

Psychological factors in sexual acting out

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Some may protest the above title. "Why do we need to look for psychological explanation when someone acts out sexually?" they protest. There is a simple explanation. It's called *taivah* (lust) and *yetzer hara* (evil inclination). Looking for psychological explanations, they assert, merely serves as an **excuse** to act out.

Perhaps we can address this legitimate concern with the following example. If a *frum* person occasionally transgresses the prohibition against *lashon hara* (slandering speech) we can indeed attribute this to the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination). The appropriate treatment would be learning *mussar*. What about someone who incessantly speaks *lashon hara* without a break? How likely is that to be purely an expression of an over-active *yetzer hara*? It is far more likely to be a result of a deep sense of inferiority which often induces a need to put other people down in a desperate attempt to bolster one's self-image.¹ If this person tries to deal with the problem just by learning *mussar*, it will likely just make his problem worse, since it would further depress his self-image thus increasing his impulse to speak *lashon hara*. Psychological help is needed to repair the inferiority complex that is feeding the excessive need to put others down. Only then can he deal with the "normal" *yetzer horah* for speaking *lashon hara* via *mussar*.

The same is true of *kedusha* issues. There are certainly the normal *taivah* impulses that necessitate the learning of *mussar* in order to control these impulses. But there are often psychological factors that cause the problem to reach levels way beyond the bounds of normal *taivah*.² In such a situation, it is often imperative to first use psychological means to deal with these extraordinary impulses to bring them down to normal levels where they can be effectively addressed via *mussar*.³

In a recent report on a Nefesh sponsored workshop on "Understanding Internet Addiction" Dr. Rachel Sarna cites similar comments made by two leading experts in the field, David Delmonico, Ph.D. and Elizebeth Griffin, M.A.:

*While it may appear that addictions are pleasure-seeking behaviors, the roots of any addiction are usually traceable to suppression and avoidance of some kind of emotional pain. Addiction is a way to escape from [a] reality, too full of sadness, or too devoid of joy. **Emotional trauma in early life may be the source of most addictions.** Everyone is [potentially] at risk. However, people who suffer from low self esteem, distorted body image and ADHD are even at greater risk than others. [p.14, emphasis added]*⁴

The frustrated emotional need of a vulnerable person can hijack his normal sexual drive in a desperate attempt to assuage its pain. The fact that the acting out involves his normal instinctual need - and may, for example, intensify when his wife is a *niddah* - can fool people into thinking that it is simply an exaggeration of a normal drive. This is why well meaning advisors will often push marriage as a cure for sexual acting out.⁵ The many married men with this problem provide irrefutable evidence that the intimate relationship of a loving couple bears only the most superficial resemblance to the acting out behavior and therefore, this "cure" is doomed to failure.

What are the early emotional traumas that may make it more likely for someone to develop an addiction to sexual acting out? There are many different possibilities, of course, but the following is a small sampling. A young child in an

emotionally supportive home, when dealing with frustration, anxiety, alarm, fear, or dread will feel comfortable turning to his parents for comfort and support. They will protect, reassure, sooth and guide him, thus teaching him by their reactions that; 1) The world is not such a frightening place; 2) Most problems have solutions; 3) Sharing problems with others makes problems easier to deal with. The child will have been **soothed by his parents** and will learn that comfort is achieved in an interpersonal venue.

In a less emotionally supportive home, parents are sometimes the **source** of the pressure the child is experiencing and even if the pressure is from external sources, the child doesn't feel comfortable sharing the problem with his parents. Since he cannot address the problem interpersonally he seeks **solitary** solutions for **self-soothing** which often involve acting out in a sexual manner. Besides the release experienced via the pleasurable experience itself, there is the additional benefit that he is not dependent on (unreliable) others for relief.

Later in life, even if the person's life becomes more manageable (perhaps as the result of therapy), there is still a feeling that without constant vigilance things will go bad again, so there is often chronic "low voltage" stress which provokes the old "solitary solution." For example, someone who has been hyper-sensitized by chronic emotional abuse early in life may feel pressure to be extra nice to his wife to ensure that she does the same for him since he cannot tolerate even mild criticism. This person may, in fact, have a good marriage with no discernable stress, but the effort to avoid the slightest bit of disharmony (rather than communicating openly and calmly about differences) can exact a tremendous emotional toll. The habituated response to this chronic strain may very well be **solitary self-soothing**.⁶

A person who had suffered from years of parental rejection will likely remain overly sensitized to being rebuffed for any reason and to any degree. Even if he's happily married and his wife is usually very affectionate, if she, on rare occasions, is not in the mood for relations, he will likely feel overwhelmingly rejected and deprived, and this may also provoke the old "solitary solution."

The emotional functions of sexual acting out

Sexual acting out is often motivated by a (subconscious) attempt to:

*contain and transform [painful emotions] - such as depression, anxiety, aggression, shame, and fear - by turning them into feelings of excitement and aliveness, rather than allowing them to be overwhelming and depleting [p. 186].. The sexual encounter [usually] takes place during periods in which the integrity of the self is threatened by some disappointment, some frustration. The aim of the sexual encounter is for both a soothing and an obtaining. a compensation for what they had to put up with or what they have been through [p. 195].*⁷

In my clinical experience, I have found another factor that often serves to maintain the overwhelming impulse to act out sexually. Someone who has been emotionally deprived, severely criticized and/or abused throughout his childhood will often feel that he is not deserving of pleasure. When he attempts to partake in a pleasurable experience, feelings of guilt will cancel out the pleasure. Only the intense sensations involved in sexual acting out can override the inhibitions to pleasure. This causes the child to become interested in sexuality prematurely and eventually this can lead to a sexual addiction.⁸

Pornography

Pornography, on a superficial level, simply serves the purpose of ensuring a more intense, momentarily self-soothing, physical experience. However, there often seems to be another level of emotional need being addressed.

A lack of affectionate intimacy in childhood often results in a frustrated need for intimacy without the tools to achieve it in a healthy way. (Like someone who did not get sufficient attention as a child, who now needs intense attention that can only be achieved by acting immaturely). This is often the appeal of pornography. In ordinary circumstances a

person wouldn't see someone else unclothed unless they had an intimate relationship. Therefore, seeing someone unclothed via pornography creates the **illusion** of intimacy.⁹

For some people, standard pornography is not intimate **enough** because everyone knows that the person they are viewing in a supposedly intimate moment is really an actress who is forgoing her privacy for the sake of money or drugs. They therefore, find it difficult to attain the illusion of intimacy with standard pornography.¹⁰ They prefer voyeurism where they believe they are "sharing" a truly private, intimate moment. They, of course, have to block out the fact that the person being observed did not consent to this "intimacy." (In the case of voyeurism via pornography they also have to accept the illusion that the observed are not aware of the fact that they are being filmed). An added emotional "benefit" of voyeurism is the feeling of power in forcing the "intimacy" on the other person. This is especially appealing to someone who was made to feel powerless in his early family environment.

Heinz Kohut elaborated on some of the emotional issues addressed by pornography and voyeurism:

Behind the enormous attraction of pornography which channels these feelings [of voyeuristic preoccupation]. were children who were contact hungry, were not cuddled or held enough. [and the] enjoyment of the interplay between mother and child - seeing and looking - was missing.. The voyeuristic issues come up in individuals who have felt deeply deprived in this more comprehensive interaction with others.. [The visual contact] becomes the carrier of what should have been. skin contact, voice contact, and all other avenues of pleasure [pp. 168-169]. ¹¹

There are often idiosyncratic details added to the sexual fantasy or acting out that enhance the longed for emotional satisfaction for particular individuals. For example, one person was especially desirous of peeping on very *frum* girls caught in the act of self stimulation. In his mind, such girls are usually less involved in sexual matters and therefore, such an act would be considered especially intimate. Similarly, another person, suffering from same sex attraction (SSA) was especially attracted to "ultra-Orthodox" men, because he believed that they have little sexual interests and so the fact that such a person desires him was especially ego-enhancing.

Interestingly, many people suffering from voyeurism have no desire to see friends in intimate situations because when there is a real relationship there is no need for the illusion of a relationship.

For some people, the act of viewing someone unclothed is sufficient to achieve a satisfaction of the emotional need for intimacy. For others, the eventual sexual release adds a necessary intensity to the emotional experience (like an exclamation mark at the end of a sentence).

After the fact, there is usually a double disappointment: First there is the guilt and shame over the act itself. Then there is the painful disappointment that the hoped for emotional comfort (i.e., the illusion beyond the pleasure - as described above) was not achieved beyond the momentary illusion. It is like when a failed dieter eats cake to alleviate loneliness. The loneliness is alleviated for only a few moments while the shame and feeling of failure linger on. One wonders why the inevitable disappointment doesn't eventually undermine the illusion. I believe there are a few possible explanations.

Firstly, As Rav Dessler explains,¹² *Hashem* gave the *yetzer horah* the power to create illusions that resist the lessons of experience. Otherwise, it would be virtually powerless. When faced with an acute or chronic frustration of a basic need (such as the need for intimacy, attention, acceptance, etc.) the power of the illusion intensifies in proportion to the frustration. One finds this with a person dying of thirst in a desert who imagines seeing an oasis up ahead.

Secondly, there is a little bit of truth in every illusion. When one is desperate this little bit becomes enormously appealing. For example, a shipwreck survivor on a raft in the ocean who, after days of unbearable thirst, will finally

break down and drink the ocean salt water even though he resisted it for days because he knows it will kill him. None-the-less, since it contains the illusion of water, at some point, it feels like it's worth it to get that temporary relief. Likewise, someone desperate for intimacy may feel, at some point, that the illusion of intimacy is all he can hope to get and that may be better than nothing.

Other factors that enhance the illusion

There is often another factor that makes it especially difficult to control these impulses by some people. Those who grew up in homes that were especially harsh and punitive were often led to feel that the Torah's limitations on sexual expression exist for the sole purpose of depriving them of pleasure. No one has attempted to explain to them that it is for the person's own benefit, even in this world.¹³ When a person experiences multiple emotional deprivations in his life, this additional perceived deprivation can seem intolerable, thereby enhancing the appeal of the illusion.

If the family puts undue emphasis on external values, such as physical beauty, or impressing others, this can also enhance the appeal of pornography (the ultimate *chitzonious*). Sadly, this emphasis is not limited to secular culture. It is alive and well in the most unlikely places and by the most unlikely people.

Many years ago I treated a young man who suffered from intense social insecurities, very poor self-esteem and same sex attraction (SSA). He had made progress with his issues and his teacher encouraged him to begin dating. One day he came to a session very despondent. He had gone out on a date with a very quiet girl. I wondered why he agreed to go out with such a girl when he knew from previous experience how much he disliked such dates. He explained that his teacher strongly suggested that he go out with this girl (even knowing that she was extremely quiet and being aware of this young man's strong aversion to such girls) because she was "gorgeous" and the teacher felt this would help him overcome his SSA issue. I found it sad that a respected teacher would subscribe to this superficial perspective of looks being more likely to make a girl attractive to him rather than looking for a girl with whom he'd feel comfortable. Feeling emotionally comfortable with a girl and desiring to feel closer, would be a much more likely path to physical attraction.

Another manifestation of a simplistic and superficial perspective on this issue is the wide-spread belief that getting married will solve these problems. Here too, if we were dealing with a normal *yetzer hara*, this would likely be true. Since we are dealing with a manifestation of a frustrated emotional need this "solution" is, unfortunately, not effective.¹⁴ Understanding this point will help us be less surprised that a person would seem to prefer to act out in a solitary manner because of the illusion of intimacy rather than by interacting with someone he professes to love where he could enjoy true intimacy. However, if we appreciate that adult intimacy is bi-directional where each partner needs to consider the needs of the other in addition to their own, we can better understand this phenomena. The emotionally deprived person is looking for the intimacy of a parent with a small child where the caring is unidirectional. Often he can only find it within the illusions accompanying solitary self-soothing.

This seeking of a unidirectional relationship is often manifested by a person in a committed relationship acting out with another person who is being paid. The payment obligates the provider to focus totally on the needs of the customer.¹⁵ Of course, the fact that the provider's motivation is purely financial makes this "solution" as short lived as the illusion.

The association between acting out and “*emunah* issues”

Chazal speak about the association between sexual acting out and *emunah* issues (e.g., Sanhedrin 63b). I would like to briefly touch upon a psychological aspect of this association that I have encountered in my clinical work. A frum person who is acting out sexually (or in any other serious manner) will experience intense guilt and profound shame. He will see himself as worthless and deserving of severe punishment, especially if his parents responded to his childhood

misbehaviors with intense criticism and/or rejection. This will drive him to intensify his efforts at controlling his behavior. Unfortunately, these efforts will most often turn out to be ineffective since the effort involves suppression due to terror as opposed to change resulting from growth.¹⁶ The failure to change intensifies the self-loathing and terror of retribution. At some point the person will develop a strong resentment toward Hashem/Yiddishkeit for putting him into this untenable situation and so he becomes alienated from Yiddishkeit. Or as one young man put it: "It's not that you don't believe in G-D, it's just that you don't want anything to do with Him. Just like I don't want anything to do with my [abusive] father even though I believe he exists!"

In conclusion, to be successful in overcoming addictions to sexual acting out, it is important to understand the psychological factors that can transform a "normal" *yetzer hara* into an addiction.¹⁷ Even more importantly, is the role such an understanding could play in prevention. When children are raised to be emotionally healthy they are spared from dealing with *yetzer haras* beyond the normal range.

¹ Similarly, Rav Dessler asserts that excessive *gaavah* (haughtiness) is often a reaction to feelings of inferiority (*Michtav MeEliyahu*, Vol. 5, p. 33).

² See Rav Chaim Shmulevitz, *Sichos Musser*, *Siman* 55.

³ This is similar to Rabbi Dr. A. J. Twerski's comment that "The methods suggested by musser to overcome *machshavos zaros* [inappropriate thoughts] are not effective with obsessive thoughts. The latter require treatment," (*Dear Rabbi, Dear Doctor*, Shaar Press, p. 117).

⁴ In the Shadow of the Net: Understanding Internet Addiction and Problematic Online Sexual Behavior. *Nefesh News*, November 2005, pp. 1 & 14.

⁵ More on this point below.

⁶ Someone who was struggling to completely overcome this habituated response asked why it was so difficult. "After all, I was able to completely give up on smoking," He noted. I suggested that while one can totally swear off smoking, thus putting it completely out of one's mind, one can't absolutely forgo all connections to sexuality. In this regard it is more similar to trying to control overeating. Many people find this more difficult to do than giving up smoking, since one can't completely forgo eating!

⁷ H. Turken. 2001. The Psychotherapeutic Encounter: Sexual Acting Out as the Focus of Intervention. *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*. 61, 185-197.

⁸ The same dynamics can apply for drug addiction.

⁹ The common use of the term "making love" even when referring to a person one hardly knows, underscores the essence of the illusion and what it is the person is really after - love. A married man who frequented houses of ill repute, related to me that one time, the lady told him when she met him that she was impressed with his intelligence; he felt satisfied with the compliment, paid the fee and left. The substitution of illusions for desperately needed feelings is not limited to sexual acting out. Parents who use intimidation to extract "respect" or expressions of "love" from their children are also living an illusion. For example, a wealthy couple with estranged adult children in graduate school gave them their monthly stipend only if they came for a weekend visit. The parents would then use the visits as evidence of their children's love and respect.

¹⁰ An analogy can perhaps be found in the act of sharing private information with a friend. As a result of this sharing, the recipient of the information feels a sense of intimacy with the one who shared with him. But what if he then discovers that the speaker shared this same information with countless others? He will no longer feel privileged.

¹¹ H. Kohut, 1987, *The Kohut Seminars on Self Psychology and Psychotherapy with Adolescents and Young Adults*, ed. M. Elson. NY: Norton. See also B. Anechiarico, 1990, Understanding and Treating Sex Offenders from a Self-Psychological Perspective: The Missing Piece. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 18, 281-292.

¹² *Michtav MeEliyahu*, Vol. 1, p. 99.

¹³ See the sefer, *Mishkan Yisroel (Yerushalayim, 5764)* and *Marital Intimacy*, Rabbi A. P. Friedman (Compass Books, 2005) where this point is elaborated upon.

¹⁴ This can be compared to the compulsive eating of a food addict who overeats to combat feelings of loneliness. The fact that he binges on ice cream rather than on carrots, doesn't mean that his compulsive eating is simply an exaggeration of the normal desire to eat.

¹⁵ As one person put it regarding the one he paid, "She was very accepting of all my needs, unlike my wife who feels I need too much." The key motivation was his desperate need to be accepted as is.

¹⁶ See *Michtav MeEliyahu*, Vol. 1, p. 235 where he compares this to pressing on a spring where the harder you press the stronger it presses back.

¹⁷ See *Michtav MeEliyahu*, Vol. 1, p. 262, and *Matnas Chaim* (Rav Matisyahu Salomon), *Maamorim*, Vol. 1, p. 229, on the importance of understanding the underlying vulnerabilities when fighting the *yetzer hara*.