

a thing as sex addiction. She certainly didn't think it applied to women – in fact, she said, 'I was inclined to write it off as an invention to excuse the behaviour of the selfish and immoral.' The words 'pot', 'kettle' and 'black' lurk temptingly close by... Ms Jonsson's initial instinct was probably spot on.

Ms Jonsson's research

The definition of a sex addict, gleaned from among the therapists across the Atlantic, surprised Ulrika. It's a person 'whose sexual behaviour damages their life'. Suddenly a shred of salvation beckoned. 'Given that, I suppose thousands of us, who believed we were just unlucky or ill-used, might fit the bill,' she mused.

She continued to use the evidence she gathered to justify the diagnosis.

Didn't lose her virginity until she was seventeen; had fewer sexual partners than average; 'and while I may have hurt others, the person hurt hardest was me.' [I'm soooooo sorry. Ed]

Therapists confirmed that it's an intimacy disorder, usually formed early in life – abuse, trauma, loneliness or rejection could be responsible. For Ulrika this would have been her four years alone with her father after her parents' separation – he apparently had a large and unconcealed library of porn, and was unconcerned at being discovered having sex with various girlfriends by the pubescent Ulrika. While not claiming this as abuse, she attributes to it her failure to connect love and sex, and said it made her feel unworthy of love or respect. A therapist confirmed that, feeling undervalued by her parents, she was trying to prove them wrong by making people desire her, and thereby give herself a feeling of worth.

I think it's easier to see the wood for the trees from a less personal and subjective source. So for now I'll simply mention two other famous 'sex addicts', actors Billy Bob Thornton (who even tried to seduce his therapist), and Rob Lowe – and I'm sure there are loads of other victims out there among the stars.

The bald facts

The truth is that there IS such a thing as sex addiction, which is every bit as damaging and destructive as the more commonly recognised addictions to alcohol, drugs or gambling. It's also the least understood of addictions in this country – naturally in the States, it's higher profile... more therapists, clinics, etc – and they invented the term in the 1970s as a recognised disorder.

It is a genuine addiction, and it can grab and destroy ordinary people. We're not

talking about individuals who have a high sex-drive – nor is it about perversions, fetishes or people who simply like a lot of sex. It's indicated in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders* by 'compulsive searching for multiple partners, compulsive fixation on an unattainable partner, compulsive masturbation, compulsive love relationships or compulsive sexuality in a relationship.' It's not the sexual activity itself, but how the addict approaches it mentally, and how it takes over their lives.

Compare it, if you like, to the narcotic hit of smoking, or the high of drugs or alcohol. The need for the buzz, the orgasmic high or even the anticipation – increases and takes the addict beyond normal behaviour to get their fix. This leads, eventually, to a depersonalisation of sex, so the addict views themselves as just an object – having sex with another object. This is very bad news for

partners, as real intimacy and friendship become immaterial. The compulsion takes over and leads to obsessive, repetitive behaviour, which in its worst form can bring the sufferer to an almost trance-like state. They lose the judgement to make rational decisions, run up bills on sex chat-lines, spend more and more time surfing the net for porn and immersing themselves in chat-rooms. The internet, you may say, has a lot to answer for... but maybe without it, addicts could resort to worse risks...

An ordinary man's addiction

One case study – by his own admission a textbook case for the way he descended into full-on addiction – went from sex-line to internet porn, to chat-rooms and arranged meetings – a seamless escalation with no sense of what was happening to him.

This man was no Hollywood Adonis with lots of time and money (and opportunities) on his hands – far from it. He, like other addicts, had plenty of other things which should have occupied his mind – job, family, responsibilities and commitments – but he was willing to risk all this, and his relationship suffered accordingly.

At the far end of the scale, the addict throws caution to the winds to get their kicks, perhaps downloading porn at work, coming on to inappropriate people, having sex in public places, crossing legal lines or ignoring the basic tenets of safe sex. It's a spiral that affects all stabilising factors in their life – partner, work and health.

What can be done?

They've been running clinics in America for ages – but here we've been more cautious. We've no accurate statistics but it's likely there are around 4 million sex addicts in the UK – in a ratio of about 2:1 – men to women. It is being treated with real concern – in 2005, Dr Glyn Hudson-Allez had ten addicts under treatment at her private Bristol clinic, and she postulated

about the causes. She pointed out that the sex addict gets little pleasure from actual physical contact – but they engage in sex they don't really enjoy to boost their low self-esteem and prevent loneliness.

It's hard for these people to form normal relationships – they, like all addicts, are powerless to control their behaviour, even when they see the damage it's doing.

There are two extremes – at one end of the scale 'in a relationship and greedy and needy', and at the other, a person alone, who is aloof and unwilling to risk closeness at all for fear of rejection.

Dr Mike McPhillips, a leading clinician at Roehampton's Priory Lodge Programme has treated people of all ages, from sixteen to sixties – not just people who put themselves about a lot or spend too long ogling internet porn, but people whose sexual behaviour has run seriously and damagingly out of control. At the PLP, twenty per cent of patients in 2005 were sex addicts, but significantly, these people had previously been treated for other addictions.

Therapy

Sexaholics Anonymous (SA) started in the UK in 1991 to help ordinary people who can't afford expensive clinic therapy. Treatment is designed to work like Alcoholics Anonymous group therapy – but not to the point of effecting total abstinence.

What they have to learn is how to remain monogamous and restrict themselves to 'normal' sexual activity. Some do respond by adopting total abstinence – but like anorexia for slimmers, it's a bad overreaction – albeit better than continuing with humiliating or illegal behaviour.

It strikes me as a very cogent comment with which to end this feature. Professor Mark Griffiths of the Psychology Department at Nottingham Trent University, an expert in behavioural addictions responded to the accusations of sex addiction levelled at

Jude Law: 'I, personally, don't believe that someone like Jude Law can

be described as a sex addict. A lot of celebrities are very egotistical and are surrounded by sycophants who do everything for them. That can lead them to think they can get away with certain behaviour because of their celebrity status. They receive more offers of sex than the average person, and if most men in a stable relationship were faced with the barrage of propositions that a film star gets, they would be tempted.'

So there it is, from the horse's mouth. What is it with these Americans? I suspect that if they were really manifesting the sort of symptoms our UK centres are treating, they'd be less keen to own up to their addict status. Along with Professor Mark Griffiths, I too suspect that these celebrities are boys behaving badly – men with a weak will... and an even weaker 'won't'.

OUR IN-HOUSE EXPERT

Psychologist Martyn Gough has his own slant on the phenomenon. 'I believe the jury's still out on the whole sex addiction matter. Isn't it really just an excuse for promiscuity when you've been caught out? Such behaviour is natural to most animals, who sub-consciously go into mating mode to spread their genes and procreate their species, as most eminent psychologists will confirm. I'm reminded of the story of the young bull and the old bull. "Look down there in that field – all those cows! Let's rush down there and shag one of them!" to which the old bull replies sagely, "No – let's amble down slowly and shag them all."'

'There is money to be made by "therapists" – particularly in California – by offering "treatment" for conditions and syndromes that may or may not exist. Increasingly, in our society, people look to explain away what could be viewed as their unacceptable behaviour by saying, "it's not my fault – it's something that's happened to me over which I have no control – HELP ME!"

Call me cynical if you like – I prefer to call it "pragmatic"...

COULD YOU BE AN ADDICT... AND WHAT COULD YOU DO?

Sexaholics Anonymous provides a concise online test to enable you to check your 'sex addict' status – it's a simple twenty-question questionnaire, but can give a good pointer as to whether or not you need help.

It begins, 'Have you ever thought you needed help for your sexual thinking or behaviour?' and proceeds to work through all areas where addiction could manifest itself.

Like the Alcoholics Anonymous approach (they are an offshoot of AA), there are meetings across the UK (and 39 countries worldwide). The website offers meeting details, information, reading matter, and support for both addicts and their families/partners.

Contact details:

Sexaholics Anonymous,
PO Box 1914, Bristol BS99 2NE
Helpline: 07000 725463
Web: www.sa.org – and www.sauk.org
Best time to telephone: 24 hours