

Courtship Disorders

by

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Implicit in most compulsive sexual patterns is a distortion of normal courtship. For example, it is very normal even for children to play “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.” It is very normal to be curious about your partner’s body and very pleasurable to have your body examined. As you grow up you learn how to handle that part of getting to know someone appropriately. Exhibitionists and voyeurs, however, have become stuck in this one part of courtship. They have become so focused on this phase that it becomes more pleasurable than the rest of the courtship. In other words, courtship has gone awry.

One of the original pioneers of understanding sexual deviance as a courtship disorder was Havelock Ellis, who in 1933 referred to exhibitionism as a “symbolic act based on a perversion of courtship.”¹ Over the years Freund and various colleagues elaborated the concept of courtship disorder. They specified four general examples of courtship distortion, which resulted in paraphilic behavior. First, they pointed to the process of locating a potential partner which when distorted becomes voyeurism. A second phase they called pre-tactile interaction for which exhibitionism and obscene calls served as examples of disordered courtship.

A third phase was tactile interaction which in disordered courtship would appear as toucherism or frotterism. Finally, they described preferential rape patterns as a distortion of normal efforts to “effect genital union.” They extended this framework to sadomasochism, triolism, and other paraphilias.

The concept of courtship disorders has been very useful in understanding various forms of sexual assault. A fully elaborated context courtship would provide a framework for looking at sexual behavior beyond those classified as paraphilic. An integrated model would extend to “non perverse” behaviors such as sexual compulsivity within marriage, compulsive masturbation or compulsive prostitution. Further, an elaborated model would create a framework in which to integrate the addiction paradigm. Three dimensions would emerge:

1. **Courtship** – Normal patterns of relationship development affected by family, culture, religion, and childhood.

¹ Ellis, H. (1978) *Psychology of Sex: A Manual for Students*. 2nd Ed. New York/London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. (Original text published in 1933).

2. **Variations** – Atypical behavior that is situational or episodic, abnormal or perverse
3. **Addictions** – compulsive behavior including abnormal and normal which is dysfunctional, dangerous, or adverse to life.

The advantage to such a framework is that non-paraphilic compulsive behavior which often coexists with the paraphilias would have a diagnostic context that clinically, would also be helpful to patients.

Consider the case of Carrie. She was sexually abused as she grew up by her father, who fondled her regularly until she was fourteen. She was emotionally and physically abused. At one point she got pregnant and her parents forced her into an abortion. Her mother had the doctor place the fetus next to Carrie's head after the surgery so she would "learn a lesson."

As an adult Carrie found it very difficult to allow herself to be sexual with a man she cared for. She was always very anxious and fearful if the relationship mattered at all. However when she was with men who were "slime" and for whom she did not care, she could be sexual with abandon. She also was intensively sexual with herself. She would masturbate whenever she got anxious. It was a tremendous relief to her when she finally understood that being abused created a disordered sense of courtship. She could not let herself be sexual with a man who really mattered. Her father mattered and yet had betrayed her. A further legacy of the betrayal was that men who did not matter and were unreliable were attractive.

A problem exists in that there is not a systematic and reliable way in our culture to learn the basics of courtship. You probably never attended a course that taught you how to appropriately and successfully flirt. Courtship failure means that you can start repetitive patterns because what you do does not work. So it is important to learn the basic elements of courtship. I propose that there are twelve components to courtship. They are as follows:

Noticing – This is the ability to notice attractive traits in others. With an existing partner this means the ability to stay conscious of the desirable traits in that partner. This dimension requires the capacity to filter out traits that, while desirable, are not a good match for you. Put another way, noticing also means to be discriminating.

Attraction – This is the ability to feel attraction towards others and imagine acting on those feelings. This dimension assumes a functional arousal "map" in which you select behavior and persons appropriate for you. Attraction involves curiosity as well as desire about the physical, emotional, and intellectual traits of others. In an existing relationship it means the ability to maintain openness to change and the unknown in the other. In quality relationships the partners

keep “discovering” the other. Attraction is where passion starts and how relationships endure.

Flirtation – Everyone needs to know how to flirt. Successful flirting uses playfulness, seductiveness, and social cues to send signals of interest and attraction to the desirable person. This ability extends to noticing and accurately reading flirtation from others. The critical factor in flirtation is in knowing when it is appropriate to send and receive. Success in long-term relationships requires an ongoing flirtation with your partner.

Demonstration – Sometimes inaccurately described as “showing off,” this is where one demonstrates “prowess” (a physical trait, a skill, or a capability). Sexually, this is the classic “I will show you mine and you show me yours.” There is in fact a pleasure or eroticism in having a potential partner show interest in your sexuality. Behaviors here include demonstrating a skill such as in an athletic competition or in dressing to attract the other person or specifically doing sexual things to further the partner’s interest. It is important to know that you are doing that and that you are being appropriate in the context and to the person.

Romance – The ability to experience, express, and receive passion. Romance assumes the ability to be aware of all the feelings of attraction, vulnerability, and risk. More importantly, a lover must be able to express them and have sufficient self worth to accept the expressions of care from a lover as true. Included in romance is the ability to test the reality of the feelings. Is what is perceived in the other person accurate or a projection of what you want to be? Or are the people selected consistently bad choices for you?

Individuation – In the midst of the romance, healthy persons are able to be true to themselves. They feel absolutely free to be who they are. They feel no fear of disapproval or control by the other. They tell the truth and do not feel intimidated. Nor do they have to “give” on important matters. They can ask needs to be met and they do not have to defer to the other. They trust that people care for them as they are.

Intimacy – As the exhilaration of early passion subsides partners enter the “attachment” phase where the relationship deepens in its meaning and integrity. This means a level of profound vulnerability that is ongoing and is more difficult than the exhilaration of discovery during early romance. This is the being known fully and staying anyway part of relationships. It is the part that fulfills the need to achieve because the level of self-candor is too great.

Touching – Physical touch requires trust, care, and judgment. Touching affirms the other but is respectful of timing, situation, and boundaries. Touching without permission or sexualizing the touch betrays trust. Touch can also be seductive and misleading. Touch can also be extraordinarily healing.

With adults who were not touched or neglected as children, touch deprivation can be very extreme. People deprived of touch will sacrifice their judgment and their needs simply to be touched. Touching is therefore important and not to be taken lightly.

Foreplay – Sometimes referred to as the most important part of sexual contact, it is the expression of sexual passion without genital intercourse. Holding, fondling, kissing, and sexual play builds sexual tension and is erotic and pleasurable. As a stage it includes the verbal expression of passion and meaning. In repeated surveys, most people say it is the best part of sex. It is often skipped over in our culture because of time pressure and stress.

Intercourse – More than the exchange of body fluids, this is the ability to surrender oneself to passion, letting go and trusting yourself and your partner to be vulnerable. Intercourse, while extremely pleasurable, is also an index of how you are able to give up control. To give oneself over to passion requires a true abandonment of how things are supposed to turn out. Many people limit themselves or fail in orgasm simply out of trust and control issues.

Commitment – Commitment is about the ability to bond or attach to another. Some describe addiction as a failure to bond or not having the capacity to form a deep, meaningful relationship. If someone matters enough, you honor the relationship by your fidelity to it. Many addicts refer to the “black hole” they are searching to fill. This is it – being bonded in meaningful relationships including the non-sexual ones. If you grew up in a family in which you learned not to count on others, you look for what you can count on. Alcohol, sex, drugs, and high risk always do what they promise. This “pathological” relationship with a mood altering behavior does not fill the void.

Renewal – The capacity must exist to sustain all the above dimensions in an existing relationship. To be married does not mean you stop flirting or express passion. There is a difference between being attached to someone out of habit and being devoted because of the meaning that has evolved in your journey together. Successful couples continue courtship, continue to show the other they are a good deal, continue to make efforts to attract their mate, and continue to express the value they have for each other. If a relationship is not working, partners take responsibility to change it. If the relationship is not tenable, they leave.

Courtship and the Ten Types

In the original research we did for *Don't Call It Love* we started with a database of 114 behaviors in which we did a factor analysis. A series of “types” of sexually compulsive behavior emerged in the sex addicts surveyed. We have, over the years, elaborated the ten types as an empirically based model of compulsive sexual behavior. Now that we have added courtship dimensions we

find that we can assist patients by identifying specific courtship distortions in each type. This makes very concrete for the patient an understanding of sex addiction as an intimacy disorder as well as an addiction. As in the above case, it is a great relief to patients to know there is something they can do and immediately provides perspective. What follows is a review of the ten types from the perspective of courtship.

Fantasy Sex – Notice attractive traits in others and will feel attracted, but they do not move beyond it. There is a safety in staying in the fantasy world as opposed to acting on the fantasy. Romance and sex can flourish when there is no reality testing. They also can become obsessional.

Masturbation to fantasies is how we learn about our own desire. When masturbation becomes compulsive, we make it a way to escape our loneliness. It is about fear of rejection, fear of reality, and reduction of anxiety. It can also be self indulgent in the sense of seeking comfort as opposed to risking relationship. Many sex addicts find refuge in fantasy sex because other forms of acting out are simply too complicated, too risky, or too much effort. Fantasy sex is a way to disassociate from reality, including relationships.

Voyeurism – Voyeurs are also non-participants in the sex game. They move beyond fantasy to searching out sexual objects in the real world. It is normal to enjoy looking at others sexually. When that means looking at people who do not know they are being viewed it becomes problematic. When it is about compulsive pornography use it becomes isolating. Voyeurs also venture into flirtation. Sitting in a strip bar and having someone do a table dance for you focusing on another's sexual demonstration behavior without the voyeur doing anything. To put it in childhood terms, you show me yours and I'll watch. Usually voyeurism means objectifying the other person so it is not a personal relationship.

Exhibitionism – Exhibitionism is the "I will show you mine" part. It is pleasurable and normal to have others notice you sexually. With a partner it is a significant part of sex play. Some addicts fixate on just being noticed and have difficulty moving beyond that. Eroticism for them is being looked at. For some it is the power of realizing they have captured the other's attention. For some it is forcing their sexuality on the other, which is angry and aggressive.

From a relationship perspective it is introducing oneself in an inappropriate way, or seeking attention from others with no intent of going further, which is to tease. Sometimes it is about the pleasure of breaking the rules. When it is obsessional and compulsive, it is a significant distortion of normal courtship.

Seductive Role Sex – Here relationships are about power and conquest. Flirtation, performance, and romance are the erotic keys for sex addicts in this category. They are hooked on falling in love and winning the attention of the

other. Often once they have established that, the sexual interest subsides. While they can quickly gain the confidence of others, and can be intimate in the early discovery, romantic stage, establishing a deeper relationship eludes them. They are on the hunt for another.

Another common scenario is to feel trapped, like they cannot be themselves. So they have multiple relationships in which they can be different with different people. They have a hard time being themselves or individuating. Often there is a fear of abandonment so having more than one relationship is a way to prevent the hurt they are sure they will receive. They are crippled in their ability to form lasting bonds and enduring relationships.

Trading Sex – Some sex workers actually do form some attachment for their clients but typically bartering sex for money is devoid of relationship. The goal is to simulate flirtation, demonstration, and romance. What actually happens in most cases is about replication of childhood sexual abuse in which the child gained power in a risky game of being sexual with the caregiver. If a prostitute is a sex addict, meaning that they found sex more pleasurable with clients than in personal relationships and are “hooked on the life,” it represents a significant distortion of normal courtship. Often the money is a sign of having been successful at the sexual “game” and the client can be disregarded except as a repeat customer. Forging significant, enduring bonds or being true to yourself as in individuation is not part of the game.

Intrusive Sex – People who do intrusive sex, such as touching people in crowds or making obscene calls, are really perverting the touching and foreplay dimensions of courtship. In most cases they are using others for sexual arousal with little chance of being caught. Their behavior represents both intimacy failure and individuation difficulties. In their behavior they do not see themselves as predatory, although they are. An implicit anger exists and they “steal” sex because they believe no one would respond as they wish. So the goal is to take it without the other’s knowledge. They become quite expert in their subterfuge.

For example professionals such as physicians, clergy, or attorney’s will look quite compassionate, when in fact they use their clients’ vulnerability for their own arousal. Stolen intrusion becomes the obsession. On-going relationship life suffers because of the secret shame.

Paying for Sex – Here sex addicts are willing participants in simulated intimacy. They are focused, however, on the touching, foreplay, and intercourse dimensions without the hassle of relationship. Frequently they tell themselves it is because of their partner’s inadequacies that they resort to prostitution. Compulsive prostitution is a larger problem but it does reflect relationship failure. Often times the failure is about the sex addict’s inability to communicate feelings to their partner or to be willing to work on their own

attractiveness behaviors. For some, sex is intimacy – or as close as they will allow themselves to be.

Frequently there is sexual anorexia, in that it is difficult to be aroused in the presence of someone for whom you care. Commitment to and renewal of relationships are profoundly undermined by the secret life of this behavior.

Anonymous Sex – By definition, this sexual behavior is not about relationship. You do not have to attract, seduce, trick, or even pay for sex. It simply is sex. Ironically the sexual anorexia counterpart is often also present, with the associated loneliness and isolation. Frequently for sex addicts, part of the high is the risk of unknown persons and situations. In part, that stems from early sexual relationships that were fearful. Having to experience fear in order for arousal or sexual initiation to work fundamentally distorts the courtship process. The safety of enduring bond is never there to allow the deeper, profound risks of being known by another.

Pain Exchange Sex – People who are compulsively into painful, degrading, or dangerous sexual practices such as “blood sports” (creating wounds which bleed as part of sex) or asphyxiation, often have significant distortions of courtship. Specifically touching, foreplay, and intercourse become subordinated to some dramatic story line that usually is a reenactment of a childhood abuse experience. For a woman to only be aroused if a man is hurting her is a distortion of what goes into sexual and relationship health. Enduring relationships are difficult to build given the arousal scenarios embedded in high-risk sex.

Exploitive Sex – To exploit the vulnerable is clearly distorted courtship. With sex offenders who rape there exists deep issues around intimacy and anger. Less obvious are non-violent predators that use seduction, as with children or professional sexual misconduct with clients. In the workplace where there is a differential of power, employees can be exploited.

When arousal is dependent on the vulnerability of another in order to be attractive there is a significant courtship problem all along the courtship continuum. Addicts in this category will use “grooming” behavior, which is to carefully build the trust of the unsuspecting victim. So attraction, flirtation, demonstration, romance, and intimacy are all used to gain the confidence of the person for sexual exploitation. Addicts will go to the extent of professing an enduring bond with a much more malevolent intent.

The clinical task is to help the patient understand how their compulsive behavior is in part a courtship problem. Their life experience did not allow for the evolution of effective and satisfying courtship skills.