



What Is a Wife to Do?

Help for Spouses of the Sexually Broken

I meet with women every week in groups and individual counseling whose husbands are sex addicts. These women are hurting. Lonely, confused and angry. Many times, the church doesn't know how to help them. They often don't know how to help themselves. The following guidelines have proven useful to many of the women I have worked with. We will look at three areas: working through grief, setting boundaries and dealing with issues.

Working Through Grief

When a woman discovers that her husband is addicted to pornography, videos or other women, her emotional life comes crashing down around her. She experiences several feelings at the same time: shock, betrayal, sadness, fear and anger. She desperately needs to talk with someone about what is happening. But a deep sense of shame makes this difficult. I've heard these women say, "What is wrong with me? Why does he have to do that to get his needs met?"

These are painful questions, because the spouse of a sex addict usually assumes that her husband's behavior is a result of some lack on her part. "If I were only more interested in sex or lost some weight or tried to be more understanding," she reasons, "then surely he wouldn't be doing this..."

What she doesn't understand is that sex addiction is never about the wife, it is about the husband. I'm not saying that she has no influence on her husband's behavior; I'm saying that the issue of sexual brokenness is a lot bigger than that. A genuine sex addict is dealing with issues that predate his wife. Therefore, since she is not the cause, she cannot be the cure.

This revelation brings both comfort and pain. Comfort, because the wife finally sees that this is not about her. Pain, because she also sees that she cannot "fix" him and make him all better.

Some women resist the idea that their husband's struggle is not their responsibility. They believe that if they could discover the right key to unlock the door, their spouse would come around.

One woman in our group went on a campaign to win back her sexually addicted husband by performing all kinds of sexual exploits. She did everything her husband asked, even subjecting herself to things that were painful and humiliating. After all this, he was still not satisfied. Only then did she realize that it was not in her power to change him.



Why Is He Like This?

What causes a man to be sexually addicted? Obviously, the first thing is sin, but there is more to it than that I have counseled those who have fasted, prayed, read the Bible and tried any number of spiritual techniques to rid themselves of the problem—all to no avail.

As I've said before, in my work with sexually broken men I have found as common thread that runs through almost all of their lives: lack of adequate nurturing in early childhood. Sexual addiction is a developmental issue. In other words, something crucial to their development was never put in place.

Outright physical or sexual abuse may have taken place, or the abuse may have been less obvious. Things like verbal put-downs, name-calling, yelling, screaming or distancing on the part of the parent may have caused the child to retreat inwardly and thereby cut himself off from the little nurturing that was available.

This kind of verbal or emotional abuse can be devastating to a child. That is why Scripture says, "The tongue has the power of life and death" (Prov 18:21). Many parents have inadvertently used their tongues to destroy their children's self-worth.

Emotional abuse can also take the form of neglect. This is the hardest type of abuse to identify. When it comes to outright abuse, people usually know if they were physically or sexually assaulted (even though, strangely, they often assume it was their fault). But neglect is harder to pinpoint because we are looking for something that should have been in place but wasn't.

Nine times out of ten, parents who neglect their child's emotional needs do not do it intentionally. They are simply "providing for their family," caught up in their own addiction or unable to give of themselves emotionally because of how they themselves were reared. But to a child who desperately needs Daddy's love and attention, this situation communicates a message: *You are rejected by me.*

Mothers can unknowingly communicate similar messages. Many sexual addicts were brought up in homes where they were required to abide by a number of obsessive rules. In the name of love, some mothers have controlled every action, feeling and experience of their child. If the child didn't keep one of the rules or failed to live up to expectation in some way, the child was made to feel inferior or unaccepted. In homes like this, children learn very early that affection is a reward for obedience. The message is clear: *You have worth only if you obey my rules.*

Early experiences like these in the struggler's childhood taught him that he had no God-given worth and that his value was based on performance. Obviously, if a man's sexual addiction is rooted in his own sinful choices and broken childhood, his wife is not going to be able to fix it through some clever engineering on her part.



The Need to Grieve

Knowing that her husband's sexual brokenness is not about her may bring some initial relief, but it does nothing to soothe the profound ache in her soul. Whether he has been involved in affairs, anonymous sexual encounters or years of staring at pornography, she will feel deeply violated and betrayed.

No magic formula can remove the terrible sadness in her heart. She will have to feel it and work through it. God understands the need to grieve. In the Old Testament, special provision is made for a woman who is taken captive in battle after the loss of her family. God commanded the Israelites to give her time to feel her sorrow and mourn her loss (Deut 21:12-13). The same is needed today.

Two important steps for a wife in this crisis are, first, to give herself permission to mourn and, second, to surround herself with those in the body of Christ who will do the same. The last thing she needs is for some well-meaning Christian to offer her insensitive platitudes, quick fixes or a guilt trip that obligates her to forgive her husband prematurely.

She needs other women who will surround her with love and acceptance and allow her to experience her emotions. She needs to be told it's okay to hurt and to not "have it all together." Unfortunately, she will probably have to work through her grief while shopping for groceries and taking care of kids.

The grieving process has five definite stages: denial, anger, bargaining, despair and acceptance. She will feel all of these at various times and must allow herself to go through the process.

She may display her denial by trying to minimize the situation—pretending it isn't that bad. Whistling a happy tune or raising the Lord anyway" is not spiritual but, in fact, a means of avoiding the painful truth. She may bargain by indulging in pornography with her husband or initiating inappropriate sexual activity in an attempt to seduce him away from his "other mistress," sexual addiction.

She may also bargain by doubling her prayer time, Bible study or religious activity in an attempt to manipulate a response from God or her husband.

She will also feel anger as a result of her husband's infidelity or acting out. That is perfectly normal. But staying angry can become a way of hiding from the deeper pain beneath it. Some choose to stay at the anger level because it seems to give them a sense of power and protection, rather than make them feel weak and defenseless.

Inevitably, as she works through the grief process honestly, she will experience the depths of despair, facing the loss of her dream of the perfect marriage. The loss of trust. The loss of control. The loss of faithfulness. While this is anything but pleasant, it is a necessary part of moving on to acceptance.



Coming to terms with the reality of her losses gives way to a true acceptance and ability to forgive, thus allowing her to move forward in a healthy fashion. However, like others who grieve losses, she may go through these stages of grief again and again. She will go in and out of each stage until her heart has emptied itself of its pain. What she needs most is a support network that will give her the space to grieve while loving her enough not to allow her to get stuck.

Setting Boundaries

As she works through her grief, she will also have to set boundaries. A boundary is a nonnegotiable line that lets the other person know that inappropriate sexual behavior or abusive treatment will not be tolerated. It also says that she will not participate in her husband's emotional sickness. Unwillingness to set such boundaries results in codependent behavior that enables the husband to keep on acting out.

A good place to start is to insist that her husband get help. If he chooses not to, this still doesn't give her permission to demand, intimidate or attack. But she must stand by her guns and say: *If you choose not to seek help, I must make some choices of my own.*

Abstinence. The next boundary I recommend is sexual abstinence. I have two reasons for this. First, if there is even the possibility of involvement with someone outside of the marriage, there is a threat of sexually transmitted disease or HIV. In that case, the wife risks her life every time she has sex with him. It is imperative that they both be tested for HIV and refrain from sex until they receive negative test results.

Second, abstinence makes this statement: *If you don't value me and our relationship enough to deal with this issue, I choose not to entrust myself to you sexually.* He can accuse her of controlling and manipulating if he wants to, but the fact is, his choices have forced her to make choices of her own.

Many wives struggle with the idea of refraining from sex because of a misunderstanding of 1 Corinthians 7:4: "The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does." What Paul is saying is that a wife does not have the right to refuse her husband because she is angry, inconsiderate, resentful or selfish. But we are not talking about a situation like that. We are talking about a life-dominating sexual addiction. For the wife to submit sexually to a husband who is actively involved in this kind of behavior is to encourage the continuance of his sinful lifestyle.

The wife may give herself to him because

- ☐ she is lonely
- ☐ she is taking responsibility for his actions
- ☐ she is feeling sorry for him
- ☐ she is being pressed into it by a sense of guilt
- ☐ she desperately wants to save the marriage



But to do so is not to act in his best Interest or her own. When he begins taking responsibility for his actions (and provided there is no threat of STDs or HIV), she can resume the sexual relationship.

Relating Styles

After the sexual boundaries are strengthened, I recommend that some relational boundaries be put in place. These will be harder to implement because they will probably cut to the core of how the couple has related for years. The two codependent relating styles that have seen most are the avoidant-compliant enabler and the avoidant-persecuting enabler.

The avoidant-compliant enabler. How do some wives enable their husbands to stay sick? First, they refuse to confront. Confrontation is scary, so they avoid it at all costs. Instead of insisting that he get help, drawing sexual boundaries or getting healthy herself, she continues to act as though everything is okay. She denies the obvious, believes she can win him by manipulating his affections or accepts the false guilt that his problem is somehow her fault.

Actually, any response on her part that does not confront the behavior enables the behavior to continue. She must not accept anything short of his stopping all other relationships and all illicit activities. Though he may have occasional relapses at first with pornography or masturbation, she must determine, with the help of experienced counsel, whether each is a minor setback in an honest and diligent recovery process or a demonstration of his insincerity and lack of respect for her boundaries. Her response must be based on that determination.

The avoidant-compliant spouse also fails to hold her husband accountable for his actions. When he says she is to blame for his problem, she accepts it instead of making him responsible for his own choices. When he lies, makes excuses or accuses her of being paranoid, controlling or untrusting, she drops the ball instead of requiring him to be accountable.

Haven't his actions shown that she has every right to be suspicious? Instead she often "goes with the flow" because she believes that is what a godly wife is supposed to do or because she is afraid of losing him. She doesn't understand that there is nothing godly about helping a man continue in his destructive behavior. And, contrary to what she may believe, a sick relationship is not better than no relationship at all.

The avoidant-persecuting enabler. The persecutor is stuck in the anger phase of the grieving process. She is never just angry about her husband. She usually has a lot of anger from hurts she has suffered in the past as well.

Her husband's betrayal serves as the focal point for all of her years of unresolved anger. So whenever he fails, even in the slightest, she goes on the attack, making him pay for what he and every other person has ever done to her.



The reason I call her the avoidant persecutor is that she uses her anger at her husband to avoid having to deal with her own issues. She makes him responsible for her feelings and feels justified in her resentful response. Like her sexually compulsive husband, she refuses to take responsibility for herself and her emotions, holding him completely responsible.

She creates an atmosphere in the relationship where failure of any kind is absolutely unacceptable. She is unconsciously on the lookout for his smallest deviation from her perfectionistic ideal of what he is supposed to be and do. And if she finds it—wham!

Even if he is sincerely trying to change, she will sabotage his recovery by chipping away at his self-worth every chance she gets. This causes him to begin to lose hope and to wonder what the point is of working so hard when his efforts will never be good enough.

She enables his struggle to continue by demanding that he stop his behavior but refusing to be a warm, inviting companion who can replace the addiction he is giving up. She says she wants him to get better, but because of her impossibly high standards she insures that he will fail miserably.

The rare man who is able to move forward in spite of the persecutor's constant attacks is often surprised when she hands him divorce papers just at the time when he is doing his best. She does this because her husband's healing and increasing maturity become an unavoidable contrast to her own unchanging bitterness and inflexibility. In other words, she needs him to stay sick.

The persecuting spouse and the compliant spouse both enable the behavior to continue—they just do it differently. The compliant spouse will put up with almost anything. The persecuting spouse has a very short fuse. The compliant one will allow her husband to be verbally and emotionally abusive. The persecutor draws her guns and opens fire the moment her husband makes a mistake.

Unlike the compliant spouse, the persecutor has a clear sense of boundaries and won't let anyone step over them. Unfortunately, in an attempt to safeguard her own boundaries, she ends up violating everyone else's. The compliant takes care of everyone's needs except her own. The persecutor looks out for "number one" even though someone else's dignity gets destroyed in the process.

The compliant and persecuting spouses are opposite extremes of codependency. And what is codependency? It is an addiction to the approval of others. The compliant needs the approval of others (especially her husband) so badly that she will be whatever he and others want her to be. The persecutor is also desperate for the approval of others; that's why she attacks whenever she doesn't get it.

The compliant must learn to draw boundaries and not be afraid of a fight for the sake of righteousness; the persecutor must learn how to lay down her weapons and begin affirming her spouse and his attempts at recovery.



It will be terrifying for the compliant to meet confrontation head on, because she is afraid of the rejection that she is sure will follow. The persecutor is terrified of affirming others, because she fears that they will take it as a sign of weakness and stop moving toward the goal she envisions for them.

Both must learn to respect their own boundaries and the boundaries of others. And they must value their spiritual and emotional health even more than they value their false security, because, in the long run, that is the only thing that will truly help them or their husbands.

Dealing with Issues

It is hard for many wives to grieve and set boundaries, because they lack Inner strength, owing to their fear of abandonment. This is where a woman and her husband are identical. He is holding onto his addiction in an attempt to meet needs and avoid his loneliness. She maintains her unhealthy hold on Jim for the same reasons.

Both have a deep, God-given need for love and are looking to the wrong sources to meet it. When she really understands this, she sees that she is really no better than her husband; they are both idolaters.

The wife must see that her need for love drives her to make choices that actually hurt her and her husband. Her love-need is not bad, but her manipulative ways of trying to secure love are unhealthy. Why is it so hard for her to stop? Because she is broken too.

As she takes an honest look at her own issues, she usually finds that she, like her husband, was raised in a family environment where legitimate emotional needs were not met. Sometimes she was the "little mother" of the family, taking care of siblings, chores and, in some cases, parents. If she perceived that her needs and feelings were not important, she denied her feelings and focused on the needs of others. But spending all of her time being what others wanted her to be insured that her needs for unconditional acceptance and nurture went unmet.

This was perfect training to become the wife of a sex addict. That's why she was able to step right into the caretaking role when he came into the picture. Because she was made to believe her childhood needs didn't matter, and she never learned appropriate boundaries, she is out of touch with her present needs. Consequently, she doesn't know how to communicate honestly or address her needs in healthy ways.

This is why it's so important for her to take a candid look at her own issues. She will need outside support, because she will tend to gloss over pain from her past and not deal with it honestly.

Usually the spouse of a sex addict prides herself on being honest. In reality, she is dishonest with herself about her own issues and about the truth regarding her husband. She is also dishonest with others. Instead of telling others the truth, she will say yes when she really wants to say no. Later, when she is groaning beneath the burden of something



she agreed to do for someone, she resents that person, never realizing that it was her inability to say no that got her into this dilemma in the first place.

Why does she feel this urgency to please everyone? It is because she is terrified of rejection and desperately seeks approval. Just as her husband feels he has worth only when he is sexual, she feels she has worth only when she can do something for someone.

She is like Martha, banging pots and pans around in the kitchen and resenting that she has to work so hard for everyone, not realizing that Jesus never wanted that in the first place (see Lk 10:38-42). If the spouse of a sex addict wants to be any good to her husband, she must take care of herself first. She will need to do three things:

1. Break out of her caretaking role. She needs to stop fixing, rescuing, saving, ministering to and "helping" everyone. She must see that she is doing it out of a need to be needed. If she were serving people the way they really needed to be served, she would let them carry more of their own responsibility (see Gal 6:5).

She must stop hiding from her own inadequacies behind a constant flurry of activity. She must stop blaming her husband for her feelings and choices and start taking responsibility for herself. After all, she has no power to change her husband; she has power to change only herself, and that only with God's help.

2. Let other people love her. The codependent spouse likes to be the great benefactor to everyone else, but she hates to be on the receiving end. The fact is, as long as she is doing for everyone else, she can feel adequate and thereby protect herself from the deep sense of worthlessness that lurks within.

The healthiest thing she could do is to commit herself to a small group of women and say, "I need you. Can you love me and show me my blind spots?" She needs other women who will accept her; care for her and be there for her right where she is.

She needs true sisters in the Lord who will affirm her value and will love her enough to challenge her self-importance and gently confront her when she falls into old patterns.

2. Let God fill the emptiness. This is the greatest area of confusion for the codependent spouse. She labors under the delusion that God requires perfect performance. Only then, in her mind, can she feel acceptable and worthwhile. She has a difficult time sitting at Jesus' feet and simply basking in his love. When she does pray or read the Bible, it becomes one more place to prove herself. She doesn't realize that God needs nothing from her and simply wants to give (Mt 11:28-30). When she is quiet before him, she doesn't always feel loved, because she is accustomed to winning the love of others. This is what she had to do since she was a little girl, and it is hard for her to not apply the same "rules" to God.



She must learn the secret of letting her guard down and allowing Jesus Christ to touch her at her point of emptiness. When she does, she will begin to feel accepted and worthwhile for who she is, apart from what she does. From that place of security she can then begin serving others out of her fullness rather than her deficit. Because she will be in a place where she can freely receive from God, she will be able to give freely to others (Mt 10:8). The old, guilt-induced mentality will be replaced by a new freedom to live and love in a way closer to what God intended.

Conclusion

What is a wife to do? Grieve well, set boundaries and face herself. If she can let God and others love her back to wholeness, she will be the kind of wife that her husband needs. "Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised" (Prov 31:30).