

Sex addictions are deeply misunderstood. A new classification could change that.

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Yvonne K. Fulbright, a noted sexologist, describes what life is like at a sex addiction clinic, including what the people receiving treatment are and are not allowed to do. AP



(Photo: Getty Images/iStockphoto)

A new classification of sex addiction as a mental disorder by the World Health Organization could monumentally shift the conversation surrounding a condition that's often deeply misunderstood.

Experts who treat sex addictions hope the classification will help change the disorder's perception from a moral failing to simply a medical issue.

“It takes it out of morality, it takes it out of religion, it just makes it about, ‘Does this person have this set of issues that’s affecting their lives?’ And either they do, or they don’t,” said Robert Weiss, an addiction specialist and the author of "Sex Addiction 101" and "Always Turned On.”

In its new International Classification of Diseases, WHO defines "compulsive sexual health disorder" as a "persistent pattern of failure to control intense, repetitive sexual impulses or urges resulting in repetitive sexual behavior.”

The new classification means that sex addiction – a term popularized before research designated the condition as compulsive sexual health disorder – can be diagnosed based on a list of criteria, which include: repetitive sexual activities becoming the focus of a person's life, numerous unsuccessful efforts to reduce sexual behavior and continued sexual activity despite deriving little satisfaction from it.

That shift resembles previous changes to how doctors viewed other addictive disorders, such as alcoholism, drug addiction or gambling.

“There was a time when alcoholism was a fatal illness, and there was no cure, and you were going to die of alcoholism because you were a bad person,” Weiss said. “We don’t look at alcoholics and drug addicts and say, ‘You’re a bad person,’ we say, ‘You have a problem.’ “

Experts also hope the new classification will chip away at a larger goal: destigmatizing sex addiction. Treatment can range from therapy sessions to stays at rehabilitation facilities to simpler methods such as prayer and journaling, said Carol Juergensen Sheets, a certified sexual addiction therapist – but many people don't seek it out.

"If somebody doesn’t know what to call this disease, this disorder, this illness, they will not know how to get help for it; they’ll continue to try to do it on their own," Sheets said.

The cost of treatment ranges from free online services to pricey inpatient rehab programs. Typically, people with sex addictions seeking treatment will be covered by insurance companies only if they're diagnosed with a concurring mental health disorder, such as anxiety or depression.

Therapists hope that could change. "We hope that ... insurance companies might be willing to now pay for treatment more directly, but that is not a given," Weiss said.

Even if sex addiction loses its stigma and treatment becomes more accessible, the disorder can carry another, more pernicious connotation: Sex addiction has frequently been cited by individuals who have committed sex offenses.

Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein and actor Kevin Spacey, who have been accused of sexual abuse and harassment, have reportedly [spent time](#) at a high-end facility for the treatment of sex addiction.

In reality, sex addicts and sex offenders are two very different categories, therapists said.

"Most sex offenders do not meet the clinical requirements for sex addictions, and conversely, most sex addicts never commit a sexual offense," said Milton Magness, a sex addictions therapist and director of a counseling service in Houston.

Sheets pointed out that a crucial aspect of sex addiction is wanting to fix the problem and being unable to – a sentiment she hasn't observed in sex offenders.

"I never saw any indication, I never heard any indication that they ever wanted to stop," Sheets said, referring to high-profile people accused of sexual assault. "That's a disorder of power and control, not sex addiction."

But even leaving sexual offenders aside, sex addiction is commonly portrayed in the media as a problem facing [badly behaving celebrities](#).

Golfer Tiger Woods, reality TV star Josh Duggar and actors Charlie Sheen, Michael Douglas and David Duchovny have all discussed sex addiction or checked into a rehab facility to treat a sex or pornography addiction. Recently, actress Jada Pinkett Smith said she [used to be addicted to sex](#).

Most sex addicts, Magness said, are ordinary people.

"Most of the people that I work with are people with very high morals, very responsible, leaders in their industries; many are even clergy or physicians," he said. "And they are involved in behaviors they do not want and repeat them, despite repeated attempts to stop."

For those people – the vast majority of whom are men, according to Sheets – experts hope the diagnosis will open the door for treating sex addiction like any other mental health issue.

"If this is classified as a mental disorder and we've got diagnostic criteria that we can accept, and the person's able to see this is a proper diagnosis for them," Weiss said, "then I believe that spells hope."