**Sexual Sobriety Plan**

**(adapted from material developed by Robert Weiss, LCISW)**

With alcoholics and drug addicts the concept of sobriety is easy to define. Essentially, for substance abusers sobriety entails total abstinence, meaning no use of mood altering substances (outside of medical emergencies and carefully prescribed, medically necessary usage). However, when looking at life-affirming behaviors that have spiraled out of control (such as sex), sobriety is much less cut and dried. Unlike chemical sobriety, sexual sobriety is defined not by ongoing abstinence, but rather by the addict agreeing *in writing* to not engage in a clearly defined set of problematic sexual behaviors*,*while engaging only moderately and appropriately in expressions of healthy (for that person) sexuality. This is actually very similar to the definition of sobriety with eating disorders, where the goal is not to stop eating altogether, but rather to eat in a healthy, life-affirming manner.

When defining sexual sobriety, the individual who struggles with hypersexuality must carefully look at the sexual behaviors that are out of control and that compromise his relationships, career, health, and life circumstances. The individual then commits in a written Sexual Sobriety Plan to not engage in these problematic sexual activities. The person also looks at what defines healthy sexuality for him in his particular life circumstances.

The ultimate goal is to encourage non-compulsive, non-secretive, non-shaming, non-offense, life-affirming sexual activities. As long as the sex addict’s sexual behaviors remain within his written sexual sobriety contract’s concretely defined limits, he is sexually sober.

These written Sexual Sobriety Plans define and set limits on what is and is not acceptable (sober) sexual behavior. Since every sex addict arrives in recovery with different problems and different goals for health and happiness, every Sexual Sobriety Plan is different. Again, this differs significantly from substance abuse recovery, where the definition of sobriety – complete abstinence – is the same for everyone. Typically, Sexual Sobriety Plans are split into three tiers.

1. **The Inner Boundary** – This is the bottom-line definition of sexual sobriety, listing specific sexual behaviors (not thoughts or fantasies) that the addict needs to stop. These are the damaging and troublesome acts that have led to negative life consequences and incomprehensible demoralization for the addict. If the addict engages in inner boundary behaviors, he has slipped and will need to restart his or her sobriety clock.
2. **The Middle Boundary** – These are the warning signs and slippery situations that can lead a sex addict into the inner boundary. Here the addict lists people, places, thoughts/fantasies, and experiences that might trigger the desire to act out sexually. In addition to obvious potential triggers (such as logging onto the Internet or driving through a neighborhood where prostitutes hang out), this list should include things that may indirectly trigger a desire to act out (such as not taking treatment seriously, keeping secrets, and the like).
3. **The Outer Boundary –** This is a listing of healthy behaviors and activities that can and hopefully will lead the individual toward achievement of his life goals (including but not limited to a healthy, nondestructive sex life). These healthy pleasures are what the recovering addict turns to as a replacement for sexual acting out. The list should reflect a healthy combination of work, recovery, and play. If going to a support group three times per week, exercising every day, and seeing a therapist once per week are on the list, then spending time with friends, and engaging in enjoyable hobbies should also be on the list.

Once again every individual is different. Each person has a unique life history, goals, and specific problematic sexual behaviors. Therefore, every Sexual Sobriety Plan is different. Behaviors that are deeply troubling for one sex addict may be perfectly acceptable for another, and vice versa. As such, there is no set formula for defining and living sexual sobriety. The key is for each individual to be totally, completely, and brutally honest when formulating his Sexual Sobriety Plan.

One common behavior that can end up in any of the three boundaries is masturbation. For porn addicts and compulsive masturbators the decision is clear: masturbation is an inner boundary activity. For others, masturbation may or may not be an integral part of the addictive cycle. As such, some sex addicts define it as a slippery but still-sober behavior (middle boundary) rather than a non-sober (inner boundary) action. Still others view non-compulsive masturbation as an aid in recovery, a tool that can be used to encourage appropriate intimacy (outer boundary). The point here is that all sex addicts are different, as are their goals and definitions of sobriety.

In sum, sexual sobriety can indeed be a confusing concept. This is because it differs for each individual sex addict, and there just aren’t any straightforward, automatic answers in terms of what is and what isn’t allowed.

Consider the (abbreviated for purposes of this blog) boundary plan of Josh, a married 28-year-old sex and [porn addict](http://www.sexualrecovery.com/pornography-addiction.php). When developing this plan, Josh’s stated goals were: to not have sex outside of his marriage; to stop looking at porn; to be honest with his wife; to improve his sex life at home; and to work toward having a family (children).

**Josh’s Inner Boundary**

1. No pornography of any kind (including softcore stuff like the Victoria’s Secret catalog)
2. No sexualized chat-rooms, dating sites, or hookup apps
3. No masturbation
4. No sex with anyone other than my wife
5. No flirting or sexting with anyone (other than my wife)

**Josh’s Middle Boundary**

1. Lying, keeping secrets, or breaking commitments of any kind
2. Going online when my wife is not home or after she’s gone to bed
3. Isolating, or feeling overwhelmed, alone, ashamed, less than, etc.
4. Intense sexual objectification of women who aren’t my wife
5. Skipping therapy and/or my 12-step meetings and/or blowing off my 12-step sponsor

**Josh’s Outer Boundary**

1. Weekly therapy sessions, both individual and group, and regular 12-step involvement
2. Being romantic with my wife
3. Planning for the future (including kids, a better job, a better home, etc.) with my wife
4. Being honest with my wife about everything, including my hopes and dreams
5. Finding and cultivating a new and enjoyable (non-addictive) hobby

When constructed, Sexual Sobriety Plans often look airtight. Unfortunately, they can sometimes be manipulated and/or worked around. As such, it is a good idea to keep the following four tips in mind, as they can be quite helpful in terms of maintaining integrity around sexual sobriety.

1. **Be clear.** Sexual Sobriety Plan are created to define sexual sobriety and to make a plan for a healthier, happier life. They are *written and signed as contracts* as a way to hold individuals accountable to their commitments, particularly in the face of challenging circumstances. When a sex addict lacks clearly written boundaries, he is vulnerable to deciding “in the moment” that certain activities are OK for now even if they’ve been wildly problematic in the past. Simply put, impulsive sexual decisions made without clear guidelines are what dragged the sex addict down in the first place, so it’s best to not leave any wiggle room in sobriety.
2. **Be flexible.** It is important to understand that Sexual Sobriety Plans are not completely inflexible. In fact, recovering sex addicts often spend a month or two (or a year or two) with a particular set of boundaries and then realize they need adjustment. That said, changing a Sexual Sobriety Plan is never something a recovering sex addict should do on his own. Making changes should always involve input from the addict’s therapist, 12-step sexual recovery sponsor and/or support group. Changes to Sexual Sobriety Plans should never be made just because some “special situation” presents itself and the individual decides, in the moment, to make a change. Such behavior is not called “changing the plan,” it’s called “acting out.”
3. **Be honest.** Creating effective Sexual Sobriety Plans requires brutal honesty on the part of not just the sex addict, but his treatment team and support system. Let’s face it, any person looking to justify the continuation of a particular behavior, even though he or she knows that it no longer serves a healthy purpose, can nearly always find someone to sign off on it (or at least to agree that it’s not a big deal). It is important to remember here that the purpose of creating a boundary plan is not to justify and rationalize problematic behaviors (or even watered-down versions of those activities), the purpose is to end sexual acting out and the incomprehensible demoralization it brings.
4. **Consider others.** Sex addicts who develop their Sexual Sobriety Plans while single often find that they need to revise their plans if/when they enter into a serious relationship. Sex addicts already in long-term relationships need to consider how their new boundaries will affect their spouse or significant other. Explaining to that person the reasons for these sudden limitations will usually soften the impact.

Creating and maintaining effective Sexual Sobriety Plans can be a lot of work. But doing so is well worth the effort, leading to a healthier, happier, and more productive life. Energy formerly spent on compulsive sexual behavior can now go into other areas of life. Creativity previously used to facilitate acting out can now be funneled into hobbies, self-care, and healthier relationships. And for individuals not in a committed partnership, there is the chance to build self-esteem through healthy choices regarding commitment, dating, romantic partnering, healthy sexuality, and more. Needless to say, sexual recovery pays big dividends over time, as long as an individual is willing to do the work of recovery.

**“Food for Thought”**

What are your thoughts about Sexual Sobriety Plans?

What are your thoughts about creating one for yourself?

More importantly what are your thought about “living” a Sexual Sobriety Plan?

What type of support would you need to “live” a Sexual Sobriety Plan?

Use the Circles below to create a Sexual Sobriety Plan?