



## SHE'S GOTTA HAVE IT

Female sex addiction might seem the topic of steamy novels or bad TV movies. But for the women who suffer from it, this disorder is all too real / BY ANNE BOKMA

» **SHE MET RICK** for sex every Thursday at noon for one hour in Room 213 of the Rainbow Motel. Never mind that she was married — he was too. Never mind that she didn't particularly enjoy the sex — it was never preceded by anything so romantic as a meal or followed by a tender embrace. Never mind that after the initial heady rush, she always felt bad afterwards, often within minutes. She may have been living a double life, but nothing would stop her from having this weekly illicit rendezvous. In fact, for two years, Sue William Silverman built her entire life around it.

"Everything during the week would lead up to that one hour I could be with Rick — it was like a full-time job," Silverman says. "I fantasized he was the love of my life and that he'd leave his wife, I'd leave my husband and we'd live happily ever after."

For Silverman, now 60, a memoirist, poet and writing instructor in Grand Haven, Mich., sex was a drug — being desired by men was the "hit" she craved. She aggressively sought this hit for two decades with close to 40 men, most of whom were casual affairs or one-night

OWAKU/KULLA/CORBIS

stands — men she worked for, men she met in bars or men she simply made eye contact with on the street. “I never really knew the men I was having affairs with. I was numbed out and not emotionally available,” she recalls. “I based all of my self-worth on whether or not a man wanted me. When an affair ended, I would plummet — it would feel just like a hangover.”

Silverman wrote about her struggle with sex addiction in her memoir *Love Sick*, in which she recounts her 28-day stay at a sex addiction treatment facility where she finally got help after years of trying to understand her reckless behaviour. She credits the care she received with enabling her to overcome an inability to separate sex from love, a belief she traces back to the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her father, a high-profile official in the U.S. government. “I used sex to numb my emotions. Whenever I felt sad or empty, I would immediately try to find a man and have sex with him to try to stop those feelings,” she says. “I needed to be nurtured but I was going about it the wrong way.”

Using sex to deal with emotional pain or as a way to get the love and attention denied in youth is the primary motivation for female sex addicts

mated to affect three to six per cent of the population. Far fewer women seek treatment and, as a result, some might question whether women can really be sex addicts. But Penny Lawson, Canada’s leading expert on women and sex addiction, says it’s a very real intimacy disorder. “Like any addiction, it’s about a loss of control. Women with sex addiction don’t want to engage in these behaviours, but they do it anyway despite the negative consequences.”

Women usually act out differently from men by being more focused on a perceived relationship, while for most men, arousal and release are key, says Lawson, creator of Canada’s only residential treatment program for sexual addiction, located at Bellwood Health Services in Toronto. “Among the women I’ve worked with, some are addicted to sex because their real drive is for love and relationships, while others use meaningless sex to medicate or prevent uncomfortable emotional states,” she says. “It’s about using sex to numb their feelings.”

While U.S. statistics suggest one in four sex addicts is a woman, Lawson says there’s only one woman seeking treatment for every 30 men at Bellwood. She attributes this disparity to the profound shame that often keeps

ing for hookups with strangers, online sex chats and plenty of porn.

For the first time, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the psychiatric bible published by the American Psychiatric Association, is considering identifying sex addiction as a diagnosable disorder. “Hypersexual disorder” is being proposed as an addition to its newest version (slated for release next year) as a diagnosis for people who, for a period of six months or longer, meet at least four of five criteria. These include engaging in sexual fantasies and behaviour as a response to depression or anxiety, and repeatedly indulging sexual desires without regard for the physical or emotional repercussions for the individual or others.

What’s the difference between someone who is simply sexually adventurous and an addict? “Sex addiction is about an absence of control — you don’t want to be engaging in this behaviour, but you continue to do it despite negative consequences,” says Lawson. “Another hallmark is that a tolerance begins to develop, so the addict needs to increase the type or the risk or the frequency of the behaviour to get the same hit.”

While sex addiction can be rooted in early childhood experiences, many women may not seek help for this in-

## “I USED SEX TO NUMB MY EMOTIONS. WHENEVER I FELT SAD OR EMPTY, I WOULD IMMEDIATELY TRY TO FIND A MAN.”

whose suffering is rooted in childhood trauma — physical, emotional or sexual abuse, abandonment or neglect.

Women become addicted to the neurochemicals associated with sexual pursuits, according to Doris Vincent, an Edmonton-based certified sex addiction therapist and clinical director of Recovery Path, which offers an outpatient program for sex addicts. These neurochemicals, explains Vincent, offer temporary relief from distress.

We usually think of sex addiction as a male problem (thanks in part to high-profile celebrities such as David Duchovny and Tiger Woods, both of whom have admitted publicly to receiving treatment). Yet sex addiction is esti-

women from seeking help. “People apply much more moral judgment to a woman’s sexual behaviour than to a man’s,” she notes.

That stigma appears to be lifting, thanks to books such as Silverman’s *Love Sick* and California writer Rachel Resnick’s *Love Junkie* and the increasing number of women-only sex addict groups (free meetings based on the Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step model) cropping up across the country.

Sex addiction manifests itself in myriad ways: multiple ongoing relationships, serial monogamous relationships, one-night stands and even compulsive masturbation. The Internet is like crack for sex addicts, allow-

ing for hookups with strangers, online sex chats and plenty of porn. “There are women in their forties and fifties who may come to this addictive practice later in life — often precipitated by a crisis such as the death of a parent, the loss of a job or a divorce,” explains Lawson. “Also, because addicts will intensify their behaviours over time, the consequences can become worse as women get older and that’s when they might get help.” Lawson notes the men in her practice are usually there because their wives found out about some aspect of their addiction, whereas some of her female patients seek treatment because they’re ashamed of their behaviour or are terrified of what may happen as a result of their addiction.

## COULD YOU BE A SEX ADDICT?

### → Take this quiz to find out.

According to Recovery Path — an outpatient treatment service for sex addicts in Edmonton, Calgary and Victoria — a positive response to just one question indicates a need for additional assessment and two or more positive responses indicates sex addiction.

- 1 *Do you often find yourself pre-occupied with sexual thoughts?*
- 2 *Have you ever sought help for engaging in sexual behaviour you did not like?*
- 3 *Has anyone been hurt emotionally because of your sexual behaviour?*
- 4 *Do you feel controlled by your sexual desire?*
- 5 *When you have sex, do you feel depressed afterwards?*

After years of tumultuous relationships — in which she'd do anything to please and keep a man, including having sex in cars or while her kids slept in the next room — Chantal Grant\*, a 62-year-old high school teacher in Calgary, hit rock bottom in her early forties after being dumped by someone she considered the love of her life. "I started thinking of ways to kill myself," she admits, "because I was in so much pain over not having this man anymore."

Grant found a counsellor who helped her understand how her sexual behaviour was connected to being abandoned by her mother when she was a toddler. "I would form attachments and there would be no goodbyes," she says. "When I was 12, I was held and kissed and told I was loved by a boy for the first time, and I felt like Sleeping Beauty who had been awakened by a

kiss. This was a high I didn't ever want to lose or let go of. From then on, I always needed to be in a relationship — sex became the only way I felt loved."

Thanks to therapy, Grant came to see her sexual neediness was a misplaced desire for love and acceptance. "Finally, there was an explanation for why I was doing what I was doing," she says. "It was so compulsive and powerful, and nobody understood it — least of all me." Twenty years after her initial treatment, she still regularly attends a 12-step program for sex addicts and says she is no longer consumed by the need to have a man in her life. She lives on her own, is close to her children (who are aware of her past addiction), does volunteer church work and feels at peace. "I wouldn't turn down a date with someone nice," she says, "but I'm no longer actively looking for it."

Individual or group therapy in combination with regular attendance at 12-step meetings is considered the ideal treatment for sex addicts. Twelve-step meetings, offered by Sexaholics Anonymous, Sex Addicts Anonymous and Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, help addicts lose their sense of isolation, lessen shame and offer non-judgmental accountability that can strengthen their commitment to recovery. People who opt for therapy — either one-on-one or in a group — are told to enter into a period of "sexual sobriety."

Sue William Silverman went through 10 therapists (most of whom thought she was simply depressed) before finding one who specialized in sex addiction. "But as much as my therapist helped me, what worked even more was being in a group with other women like me," she says of her time in the residential sex addiction program and in 12-step programs. "For most of my life, I saw women as competition for male attention. Slowly, I learned how to feel close and be emotionally available to other women, and that led to being able to be emotionally close to men as friends as well." Silverman says she has been "sexually sober" for more than 20 years and is in a decade-long monogamous relationship, which she describes as "wonderful, because I feel valued and secure." Best of all, she says, "I've learned to love myself." **M**

*\*Name changed by request*

New



We know you'll like  
Wheat Thins Baked with Real Vegetables  
— especially if you try them.

You'll be back for more.