

**An Unpopular Guide  
To  
Sex and Relationships**

**for people in 12-Step Fellowships**

**by**

**Several Program Members**

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## Foreword

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Nearly all these *Unpopular Guides* are the creation of several members of Program. We come from various 12-Step programs and are recovering from various addictions, but we have one thing in common: We believe that the goal of our recovery is the ongoing, constant practice of Steps 10 and 11, exactly as outlined in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, and the practice of Step 12 using the guidance, direction, and strength of our Higher Power as that Power may reveal itself to us in Step 11.

This particular *Unpopular Guide*, however, has rather different origins. It has been put together by a smaller group of Program members, members who identify themselves as sex and relationship addicts. They base their recovery from sex and relationship addiction almost entirely on pages 68-70 of the AA Big Book, and they actually practice Steps 10 and 11 in every meeting, using pages 84-88. Not all of them may be members of AA itself or of other 12-Step programs, though most of them are.

You might therefore regard their meetings as open AA meetings where the topic of discussion is always the same: recovery from sex and relationship addiction, as suggested by the AA Big Book. They call these *P-68 meetings* (after page 68 of the Big Book), and you can find more about P-68 at <https://p-68.org>.

However, the creators of this *Unpopular Guide* want to make the following very clear:

***This book is not P-68-approved literature, nor is it endorsed in any way by any P-68 meeting.***





# 1. Introduction

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## **An addiction that can be worse than alcohol and drugs**

Some time ago, a professional man of middle-age came to one of our meetings. He had been sober in AA for a number of years, but he was becoming increasingly concerned about the sexual relationships he had had with women during that period of sobriety. They were making him uncomfortable. They did not bring him the satisfaction and happiness that he would have liked, and he found he was being dishonest with these women. He listened to what we said and came to a few more meetings, and then he disappeared.

About twelve months later, he turned up at a meeting again. He no longer had several years of sobriety. As he told it, his sexual relationships had become more and more unbearable, and he got drunk. At the end of our meeting, he vowed that he would check himself into an alcohol treatment center shortly if he could not stay sober. He couldn't. At the time of writing, he was commencing treatment.

Another person – a woman – discovered our meetings while she was actually in a treatment center. Upon leaving, she found herself an excellent job and moved home. She was in a relationship, and she found herself suspicious and jealous of her partner even though she herself was staying sober. Eventually that suspicion and jealousy became too much, and she used drugs again. She is sober now, and working on what she realizes is her sex and relationship addiction.

These are examples of people who – hopefully – have identified their sex and relationship addiction, have realized how dangerous it is, and have done something about it.

What about alcoholics and addicts who don't do anything about it? Do any of them die? We suspect that some of them do ... but we can't be certain.

Why can't we be certain? Well, when alcoholics or addicts die of alcoholism or drug addiction, all we will ever know is that they overdosed or drank themselves to death. That is what may appear on the death certificate. How many of them actually died because they could not handle sex and/or relationships, we cannot say for sure. However, the percentage of addicts and alcoholics we know who,

during some period of sobriety, have admitted that they *do* have significant problems with sex and relationships is very high.

That suggests that the real reason many addicts and alcoholics relapse is untreated sex and relationship addiction. They could perhaps have stayed sober if they'd done something about it. But they didn't. They continued to act out in their sex and relationship addiction, and as a result they drank and drugged again.

Sex and relationship addiction can affect anyone, but it seems to be more common among alcoholics and drug addicts than among the population as a whole. The AA Big Book spoke about this more than eighty years ago on pages 68-70, and it also suggested why this happens.

Now, it may be that there are many sober people in AA, NA, and similar fellowships who have few or no problems with sex and relationships. While they may still find this book of interest, it's really intended for those members of 12-Step fellowships who are sober or abstinent, but *who have come to suspect that they do have a problem with sex and relationships*.

Might you be a sex and relationship addict, even though you are sober and abstinent? If you are a sex and relationship addict, and if you do not do something about that addiction, our experience suggests that it *may* kill you.

We don't *know* that it will kill you, of course. But – speaking for ourselves – *we* are fairly certain that if *we* don't do something about our sex and relationship addiction, and if *we* don't keep doing something about it, it may well kill *us*. We are *absolutely certain* that it will make us as miserable as, and perhaps more miserable than, our drinking and drugging once did.

### **What is “sex and relationship addiction”?**

Many of us will never have heard the expression “sex and relationship addiction” before.

We may have heard of, or we may belong to, programs that help people with sex-related problems, such as Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA) or Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA). But the phrase “sex and relationship addiction” may be quite new to us.

Why are we talking about “sex and relationship addiction”?

People whose problems are mainly with sex itself may choose to join SAA or similar 12-Step fellowships.

Those whose sexual problems have a strong emotional component to them – for example, “romantic” elements, or elements of emotional intrigue, fantasy, and secrecy – may instead attend SLAA or similar meetings.

However, in our own meetings we make no distinction between the various sexually-based behaviors that may be causing us difficulties.

We believe that all of us – from those whose focus is mainly on sex, to those for whom “being in love” seems to be the most important thing in life – have the same underlying problem:

*We have difficulty developing intimate relationships with another human being. And so, inevitably, our “acting out” sexually or romantically becomes a **substitute** or a **replacement** for that intimacy.*

We also share another belief:

*We have difficulties developing intimate relationships with other people because we have never really developed an intimate relationship with a Power greater than ourselves.*

We would like to repeat what we are saying here – and also what we are *not* saying:

- We are *not* saying that members of other 12-Step programs like SLAA or SAA are wrong or misguided, or that those programs are ineffective.
- We are *not* saying that we have some sort of monopoly on recovery from sex and/or relationship addiction.
- We *are* saying that we have found a common solution to our various sex and relationship problems.
- We *are* saying that we believe our common problem is *not* our dysfunctional sexual or romantic behavior – that is merely a symptom – but our difficulty in developing

intimate relationships with another human being. That is why we call ourselves “sex and relationship addicts.”

- We *are* saying that we believe it is impossible to have any sort of meaningful sexual relationship with another person unless that relationship is an **intimate and committed** relationship **first**.
- We *are* saying that our difficulties are a result of our lack of a truly intimate relationship with a Power greater than ourselves.

### **How do we recover from sex and relationship addiction?**

We believe our recovery from sex and relationship addiction has three parts to it:

- Developing an intimate relationship with a Power greater than ourselves (and therefore getting to know ourselves intimately).
- Building intimate relationships within Program.
- Building intimate relationships outside Program.

You may be thinking, “Wait a moment: those all refer to *relationships*. What’s happened to the sex?” Our experience suggests that there is no point in trying to address the sexual issues until we learn how to have intimate relationships. Once we are able to have intimate relationships, we can address the sexual issues. This may seem very strange to most readers, but we deal with it at length in the following pages.

## 2. The problem

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### A problem that no one wants to acknowledge

Most people think that they have no sex and relationship problems – even people who actually *do* have these problems.

Why is this?

To understand why, let's talk for a moment about alcoholism and drug addiction, and then compare it with sex and relationship addiction.

Most of us (other than perhaps practicing alcoholics and addicts) think that alcoholism and drug addiction is a huge problem, particularly in the West. As a society, we don't think that it is a good idea to abuse alcohol and drugs. We probably think that it *is* a good idea to try and do something about alcoholism and drug addiction – with the help of governments, faith-based organizations, 12-Step programs, private or public health services, and so on. When we see men and women around us destroying themselves with alcohol and drugs, we know that there is something terribly wrong with them. We call such people *addicts*.

Now let's look at sex and relationship addiction.

In some ways, most of us view sex and relationship addiction – particularly sex addiction – in the *same way* as we regard alcoholism and drug addiction. Most of us view rape, sex with children, and other similar behaviors as completely unacceptable. We tend to be uneasy about people who use pornography (even though the evidence suggests that an increasing number of us do so ourselves). We might well regard people who behave in this way as sex addicts, in fact.

In other ways, however, most of us regard sex and relationship addiction as being very *different* from alcoholism and drug addiction. In fact, we often think sex and relationship addiction is *normal*, even if we don't necessarily think it's *desirable*.

For example, when people – including many people who are recovering in a 12-Step program – have casual sex with partner after partner; when they have intense, sometimes lengthy affairs, even though they are already married or in an existing long-term relationship; when they fantasize constantly about sex, or consistently stare at attractive men or women when they walk past; when they think nothing of having sex with someone they do not know and will

probably never meet again ... many of us view this sort of behavior as *normal*.

Similarly, most of us accept quite readily that people get divorced because they have “fallen out of love with each other” and that they may then fall in love again, remarry, and fall out of love and get divorced again, possibly several times. Indeed, we ourselves may fall into that category. We think problems with sex and relationships make excellent material for songs, sitcoms, and movies. We often find sex and relationship problems funny or entertaining.

And yet, when we look at the results of this kind of casual sexual behavior, we see that they are often extremely damaging. As mentioned earlier, we – the creators of this book – have admitted that we are sex and relationship addicts. We have accepted the damage that we have caused to ourselves and to other people because of our sex and relationship addiction. But we can also see clearly the similar damage being caused by other people – particularly recovering addicts – who regard themselves as *normal* when it comes to their sexual behavior and their relationships.

So here are some important questions:

- If supposedly “ordinary” people are causing this kind of damage to themselves and others, might at least some of those “ordinary” people also be sex and relationship addicts?
- Are *you* inflicting this kind of damage on yourself, on your family, on your friends and acquaintances, and on society as a whole, even though you may belong to a 12-Step fellowship?
- And – if you are – is it possible that *you* may be a sex and relationship addict too?

To help you answer these questions, let’s look at some of the consequences of sex and relationship addiction. See if you recognize any of them in yourself (or in people you know).

## **Might you be a sex and relationship addict?**

Here are some typical symptoms of sex and relationship addiction. Are you displaying any of these symptoms?

- You're spending much of your life hopelessly pursuing an ideal relationship where being "in love" lasts forever.
- You have left a marriage or long-term relationship because you "fell in love" with somebody else, particularly if you have done this more than once.
- You have always arranged your life so you never have to be without some sort of "intimate" partner for any length of time.
- You spend significant amounts of time fantasizing about certain men or women, regardless of whether the fantasies are purely sexual or are "romantic" in nature.
- You don't even recall names, locations, or exact events from many of your sexual encounters because they were so brief.
- You try to avoid certain old friends because you had a brief (or perhaps lengthy) sexual relationship with them which damaged your friendship.
- You don't seem to be able to stop yourself staring at men and women whom you see casually (for example, in a restaurant). You may stare only briefly, but you know very well that you are "checking them out".
- You use pornography to an extent that makes you uncomfortable.
- You use alcohol or drugs to "enhance" your sexual encounters.
- You're in a long-term relationship, but you are involved in one or more other "intimate" relationships which have to be kept secret from your long-term partner.
- You are trying to moderate or stop certain sexual or "romantic" behaviors, but you've never been successful over any meaningful period of time.
- You have caused grief, sorrow, anger, and resentment to members of your close family, your extended family, your

- friends, and your acquaintances because of your sexual or “romantic” behavior.
- Your sexual behavior is based on being completely alone or completely secretive, so it has made it difficult or impossible for you to have friendships or to be involved in normal society.
  - You feel self-disgust at your behavior, or you experience deep guilt, loneliness, isolation, and increasing alienation from others.
  - You interfere in and manipulate the lives of your children in an attempt to help them find “happier” relationships than you have been able to find. This often shows itself in forbidding your children to behave in ways which you yourself have behaved, or in urging them to have the kind of relationship you’ve never succeeded in having.
  - You’re afraid of getting older, because ageing inevitably makes fantasy-based relationships more difficult to find.
  - If you practice a religion, it seems to be of little or no help. You know that your religion can never condone your behavior, and yet it doesn’t seem to have the power to make you stop.
  - You have moral or legal troubles, if your particular sexual practices are frowned upon, or regarded as illegal, by society.
  - You suspect your recovery is threatened, if you are in a 12-Step program like AA or NA ... or any other 12-Step program, for that matter.
  - You seem unable ever to experience fully the wonder, the mystery, the frustration, and the “every-dayness” of a genuinely intimate and committed relationship with another human being.

We do not offer this list as some sort of test to determine whether you’re a sex and relationship addict. Only you can make that decision. Nevertheless, some recovering sex and relationship addicts have suggested that if you answer Yes to one of these items, you *might be* a sex and relationship addict. If you answer Yes to two items, you *may well be* a sex and relationship addict. And if you answer Yes to three or



more, then you almost certainly *are* a sex and relationship addict. But – as we just said – only you can make that decision.

Incidentally, we are not saying that the list above is exhaustive. You may be able to add other items to it.

We think you will agree that none of these symptoms describe happy people who know how to have intimate, committed relationships.

### **Attempting to control sex and relationship addiction**

We – the creators of this book – typically identify with several items on this list, though the items may be different for each of us, based on the nature of our sex and relationship addiction. We tried over and over to find some satisfactory way of directing our lives in this modern, sexually “free” society, only to make decisions and take actions which made ourselves, and the people with whom we interacted, miserable and resentful. Many – but not all – of us found our inability to deal with sex to be linked closely to our abuse of alcohol and drugs. We found the combination of sex and alcohol or drugs to be damaging in the extreme. *But even when we sobered up, many of us found that our sex and relationship problems persisted.* Sometimes they even got worse. And sometimes they led us back to alcohol and/or drugs.

As with most other addictions, our failure to control our sex and relationship addiction did not prevent us from attempting over and over again to manage it. Our lack of success was not due to lack of willpower, for most of us have plenty of reserves of that. We failed because – as we now realize – our sex and relationship addiction can’t be handled with willpower.

We want to emphasize again that we are talking here about sex and relationship addicts – not about people in general. In our modern Western societies, it may well be the case that most people are able to handle this new freedom around relationships with a sexual component to them. It may be that you are able to handle it. *We have no opinion on how people in general should handle or do handle these relationships.* Our observations here are about people who – like us – are sex and relationship addicts, and therefore *cannot* handle this freedom.

## “AFICS”

In most societies – even to some extent in our modern-day Western society – *healthy* intimate relationships that have a sexual component to them seem to pass through these stages:

- Acquaintance, followed by
- Friendship, followed by
- Intimacy, followed by
- Commitment, followed by
- Sex

A person who chooses to live life in this healthy way has **Aacquaintances** – people he or she knows, but only superficially. He or she may have many acquaintances. Of those acquaintances, a few may become **Friends**. And of those friends, a very small number may become **Intimate** friends. Most of those intimate friendships will have no hint of any physical attraction. But one of them may, and the result may be that the man or woman decides to make a **Commitment** to that intimate friend – a commitment to be with that friend for the future, regardless of what may happen. Against the background of that intimate, committed relationship, a physical or **Sexual** relationship begins.

Of course, this commitment to one person didn't and doesn't always work out in the way we've just described. In all societies, no matter how restrictive or traditional they may be, problems have always arisen when people attempt to have intimate committed relationships that have a sexual component to them. However, many societies in the world typically discourage any sort of deviation from the AFICS pattern. It would be true to say that most members of those societies follow – or at least accept that they *ought* to follow – this pattern.

In modern Western society, by contrast, it would probably be true to say that most people *don't* follow this AFICS pattern. It would probably also be true to say that many people don't think that they *should* or that they *need to* follow this pattern. Sex may be a component at any stage of the development of a relationship. In some cases it can even precede acquaintance.

As we have said several times already, we have no opinion on how well the abandoning of the AFICS pattern works for people in general. It may be that the increase in sexual freedom suits most people just fine. Or it may be that it causes them problems from time to time, but not problems of a serious nature. We are interested here only in people who have – or who suspect that they may have – a *significant* problem which is damaging them and the people with whom they interact: people, in short, who are – or who think they might be – sex and relationship addicts. We are particularly interested in such people who are also members of 12-Step fellowships.

For those of us who suffer from sex and relationship addiction, any variation of the AFICS pattern usually results in severe and increasing problems. Generally speaking, sex and relationship addicts cannot handle relationships where that letter *S* in AFICS comes anywhere other than at the end. In other words, we can't put the *S* in front of any of the other letters.

Let's see what happens when sex and relationship addicts attempt to place sex anywhere other than at the end of the continuum of acquaintance-friendship-intimacy-commitment. Let's examine the results of taking that letter *S* for sex, and trying to place it somewhere else.

### **Variations on AFICS and the resulting problems**

1. *Sex prior to acquaintance* (SAFIC). Sex and relationship addicts who put sex before acquaintance may use fantasy or masturbation. Rape, including rape or gang rape of someone completely unknown, can come into this category, as does sex with a child, an animal, or with something inanimate. Some examples of sex with prostitutes may belong here too.

*Sex prior to acquaintance* seems to be characteristic of people who are afraid of engaging emotionally with other adults, even at a superficial level. They may spend most of their time alone. A few, however, may outwardly show a swaggering, even violent, bravado, although this often seems to be a cover for fear or anger.

2. *Sex prior to friendship (ASFIC)*. Sex and relationship addicts who base sex on acquaintance rather than friendship try to have sexual relationships with other adults, while keeping any hint of an *ongoing* relationship to an absolute minimum. So-called “one-night stands” fall into this category. So do some sexual interactions involving more than one person, dating sites that are used predominantly for so-called casual sex, or most sex with prostitutes.

Sex and relationship addicts who *put sex after acquaintance but before friendship* seem to feel the need for some human interaction when they have sex, but they want it to play a minimal role. It may be the case that they are afraid even of the mild closeness of friendship, let alone any true intimacy.

3. *Sex prior to intimacy (AFSIC)*. This variation is fairly common in Western society, and is often ironically referred to as “friends with benefits.”

Sex and relationship addicts who attempt *a sexual relationship based just on friendship* may be sociable and outgoing. They know how to make acquaintances and how to build some of those acquaintances into friendships.

However, they don’t want a sexual relationship with someone with whom they are intimate – that is, someone with whom they can and do discuss their most intimate thoughts and feelings. They seem to be afraid of intimate relationships. As a result, their sexual relationships are often brief and rarely last any length of time, because pure sexual attraction rarely lasts any length of time.

This kind of sexual relationship can often damage the friendship within which it occurs. It can then take time for that friendship to mend, and in many cases it never does mend.

However, most sex and relationship addicts of this type make friends quickly and easily, so there is always the opportunity to repeat this behavior with someone new.

4. *Sex prior to commitment (AFISC)*. This may be the most common variation in Western society. As a result, sex and relationship addicts with this pattern may have the most difficulty in seeing that they may have a problem.

Addicts who place *sex prior to commitment* are able to make the acquaintance of people and to become friends with a certain number of those acquaintances. They then progress to what they like to think is an intimate relationship with one of those friends to whom they may be sexually attracted. In many cases, however, that relationship is not truly intimate. Instead, it's "romantic." "Romantic" relationships are rarely intimate, though they often *feel* as though they are intimate. The reason that they *feel* intimate seems to be that, when we are in love, the other person may seem perfect, or nearly so. The truth is that the addict is actually "high" in a sense, and will remain so until he or she falls out of love.

What is missing from these romantic, supposedly "intimate" relationships? Generally speaking, it's the ability and the willingness to be completely and openly honest with the other person.

We want to stress here that we are talking about being *willing* to be open and honest. Not for one moment are we suggesting that people in intimate relationships should always *be* brutally honest with one another. What we are instead saying is that the *willingness* should be there.

But that openness and honesty is generally absent from these supposedly intimate relationships. Here's a brief list of what is usually missing: discussions of the addict's deepest fears; the ability to listen to the partner without judgment; the willingness to recognize that, in any committed relationship, each partner may be many different things at many different times: lover, parent, child, victim, persecutor, a God-substitute, a friend, and so on.

Instead, the addict typically has an image of him- or herself as s/he would *like* to be, and may attempt to persuade the partner that s/he actually *is* that person. Even to attempt something like this means avoiding the truth to at least some degree, because it involves us in pretending that we are something we are not, and no truly intimate relationship can survive this sort of dishonesty.

The typical version of sex before commitment goes like this. Two people "fall in love," and during the in-love phase are easily able to overlook the reality of who the other person actually is. They marry or make a commitment of some other kind to one another, convinced that they will feel this way about one another for ever. Some time after making that commitment, it dawns on one or both partners that the

other is in fact just an ordinary, fallible human being – an insight which usually coincides with realizing that he or she is no longer “in love.” At this point, therefore – in other words, at exactly the moment where they might finally be able to develop a committed meaningful relationship to each other, because they are no longer “in love” – they separate and/or divorce *because* they are no longer in love. Often, this breakup is accompanied by one or other of the partners “falling in love” with another person ... and so the pattern continues.

Sex and relationship addicts of this kind fail to understand intimacy in its fullest sense. They have sex based on their defective ideas of “intimacy” and then attempt to build a commitment upon “being in love” instead on upon *genuine* intimacy.

### **“Unacceptable” and “acceptable” types of sex and relationship addiction**

If you go back to the list of kinds of sex and relationship addiction – the four variations on AFICS that we discussed – you’ll notice something important. The higher up the list the particular kind of addiction, the less “acceptable” it is to people in general.

Types 1 and 2 (*SAFIC* and *ASFIC*) are generally regarded as “unacceptable”; types 3 and 4 (*AFSIC* and *AFISC*) are generally regarded as more acceptable. We like to think that the difference between them is that the behaviors associated with types 1 and 2 are disgraceful or disgusting. But the real difference is this:

People of all types – 1, 2, 3, and 4 – have difficulties building intimate relationships with others. However, those who are closer to the top of the list seem to a large extent to have given up on ever having these intimate relationships. Rather than trying to have them, they use their behavior as some sort of substitute for intimacy.

Those who are closer to the bottom of the list, by contrast, like pretend to themselves that the relationships they develop *are* intimate relationships. They talk themselves into believing that they *do* know how to have intimate relationships. But – as we have seen – they don’t.

## Why do we talk about “relationship addiction”?

You may already have accepted to some extent that sex addiction of any kind is simply a symptom. It’s a symptom of deep problems in developing intimate relationships of *any* kind, whether those relationships have a sexual component to them or not.

But you may be puzzled as to why we talk about “relationship addiction.” We may have difficulties with intimate relationships. But what does that have to do with “relationship addiction”? What do we mean by “relationship addiction”?

The answer is fairly obvious, when we give the matter some thought. Think of any sort of addiction at all, from the obviously devastating addictions like alcoholism to those addictions that some people might even regard as “healthy,” such as workaholism.

The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous says that “our drinking careers have been characterized by countless vain attempts to prove we could drink like other people. The idea that somehow, someday he will control and enjoy his drinking is the great obsession of every abnormal drinker.” Here is the *addictive* component of alcoholism. The alcoholic’s problem is two-fold: On the one hand, he cannot handle alcohol; on the other hand, he is convinced that he can if only he tries harder.

Now let us rephrase this quotation from the AA Big Book, but substitute different words such as “work” or “workaholism” for “drink” and “drinking.” The problem for the workaholic is also two-fold. She cannot exercise control over the amount of time she devotes to work; and yet she is convinced that she can, if only she tries harder.

Those of us who identify as sex and relationship addicts can say exactly the same thing about our attempts to form intimate relationships. We fail to do so over and over again. But our failures don’t seem to stop us from *trying* over and over again to develop an intimate relationship. We are convinced that we’ll manage to do it somehow or another, if we just keep trying.

That is why we talk about “relationship addiction.” Our attempts to form intimate relationships are doomed in exactly the same way as alcoholics’ attempts to control their drinking, or workaholics’ attempts to bring some balance to their work and non-work lives. On the one hand, we see over and over that we fail when we attempt to form

intimate relationships. On the other hand, we're convinced we'll figure out how to do it eventually, if we persist at it.

That's *real* addiction: trying over and over again to control something, when all the evidence is that we can't control it.

### **Becoming desperate, becoming willing**

The AA Big Book says the following about alcoholism. It is equally true of sex and relationship addiction:

*There is a solution. Almost none of us liked the self-searching, the leveling of pride, the confession of shortcoming which the process requires for its successful consummation. But we saw that it really worked in others, and we had come to believe in the hopelessness and futility of life as we had been living it.*

But we would like to add something to this paragraph. Although we have seen many of our members recover from sex and relationship addiction, that number is vanishingly small. Most people who attend our meetings once *and who freely admit during the meeting that they are sex and relationship addicts* never return. We know that our program works, for those who are willing to work it. So the question is this: Why? Why are so few sex and relationships addicts willing to work it, once they have been exposed to it?

The answer appears to be this: *They are not desperate*. They know they have a problem, but they are able to rationalize it away by reflecting that plenty of supposedly normal people seem to have the same problem. Society as a whole doesn't seem unduly troubled by people's sex and relationship problems. So a sex and relationship addict seems to need to reach a point of *total desperation* before he or she is willing to work our simple program.

Sometimes we feel a little like the early members of AA ... but with one great difference.

In the early days of AA, very few people thought the life of a practicing alcoholic to be a desirable one. The vast majority believed



alcoholism to be a scourge. In other words, the message of recovery in AA was a message that many alcoholics were more than ready to hear.

But that is not true of sex and relationship addiction. Most sex and relationship addicts don't think they have a problem at all. Others acknowledge a problem, but don't believe it to be that great. No wonder that there are no long lines of people outside our meetings begging to be admitted.

So much for the problem of sex and relationship addiction. Now we're going to talk a little about the roots of that addiction.

### 3. Selfishness, dishonesty, and fear

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#### Identifying and accepting our fear, selfishness, and dishonesty

Why is it that we sex and relationship addicts seem to make such a mess of things when we attempt to have intimate relationships with other people? It's because we are *afraid*. We're afraid that we're unlovable. We're afraid of being alone. We're afraid of being trapped in a relationship. We're afraid of being known. We're afraid of intimacy and commitment. And we're resentful too, but that's just another form of fear (that is, *I'm afraid, but it's somebody else's fault*).

Those fears manifest themselves in two kinds of behavior, which the AA Big Book identifies in Chapter 5 when it talks about the causes of alcoholism itself.

We are *selfish* – deeply selfish, so deeply selfish that very often we are completely unable to see how profoundly selfish we are.

And we are *dishonest* – not just with other people, but with ourselves.

1. *We are being driven by what we want. We are selfish.* We believe that we know very well what we want and need from an intimate relationship. For example, we may want or need sex. However, it may also be true that our wants and needs may have little or nothing to do with sex itself. We may want to dominate and control within an intimate relationship. Or we may want the opposite: we may want to be guided, looked after, or controlled by someone within an intimate relationship. For most of us sex and relationship addicts, there seems to be a combination of sexual or physical wants and needs, and non-sexual wants and needs.

This is the nature of real selfishness: seeking above all else to meet our own wants and needs, either by having sex without any sort of relationship at all, or within a supposedly “intimate” relationship that is not really intimate at all.

2. *We are not prepared to be open and honest* with the other person about what we want and need. **We are dishonest.** We sex and relationship addicts believe that we will not get what we want and need if we are foolish enough to reveal our wants and needs. So in order to meet our selfish requirements, we are *dishonest*: we pretend to be

someone other than who we really are. We may pretend that we don't want or need any kind of intimate relationship with anybody. Or we may pretend to be self-confident and capable, when in fact we are fearful of making mistakes. Or we pretend to be what the other person wants us to be, because we are desperately looking for someone to take care of us and protect us. In addition, of course, if we are attempting to have more than one sexually-based relationship at a time, we tell lies to cover the way we are deceiving our partners.

Briefly, then, we sex and relationship addicts tend to do the following.

- We attempt to develop, or we attempt to avoid entirely, “intimate” relationships with other human beings, so that we can get what we selfishly believe we want and need;
- We set about this by being dishonest – that is, by pretending that we are someone different from who we actually are.

You may want to read those bullet points again. When our approach to intimate relationships is stated as simply as this, it immediately becomes obvious that we can never succeed. How on earth is an intimate relationship even possible, when it is *our* wants and needs that are the priority? How is an intimate relationship even possible, when we are pretending to be someone other than who we are?

*How is it possible to have an intimate relationship that is based on such fundamental and profound fear, selfishness, and dishonesty?*

*Identifying* our fear, selfishness, and dishonesty is an important step in dealing with our sex and relationship addiction. So is *accepting* our fear, selfishness and dishonesty. It's not an easy thing to accept that most, if not all, of our close relationships have been built on fear, on the defective foundations of our own wants and needs, and on our attempts to conceal who we really are.

But identifying and accepting our fear, selfishness, and dishonesty is only the beginning of solving our addiction problem.

If knowing what was wrong with us were enough, none of us would have attend more than one of our meetings. The other members at that meeting would explain our fear, selfishness, and dishonesty, and we would leave the meeting having realized that all we needed to do was to stop being afraid, selfish, and dishonest.

Unfortunately, we are addicts, so just knowing what is wrong with us won't solve our problem. Self-knowledge is only a half measure, and the AA Big Book says, "Half measures availed us nothing."

### **The results of fear, selfishness, and dishonesty**

When we sex and relationship addicts look back over our lives, we typically find that fear, selfishness, and dishonesty have been a part of all our attempts at having, or avoiding, intimate relationships. It has been a pattern for most of our lives. Only by pretending would we be able to get love, sex, acceptance, and intimacy. Or – if we were afraid of any real human interaction at all - only by isolating ourselves for most of the time would we be able to get the sex we wanted.

In fact, most of us find ourselves in an internal struggle between who we wish we were on the one hand, and who we are afraid that we are on the other. We can think that we are unpleasant, perhaps unacceptable individuals, a prey to unhealthy wants and desires which would horrify other people if they found out about them. At the same time, however, we may do all we can not to appear to be these unpleasant individuals. Many of us strive instead to be who we would *like* to be.

This conflict between who we are afraid that we are, and who we want to be instead, is something that we sex and relationship addicts may handle in different ways.

A few of us have given up almost completely on trying to be who we want to be, so we keep away as much as we can from other people. In our world of near-isolation, we can then attempt to satisfy our hidden wants and desires. Many sex addicts behave in this manner.

But there are also sex and relationship addicts who behave in a very different way. They have almost managed to convince themselves that they *can* be the people they want to be. They appear to be friendly, open, self-confident, and cheerful. They are often the envy of others, addicts and non-addicts alike. They have done all they can to bury that other person, the person they are afraid that they really are. On the outside, they may seem to have succeeded. But on the inside, they know they are living a lie.

Most of us sex and relationship addicts fall somewhere on the continuum between disliking ourselves for who we really are, and trying desperately to appear to be who we want to be. Some sex and relationship addicts may do both. The problem is this: The longer we dislike ourselves for being who we are afraid we are, or attempt to be someone that we know we are not, the more we lose touch with who we actually are.

Gradually, we build around us a world which does not reflect who we really are, but which permits us to pretend to be who we want to be, or which prevents other people discovering what awful people we are. So we choose friends, jobs, even leisure activities based on this imaginary “I” that we create out of our fear, selfishness, and dishonesty. If the people that are now our friends, our acquaintances, even our family members knew who we really are and what we really want, then our secret would be out and we would be rejected, ridiculed, pitied, treated with contempt ... all the things we fear may happen if we are completely honest about who we are. In some cases we remove ourselves altogether from others, and live in a world of isolation. Most of us spend most of our time hiding who we are, trying to be somebody other than who we are, or both.

When we sex and relationship addicts have reached this point – the point of starting to lose altogether who we really are – then we are in a downward spiral of fearful, selfish, dishonest, addictive behavior that we are powerless to escape. We are, in many cases, “beyond human aid,” as the AA Big Book puts it.

But where can that aid come from? We cannot trust “ordinary” people and tell them what is really going on with us. Those of us who are alcoholics, drug addicts, or other kinds of addicts very often find that *we cannot even trust fellow recovering addicts with this information about ourselves, because many of those recovering addicts seem to have problems with sex and relationship addiction too ... and are doing little or nothing about them.*

What can we do to rid ourselves of this fear, selfishness, and dishonesty? What should we do to recover from sex and relationship addiction?

## 4. The solution

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### The three aspects of recovery

As we have already mentioned, there are three aspects to our recovery:

- Developing a genuinely *intimate* relationship with a Power greater than ourselves, and therefore getting to know ourselves intimately.
- Building genuinely *intimate* relationships within Program.
- Learning how to have genuinely *intimate* relationships outside Program.

We learn how to do these things by practicing the Twelve Steps of Program, just as in any other 12-Step fellowship. But there is a distinctive approach to the Steps in our meetings.

First of all, we work the first nine Steps as quickly as possible. Many of us are members of other 12-Step programs, so we may already have worked them. *Regardless of whether we have done them, we repeat the sex inventory part of Step 4 and the corresponding part of Step 5.* Even if we've done Step 4 before, most of us made a poor job of the sex inventory part – if we even troubled to do it at all. In Appendix A, we offer an outline for the sex inventory, based (as usual) on the suggestions in the AA Big Book.

Second, we *actively* practice Steps 10 and 11 from the very start of our recovery.

### The role of Steps 10 and 11

In every one of our meetings, we members actually work Steps 10 and 11 – that is, we follow the suggestions for working Steps 10 and 11 found in the AA Big Book on pages 84-88. New members can often find this practice a little puzzling. What, they wonder, can be the connection between practicing these Steps and recovering from sex and relationship addiction?

The answer is that the practice of these two Steps is the foundation of our ongoing recovery. We learn through Steps 10 and 11 how to become, not who we think that we are, or who we are afraid that we are, or who we would like to be, but who our Higher Power says that we are. And we do that by developing an intimate relationship with that Higher Power using those very Steps.

In the practice of Step 10, we acknowledge our wants and desires and the selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, and fear that arise out of these wants and desires. We don't simply sit and *think* about these things. We *watch* for them, we ask our Higher Power to *remove* them, and we *discuss* them with other members. This is an intimate practice – about as intimate as anyone can get. We admit what we want, and we admit how those wants and desires make us feel. To admit these things to a Higher Power is to experience an intimate relationship with that Higher Power. To admit these things to another member (or to two other members: the practice is done in two and threes in our meetings) is to experience an intimate relationship with those members. To admit these things in a group is to experience a sense of fellowship with the group as a whole. These other people may be very different from us in many ways, but when it comes to needing to learn how to develop intimate relationships, they are exactly like us – they must be, or else they wouldn't be in the meeting to begin with.

After we've practiced Step 10, we move on to Step 11. There are a few minutes of silence, during which time we are quiet and give our Higher Power both space and time to work within us. Because this is done as a group, it reinforces the sense of intimacy that we find in the practice of Step 10.

To practice Steps 10 and 11 in the meeting is, for many new members, to experience the beginnings of true intimacy for the first time in many years. Of course, if we only practice these two Steps in meetings, that insight into intimacy is likely to grow very slowly. So most of us practice Steps 10 and 11 by ourselves, several times a day. We ask ourselves as often as we remember, *Right here, right now, am I disturbed in any way?* (This question comes from page 417 of the Fourth Edition of the AA Big Book.) If the answer is *Yes*, then we continue with the practice of the rest of Step 10, getting in touch with another member if there is anything we need to discuss.

Out of this intimate practice there starts to emerge a sense of who we really are – as opposed to who we’re afraid we are, or who we would like to be.

And something else starts to happen, something of the greatest importance, something that lies at the heart of all *real* recovery in any 12-Step program.

Many recovering addicts dream of the day that they will no longer *want* to do the things they ought not to do. Many recovering addicts dream of the day when they will *want* to do the things they really ought to do. But even if these do happen from time to time, they’re not the basis of *real* recovery. They can’t be, because inevitably a time will come when we are powerless over our wants and so revert to our old ways.

*Real* recovery is learning that:

- We can do things that we don’t want to do, *while not wanting to do them*, because our Higher Power is giving us the will and the power to do them.
- We can refrain from doing things that we want to do, *while wanting to do them*, because our Higher Power is giving us the will and the power not to do them.

This *real* recovery is vital for recovering sex and relationship addicts, because a committed relationship can’t survive if it’s based on us getting what we want when we want it, and not getting what we don’t want when we don’t want it. That’s not the way it works. So Steps 10 and 11 teach us how to handle those times when a committed relationship becomes difficult. Our practice helps us to turn our feelings over to our Higher Power, prevents those feelings from pushing us into impulsive and destructive actions, enables us to determine what we should do instead, and allows us to find the strength from our Higher Power to do it.

The AA Big Book describes this as “a way of living” that “should continue for a lifetime” (page 84). It requires patience and persistence, and those can only come with the help of our Higher Power. So this sense of who we really are will not emerge immediately or even quickly. And when it does begin to emerge, there will be many, many times that we retreat from it, and start once more to be afraid of who



we think we are or to want to be someone else. Handling these feelings is part of the purpose of Step 10. It is a “go-to” tool for when these feelings of fear or desire arise. Together, Steps 10 and 11 can deal with anything we may encounter.

As we work these Steps, we find that *all* our relationships begin to improve, not only those with our Higher Power or with other recovering sex and relationship addicts. When fear, selfishness, and dishonesty start to slip away from us, there is much more room in our lives for everyone else in the world. This is one of the benefits of recovery from sex and relationship addiction: our increasing interest in, and acceptance of, other people – not for what we can get out of them, but purely for themselves.

### **Next steps**

The AA Big Book talks about two preconditions for recovery: honesty (particularly self-honesty) and unselfishness. They are dealt with in the opening pages of Chapter 5: How It Works. In every one of our meetings, our members ask themselves whether they are being selfish and dishonest, and then share their answers with another member in the meeting.

The AA Big Book also talks about the causes of this dishonesty and selfishness: they arise, it says, out of resentment and fear. In every one of our meetings, our members ask themselves whether they are resentful and afraid, and then share their answers with another member in the meeting.

In other words, they practice Step 10 in the meeting. And then they go out into the world and practice Step 10 there too.

The AA Big Book suggests prayer and meditation as a means of determining what our Higher Power wants us to do, and as a means of getting the power to do it. So in every meeting, there are two short periods of silence for this activity.

In other words, members practice Step 11 in the meeting. And then they go out into the world and practice Step 11 there too.

So what can *you* do to recover from sex and relationship addiction?

If you are a member of a 12-Step fellowship which focuses on sex and relationships, but you’ve been unable to build any meaningful

recovery in that fellowship, it may be that you need to practice the solution that we have offered in this chapter. Perhaps you can start a meeting within your own fellowship which uses our simple suggestions.

You could also start an open AA meeting that focuses on sex and relationships, as we suggest in the Foreword to this book. This may take some courage on your part, because some recovering alcoholics may object to it. They may maintain that AA meetings should avoid any discussion of politics, religion, or sex. Perhaps politics and religion *are* best avoided, but it seems strange to us that sex and relationships – the only addiction other than alcoholism to which the AA Big Book devotes any attention (on pages 68-70) – should be off-limits for an AA meeting.

You could also start a P-68 meeting, as mentioned in the Foreword to this book. You can find all the information you'll need, including a suggested meeting format, at <https://p-68.org>.

Our growth towards what our Higher Power wants us to be is gradual and sometimes frustratingly slow. But over time we see it work more and more frequently, more and more deeply. We have seen this happen time after time with our members. We suspect that it can happen for you too, if you begin to do what we do. The P-68 *Little Book*, which you can find at <https://p-68.org>, tells you *exactly* what we do and how we do it.

Our path to recovery is simple, but not always easy. If you are sober or abstinent in your 12-Step program, but you are still having problems with sex and relationships, we hope you will walk with us at least a little way along that path to recovery. It can do you no harm, and it may save both your recovery so far ... and your life.

## Appendix: The Step 4 Sex Inventory

Whether or not we are members of other 12-Step fellowships, we find it beneficial to write an in-depth sex inventory as we work on our recovery from sex and relationship addiction. Perhaps we have attempted a sex inventory before, but most of us would agree that we did a pretty half-hearted job of it. Clearly, a meaningful Step 4 sex inventory is likely to be vital if we want any lasting recovery from sex and relationship addiction.

Here is what the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous suggests on page 69:

*We reviewed our own conduct over the years past. Where had we been selfish, dishonest, or inconsiderate? Whom had we hurt? Did we unjustifiably arouse jealousy, suspicion or bitterness? Where were we at fault, what should we have done instead? We got this all down on paper and looked at it.*

Let's take this a sentence at a time.

### **A. We reviewed our own conduct over the years past.**

We are not suggesting that we note down the details of every relationship we may have had in the past. That might have been possible when the Big Book was first written, but most people today have many sexually-based relationships (or “romantic” relationships) and there is little point in listing all of these – even if we remember them.

Instead, we consider the wording of Step 5: *Admitted ... the exact nature of our wrongs*. We are writing our Step 4 sex inventory so that we can determine the exact *nature* of our wrongs: it's not intended to be a list of all our wrongs.

Instead, we suggest writing a list of those relationships we had which were significant for us in some way. Any long-term relationships or marriages will appear in the list. So will relationships which remain in our minds for some reason. Examples may be: the first relationship where we fell in love; the first relationship where we had sex; the

person who “dumped” us and who we never really got over; any relationship that we recall with special emotion, like the person we still think we should have married. Most of us select eight, ten, or twelve relationships which are examples of the *nature* of our overall relationship patterns. If we have difficulty in deciding whether a relationship should be on our list, we ask our Higher Power.

**B. Where had we been selfish, dishonest, or inconsiderate?**

For *each* of the relationships on our list, we write down *concrete examples* of our selfishness, dishonesty, and lack of consideration in that relationship. We do not generalize: we recall specific instances and write a few sentences about them.

**C. Whom had we hurt?**

For each of the relationships on our list, we note down the people we hurt.

We have found that it’s not sufficient simply to write down *I hurt her* or *I hurt him* and then move on to the next relationship. Instead, we list *all* the people we hurt: the family members whose expectations of the relationship were strong, but who were to be disappointed; friends who brought us together with the other person; guests at our wedding who were so hopeful for our future happiness. We do not always note down actual names, but we do so where those people were important. Again, we look to our Higher Power for guidance on this matter.

**D. Did we unjustifiably arouse jealousy, suspicion or bitterness?**

Typically, we used these three things as weapons, perhaps in order to get out of a relationship, perhaps to force the other person to stay with us. Once more, we find generalizations to be less than useful. Our experience suggests that writing down *concrete examples* for *each* relationship make for a more effective sex inventory.

**E. Where were we at fault, what should we have done instead?**

This is an important part of the inventory. No matter how appalling our behavior was in these relationships, to some degree at least *we knew that what we were doing was dishonest and selfish while we were doing it*. And – because we are now writing about what happened – we see

that we *still* know what we should have done instead. We are equipping ourselves for a life where we no longer do these things, and our memory of those old relationships is a useful guide to our future behavior as we rely more on more on our Higher Power.

Remember, we gain the most benefit if we write specifically about each relationship. Generalities (e.g. “I should have done better”) are insufficient.

**F. We got this all down on paper and looked at it.**

We’re now ready to discuss our whole life story with another person as we do our Step 5.