mental health
- ▶ Social supports may help prevent PTSD symptoms

(Gottman & Gottman, \*; Goldsmith et al., 2013; Tirone et al., 2021)

# Potential Symptoms of Traumatized Partners

“Hyperarousal  
Helplessness  
Hypervigilance  
Panic Attacks  
Withdrawing  
Restlessness  
Denial

Phobias  
Sleeplessness  
Anxiety  
Oversensitivity  
Chronic Fatigue  
Overeating  
Confusion

Depression  
Immobility  
Nightmares  
Dissociation  
Avoidance  
Mood Swings  
Rage”

Inability to Eat  
Reliving the Event  
Intrusive Images  
Health Problems  
Flashbacks  
Immune/Endocrine Problems

(Steffens & Means, 2009, p. 6-7)





# Contraindications for Therapy

- ▶ Active relationship outside the marriage
  - ▶ including pornography
- ▶ Untreated mental illness
- ▶ Active addiction
- ▶ Abuse of any kind
- ▶ Decision of one or both to divorce

# Attachment Relationships

- ▶ Bowlby (1988): Relationship between a care-giver's responsiveness when in distress
- ▶ How this shapes expectations of others' availability when distressed
- ▶ Functioning of attachment system can be protective
- ▶ Has implications for mental health and responses to trauma

(Currier et al., 2012; Fraley et al., 2011; Mikulincer et al., 2014)

# When to Refer for Trauma Work

- ▶ Partners of sex addicts experience trauma (Minwalla, 2012)
- ▶ Severity of trauma & length of marriage
- ▶ Early support is recommended

(Steffens & Rennie, 2006)



# Treatment for Partner

- ▶ Sensitive treatment considers:
  - ▶ Needs of partner
  - ▶ Trauma lens
  - ▶ Education
  - ▶ Release from shame & self-blame
  - ▶ Empowering



# Self-Care & Self-Compassion

- ▶ Support system
- ▶ Notice what am I paying attention to
- ▶ “Umbrella” of self-care
  - Spiritual, Social
  - Emotional, Intellectual
  - Financial, Physical



# Multidimensional Partner Trauma Model

## Three phases of Treatment:

- ▶ Safety
- ▶ Remembering & Mourning
- ▶ Reconnecting



(APSATS, n.d.; Judith Herman, 1992, 1997)

# Safety

- ▶ Assess safety:
  - ▶ Physically, Emotionally, Financially
  - ▶ Safety during disclosure & discovery
  - ▶ Support managing strong emotions
  - ▶ Set up boundaries

(APSATS, n.d.)

# Remembering & Mourning

- ▶ Processing trauma with trauma focused modalities
  - ▶ EMDR, Neurofeedback, Somatic therapies, Cognitive Processing Therapy
  - ▶ Grief work
  - ▶ Group

(APSATS, n.d.)

# Reconnecting

- ▶ Family of Origin Work
- ▶ Work to rebuild trust
- ▶ Vision for Future
- ▶ Build relationship
- ▶ Build intimacy
- ▶ Moving on & Helping others

(APSATS, n.d.)



# Treatment for Addict

- ▶ Lacking in ability to handle emotions such as anger, fear, sadness
- ▶ Uses sex to manage & regulate emotions
- ▶ Sex is most important need
- ▶ Owning impact of behavior & decreasing denial

(APSATS, n.d.)

# Safety

- ▶ Discovery
- ▶ Disclosure prepared
- ▶ Education
- ▶ Work towards stabilization
- ▶ Manage triggers

(APSATS, n.d.)

# Remembering & Mourning

- ▶ Addiction Treatment & Trauma Treatment
- ▶ Repair relationships
- ▶ Develop empathy skills
- ▶ Grief work
- ▶ Make amends
- ▶ Stay sober

(APSATS, n.d.)

# Reconnecting

- ▶ Rebuilding trust
- ▶ Vision for the future
- ▶ Sustaining new lifestyle and healthy behaviors
- ▶ Relationship and intimacy building and sexual reintegration
- ▶ Moving on, helping others

(APSATS, n.d.)

# Therapeutic Disclosure

- ▶ Risks & Benefits
- ▶ Purpose to restore foundation of trust & new truth-telling
- ▶ Work through fears of abandonment
- ▶ For partner, knowing what to forgive

(APSATS, n.d.)

# Polygraph Test

- ▶ Research study with 92 partners of sex addicts by Corley et al. (2012)
  - ▶ 16.7% of the addicts took a polygraph test.
  - ▶ 46.7% of these partners reported the results confirmed what was disclosed.
  - ▶ Just 20% reported this was helpful to begin trusting again, and
  - ▶ 26.7% reported these results were beneficial to their relationship
  - ▶ 26.7% found the results to be distressing

# Marriage & Couples Counseling

- ▶ Being in relationship with someone with problematic sexual behaviors
  - ▶ Traumatic experience
  - ▶ Individual work precedes couples counseling
  - ▶ Safety must be created (Cohn, 2014)
  - ▶ Root cause?
  - ▶ Peace Cycle (Hargrave & Pfitzer, 2011)

# Marriage & Couples Counseling Continued

- ▶ Understand old relationship and build new
- ▶ Boundaries
- ▶ Forgiveness opportunities
- ▶ Develop trust
- ▶ Empathy
- ▶ Connections

(APSATS, n.d.)

# Reconnecting as a Couple in Therapy

- ▶ Sobriety
- ▶ Truth
- ▶ Disclosure
- ▶ Practicing empathy
- ▶ Learn to manage conflict
- ▶ New tools and skills for managing emotions

(APSATS, n.d.)

# Couple Healing

- ▶ Each does their own recovery work  
Treat trauma
- ▶ The value of safe community

# Helpful Skills in Recovery

- ▶ Non-defensive communication (addict & partner)
- ▶ Addict develops/expresses empathy
- ▶ Addict grasps impact of behaviors on partner
- ▶ Boundaries
- ▶ Assertiveness
- ▶ Life as an open book
  
- ▶ “With what I have done, I can understand why you would feel this way”

(APSATS, n.d., p. 31)

# “Gift” in Recovery

- ▶ A reported gift of recovery, shared by recovering sex addicts includes the capacity for compassion and empathy – including accepting others and the ability to better understand human suffering (Carnes, 1991, p. 260).

# Posttraumatic Growth

▶ In a study of 202 women partners of sex addicts, 60% met criteria for PTSD and 80% of them reported posttraumatic growth in the following areas:

- ▶ Appreciation of life
- ▶ Personal Strength
- ▶ Spiritual Change
- ▶ Relating to Others
- ▶ New Possibilities

(Laaser et al., 2017)

## ...not helpful

- ▶ Leave your partner
- ▶ Forgive and forget
- ▶ He will never change
- ▶ Pornography is not a betrayal
- ▶ Just get over it and it will be fine
- ▶ If you had been more sexually available, he would not have betrayed you

(Laaser, 2017)

# Healthy Relationship

- ▶ If a couple desires to pursue couples counseling following their individual work
- 1. Clear view of partner and accepting imperfections
- 2. Be responsible for your own growth
- 3. Stay in your “adult”
- 4. Take personal responsibility
- 5. Support partner & receive support
- 6. Value & care for yourself
- 7. Negotiate
- 8. Focus on what you like in your partner
- 9. Communicate simply

(Mellody et al., 1992)

Recovery is a long  
Journey

There is hope  
for healing  
and help...



# Resources

## Help her Heal

Carol Juergensen Sheets (empathy workbook for sex addicts to help their Partners Heal )

## Shattered Vows

Debra Laaser

Full Disclosure: Seeking Truth after Sexual Betrayal – Volume 1:  
Understanding how a disclosure can help you heal.

Janice Caudill and Dan Drake

Volume 2: Preparing for Disclosure on Your Terms

Janice Caudill and Dan Drake

Open Hearts: Renewing Relationships with Recovery, Romance & Reality

Patrick Carnes, Debra Laaser, & Mark Laaser

Recovering Couples Anonymous: A Twelve-Step Program for Couples

# Resources Continued

- ▶ Faithful and True - Faith based treatment in Minnesota
- ▶ On Site
- ▶ The Association of Partners of Sex Addicts Trauma Specialists non-profit

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# Thank you!

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