

Finally, seek advice from your careers advisers on voluntary work — both the hassles and the benefits. They have probably worked with many students at your school or college in the past with your interests in psychology, so can share what they did with you and give you much food for thought. They can also direct you to suitable websites, including university psychology department websites, which often explain clearly the kind of voluntary work they accept and respect in preparation for a psychology degree. The British Psychological Society (BPS) is a good place to start (see www.bps.org.uk).

Paid employment

The option to work while travelling could be an irresistible alternative to the above. However, first you need to research the work visa options (for example, it may well be easier to work in Canada which is a host Commonwealth country, rather than the USA just across the border. Despite President Barack Obama's recent promises to increase the number of student work and travel visas to enhance and promote a US-globalised economy that is open for business, it may be harder to get a visa). If you are applying for work overseas, you also need to update your CV and make it appealing to an overseas employer (who may not even know what a GCSE is). You will find the British Council in London is a good place to start your job search information (www.britishcouncil.org).

If you plan on working closer to home, you will still need to identify what skills, talents and abilities you have to offer an employer. You need to decide what exactly it is that you want from a job and the sector in which you would like to work. As a psychology student seeking to study psychology at university, or even going into a psychology-related job after A-levels, you could first contact your local Primary Care Trust (PCT) and ask to speak with their education head. Usually this will be someone with a clinical or health background. They may also give you advice about possible work opportunities in primary care (e.g. GP surgeries or walk-in centres) or the voluntary sector (work opportunities at a local cancer hospice). The good thing about working in your gap year is that if you plan and research this well, you can gain valuable work experience and make inroads into that student debt at the same time.

Study

This may not be the most inspiring idea of how to spend a gap year but if funds for exotic travel are limited or you do not want to leave home for more personal reasons, you could consider gaining extra skills in ICT, learning a foreign language or even learning to teach a foreign language by enrolling on a TEFL course.

You could also learn a variety of different vocational skills ranging from floristry to car maintenance, from plumbing to engineering. It may not be psychology, but some of the skills you pick up could involve improving your communication skills, working as a team and problem-based learning scenarios (PBL) — all essential features of a psychology degree. Although national funding opportunities for vocational study are currently limited, you need to weigh this up against how usefully these skills may equip you for later life.

Mix and match

This may be the best and most realistic option for your gap year, given all the pros and cons I have already discussed. Perhaps working for a while to save up for travel, which in turn might be combined with short-term work overseas or a part-time course, could be a wise option.

Whatever taking time out means for you, focus on why you want to do it and what the potential costs and benefits will be. Are you taking a gap year specifically to prepare yourself for a psychology degree, for example, or are you more interested in travelling? Whatever your decisions and choices (and you have many), enjoy this part of researching and planning your gap year. As the American poet T. S. Eliot is credited with saying, it is the journey, not the arrival, that matters.

Useful resources

A quick search on Google will generate a wealth of gap year opportunities and organisations that can guide you through your journey. Make sure that the websites you visit are authoritative and up-to-date (your teachers can help you with this). With such competition for providing quality information on gap years, the chances are that if the company is asking you to send them money up front, then it may not be reputable. In addition, your school or college careers advisers can help you with your search. See the following list for a summary of popular gap year sources:

www.copa.org.uk: Christian charity based on educational work in the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

www.direct.gov.uk: an excellent starting place for the UK government's advice on taking a gap year. It also helpfully includes gap year opportunities by country.

www.flyingfishonline.com: Australian/USA organisation offering water-based adventure courses varying from scuba diving to yacht racing, leading to national qualifications at the same time.

www.gapyear.com: international travel site with useful message boards from users who have taken (or who are about to take) gap years.

www.igapyear.com: this organisation helps you do your preparation work and makes sure you arrange your perfect gap year. Just click on the world map to arrange your jobs, courses, placements and trips.

www.lattitude.org.uk: this leading gap year volunteering charity was established in 1972 and helps students organise gap-year placements in 17 different countries around the world.

www.realgap.co.uk: this organisation provides rewarding gap-year jobs and volunteer gap-year projects abroad for students, career breaks and 'gap years for grown ups' in over 35 countries.

www.world-challenge-expeditions.co.uk: as its name suggests, this is not for the faint-hearted. If you want a gap year involving adventure travel, trekking or expeditions in the third world, then this could be for you!

Further reading

Griffiths, S. (2010) *Your Gap Year: Everything You Need to Know to Make Your Year Out the Adventure of a Lifetime*, Penguin (www.gapguru.com).

Nq, J. (2006) *Gap Year Volunteer: A Guide to Making it a Year to Remember*, Summersdale Publishers Ltd (www.summersdale.com).

Sheppard, J. (2010) 'Budget 2010: promise as 20,000 university places "misguided" as lecturers face cull', *Guardian*, 25 March 2010.

Withers, A. (2010) *The Gap-Year Guidebook* (18th edn), John Catt Educational Ltd (www.gap-year.com).

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Addicted to sex?

Cases of apparent sexual addiction feature regularly in our news casts and gossip magazines. But does it really exist in the same way as substance addiction, or is it just an excuse for infidelity and promiscuity? **Mark Griffiths**, expert in the field of addictions, discusses this complex issue

In January 2010, the mass media were full of stories about the US golfer Tiger Woods checking into a rehabilitation clinic to be treated for his 'sex addiction'. This is not the first time a celebrity has claimed that an addiction to sex was the reason for their infidelity. Similar stories have surfaced for actors such as Michael Douglas and David Duchovny. I was contacted by a number of national newspapers which wanted to know if sex addiction is a real medical condition or a convenient excuse for someone to give when they are caught being unfaithful to their partner. This is not an easy question to answer, as it depends on both (a) the individual in question and (b) the definition of addiction used.

Does sex addiction exist?

Even among psychologists, there are wide differences of opinion about the existence of sex addiction. Some psychologists adhere to the position that unless the behaviour involves the ingestion of a psychoactive drug (e.g. alcohol, nicotine or cocaine/heroin), then it cannot really be considered an addiction. I am not one of those psychologists, as my research into a wide variety of excessive behaviours has led me to the conclusion that behavioural addictions can and do exist (e.g. gambling addiction, video game addiction, internet addiction, exercise addiction and sex addiction; see Griffiths 2009 and *Psychology Review*, Vol. 15, No. 1).

Many individuals have attacked the whole concept of sex addiction, saying it is a complete myth. It is not hard to see why. Many sociologists would argue that sex addiction is little more than a label for sexual behaviour that significantly deviates from society's norms. Similarly, some say that when people claim they have a sex addiction, it is actually what social psychologists would call a 'functional attribution'

(a way of justifying behaviour in cases of, say, infidelity). The most conventional attack on sex addiction is a variation on the position outlined above (that addiction is a physiological condition caused by the ingestion of physiological substances and must therefore be defined physiologically).

There are also those researchers within the social sciences who claim that the everyday use of the word 'addiction' has rendered the term meaningless (such as people saying that their favourite television show is addictive viewing or that certain books are addictive reading). There are also attacks on more moral grounds, with people saying that if excessive sexual behaviour is classed as an addiction, it undermines an individual's responsibility for their behaviour.

Despite the belief by some researchers that sex addiction is a myth, there are therapists worldwide who treat the disorder. Arguably, the most well-known sex therapist is Dr Patrick Carnes, who has written many books on the topic (most notably his 1992 best seller *Out of the Shadows: Understanding Sexual Addiction*). Dr Carnes's treatment programme based in California (www.sexhelp.com) is eclectic in focus and includes behavioural therapy, trauma counselling, relapse prevention strategies and exercise and yoga classes, in addition to individual sessions in areas such as shame reduction and the setting of sexual boundaries.

Carnes's data suggest that up to 6% of the US population suffer from sex addiction. He finds that sex addictions often occur alongside other addictive behaviours. Sexual addiction may be combined with chemical dependency (42%), eating disorders (38%), compulsive working (28%), compulsive spending (26%) and compulsive gambling (5%). A large number of the sex addicts Carnes works with say their unhealthy use of sex was a progressive process. It may have started with an addiction to masturbation, pornography (either printed or electronic), or a relationship, but over the years it has progressed to being increasingly dangerous.



Scott Maxwell/Corbis

High profile celebrities such as Tiger Woods may have simply succumbed to endless sexual advances.



TigerPhoto

Dr Carnes' research is based on those people who attend for treatment at his clinic. There has been no national prevalence survey of sex addiction using validated addiction criteria and it is therefore impossible to know whether Carnes' figures apply to the whole US population. If up to 6% of adults across the USA were addicted to sex, it seems likely that there would be sex addiction clinics and self-help support groups in every major city and this is not the case. However, this does not mean sex addiction does not exist, only that the size of the problem is hard to assess. In the UK, there are a number of sex addiction specialists. There are also some '12-step' self-help support groups such as Sexaholics Anonymous, but these are few and far between.

Addictive behaviours

I have claimed for most of my academic career that almost any behaviour can be potentially addictive, in the sense that it can become the most important thing in people's lives. There are many behaviours in which behavioural excess can compromise a person's relationships, their jobs and their families. These people become addicted to such behaviours for the constant reward that the behaviour brings, and they can take many different forms (e.g. physiological, psychological, social and/or financial). But all addictions operate within a context.

I always say that the difference between a healthy excessive enthusiasm and an addiction is that healthy enthusiasms add to life and addictions take away from it.

At the heart of addiction is the extent to which the behaviour impacts negatively on a person's life.

Defining sex addiction

Those working in the sex addiction field suggest that this addiction has little relationship with a high sex drive, but is more to do with the function of sex within the person's life. If a person is consistently using sex as a way of altering their mood state and/or if sex becomes the primary coping mechanism for dealing with the difficulties in their life, then these indicators might signal the beginnings of a sex addiction.

Carnes cites a number of 'warning signs' that indicate someone might be addicted to sex. These are based on the consequences of other more traditional addictions and

include some of the core components of addiction, including conflict, mood modification, tolerance, relapse and loss of control. More specifically, Carnes's criteria for sex addiction include:

- 1 Acting out a pattern of out-of-control sexual behaviour. Examples can include: compulsive masturbation, indulging in pornography, having chronic affairs, exhibitionism, dangerous sexual practices, prostitution, anonymous sex, compulsive sexual episodes, voyeurism.
- 2 Experiencing severe consequences due to sexual behaviour and an inability to stop, despite these adverse consequences. These can include: loss of partner or spouse, severe marital or relationship problems, loss of career opportunities, unwanted pregnancies, abortions, suicidal obsession, suicide attempts, exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, legal risks from nuisance offences to rape.
- 3 The persistent pursuit of self-destructive behaviour.
- 4 On-going desire or effort to limit sexual behaviour.
- 5 Sexual obsession and fantasy as a primary coping strategy.
- 6 Increasing the amount of sexual experience because the current level of activity is no longer sufficiently satisfying (tolerance). In sex addiction, a person can develop a tolerance (i.e. needing more stimulation or novelty to gain the same level of arousal previously obtained with less stimulation or novelty). As tolerance develops, individuals may find themselves seeking out more unusual sexual experiences, more frequent sexual experiences and more graphic pornography.

Box 1 Patterns and examples of sexual addiction

- 1 Fantasy sex: neglecting commitments because of fantasy life, masturbation
- 2 Seductive role sex: extramarital affairs (heterosexual or homosexual), flirting and seductive sex
- 3 Anonymous sex: engaging in sex with anonymous partners, having one-night stands
- 4 Paying for sex: paying prostitutes for sex, paying for sexually explicit telephone calls
- 5 Trading sex: receiving money or drugs for sex
- 6 Voyeuristic sex: patronising adult bookstores or strip shows, looking through windows of houses, having a collection of pornography at home or at work
- 7 Exhibitionist sex: exposing oneself in public places or from the home or car, wearing clothes designed to expose
- 8 Intrusive sex: touching others without permission, using position of power (e.g. professional, religious) to exploit another person sexually, rape
- 9 Pain exchange: causing or receiving pain to enhance sexual pleasure
- 10 Object sex: masturbating with objects, cross-dressing to add sexual pleasure, using fetishes as part of sexual rituals, having sex with animals
- 11 Sex with children: forcing sexual activity on a child, watching child pornography

Source: Schneider, 1994

7 Severe mood changes related to sexual activity.

8 Inordinate amounts of time spent obtaining sex, being sexual and recovering from sexual experiences.

9 Neglect of important social, occupational, or recreational activities because of sexual behaviour.

Most sex therapists treating sex addiction find that it is primarily a male heterosexual phenomenon, but these data may be biased because of the people who turn up for treatment. For instance, females with sexual addiction problems may not want to seek treatment because of their perception of what the therapist might think about them. They may feel more stigmatised than men in seeking help for their addiction — something that is common among other addictions too.

Conclusion

Sex addiction can take many forms (see Box 1), from excessive use of pornography to compulsive masturbation through to fetishes, high-risk sex, paid-for sex, internet sex and multiple affairs. Furthermore, most of the psychological literature says it is not uncommon for some kind of

childhood abuse to have occurred. Carnes says that among the patients he has treated in his clinic, different types of abuse were commonplace in childhood. These included sexual abuse (81%), physical abuse (72%) and emotional abuse (97%).

There are also researchers like me who believe that new media such as the internet may facilitate excessive sexual behaviour for those who are predisposed to develop such addictions (see Griffiths 2001). Because the internet is so anonymous, disinhibiting and non-threatening, it provides a highly accessible and convenient outlet for sexual expression that simply was not there a generation ago.

In the case of high-profile celebrities like Tiger Woods who are allegedly addicted to sex, it may be the case that they were simply in a position where they were bombarded with sexual advances and they succumbed. How many people would not do the same thing if they had the same opportunities as a member of the Hollywood A-list? In these situations, it only becomes a problem when the person is discovered. Whether these instances are really a sex addiction divert us from the fact that a small minority of people do seek professional help for

a behaviour that they feel is genuinely addictive.

References and further reading

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