What constitutes sexual addiction versus having a high libido?

Dorothy Horton, PsyD, answers your questions in her latest Ask Doctor Dee column.

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Q: What constitutes sexual addiction versus having a high libido?

A: Sometimes it is definitely a challenge to distinguish between a high sex drive and the compulsive sexual behaviors that can cause chaos and confusion in an individual's life.

In general, sexual addiction is characterized by a lack of control over carnal desires and an obsessive focus on sex that results in continued bad decision-making, which can cause significant harm to oneself or others.

These behaviors include acting out risky or illegal fantasies, a preoccupation with pornography, compulsive masturbation, exhibitionism and voyeurism.

Essentially, what differentiates sexual addiction from having a high sex drive is when any of these behaviors become disruptive enough to negatively affect someone's day-to-day functioning.

These actions also become problematic if they must grow in frequency and intensity for the achievement of sexual satisfaction, trigger feelings of guilt or shame, or generate unpleasant withdrawal symptoms if stopped.

A qualified psychiatrist can distinguish between the two possibilities, however, and suggest possible treatments for the mental condition. Therapy options include self-help organizations that offer 12-step programs to help individuals manage the disorder, care at residential treatment facilities, cognitive behavioral therapy and prescription meds to calm inappropriate sexual urges.

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