



### **Anatomy of an Addictive Behavior: Not for Men Only**

Mitchell Milch, LCSW

This article attempts to make sense of our vulnerabilities to developing abusive or to use a more popular term; addictive relationships to activities of daily living. I will review the outstanding features of those of us caught up in addictive relationships. Then, I will highlight some developmental issues that shape one specific activity of daily living that holds the potential to become an addictive one; male masturbation. As an addictive relationship male masturbation has received much publicity with the coming of age of the world wide web. The use of images by husbands and boyfriends to stimulate gratifying fantasies is for many wives and girlfriends inseparable from acts of betrayal and infidelity; illicit affairs so to speak with digitally generated images. Although, such acts may be the first step on such a slippery slope I'd like to frame such behaviors as symptomatic of these men's anxieties over being intimate and vulnerable with their significant others while being mutually respectful and considerate of each others needs.

This is an article about an addictive behavior which by definition is a behavior that assumes an out of control quality by dint of it attempting inadequately yet safely to meet needs that can only be met within the context of a loving and accepting relationship. In my mind, masturbation has the same potential for abuse and belongs in the same category as eating, working, and spending. All of these activities in moderation are healthy and pleasurable activities. When used in moderation they all keep us in balance and thus, serve life sustaining functions. When we develop an over reliance on these activities in ways they were not intended to be used by adults, they become self- defeating and self-destructive activities. They wind up creating problems for us instead of enhancing our lives, and they erode our willingness and abilities to sensibly manage our lives.

I write this article hopeful that many of you out there will enhance your understanding of why so many of us take such activities beyond healthy self-interest into a realm of unhealthy extremes. I hope whatever you learn may translate to greater compassion, acceptance and empathy for those who suffer with addictive behaviors. Furthermore, my

desire is that these insights empower those of us who will benefit from them to overcome our denial of needing more help than just plain willpower.

Many of you may recall having seen on television or read how in an era that pre dated modern medicine salesmen peddled tonics. These tonics were advertised as elixirs for all that ailed the consumers. Those who hawked these products preyed on folks' wishes for magical solutions to their medical problems. Not only did these elixirs not live up to their billing but, the buyers in neglecting more conventional treatments wound up worsening their conditions. Furthermore, the consumers' appetites for these alcohol based tonics grew as they were indeed, habit forming. The unsuspecting buyers in many cases wound up drinking these tonics as if they were "stiff drinks" to forget their unhappiness about their physical ailments and temporarily numb their pain. The more they became hooked on the alcohol laden elixirs, the less willing and able they were to manage their lives, let alone their ailments. Soon they were so disabled mentally and physically by these tonics that even if they were inclined to see a doctor they couldn't gather themselves to do so. Such is the anatomy of an addictive relationship. An interesting note here is that one does not have to self-medicate emotional pain with alcohol or other mind altering drugs. This can be accomplished with food, exercise, spending, and even pleasuring one's self. All can produce similar effects on our brains. We all have bottomless bags of magic tricks to temporarily make life's challenges we are overwhelmed by, temporarily disappear. Meanwhile these actions increase our resistance to change, weaken our tolerance for the painful truths about ourselves we all must face to grow, and devalue and retard our abilities to create meaningful changes in our lives.

My experiences inside and outside my psychotherapy practice have taught me that all addictive relationships express our feelings of hopelessness and helplessness to be active agents of change in our lives. Often we are running from legacies of emotional deprivation and abuse that we believe to be life long punishments for being bad and/or incompetent people. We fear being found out and run from our dirty dark secrets which are in truth, as inescapable as one inert piece of metal trying to pry itself loose from another piece of metal it is soldered to. In running from our selves we can behave in ways that make real our worst fears about ourselves. We must admit our powerlessness to escape our self-imposed existences and accept responsibility for reaching out for help in order to pursue our roads to recovery.

At the risk of over simplifying an examination of addictive behaviors below please find a review of some outstanding characteristics of folks suffering with addictive disorders. As you read the comments please keep in mind that addictive behaviors speak volumes about ferocious struggles to resist needing others in any way, shape or form unless those others can be controlled. Folks who suffer with addictive relationships tend not to discriminate between healthy dependencies and unhealthy dependencies.

As mentioned before we deny that our magical solutions to our problems increasingly become self -defeating and self -destructive. We deny that our addictive behaviors sabotage and disable our mental functioning making us more unwilling and/or unable to develop healthier and more mature ways to meet our needs. The continuation of these behaviors may result in mental and physical problems due to the stressful consequences of our actions.

Our actions are as much exercises in futility as trying to feed a lonely heart with endless amounts of food. All we will wind up with is a helplessly and hopelessly lonely, obese person who learns to eat to temporarily fill an emotional void. We can temporarily numb an infection with a topical anesthetic and cover it with a band aid so we don't have to look at it however, such band aid approaches are quick fixes that only make matters worse in the long run.

Folks with addictive patterns make certain that they remain in the grips of unidentified needs; that create bodily tensions. When we cannot connect to, think about and satisfy what is wreaking havoc on a physical level, we cannot bring ourselves back into balance. This is both a cause of addictive patterns and a worsening consequence of its continuation. It's like racing a car engine in park and then, suddenly putting the car in gear. We can lose control of ourselves and engage in impulsive, mindless and reckless acts. We begin to feel and act like children in need of guidance, structure and limit setting who believe that someone other than ourselves should be responsible for controlling our impulses and/or dealing with their consequences. Left to our own devices we make messes of things, and heap shame and guilt on ourselves only to seek temporary refuge in our addictive behaviors to flee our intolerable emotional pain. We will make parents of anyone who will apply for the job; even our own children.

So, how do we apply this definition to men who though, they may have loving and available sexual partners develop unhealthy dependencies on pleasuring themselves? Why do they continue to do so even when doing so late at night leaves them without enough sleep to function adequately the next day? Why do they do so even when these activities leave them feeling ashamed, embarrassed and guilty so as to distance themselves emotionally and physically from their partners? Often matters will go from bad to worse when their partners reproach them for feeling, abandoned, rejected, and perhaps, deceived and betrayed by them. Such are the addictive messes we can make for ourselves and our loved ones.

I will use my understanding of normal and abnormal child development to explain how specific instances of physical and emotional abuse and neglect suffered during our formative years may translate to the abuse of masturbation as a self-regulatory activity. This addictive relationship like others expresses a universal and normal resistance to accepting the unfairness and injustice that comes with the territory of growing up. This relationship also expresses a resistance to accepting societal expectations that we will be responsible for the “crosses we must bear.” We may not have caused our problems early in life however, we are the only ones who can accept responsibility to overcome them. Pleasuring ourselves when carried to an extreme is like all other addictive relationships. The repetition of the activity will intensify our resistances to mourning our losses, and finding forgiveness in our hearts. We may fight against these realities with a resolve so fierce that one might imagine we are defending our homes, our communities and our homeland from annihilation. Such is the nature of addictive relationships. Think about whomever you might know who is suffering with this addictive issue and please allow my remarks to be food for your own thought as you build your own logical bridges between the causes and effects of this widespread problem in the era of cyberspace. I look forward to hearing from you in the hopes of sharing insights and stretching our understanding of this hot topic in today’s world. Please imagine how the following formative experiences might or might not shape an addictive relationship to masturbation based on your own experiences and observations in life

- 1) When emotional needs become sexualized then, we need to discharge these sexual tensions by achieving orgasms with great regularity. There is such a thing as too much external stimulation by a mother or maternal surrogate that can shape both too much of a dependence on external stimulation for pleasure and a sense of aliveness. This condition

may result in a child not learning to translate physical excitation to feelings they can identify, connect to, think about, verbalize and act on in meaningful ways.

2) Many male adolescents when they need to transfer loving feelings once reserved exclusively for their mothers to their female peers can't do so. As adults, tender loving feelings and sex mix as well for these men as oil and water. This outcome may be shaped by a possessive mother who at some point in the past or present still competes with her son's love interests for his primary allegiance. The son grows up and struggles in his mind to separate his partner from his mother. He may feel caught in a tug of war between the two of them. In either case feelings of shame and guilt may erupt. I've heard many a male client comment to me: "I don't know why but, once we got married and it even got worse when our first child was born, something held me back from enjoying sex with my partner. Suddenly, it felt like the wrong thing to do." These men may try unsuccessfully to separate the two most important women in their lives by relating sexually to their partners as if they were glorified prostitutes. When such demeaning expectations create frictions they may wind up masturbating to fantasies of glorified prostitutes.

3) Sexual relations may shape fears of castration for men who are belittled by their partners in ways that remind them of the ways they were belittled by their mothers and/or fathers. Such legacies can be the products of many things such as: 1) Hostile competitiveness between fathers and sons, 2) Mothers' displaced hostilities from an absent and/or distant father onto a son, or 3) A mother's hostile envy of her son's male identity rooted in the degradation of her own female gender identity.

These unresolved issues can shape sexual performance issues and may not only leave men insecure about their male identities but, also leave them blaming their partners for their insecurities. In such an environment masturbation may assume several important functions. It may become a means for men to reassure themselves in fantasy of their male potency, and become an act of retaliation for their powerlessness and hunger to be admired by the women in their lives. Perhaps, without even realizing it, they wind up rendering their women as powerless to get their sexual and emotional intimacy needs met as they feel powerless to get their needs for respect, admiration and love met by their partners.

4) Stressful environments where the emotional caretakers subject male children to frightening and dangerous scenarios while oblivious to their needs for safety and security may help shape a reliance on masturbation to self soothe and discharge physical stress. This behavior may be outgrown in adulthood in favor of men talking to themselves and others to soothe their fears and anxieties. However, if these men repeat the frightening transactions they witnessed as children in their adult relationships, they may very well return to masturbation to soothe what feel like overwhelming and unmanageable situations.

If we liken the above trends as many streams emptying into a river known as addiction then, we can begin to appreciate the energies that fuel these behaviors. I hope this article not only offers something about the power sources that energize addictions but, also what needs to happen to short circuit them.