

Stopping Fantasy

From Dr. Mark Laaser, *Healing Wounds of Sexual Addiction*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999. Slightly edited from the original.

Note: This was written for classic sex addiction, prior to the epidemic of internet porn and cybersex. Contemporary sex addiction is not as tied to trauma and abuse as the classic version, but they still can play a significant role.

Stopping fantasy is perhaps one of the hardest aspects of recovery. Addicts can simply think about their behaviors for stimulation—and a sex addict has countless memories and fantasies to draw on. Sights, sounds, words, and people can instantly trigger a fantasy. Trying to stop is extremely frustrating because these images can't be erased.

Traditional approaches to stopping fantasy include encouraging the addict to simply stop, think of something else, or to do something negative when fantasies occur so they associate pain or punishment with fantasy. None of these approaches is very effective.

Addicts have played so many mind games and have too many stimuli locked away in their memories to simply stop the fantasy or to think of something else.

The problem with associating pain with fantasy is that sex remains or becomes a completely negative experience. If addicts condition themselves to associate sex with pain, at what point do they experience healthy and positive sexuality? I do not recommend these strategies.

Fantasies don't develop randomly or without reason; they have a purpose. In order to stop them, we must first understand their purpose.

Fantasy Has Three Objectives

Fantasy is a symptom of the emotional and spiritual condition of sex addicts. When they are lonely, tired, angry, sad, anxious, or afraid, their fantasies take over their thinking. **Fantasies accomplish three objectives:**

- (1) Distracting addicts from painful emotions,**
- (2) Meeting addicts' otherwise unmet desires and needs, and**
- (3) Recasting addicts' experiences of past neglect or abuse.**

Distract

First, fantasizing distracts addicts from painful feelings. Even fantasizing about sex can create all the neurochemistry of the sexual response.

Exciting, new, and perhaps dangerous fantasies elevate mood. Romantic and connecting fantasies calm mood.

Fantasies, therefore, have the capability to either raise or lower mood.

Fulfill desires

The second objective of fantasies is to fill deep desires addicts feel they can't fill any other way. When addicts feel they have not been heard, affirmed, blessed, loved, nurtured, and touched in healthy ways, fantasies create scenarios in which all these needs are met.

There can be many types of fantasies. Most of us have some kind or another. We might dream of athletic, monetary, role, status, or power fantasies. Any of these fantasies might allow us to imagine we are really special people deserving of love and attention.

Sexual fantasies are like that. In them, the addict is always heard, touched, included, affirmed and praised, and loved. Although it is a false solution, a false idol, it is the way the addict has coped for years.

Reverse abuse

The third objective of sexual fantasies is that they enable the addict to replay past sexual abuse experiences (perhaps in symbolic ways), but with two potential differences:

- Either there is a different outcome to the activity, or
- The addict gets to be the initiator rather than the victim.

Fantasies are almost always symbolic of deep wounds and unmet needs. The most effective way to stop fantasies is not to ignore them but to:

1. Understand what they mean,
2. Identify the family of origin and abuse issues they represent, and
3. Then make healthy choices to get needs met.

Discover What the Fantasies Symbolize and What Needs of the Wounded Self They Represent

Every sexual fantasy has symbolic meaning. To stop fantasies, it is important to first understand what they represent.

Who

Sometimes the personality or appearance of a person (or more) who shows up in a fantasy represents the person who most profoundly abandoned the addict. In the fantasy, however, the person is completely loving in ways the addict needs to be loved.

What

The type of sexual activity is also highly symbolic. It may:

1. Re-create exciting early sexual experiences,
2. Symbolize total acceptance, or
3. Represent consuming the essence of the sexual partner.

Tug-of-war within

Talking about stopping sexual behaviors, rituals and fantasies in extremely threatening to sex addicts, for these behaviors have helped them survive.

Perhaps the addict was abandoned as a three-year-old. Frightened and alone, he turned to behaviors that calmed him and allowed him to escape, at least in his mind. Would he not cling to that behavior?

Only in later life does he learn these behaviors will also kill him. Somehow, this doesn't make sense. How could something so helpful be so deadly? This confusion is a barrier to giving up addictive behavior.

Sex addicts are adults who know their behavior is dangerous. Yet inside them is a child [self] who knows giving up that behavior will cause great pain.

Addicts' lives are a tug-of-war between the adult [self] and the child [self]. Before addicts can find healing and become fully adult, [in therapy] they must confront the fears of the child within...

Make Healthy Choices to Get Needs Met

In recovery, addicts must be taught they have choices about dealing with painful feelings. **When they are tired and lonely and beginning to fantasize, they can ask themselves, "What does this fantasy mean? What am I feeling? Am I sad, lonely, afraid, or what?"**

They can call someone to talk to. They can go to a meeting. The key is learning to tell someone what the feelings are and getting the support they need.

Questions:

1. *Do you usually use your fantasies to elevate a down mood, or to calm yourself?*
2. *What emotional needs do your fantasies tend to satisfy? Is it the desire to be nurtured, comforted, attended to? Or to be noticed, get attention, be affirmed as important? Or to be seen as powerful, effective, successful?*

- 3. Do you think some fantasies help reverse bad past experiences? If so, do you take the place of the one who hurt you and you hurt someone like them? Or is the situation reenacted and this time someone like the one who hurt you is now caring for you?*