

THE JOY OF SEXual recovery

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Sexual recovery is a rollercoaster full of unexpected twists and turns lurking beyond every corner. Fortunately, the rollercoaster gets smoother and less tumultuous as recovery goes on, and you get to choose the same old ride or avoid the turbulent rollercoaster altogether.

Long-term recovery from sexual compulsion takes on different dimensions than early recovery. While the beginning stages focus on stopping self-destructive, out-of-control behaviors, long-term recovery unlocks life-affirming, expansive experiences. Early recovery requires acknowledgment and recognition of self-sabotage while long-term recovery is often a time of clarity and resourcefulness. Early recovery sifts through the wreckage of the past while long-term recovery makes room for the exploration of limitless possibilities.

Early Recovery	Long-term Recovery
Acting Out	Mindfulness
Self-sabotage	Self-compassion
Isolation	Connection
Frozenness	Thawing
Limited Intimacy	Greater Intimacy
Shame	Joy

In early recovery it's crucial to learn strategies to steer clear of past toxic behaviors, but after using these foundational tools for awhile, it's time to integrate sex and intimacy into one's life in healthier ways. Currently, there's still an absence of research validating the experiences of those who have been sexually sober for many years. Through the lens of coaching, psychotherapy and twelve-step wisdom, this article takes a closer look at this growing, sober population—a journey for those who have crossed beyond the threshold of early recovery and into this uncharted territory.

In recent years there's been a paradigm shift in the mental health profession re-focusing on what's right with clients in addition to what's wrong. Mental health professionals no longer limit their research and clinical work to psychopathology or deficits. Instead, Positive Psychologists such as Martin Seligman, PhD at the University of Pennsylvania now research *What Makes Life Worth Living*, and several years ago Time magazine called it *The Science of Happiness*.

Because the tone of the twelve-step rooms often follows the disease model of addiction introduced by Alcoholics Anonymous, there's a tendency to focus on the addiction as an illness. Sexual recovery fellowships have fewer participants than more-established groups like AA resulting in fewer old-timers in the rooms. As a result, sharing often emphasizes the trials and tribulations of stopping behaviors rather than building more capacity toward healthier patterns of sex,

intimacy and relationships. Taking the lead from Positive Psychology, it would be remarkable to see what would happen if more meetings focused on purpose, engagement, well-being and resiliency.

Another fundamental difference exists between process addictions (i.e. sex, food and money) and chemical addictions because sex, food and money remain an ongoing part of one's life in contrast to complete abstinence from substances. Long-term sexual recovery focuses on the integration of sex and intimacy as a healthy element which requires a soul-searching process usually with a sponsor, coach and/or therapist. Living life to its fullest while building greater capacity to give and receive love is the broader vision for sexual recovery.

Webster defines joy as *the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires*. This implies that someone actually knows what they desire, and herein lies the initial challenge. The longer someone is in recovery, the more clarity appears. Priorities often shift from the superficial toward deeper pursuits of meaningful connection and engagement. For instance, what brings you joy at this point in your recovery?

As part of the twelve steps, an inventory of resentments and character defects is typically written and shared with a sponsor. Consider developing a joy inventory to complement these steps. Beginning with your earliest memory of joy, list as many fun and joyful experiences you can remember. Focusing on such memories creates a rolodex of nourishing moments which carves out new neural pathways as well as greater awareness of life-enhancing experiences.

In his book *Overcoming Addictions*, Deepak Chopra states that *the absence of joy is the cause and the effect of addiction*. Although this may be an oversimplification, it does speak to the idea that joy and well-being may be a preventive measure as well as a safety net from future addictive tendencies.

Joy-building takes shape through practice, and your litmus test is simple. Does this person, place, thing or experience nourish or deplete you? Ask yourself this question from now on, and it will reveal what belongs in your life or not.

Joy and serenity often overlap, and the Three S's—service, spirituality and self-care—adapted from twelve-step wisdom are valuable tools often leading to greater joy in one's life. Being of **service** is an antidote to the narcissism of addiction. Because obsessive-compulsive behaviors are self-centered by nature, shifting toward other-centeredness breaks the narcissistic cycle.

Simplify the concept of **spirituality** by asking yourself the question "What gives your life meaning?" Not easy to answer, but most people will describe elements related to joy, vitality and aliveness. Often spirituality requires you to ask the right questions rather than having any specific answers.

The concept of impeccable **self-care** might seem to contradict the idea of being of service, yet how can you be there for others if you're not taking care of yourself? Because many people in recovery had gaps in their parenting, this can be a time of re-parenting through self-awareness, self-compassion, self-acceptance and eventually self-love.

Long-term recovery also requires movement from sheer isolation to deeper, meaningful connection with yourself and others. Connection to self may involve mindfulness, body awareness, broader forms of self-expression and creativity. Connection to others challenges you to discover or re-discover those who have always been in your corner.

Once you've gained more clarity and grounding, it's time to celebrate your sexual self. Because touch was automatically sexualized and associated with acting-out experiences, it becomes essential to discover ways to touch and be touched safely. Hugs, cuddling and therapeutic massage are just a few examples of practicing safer touch, and each of these possibilities can be safely re-negotiated to determine how they promote intimacy rather than perpetuate compulsive patterns. Discuss these options with a confidant to demystify the exploration and help you gently walk through the discovery process toward mindful choices.

What is it that you really want and desire in this next chapter of your recovery? Shifting toward a future-focused, action-oriented approach creates empowerment and trajectory. What matters most to you? What is something that would really put a smile on your face? By identifying core values, passions and priorities, you'll develop action steps with purpose. Once you've established your vision, find an accountability partner to stay on track with your heart's intentions.

The field of neuroplasticity has discovered that synaptic connections in the brain expand through focus and attention. For example, if you get stuck in shame and resentments, synaptic connections multiply around these outdated beliefs. If you focus on joy, gratitude and well-being, your brain creates neural pathways pointing in a life-affirming direction. As you make conscious choices toward a smoother, more effortless ride, endless possibilities will inevitably appear in ways you never imagined.

We cannot cure the world of sorrows, but we can choose to live in joy.

-Joseph Campbell