

Addressing Sexual Behavior Problems in Trauma Survivors

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Definition of Problematic Sexual Behavior

- Any sexual behavior that is risky or gets survivor in trouble
 - Do not make gender or sexual orientation assumptions
 - Discriminate from sexual victimization experiences
- Often involves distress reduction behaviors
 - Trigger → activated abuse or attachment memories → upsurge of distress → sexual activity that
 - Soothes or distracts
 - Produces positive feelings that neutralize negative feelings
 - Provides momentary attachment experiences
 - Increases self-esteem, sense of power
- Versus
 - Hypersexuality, sex addiction, promiscuity, sex industry

Etiology

- Child abuse, especially sexual maltreatment
 - Triggered memories motivate distress reduction behavior
- Insecure/traumatic attachment
 - Preoccupied attachment
 - Low self-esteem, fear of abandonment, desperation-based behaviors
 - Self-schema
 - Unworthiness, primary value as sexual object for others
 - Sexual behavior as source of self-esteem
- Impacts of sex-roles on sexual behavior
- Current sexual exploitation → adversarial sexuality

Treatment

- Attention to countertransference
- Establish motivation (versus demands for change)
- Harm reduction
 - Safer sexual practices
 - Focus on interpersonal safety
 - Regular testing
- Psychoeducation
 - Discuss (rather than lecture):
 - Common reasons for risky sexual behavior
 - Risks, without shaming/pathologizing
 - Explore (without judgement) continued behavior despite risks

Treatment

- Trigger management
 - Identifying triggers and triggered states
 - Discriminating compulsive behavior from actual sexual interest/behavior
- De-escalation
 - Grounding
 - Breath/relation training
 - Mindfulness and metacognitive awareness
 - ReGAIN (handout)
 - Self-talk
 - Countering negative self-talk
 - Metacognitive self-talk
 - Distraction

Treatment

- Processing abuse and attachment memories
 - Titrated exposure
 - Cognitive processing of abuse
 - Debrief/analyze abuse-related cognitive distortions about self and others
 - Therapeutic relationship that is close and caring, but not sexualized
 - Therapist studied noninvolvement
- Group therapy/support
 - Ground rules
 - Therapist-led
 - Single gender
 - Cautions about self-help groups

Trigger management

- Harm reduction
 - Delay as long as possible
 - Do as little as possible
 - Replacing versus distracting
- Psychoeducation on triggers
- Identification: Direct and indirect
- Urge/emotion “surfing”
 - You can’t stop a wave, but you can learn to surf (Kabat-Zinn)
 - Half-life of triggered distress

Titrated emotional processing

- Therapeutic window dynamics
- Multiple targets
 - Cross-activation, multiple traumas, self-titration
 - Client decides focus: “follow the targets”
- Shorter exposures
 - Habituation probably not issue
 - Less overwhelming
- Interspersal
 - Distress in compatible states
 - Grounding, relaxation, mindfulness, relatedness

Suggested readings

Briere, J. (2019). *Treating Risky and Compulsive Behavior in Trauma Survivors* NY: Guilford.

Briere, J., & Scott, C. (2014). *Principles of trauma therapy: A guide to symptoms, evaluation, and treatment, 2nd edition, DSM-5 update*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.