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**The Use of the Concept of New Identity in Christ in
Counseling Sexual Addiction in Young Girls**

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Introduction

This article proposes to give an overview of the problem of sexual addiction in young women and to offer insight as to how counseling the addicted client might be accomplished through a framework of a new identity in Christ.

When we hear the term sexual addiction some automatic thoughts might spring to mind such as pornography, celebrity, rehab centers, adultery, promiscuity, and cybersex. We might also be picturing the

sexual addict as a male. This article seeks to shed light on what some have called the dirty little secret among females. In 2003, *Today's Christian Woman* found in a survey that one out of every six women, including Christians, acknowledged struggling with sexual addiction. An article printed in the Washington Times gives survey results from the Internet Filter review (2006) and the Internet Pornography Statistics (2008) that found 9.4 million of the individuals accessing adult websites are females, one in three visitors to pornographic sites is a female, and seventeen struggled with addiction to pornography . This is a problem that can no longer be ignored by the Christian community, the church or counselors.

I. Defining Sexual Addiction

A. General

Addiction defined by the American Heritage Dictionary is “a habitual or compulsive involvement in an activity”. Addiction is a persistent, compulsive dependence on a behavior or substance. In the case of sexual addiction the behavior is sexual in nature. Although one hears the term addiction used to describe many behaviors that individuals may feel are “out of control”, the clinical diagnosis of a sexual addiction is not yet included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Disorders (*DSM-IV-TR*, 2000), the manual used to diagnose and treat mental and addictive disorders. Therefore, this article begins with a clarification of terms and definitions that will guide the reader toward a better understanding of what is meant by the term sexual addiction.

The American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) explains addiction to be a primary, chronic disease of brain reward, motivation, memory and related circuitry. Dysfunction in these circuits leads to characteristic biological, psychological, social and spiritual manifestations. This is reflected in an individual pathologically pursuing reward and/or relief by substance use and other behaviors. Addiction is characterized by inability to consistently abstain, impairment in behavioral control, craving, diminished recognition of significant problems with one's behaviors and interpersonal relationships, and a dysfunctional emotional response (Public Policy Statement ASAM, 2011).

Goodman (2001) hypothesizes that the addictive process originates by an impairment of the self-regulation system. Addictive behavior is known to change the brain. Pleasurable substances like food, drugs, alcohol, as well as pleasurable behaviors like eating, gambling and sex are directed to the reward system pathway in the brain (National Institute on Drug Abuse, NIDA, n.d) According to the American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) this is the point at which the pursuit of rewards becomes pathological, Reward seeking become compulsive or impulsive.

The brain tells the sex addict that having illicit sex is good the same way it tells others that food is good when they are hungry. The addicted brain fools the body by producing intense biochemical rewards for this self-destructive behavior (Herkov, 2006). Atwood (2006) states that sexual addiction is a pattern of sexual behavior that is initially pleasurable but becomes unfulfilling, self-destructive, and that a person is unable to stop. Addiction leads to the continuation of a behavior despite extremely negative consequences. To understand addiction is to understand the biological systems that govern our search for pleasure (Kuhn & Wilson, 2005).

While there is yet no official diagnosis for sex addiction, clinicians and researchers have attempted to define the disorder using criteria based on chemical dependency literature. Counselors would look for the following behaviors to assess sexual addiction:

- Frequently engaging in more sex and with more partners than intended.
- Being preoccupied with or persistently craving sex.
- Continually engaging in excessive sexual practices despite a desire to stop.
- Spending considerable time in activities related to sex.
- Neglecting obligations such as work, school or family in pursuit of sex.
- Continually engaging in the sexual behavior despite negative consequences.
- Escalating scope or frequency of sexual activity to achieve the desired effect.

B. Pre-adolescents and Adolescents

According to the United States Census bureau (2010) there are 53,980,105 girls living in the United States between the ages of 5-17. This comprises 17.5% of the entire U.S. population. “Young girl” will be defined as preadolescent and adolescent female. Although there is

new research and literature that is currently looking into the association of hypersexual behavior and younger children this is outside of the scope of this article. These hypersexual and compulsive behaviors have been associated with both Bipolar Disorders and with youth identified with autism spectrum disorder (Geller, et al., 2000; Realmuto and Ruble; 1999).

The common addictions among children and adolescents include, food, gambling, internet, computer games and sex (Atwood, 2006; Sussman, 2007). Addiction can be viewed as a disorder of young people since research shows that 95 % of addictive behaviors involving substances begin before the age of 20. According to Sussman (2005) teenage sexual addiction may set an individual for “a life-long struggle in which one’s focus of activity, reward system, affect and behavior are intertwined with themes of sexual pleasure” (p.259). One study explored the sex lives of pre-teenage girls (ages 8–13) as they reported them in Internet chat rooms. Over 1,300 pre-teen girls over a five-year time period were interviewed. The results indicate that for some young girls, their lives are filled with sexual behavior of one sort or another. “They appear to be well versed in sexual terms and behavior” (Atwood, 2006, p. 2).

II. Forming of Identity in Early Adolescence

Identity is an individual’s self-definition that focuses on enduring characteristics of the self. In an established identity, the individual is able to explain the origins of these self-defined characteristics and the influences behind those origins. Complete identity includes a clarification of one’s morals, ethics, and standards. Between the ages of twelve and twenty, adolescents choose what their identity is to be. Psychologist Stephen A. Johnson explains the four fundamental views of the self:

1. The subjective self is the adolescents’ private view of who they see themselves to be.
2. The objective self is what others see when they view the adolescent. It is the person others think the teen is.
3. The social self is the adolescents’ perception of themselves as they think others see them.
4. The ideal self is the adolescents’ concept of who they would like to become, their ultimate goal (Johnson, 2001).

Pre and early adolescence can be a difficult time in a person's lifespan. Psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1968) developed eight stages of personal development that psychologist, educators, and counselors still reference today. During their adolescent years young people have to ask themselves "Who am I?" This stage is known as "Identity vs. Role Confusion." The teenager must find an identity, or she will experience confusion about her role in the social order. The primary task during adolescence is to achieve ego identity. Psychologically, all adolescents need room to grow and safe places to test their newly emerging selves. Adolescents find ways to meet his or her needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Bronderick & Blewitt, 2005).

As successful identity achievement is developed adolescents need the influence of parental value systems and definitions of morality and maturity. According to Santrock (2004), Parenting styles greatly influence the achievement of identity in adolescence. Parents who emphasize high standards and communicate well with their teen provide a nurturing environment for identity development.

III. Media, Internet and Technology

Sexual content is marketed to children and teens on a regular basis. According to the Campaign for a commercial-free childhood's fact sheet on *Marketing Sex to Children* these television shows, movies, commercial advertisements, and internet sites affect a young person's activity and beliefs about sex. Sex seems to be used to sell everything. New research is showing that teenagers' exposure to sexual content in the media may be responsible for earlier onset of sexual intercourse or other sexual activities (Collins & Berry, 2004; Brown, L'Engel, Pardun, Guo & Jackson, 2006).

Sexual content appears in 64% of all TV programs; those programs with sexual content average 4.4 scenes with sexually related material per hour. Talk about sex is found in 61% of all programs; and approximately 1 of every 7 programs (14%) includes a portrayal of sexual intercourse, depicted or strongly implied (Gerbner, Gross & Signorielli, 1986). This frequency of exposure to portrayals of sex may affect adolescents' developing beliefs about what is normal sexual behavior. Teens who see media portrayals of teens and adults having casual sex without experiencing negative consequences will be more likely to adopt these behaviors without understanding the full implications (Bandura, 1986).

According to the Internet Filter Review, approximately 40 million U.S. adults regularly visit pornographic websites. One in eight visitors to an adult site is age 7 to 17. The average age of first Internet exposure to pornography is age 11 although 15-17 year olds have the highest rate of multiple hard-core exposures. 90% of 8 to 16 year olds having viewed pornography online while doing their homework. This is both boys and girls (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007). A 2005 study completed by the London School of Economics found that more affluent children are more likely to have their own computers, and tend to navigate further and more skillfully around the internet. They also spend more time on the computer and have become adept at avoiding parental monitoring. 57% of the 1,297 children studied had viewed pornography online. A survey by the Children's Digital Media Centre found that a quarter of young girls who viewed pornography initially felt 'disgust, shock or surprise.' But gradually, girls become desensitized and start to view pornography as a graphic kind of sex education (Carey, 2011).

Children as young as eight are watching a great deal of porn online - some of it hard-core - and its long-term effects could be damaging. Today's digital youth culture is a place that adults must understand if we are not going to lose touch with an entire generation and those to follow. Many adults would agree with headmaster Geoff Barton, from King Edward VI School in Suffolk England who has stated that children are living in a society with far too low a tolerance threshold for pornography. What might have been called soft pornography a decade ago is now seen as harmless fun for young girls who help one another take provocative pictures to post online. The 'sexting' craze is affecting teenage girls from all walks of lives. It usually starts at around 11 or 12 years of age (Marshall, 2009). According to new research published in the *Archives of Pediatric & Adolescent Medicine* in July 2012, one-fourth of teens admitted to having sent a sext and those teens that "sext" may be more likely to engage in sexual behaviors.

Experts are beginning to study youth and sexual addiction and a growing body of research is showing that youth are struggling with compulsive internet use and compulsive behaviors related to Internet pornography and cybersex (Delmonico & Griffin, 2008). According to Robert Weiss an expert on sexual addiction, intimacy and

technology, “Adolescent sexual addiction is not solely the purview of boys. Girls are also susceptible to the Internet’s allure, though they are much more likely to become hooked on romance and intense “love” experiences.”

Psychologists, counselors and other mental health professionals are realizing that healthy sexuality is compromised by the media and its portrayal of girls as objects of sensual desires. The American Psychological Association (APA) created a taskforce to research and report on the sexualization of American girls. Psychological researchers have identified the term *self-objectification to describe the process that girls follow as they learn to treat their bodies as objects of desire. This phenomenon is seen in both preadolescent and adolescent girls.* (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996; McConnell, 2001; Slater & Tiggemann, 2002).

IV. What Is Healthy Sexuality?

A. General

The answer to what is healthy sexuality will differ depending on the worldview one holds. For those who have not come to a saving knowledge and acceptance of Christ’s work on the cross, human sexuality and behavior will be understood from a secular perspective. This perspective views adolescence as a time for sexual awareness and experimentation. Many investigators recognize sexual behavior among teens as reflecting historically normative behavior (i.e., Everett et al., 2000; Lam, Stewart, & Ho, 2001; Poulin & Graham, 2001; Spingarn & DuRant, 1996, Lerman, 2000). An article published by the National Institute of Health instructed parents to be prepared for their adolescent children experimenting with or considering a wide range of sexual orientations or behaviors as they learn to feel comfortable with their own sexual identity. Parents were then advised to be careful not to call these behaviors “wrong,” “sick,” or “immoral” (as cited by Mannheim, 2011). The perspective by some secular writers is that exploration, experimentation and investigation is within the range of normal developmental stages of the adolescent boy or girl.

The Christians perspective on healthy sexuality is that it is a gift from God and designed for both procreation, pleasure and the demonstration of love between husband and wife (Genesis 1:27,28;

Ephesians 5:25). Understanding God's purpose for sexuality is an important concept for counselors as they undertake the work of helping young girls in sexual addiction.

B. Risk Factors for Young Girls

1. Sexual Abuse

Contemporary addiction professionals suggest that sexual addicted behaviors may be related to sexual abuse in childhood (Briere, Smiljanich, & Henschel, 1994, Carnes, 1983; Dinwiddie & Bucholz, 1999). Carner (1991) found that in his study of 290 recovering sex addicts 81% were sexually abused as children. Other studies also show that adults who experience sexual abuse during childhood have significantly greater chances of developing a serious addiction and the correlation to sex addiction and childhood abuse has been documented (Carnes, 1991; Cinq-Mars, 2006; Corley & Hook, 2012). Since 1 in 4 girls (25%) are sexually abused by the age of 18 this is an important demographic to understand in working with young girls and sexual addiction.

Childhood sexual trauma leaves a child unsure of sexual boundaries, having developed a learned helplessness in the face of sexual advances, and self-worth connected to being sexual (Timms & Conners, 1992; Mayall & Gold, 1995). Children who have been sexually abused may have difficulty relating to others except on sexual terms and according to Book (1997) the beginnings of sexual addiction are rooted in childhood or adolescent years. Over 60% of sexual addicts were abused by someone in their childhood. Being exposed to pornography as a young girl also has been identified as a common factor among female sex addicts (Corely & Hook, 2012). When a sex addict has experienced childhood trauma, it has been suggested that the addiction is not necessarily a pleasure seeking strategy but a survival strategy (Fisher, 2007). Sexual behavior may become a way for a trauma sufferer to numb feelings and the young girl engaging in sexual addictive behavior may feel she has found an effective technique to stop the pain of the past (Dobson, 2009; Fisher, 2007). "Contrary to enjoying sex as a self affirming source of physical pleasure, the addict has learned to rely on sex for comfort from pain for nurturing or relief from stress" (Carnes, 1991, pp 34). Almost all

survivors are confused about sex. They mistake sexual activity for love and vice versa, and so they are often promiscuous or unfaithful.

Marnie Ferree (2009), a Christian expert on women and sexual addiction, reports that sexual abuse survivors seem to have a higher rate of two specific addictions: first, to sex (including pornography) and relationships; and second, to food. Many therapists believe a possible reason for these particular problems is that both sex and food are also self-nurturing.

2. Shame and Guilt, Power and Control

Sex addicts like many other types of addicts often come from families where there is dysfunction such as chemical dependency, sexual addiction, or emotional, physical, or sexual abuse (Irons & Schneider, 1997). Enormous shame and fear of ridicule still surrounds sex addiction. Underneath the addiction may be a need to escape from feelings of shame and worthlessness (Frances, 2013). Adolescent sex addicts may have considerable levels of shame and guilt which prevents disclosure of the problem to adults who could help.

Director of the Child and Adolescent division for the study and treatment of adolescent sex offenders at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center in Memphis, Dr. William Murphy describes sexual addiction as an early onset disorder, one rooted in childhood and adolescent problems. According to the National Council for the Protection of Children and Families (NCPCF), 83 percent of sexual addicts report being sexually abused, 75 percent physically abused, and 97 percent emotionally abused/neglected as children. Carol McGalliard a Christian speaker and women's Bible study leader states in an article about the hidden shame of sexual addiction that abused children view themselves through the stigma of abuse, a shame-based perspective rather than God's perspective. It may be hard for the young female addict to separate her shame from her spiritual beliefs. According to McGalliard, a core healing issue for addicts, therefore, is learning to accept God's love.

C. Warning Signs for Sexual Addiction in a Young Girl

According to Carnes (2001), Goodman (2001), and Sussman (2007), a youth struggling with sexual addiction may exhibit the following: (1) a marked preoccupation or obsession with sexual activity (2) having multiple sexual partners, often at the same time (3)

Dehumanize/objectify people to focus on body parts (4) Possess large quantities of pornography (5) Engage in sexual activity in response to negative moods (6) Develop serious problems as a result of her sexual behaviors (e.g., falling grades, injuries to the genitals).

V. Identity in Christ

While the world looks to identity formation as a developmental process, the believer's identity in Christ is received once a person accepts God's gracious salvation. This unchanging truth comes directly from God's inspired word. From God's perspective, being "out of Christ" (dead) to being "in Christ" (alive) takes place the moment we put our trust in His eternal salvation. our new identity is not based on us, it is based on God Himself, His unlimited grace, acceptance, forgiveness, and redemptive power that makes us new. (Romans 6:1-14). Living in the bondage of addictive behavior is not what God intends for his children. Christ can and will provide the strength to overcome sexual addiction.

VI. Counseling through the framework of Identity in Christ:

As a counselor working with young girls struggling with sexual addictive behaviors providing unconditional positive regard and empathy can be seen as a primary role of the counselor. Demonstrating empathy and acceptance of a client is very important for a proper therapeutic alliance to form and for positive outcomes in treatment. The therapeutic alliance remains a key component of creating successful outcomes in psychotherapy and according to Patterson (1984) "there are few things in the field of psychotherapy for which the evidence is so strong. The evidence for the necessity . . . of accurate empathy, respect, or warmth, and therapeutic genuineness is incontrovertible" (p. 435). Empathy is an integral factor to not only forming the alliance, but also increasing a client's ability to feel validated and understood (Glanzer, 2006; Lynch, 2012; Patterson, 1984). Empathy can be defined understanding and sharing in another's feelings (Stueber, 2008). The counselor is a model of true acceptance and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1967). Many sex addicts are embarrassed to talk about their problem in the church because they fear rejection and condemnation. The body of believers can help by accepting of the youth who struggles in addiction. In the case of working with any presenting issue including sexual addiction

in young girls, the counselor's attitude is of utmost importance. The counselor is functioning in a professional role as helper, educator, and encourager as well as providing a place for spiritual insight and individual development and attitudinal, cognitive and behavioral change. The young girl trapped in sexual addiction can begin to heal from the past hurts and see herself as a new creation within a safe and nurturing environment and therapeutic relationship between herself and the counselor.

A concept of a new identity is important to understand because identity precedes and affects what we value, how we behave, our attitudes and emotions. When we accept Jesus as our Savior, we experience a rebirth. "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3). Once received through faith, the gift of salvation provides the believer with a new identity, one of adopted son [or daughter] (Ephesians 1:5). You become a child of God and joint heir with Christ (Romans 8:17). Once saved, your identity changes before God. No longer are we slaves to sinful lusts or bound by shame and guilt. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). His forgiveness knows no limits.

As a believer you are free from the authority of Satan. Through Christ's redemption all that believe and trust in Him are free. The young girl struggling with sexual addiction can be free too. It is through this freedom that we discover who we really are and our new identities in Christ not based on the world's standard for behavior, nor based on past behaviors that have been self-destructive. The believer who accepts God's grace for salvation and is Spirit led will be able to embrace a new identity, a new beginning and a new found freedom through the power and redeeming grace afforded to us by God's great sacrifice and through His promise of making the believer a "new creation", someone who no longer is bound by the power of the flesh but has power through the new identity imposed by Christ to overcome bondage. The church and counselors can follow the instructions given by the apostle Paul who said "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. . . . Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:1-2, NIV). According to Dr. James Dobson of Focus on the Family the loving thing to do for the sex addict is to

confront the problem in a loving way so that healing and restoration can begin. The young girl that finds herself struggling with addictive sexual behaviors can be reminded that nothing done after the moment of salvation can take away the gift of salvation and eternal security that God gives and holds for the believer. We are sealed by the Holy Spirit and kept by God's power not our own (John 10:28, Ephesians 4:30).

The concept of a new identity in Christ means that a young girl's identity does not have to come from media, peers, chaotic family role models, or be shame based. Counselor can present the facts surrounding who you are as a child of God. You are blameless (I Corinthians 1:8), You are set free (Romans 8:2; John 8:32), You are crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:20), You are more than a conqueror (Romans 8:37), You are the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21), You are safe (I John 5:18), You are healed from sin (I Peter 2:24), You are no longer condemned (Romans 8:1, 2), You are not helpless (Philippians 4:13). It is important for the Christian to believe that you are no longer a slave to sin even when the battle with sin feels futile. Feelings cannot be trusted, but the word of God can be.

Romans 6: 13 says that the believer should not go on presenting the body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as instruments of righteousness to God. This means an active choice to walk in righteousness and to act in ways consistent with the new identity in Christ. It is necessary to choose to *turn away from* immoral habits (vs 13a: "do not go on presenting yourselves to sin"). It is also necessary to *turn to* God in ways that expose you to his alternative (vs 13b: "but present yourselves to God"). Real change involves the willingness to stay out of sexually tempting situations and turn to God and sisters in Christ to empower and strengthen this resolve. Counseling can assist the young female sex addict in changing cognitions that lead to damaging behavior. These dysfunctional thoughts can be replaced by the true word through meditation and commitment to replacing the old with the new.

Conclusion

Christian must no longer avoid, deny or overlook that within the body of believers there are young women struggling with sexual addiction. Tim Clinton, President of American Association of Christian Counselors stated "Our culture is flooded with sexual content. Christians are constantly bombarded with sexual images and messages, yet within our churches, sexuality is rarely mentioned. In

the shadows of practically every church body are sexual behaviors many prefer to ignore”. There are sources available for the young girl struggling with sexual addiction. Many Christian counseling services exist and are ready to help the young female sex addict. There are rehabilitation and treatment centers, outpatient therapy, teen ministries and support groups that are committed to bringing the good news of freedom from the bondage of sexual sin to anyone struggling with sexual addiction.

The young girl struggling with sexual addiction, along with everyone else carrying secret burdens and battling self-destructive behaviors need to know who you are in Christ in order to live a triumphant Christian life. The counselor working with the young female sexual addict has the privilege of modeling Christ and providing information and encouragement based on God’s word and what the word says about our new identity in Christ. As the addict begins to see herself as God sees her and accepts forgiveness, is able to forgive others, works through both the pain and temptation on a daily basis, victory can be achieved. Identity doesn’t depend on past behavior (you are not a slut, sexual object, possession, or deviant) or choices you’ve made (pornography, cybersex, multiple sexual partners, dangerous liaisons), your true identity is found in Christ, you are redeemed, a new creation, and daughter of the King.

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