



# THE BRAIN SCIENCE OF UNWANTED SEXUAL BEHAVIORS

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**E**ngaging in unwanted sexual outlets (porn, masturbation, live sex chat, escorts, paid sex) or even streams of short-term, meaningless relationships can create a great deal of shame, despair and self-loathing. After repeatedly trying and failing to implement the common advice—“Why don’t you just stop,” or “You just need to use more willpower!” many caught in the “unwanted-sexual-behaviors-trap” feel hopeless—“Maybe I’m just basically weak, worthless, a pervert, a freak.”

Most struggling individuals don’t understand the specific brain processes that have developed their behaviors over time. Learning there is a “logical brain-science explanation” for their condition goes a long way in relieving shame and hopelessness. Perhaps

some of the following insights will help you better understand “how you got here”—

## 1. Curiosity:

As we grow up, it’s very natural to be curious about our bodies, the bodies of others, and human sexuality in general. In many cases, experiences with pornography, masturbation, casual sex and other sexual outlets start out motivated by simple curiosity. We can be exposed to these things by accident, through our own efforts, or through friends and family members. In any case, it’s usually a natural curiosity that lures us in.

## 2. Excitement and Pleasure:

After the initial discovery, many individuals start using sexual outlets “recreationally,” that is, they find them exciting and arousing. Por-

nography viewing, masturbation and various other sexual outlets trigger the brain into releasing powerful neurochemicals like dopamine, norepinephrine and endorphins, producing a “rush” or a “high.” Sexual outlets are a very convenient and powerful way for the brain to feel pleasure and cope with boredom or mental burn-out. In fact, These activities are initially thought of as fun, exciting, and an easy and sometimes cheap way to get a thrill.

## 3. Self-medication:

Sexual outlets and behaviors release the same kinds of neurochemicals commonly experienced with illicit street drugs, alcohol and prescription drugs. What starts out as recreational use, can quickly lead to an escalating “drug of choice” for self-medication, escape. Over time, the brain learns that the quickest,

easiest, most potent solution for feeling emotionally blasted (i.e. anger, stress, boredom, loneliness) is a sexual outlet. Once in this stage, the individual usually needs to go through a detox period and create some boundaries so the brain can get a break from the neurochemicals and start responding to “normal healthy pleasure” experiences.

## 4. Dependency:

As a person repeatedly uses sexual outlets as their primary strategy for pleasure, escape and coping, their brain begins to believe that this IS the way to deal with the stresses of life. They can get to the point where sexual outlets and behaviors become a central focus in their life. Their thoughts become dominated by sexual images, urges and fantasies. Increasing amounts of time, effort and energy are expended on anticipating and preparing for sexual outlets, engaging in them, or fighting the urge. Their brain can begin to interpret sexual outlets as a “need” just like food or sleep. Over time, they become dependent on the chemical release they get through their sexual behaviors. They find themselves going back again and again, despite the negative consequences. Their brain is constantly seeking relief and is convinced that they must have their sexual outlets to survive—that they’ve got to get that neurochemical rush to be able to function in life. They try to stop, but they can’t. Just as those who struggle with drugs and alcohol, they have developed a chemical dependency.

## 5. Replacement for real intimacy:

We live in an age of people communicating by phone, texting, e-mail and chat rooms. This has reduced the amount of face-to-face communication, interaction and real “connection.” Add to this the fact that some people are shy or afraid of social settings, others are divorced or experiencing marital difficulties, some do not know how to maintain a long-term relationship and many are so caught up in the busyness

of life that in their most important relationships, they become like “ships passing in the night.” All of this creates feelings of isolation, disconnectedness and loneliness. Many seek out pornography and cybersex chat rooms, paid sex, or quick, meaningless relationships as substitutes for real human connection, intimacy and relationships—to fill the “void” of loneliness. These sexual outlets offer a “fantasized relationship;” a semblance of being in love and having a real fulfilling partner relationship. In this fantasy world, people imagine things like, “She wants just me.” “He adores me—I’m desired, craved, loved.” The person sees the experience as exclusive, private—“It’s just me and her.” The experience is seen as exciting, pleasurable, taboo, and privileged—giving the façade of intimacy, exclusivity, loyalty and trust. And all of this is easy, convenient, instant and sometimes cheap or free. It does not require the risk and work of developing and nurturing a true intimate relationship. The great tragedy of using these types of behaviors as a substitute for real intimacy is that these activities shut the person off from true emotional intimacy or real human interaction, making them feel even more isolated, disconnected and lonely, increasing their longing, pain and shame. This then drives them to seek out more of their behaviors, creating a deepening downward-spiraling isolation and loneliness cycle.

## 6. Obsessive/Compulsive:

Eventually the myriad negative consequences from unwanted sexual behaviors lead the individual to a resolution to “quit.” However, few are prepared for the extreme difficulty and “rebellion of the brain” when they attempt to stop. After repeated failures to cease the behavior, the individual starts to feel “out of control,” weak, discouraged and hopeless. He begins to fear the sexual thoughts, images or stimuli that he might encounter in everyday life. Just like the OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) sufferer who is obsessed with a fear of germs, the struggling person tries to force

any sexual thoughts or images out of their mind. But the more they try not to think about these things, the more they “force” themselves in. This is how every brain works. Avoidance of a feared or stressful thought quickly develops into an inability to stop thinking about the very thought one is trying to avoid. Soon their life becomes dominated by unwanted and intrusive thoughts and urges—obsessive thoughts and urges. They can only keep this incessant fighting and struggling up for so long until they are worn out and exhausted. Then they discover that “giving in” to their unwanted sexual behaviors actually provides temporary relief—the chemical rush, the incredible release of “Finally I don’t have to fight these thoughts and urges anymore!” It’s like the OCD sufferer who obsesses over germs and then compulsively washes his hands to get relief from his obsessive thoughts. After giving in yet again to sexual urges, the individual feels guilt, regret and shame and the whole cycle of fighting and resisting starts over again. The more they try to fight it, the worse it gets. Finally, many just give in and give up, resigning themselves fully to their unwanted behaviors, which only accelerate in severity.

Regardless of your particular kind of unwanted sexual behaviors, it’s important to understand that there is a logical, reasonable, scientific explanation behind how you got caught up in these behaviors. You are NOT a freak, loser or lost cause. You are a good and valuable human being who has simply developed a dependency on an extremely powerful “brain-chemical-releasing activity” for escape, self-medication and pleasure. This is not unlike anyone who chooses alcohol, drugs, food or any other personal “drug-of-choice.” The good news is, just as with any other unwanted behavior or addiction, there is logical way out. You can break free. The RECLAIM program has been created to put you solidly on the recovery path where you can quickly begin moving forward.