



Welcome!

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Addressing Sexual Behavior Problems in Trauma Survivors

John Briere, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus

Department of Psychiatry and the Behavioral Sciences
Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California

www.johnbriere.com

Amazon Author Page: www.amazon.com/author/johnbriere

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.