Compulsive sexual behaviour as a behavioural addiction: the impact of the internet and other issues

The issue of sex addiction as a behavioural addiction has been much debated. However, there is little face validity for the amount of activity undertaken. As I have argued, the fundamental difference between healthy excessive enthusiasms and addictions is that healthy excessive enthusiasms add to life, whereas addictions take away from them [6]. The paper also appears to have an underlying assumption that empirical research from a neurobiological/genetic perspective should be treated more seriously than from a psychological perspective. Whether problematic sexual behaviour is described as CSB, sex addiction and/or hypersexual disorder, there are thousands of psychological therapists around the world who treat such disorders [7]. Consequentially, clinical evidence from those who help and treat such individuals should be given greater credence by the psychiatric community.

Arguably the most important development in the field of CSB and sex addiction is how the Internet is changing and facilitating CSB [2,8,9]. This was not mentioned until the concluding paragraph, yet research into online sex addiction (while comprising a small empirical base) has existed since the late 1990s, including sample sizes of up to almost 10 000 individuals [10–17]. In fact, there have been recent reviews of empirical data concerning online sex addiction and treatment [4,5]. These have outlined the many specific features of the Internet that may facilitate and stimulate addictive tendencies in relation to sexual behaviour (accessibility, affordability, anonymity, convenience, escape, disinhibition, etc.). The Internet may also facilitate behaviours that an individual would never imagine engaging in offline (e.g. cybersexual stalking) [2,18].

Finally, there is the issue of why Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) was included in the DSM-5 (Section 3) but sex addiction/hypersexual disorder was not, even though the empirical base for sex addiction is arguably on a par with IGD. One of the reasons might be that the term ‘sex addiction’ is often used (and misused) by high-profile celebrities as an excuse to justify infidelity and is little more than a ‘functional attribution’ [19]. For instance, some celebrities have claimed an addiction to sex after their wives found out that they had many sexual relationships during their marriage. If their wives had not found out, I doubt whether such individuals would have claimed that they were addicted to sex. I would argue that many celebrities are in a position where they are bombarded with sexual advances from individuals and have succumbed; but how many people would not do the same thing if they had the opportunity? Sex only becomes a problem (and is pathologized) when the person is found to have been unfaithful. Such examples arguably give sex addiction a ‘bad name’, and provides a good reason for those not wanting to include such behaviour in diagnostic psychiatry texts.
Declaration of interests

The author did not receive specific funding support for this work. However, the author has received funding for a number of research projects in the area of gambling education for youth, social responsibility in gambling and gambling treatment from the Responsibility in Gambling Trust, a charitable body who funds its research programme based on donations from the gambling industry. The author also undertakes consultancy for various gaming companies in the area of social responsibility in gambling.

Keywords

Behavioural addiction, compulsive sexual behaviour, excessive sex, online sexual behaviour, sex addiction.

MARK D. GRIFFITHS
Psychology Division, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK
E-mail: mark.griffiths@ntu.ac.uk

References