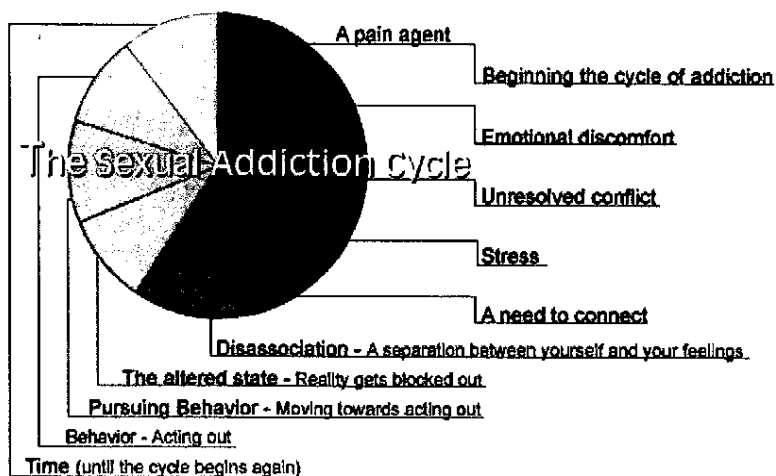


# Welcome to Sex Addiction Help

Sexual Addiction Psychotherapists Serving the San Francisco Bay Area

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This cycle describes what happens inside someone who has a sexual addiction. First a pain agent is triggered; it could be any kind of emotional discomfort (i.e., pain, fear, shame, anger, etc.), it could be unresolved conflict (inner or outer), it could be stress, or it could be the need to connect with another.

If the person doesn't take care of the pain agent in a healthy way, he may then move into the second stage of this cycle - disassociation. In this stage, you begin to disassociate or move away from your self and your feelings; a separation begins to take place between your mind and your emotional self.

If a person does nothing to help himself reconnect with himself at this stage, he may move into the third stage called the altered state. In this stage you become very disconnected from yourself and your emotions, so that sexual acting out makes sense (usually there is a lot of thinking about how good it will be and an absence of any awareness of any negative consequences). Reality becomes blocked out.

From this altered state stage, a person generally moves on to the pursuing behavior stage. In this stage, one begins to take action towards the acting out; perhaps by making a phone call to a sex line, or by getting in a car and taking off to find a prostitute, etc.

The next stage is the behavior itself - whatever it is for each particular person.

Then the final stage of the cycle is time, which simply represents the amount of time until the whole cycle begins again. This is different for each person; it could be several hours, a day or a week.

What is particularly important about this cycle is that it shows how in stage 1 the pain agents are what trigger the complete addictive cycle. What a person needs to do therefore is to work right at stage 1. One needs to learn how to deal with these pain agents in healthy ways, because if you do not you may begin to move deeper into the cycle. It is also possible to work in the 2nd stage by learning to recognize when you are disassociating from your self, and then learning how to reconnect with your self and your feelings.

If you can do this, you can stop the cycle from continuing. However, if a person has done nothing (or has not been able) to deal with one or more of the pain agents, or has not been able to reconnect with their feelings from the 2nd stage, he will most likely move into the 3rd stage - the altered state stage.

In the 3rd stage it's usually too late to get out of the cycle; in other words, once you get into the altered state stage, you are most likely going to act out. This is why it's so important to work in the 1st or 2nd stage. This is why it is so important to work with any difficult feelings coming up, or in dealing with stress in healthy ways, or in recognizing that one has a need to connect with another and taking action to get this need met. In addition, one can learn when he is disassociated or cut off from himself and learn healthy ways to deal with it.

A lot of people end up getting down on themselves for not being to get out of the altered state stage. This is the stage usually where your thinking about doing something sexually really gets going. The truth is that for many people, once you've gotten to this stage it's very hard to derail the cycle - it will usually happen, particularly for early recovery people. It helps to know this (especially if you are early in recovery) so that you can be easier on yourself when you do act out and so you can learn to work on the stage 1 thing(s) that most commonly trigger the whole acting out cycle.

The main benefit of this cycle is that it clarifies how the pain agents begin the cycle, and that the most effective way to work on a sex addiction is at stage 1. When working at stage 1, you need to first learn what issues you have that are triggering the cycle, which will be one or more of the 4 pain agents (childhood trauma is included here as it can cause any of the 4). Then you need to begin to understand what these issues are all about, and then to begin both resolving them and learning how to deal with them when they come up.

Text. by Mark Robinett, MFT

Click here to see another article on this cycle: [why-you-must-know-about-the-sex-addiction-cycle](#)

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# About.com Fatherhood

## Pornography Addiction - Understanding the Addictive Cycle

By Wayne Parker

Several years ago I had the opportunity to work with a group of men who were struggling with addictions with a primary focus on [sexual addiction](#)<sup>1</sup>. These were good men who found themselves trapped in a vicious cycle that pulled them further and further away from loving and intimate relationships in their families and more and more into a selfish and addictive behavior pattern.

During the [12 Step program](#)<sup>2</sup> in which they were involved, the instructors talked to them about the addictive cycle. This cycle is a common pattern that seems to be found in almost all addictions, whether associated with sex and pornography or with food addiction, drug addiction, or other destructive self-defeating behaviors.

This cycle is, like all cycles, cyclical. It tends to follow a predicted pattern in a downward spiral and continues time after time unless disrupted by a thought and behavior pattern that changes the typical cycle and allows the addict to make a change for the better. Understanding this addictive cycle can help a father come to better understand his own addiction and the behavior associated with it or to help a child or a friend having these struggles to make the changes necessary to break the pattern and begin a recovery effort.

There are ten basic steps in the addictive cycle. These include:

- 1. A Vulnerable Time.** In this step, the addict has a moment when he or she is vulnerable to the temptation to act out inappropriately. He or she might be home alone, be feeling tired, be [under stress](#)<sup>3</sup>, feel lonely or rejected or might simply be bored. When a person in the addictive cycle feels one of these emotions, that person is vulnerable. Often, simply dealing with the issues present at the time in more positive and productive ways can break the cycle.
- 2. Stimulus or Trigger** When in the vulnerable state, the addict will experience a trigger or some external or internal stimulus. He might replay an old memory, might smell something or see an image in a grocery store or online that might start his unconscious mind heading down a destructive path.
- 3. Emotion.** In this step, the trigger leads to an emotional response. It might be curiosity, excitement, or just a heightened sense of awareness. The emotion, when connected to the trigger, forms a powerful bond which drags the addict further down the path.
- 4. Thought.** Following the emotional response, the person in the cycle will begin to think or ponder about the possibilities. Something comes to his mind suggesting "I wonder what it would be like to ...?" or "What if I just did ...?" As the thought comes to mind in the heightened vulnerable state, the person in the pattern tends to only see the solution proposed by the addiction.
- 5. Chemical Release.** As the trigger, the emotion and the thought merge, the human brain tends to release chemicals that further the process along. These brain chemicals include [Dopamine](#)<sup>4</sup> (which focuses the brain and thought patterns intensely) and [Norepinephrine](#)<sup>5</sup> (which increases energy and exhilaration). These chemicals increase the tendency to repeat the addictive behavior which leads to sexual acting out.
- 6. Physiological Response.** With the release of these brain chemicals, the body begins to respond in kind. The person in the addictive cycle finds pupils dilating, heart rate increasing, and muscles tightening. This physical response just reinforces in the addict's body the chemical changes that are occurring.
- 7. Rational Thought.** In the midst of all of these physical changes, the brain in its addictive pattern, gives the person in the cycle a second chance. Just prior to acting out, an addict has an opportunity to have an out. The sense in this stage usually is "I know that I shouldn't go there, but it sure feels good to be going." This is often the point at which an addict can, if he takes a break from the pattern by changing positions, turning off the computer, taking a walk, or calling a supportive friend, break the cycle and change directions.
- 8. Hypothesis/Belief.** In this setting, the addict, depending on what he does with his rational thought, will either feel hopeless to overcome or will successfully stop the process. That choice is impacted by his belief about the future.
- 9. Response.** Based on that belief and his hypothesis about what will happen next, the addict either acts out or gets out. Most often in the cycle, the addict's response is to act out in ways that follow the pattern.
- 10. Remorse.** After acting out, the person in the cycle will return to a sense of rationality in which the pattern concludes with a sense of remorse. "Why did I let that happen?" is a common thought. As the cycle concludes, the addict will usually commit to a change in the future, but without some intervention, the pattern will start again and cycle through, digging an even deeper rut for the addict to confront the next time. Coming to an understanding of the common pattern of the addictive cycle can help a person struggling with these addictions better know what is happening as the process plays out and how to find moments to stop the cycle all along the way.

[Learn more about pornography addiction and other sexual addictions and how to overcome.](#)<sup>6</sup>

*This About.com page has been optimized for print. To view this page in its original form, please visit: <http://fatherhood.about.com/od/sex-and-porn-addiction/a/Pornography-Addiction-Understanding-The-Addictive-Cycle.htm>*

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### Links in this article:

- [http://addictions.about.com/od/sexaddiction/tp/sexaddict\\_types.htm](http://addictions.about.com/od/sexaddiction/tp/sexaddict_types.htm)
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