

# SEXUAL ANOREXIA

**(Response to questionnaire: Does anorexia tie in with your love and sex addiction? If so, how?)**

What is anorexia? Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (S.L.A.A.) offers this definition: “As an eating disorder, anorexia is defined as the compulsive avoidance of food. In the area of sex and love, anorexia has a similar definition: Anorexia is the compulsive avoidance of giving or receiving social, sexual, or emotional nourishment.”

Patrick Carnes, the nationally known author on addiction and recovery, describes sexual anorexia as: “an obsessive state in which the physical, mental and emotional task of avoiding sex dominates one’s life. Like self-starvation with food, deprivation with sex can make one feel powerful and defended against all hurts.”

The S.L.A.A. members that responded to our survey have spent a lot of time and energy trying to avoid sex and intimate relationships.

One of the responders to our questionnaire identifies herself as a 56-year-old lesbian with sexual, social and emotional anorexia. “I have always pursued relationships with unavailable women who are married, alcoholic or straight; I’ve never sought a sexual relationship with another lesbian.”

A 45-year-old participant is struggling with what she believes is sexual anorexia. She grew up in a sexually repressive family and social system where alcoholism and other dysfunctional behavior existed. “I didn’t have a model of a good healthy sexual relationship growing up,” she explains. “I’ve never had a loving relationship. I can’t be sexually open and free. I have hang-ups.”

## **‘HANG UPS’ (FEAR)**

Many of the participants shared a fear of sexual pleasure and indicated that they were full of fear and sexual self-doubt. The following are some of the fears they expressed in their responses:

- Fear of intimacy of “connection” with others
- Fear of engulfment, “suffocation,” loss of self, or death
- Fear of intense feelings (which have been suppressed)
- Fear of being visible or seen for one’s self
- Fear of one’s sexuality
- Fear of being attracted to someone
- Fear of starting or exiting a relationship

## **ADDICTIVE and DEPRIVATION BEHAVIORS**

**Used to decrease pain (numbing out) or increase pleasure (getting a hit)**

Sexual anorexia has been described as the flip side of sexual addiction. It’s elusive, often masking itself behind other compulsive and deprivation behaviors. The responders consistently indicated that the fear hides behind avoidance schemes or other self-protective mechanisms. Their responses showed that sexual anorexia can wear many masks; the following are some of the behaviors they use to compensate:

- Isolation strategies for self-comfort
- A vivid fantasy life (in private)
- Pornography, voyeurism, masturbation, etc.
- Cross-addictions – food, money, drugs, alcohol, hoarding, TV, Internet, etc.
- Sexual promiscuity or acting out (with unavailable people)

## **POOR SELF-ESTEEM, DEPRESSION, AND ANXIETY**

Like food anorexics, sexual anorexics starve themselves in the midst of plenty. Many of the participants indicated that they feel a sense of acute alienation and loss of self. The following are some of the issues mentioned by the responders:

- Deprivation (sexually, emotionally, etc.)
- Self-belittling and judgment
- Perfectionism
- Grandiosity or inferiority extremes
- Hiding from life and light
- Loneliness
- *Stuck* emotions
- “Nothing ventured, nothing gained” thinking and acting

## **TRAUMA IN EARLY FAMILY LIFE**

Anorexia is usually rooted in childhood trauma. If a person is traumatized as a child they tend to have no control; in order to lessen the trauma, sexual anorexics may become adverse to sex and their own sexuality. The responders, both men and women, indicated that trauma was present in their childhood histories, including the following:

- Boundary violations
- Sexual shaming
- Emotional neglect and abuse (needs not met)
- Sexual and/or physical abuse
- Deprivation leading to addictive strategies in later life
- Loss (death) of family members

## **AVOIDANCE OF INTIMACY**

In the S.L.A.A. literature, anorexic members make this observation: “We anorexics begin to realize that we have been living our lives for a long time without love. We observe the absence of closeness in certain areas of our lives and we observe that we engage in dread of others and a strategy to keep them at bay. Having become aware of this we may have tried to change our conduct. If we found we could not change, we may have come to understand we are addicted to it: **it was conduct we repeatedly engaged in and could not stop despite the consequences.**” These are some of the methods used by the responders to avoid intimacy with themselves and others:

- Intellectualizing (using anorexia as an excuse to act-out sexually, inability to find a balance between need to rejuvenate and wanting to isolate out of fear of being visible, etc.)
- Distancing strategies (avoidance of dating, avoidance of intimate friendships, behaving in a grandiose or inferior manner, avoidance of the company of others, withdrawal or isolation from partner, etc.)
- Addictive behavior (masturbating, fantasizing, intrigue, overeating, etc.)
- Using safety mechanisms, i.e. operating automatically (making oneself “small” and “unseen” in group situations, keeping secrets, pretending to be “to busy” all the time, etc.)
- Addictive obsession with unavailable people

## **ANOREXIA: Sexual, Social, Emotional** (published by *The Augustine Fellowship of S.L.A.A.*)

“We know there are very good reasons for our having become anorectic; we also have come to realize that there is nothing to blame ourselves for in being anorexic. But we now want nourishing emotional, sexual, and social lives. Our anorexia may have come out of a precious sense of our own preservation, but still we want to change; we have begun the work of recovery and change in S.L.A.A. We would like to say that your recovery is essential to ours. So each new member brings a fresh understanding and a new possibility for recovery for all. The fellowship of Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous welcomes you!”