

Sex addicts turn to porn and rehab as they avoid hook-ups

By Caitlin Fitzsimmons
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Rehab centres and counsellors are treating a growing number of people for sex addiction, mainly compulsive porn consumption after the pandemic crimped the hook-up scene.

Heide McConkey, the director of Affirmative Sex Addiction Australia in Darlinghurst, said sex addiction has become harder to conceal from partners because people are either out of work or working from home.

"The behaviour becomes more seen and noticed and creates more conflict in relationships, and people then present for counselling to try to fix the issues," Ms McConkey said.



Compulsive porn consumption is one of the main types of sex addiction. ENIGH/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

"Their partners find evidence of using porn, all sorts of porn, including gay porn, transsexual porn, whatever porn, which then brings a lot of questions into the relationship about sexuality and infidelity."

Ms McConkey said the prevalence of people going out and having sex with strangers had decreased during the pandemic because of fear of the coronavirus, though it still happened.

Mark Cross, a psychiatrist who works in private practice in Cremorne and Campbelltown, said it made sense that more people would present for help.

"The overarching need to survive COVID and not put themselves at risk would be a strong reinforcement," Dr Cross said. "There would also be the issue of there being less opportunity for meeting or hook-ups."

Dr Cross said he had some patients with high sex drives who usually met sexual partners through apps but they had turned to porn instead. He treated a number of gay patients who had lived through the HIV epidemic and altered their behaviour significantly as a result.

Alyssa Lalor, the program director at South Pacific Private on the northern beaches, said there had been a "significant increase" in referrals for sex addiction since the start of the pandemic.

"It may be because everything's online now - everything is via Zoom and everything is computer based and one of those common ways with sex addiction that someone would act out would be using pornography or using apps or using a computer," she said.

Ms Lalor said compulsive pornography consumption was one of the main problems people with sex addiction wanted help to manage, followed by using prostitutes.

Ms Lalor said that clients in general, not just those with sex addiction, were booking in for rehabilitation. People were struggling without a normal routine and the relapse rate was high because most 12-step meetings had gone online, she said.

The pandemic also presented an opportunity to seek help because it was a break from regular life.

"We're finding clients are coming in saying 'I have time off or I've lost my job, I might as well go do rehab, this is a really good time for me to get the support that I need because I was too busy before,'" she said.

[Online dating apps have boomed](#) throughout the pandemic, though the sites report it has been mainly messaging rather than meeting up in person.

Ashley Madison, a dating site for people who want to cheat on their partners, reported more than 9,000 Australian sign-ups between April and May, led by Albury, Coffs Harbour and Newcastle.

Sydney psychotherapist Dan Auerbach said many dating apps were designed to be addictive.

"Apps like Tinder and Grindr have gamified sex seeking, providing a poker machine-like experience - the next swipe might just be what you are looking for," Mr Auerbach said.

"I think advertisers have realised a massive opportunity to exploit relationship discontent by tempting users into affairs. Sites like Ashley Madison promise adventure, escape and anonymity - well-known factors that stoke addictive impulses and are hard to resist."

Ashley Madison chief strategy officer Paul Keable said shutting down operations would not make infidelity go away.

"What we're really in the business of is creating a better affair, what we like to call a successful affair - one that is undiscovered," he said.

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