

Student activities

Tutors, examiners, researchers and textbook writers all tell us how important it is to be active in our learning. **Mark Griffiths** gives some useful activities that will consolidate and enhance your understanding of the article you have just read.

Sex addiction

Exercise 1: Defining sex addiction

Spend 5–10 minutes on your own trying to devise your own definition of 'sex addiction'. Share your definition with others in the class and discuss the problems in trying to define it. Discuss what other factors may impact on whether sex is excessive.

Post-task discussion

- Was the task difficult or easy?
- What the parameters were you working within?
- Does sex addiction only involve behaviours to do with sexual intercourse or did you consider other excessive sexual behaviours that may not involve sexual intercourse, such as sexual sadism, sexual masochism, sexual bondage or sexual fetishes?
- Excessive sex may not be a problem and can depend on such factors as age, novelty, hormones and cultural norms. You should also realise that all definitions of any type of 'addiction' such as 'sex addiction' are necessarily operationally defined.
- By spending 5–10 minutes on your own, trying to devise your own definition of sex addiction, you may start to realise that the whole is more than the sum of its parts and that giving examples of this type

of addictive behaviour is easier than trying to define it. By sharing your definition with other people in the class, you will start to see that others are likely to have different parameters and boundaries.

Exercise 2: Excessive sex as an addiction

There are number of things to consider when looking at sex addiction. Get into groups in your class and discuss the following questions, spending about 5 minutes on each question. Share your answers with the rest of the class.

- 1 How much control do people have over their sexual behaviour?
- 2 What are the similarities and differences between chemical addictions and a behavioural addiction (like sex addiction)?
- 3 Is sex addiction something that can happen to anyone (like catching measles) or are some people more likely to develop these behaviours than others? If so, then why? Is it due to chemical imbalances, genes, family background or something else inside them?
- 4 How can we obtain evidence for sex addiction? Are the methods of asking people to describe their sexual experiences the best way of capturing what is going on? Are there other ways of collecting reliable evidence?

Post-task discussion

- Your answer to how much control people have over their sexual behaviour will depend on whether you feel that some people are predisposed towards addiction or whether you believe that people are fully responsible for their own actions.
- What parameters were you working within when answering this question? In thinking about these questions, it is probably useful to consider the psychological evidence.
- In relation to similarities and differences, a 'components' model of addiction (see Griffiths 2005) looks for similarities across all addictive behaviour, but all addictions are idiosyncratic to some extent. All chemical addictions involve the ingestion of a psychoactive substance, whereas behavioural addictions do not. This means that biological factors may be more prominent in chemical addictions and cognitive factors may be more important in behavioural addictions, such as sex addiction.
- Learning factors might be equally important, irrespective of addiction type. Some addictions feature aspects unique to that addiction (such as 'chasing' behaviour in gambling addiction). In relation to whether anyone could be a sex addict depends on how you evaluate the literature. It could be argued that all addicts have some kind of predisposing factors but for some, this may be based on biological heredity (e.g. genetics) and for others on social heredity (e.g. social learning).
- There are many ways of collecting data about addictive behaviours. These include self-report methods (questionnaires, interviews), observation methods (participant observation, non-participant observation), experiments (laboratory based, ecologically valid experiments, natural experiments), chemical testing (urine tests, hair analysis) and corroborative evidence (archive data, parental and peer reports).



However, for sex addiction, some of these methods cannot be used (chemical testing) and some methods are likely to be difficult and/or unethical (experiments, participant and non-participant observation).

Exercise 3: Culture and sex addiction

It could be argued that sex addiction is merely an invention of Western culture. Sex addiction treatment mainly exists in Western cultures, even though developing world societies engage in potentially addictive behaviours. In class, discuss the extent to which sex addiction is universal.

- 1 Do you think that sex addiction is an invention of Western culture?
- 2 Is it connected to the role and the rise of the mass media?
- 3 Are sex addictions more or less prevalent in developing world countries?

Post-task discussion

- The answers to these questions depend on how addictions are operationally defined and how each individual culture views a

particular behaviour. Excessive sex in a developing world culture might be viewed quite differently and may not be pathologised in the same way as in our own culture. The mass media could be said to reflect societal addictions rather than be a cause of them, although advertising and the media can contribute in the initiation and promotion of addictive behaviours.

References

- American Psychiatric Association (1994) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th edn), American Psychiatric Association.
- Griffiths, M. (2004) 'An empirical analysis of the film The Gambler', International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction, Vol. 1, No 2, pp. 39–43.
- Griffiths, M. D. (2005) 'A "components" model of addiction within a bio-psychosocial framework', Journal of Substance Use, Vol. 10, pp. 191–97.

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