

Culturally Relevant Assessment and Treatment for Gay Men's Online Sexual Activity

Douglas Braun-Harvey

The Sexual Dependency Institute of San Diego
3110 Camino del Rio South, Suite #219
San Diego, California 92108

619.528.8360
email-sexdepinst@aol.com

Introduction

The Internet is sex. Since the advent of the Internet, sexual interests and behavior have become a common purpose for “surfing the net”. Each new application and technology on the Internet has resulted in a vast array of sexual applications, from the dissemination of sexual information to the selling of sexual health and erotic toys as well as an infinite number of sexual images, activities and turn-ons. The companies that are making the most consistent profits online are companies that provide sexual related products. (Cooper 2002) The unspoken yet generally understood assumption is that people go online to pursue curiosity about sex. The prevailing viewpoint about this phenomenon is largely one of the risks and negative consequences.

Much has been written about the potential for extreme cyber sexual behavior problems for men and women using the Internet for online sexual activity, Griffiths, M., (2001) Young, K. (1998), Maheu, M.M. & Subotnik, R.B., (2001), Cooper, A., Delmonico, D., & Burg, R. (2000). Online sexual problems may begin with a single incident of a client reporting his or her spouse chatting sexually online at one o'clock in the morning. Extreme cyber sexual behavior involves a pattern of excessive involvement which interferes with personal, relationship, legal, financial or occupational aspects of ones life. The inability to regulate the cyber can result in severe consequences.

Positive consequences and motivations for online sexual activity have also been documented. Cooper (2002), Young et al. (2000), Cooper, A., Scherer, C., Marcus, I. D., (2002) The Internet is a valuable resource for “virtual communities” to discuss and share information about common sexual interests, sexual information, sexual research or political sexual issues.

Stern & Handel, (2001) provide a developmental perspective for understanding the tension between potential harm and health when it comes to sex and the Internet. They conclude that the current issues regarding sexuality on the Internet “are part of a larger pattern by which new technologies emerge and develop” (p. 287). Stern and Handel found a clear relationship between the technological leaps of the last 100 years and the development of sexual media. Every media technology has prompted a sexual application and each new media sexual application, in its time, resulted in easier access to sexual imagery and stimulation.

Technology can also have alienating effects when people become frustrated and depersonalized the more they interact with machines. This can produce what Zimbardo (1969) called deindividuation. This condition occurs when people’s concerns about being evaluated by others are decreased because of an anonymous situation. A lessening of self-consciousness leads to an increase in behaviors they would not usually perform, including sexual behaviors. For Stern, the potential for deindividuation that accompanies online sexual behavior can result in altering the power of legal, social, political, cultural and religious forces to restrict access to sexual materials. This can be a positive circumstance for gay and lesbian Internet users to find greater self-acceptance of their sexual orientation identities. “The sense of community and belonging derived from such contacts can have important and salubrious psychological effects on individuals and contribute to the changing political and social perceptions of these groups.” (Cooper 2002, p. 8)

Cooper et al, (2000) concluded that more than heterosexuals, gay and bisexual men are technologically skillful and likely to use the Internet for a variety of purposes. Griffiths (2001) proposed that the sense of safety and the ready access to partners, for many Internet users are themselves risk factors for developing a problem with compulsive sexual behavior, but that

paradoxically the very same factors may be extremely beneficial for disenfranchised groups such as homosexuals. Therefore, the more disenfranchised the sexual interest, the more advantages the internet may have for making contact with persons of similar interest.

The Internet is a virtual place for cyberspace communities to be drawn together to explore and identify common sexual interests. It is believed that gay men proportionally are using online Internet access at a higher frequency and a higher proportion than most any other demographic group. Tikkanen and Ross (2000) reported half of a sample of Swedish gay men had used the Internet in search of sexual partners or gratification. Therefore, a subculturally normative gay male relationship with online sexual activity for example, requires psychotherapists working with gay men to have knowledge of the world of online sexual behavior as well as specific online behavior patterns commonly present in the lives of gay men.

Individual, couples and group psychotherapy with gay men must include an assessment of their online sexual activity and integration of this assessment material in treatment planning and implementation. Psychotherapy with gay men is unnecessarily limited by a therapist who tends to prematurely or inadvertently over focus on compulsive or troublesome online sexual behavior in response to a gay man's description of his online sexual activity. This article will describe culturally relevant psychotherapeutic perspectives regarding online sexual activity for individual, couple and group psychotherapy with gay male clients.

Relationship Between Gay Men And Online Sexual Activity

“For gay men, it is reasonable to assume that Internet use is subculturally normative.” (Ross and Kauth, 2002, p 50) Because the gay male subculture may be centered upon sexual activity, (See Ross, Fernandex-Esquer, and Seibt, 1995) especially at various stages of integrating gay sexual orientation identity, gay men with access to the Internet will most likely express some aspect of

their sexuality via online sexual activity. “Any description of online sexual activity for men who have sex with men must distinguish the type and purpose of activity.” (Ross 2002 p. 49) Types of online sexual activity may be text, audio, video or graphic files. Text is simply typing words to have a conversation with one or more persons online. Sometimes text is accompanied by audio or video live images. This would mean the person has a microphone connected to their computer as well as a video camera connected to their computer and may be using any combination of these three to communicate with one or more other people online. Gay men’s motivations for cyber talk may be to acquire information about sexually transmitted diseases, HIV or a sex education, to make contact with other gay men in the destination city in which they are traveling as well as to discuss issues regarding sexual activity between men.

Graphic files may involve voluntarily or not voluntarily receiving a picture from some other person. This graphic file may involve some degree of nudity and sexual activity. For some people, graphic files are something they receive from other gay men. Others use their own cameras to create graphic picture files of themselves that may involve some degree of nudity or sexual activity and then send these images, solicited or unsolicited, online to others. Gay men may utilize the Internet for viewing pictures of sexual images or accessing sexual imagery via live video as part of their masturbatory pleasure. In order to distinguish the type of activity, a therapist must ask specific and detailed questions that elucidate the specific details of the type of online sexual activity in which the client engages. Once the venue of the activity is understood, in other words images, conversation or pictures, it is important to explore the meaning and purpose the online sexual activity has for the client.

Gay men also tend to have levels of sexual activity that are significantly higher than in the dominant heterosexual culture. (Ross, 2002) For many gay men, a psychotherapist’s

assessment for individual, group or couples therapy may be the first respectful, reasonable and thoughtful inquiry regarding their online sexual activity. It may be a challenge for clients to use words to describe their behavior and to articulate the purpose their online sexual activity has in their lives. Men having sex with men, gay male sexual orientation, as well as online gay male sexual activity is stigmatized. This chronic societal sully of gay men's lives may result in the gay male client misperceiving the therapist's exploration of the meaning and purpose of the client's online sexual activity as the therapist only being interested in assessing for problematic, excessive or out-of-control online sexual activity. It is imperative for the therapist to clarify at the beginning of the assessment that this is not necessarily an assessment of problematic, compulsive cyber sex concerns, but an overall information gathering to give the therapist a general sense of the client's current online sexual activity.

Gay Men Online Sexual Activity And Initial Assessment

The psychotherapist will be more effective in addressing his/her gay male client's online sexual activity if he or she has a curiosity about the connection between the client's presenting symptoms and his current online sexual behavior. The assessment must incorporate stage dependent models of gay male sexual orientation identity development as well as a client history including past and current experiences with heterosexism. Heterosexism exists in society due to legal, institutional and societal standards that maintain a stance that a heterosexual orientation is considered normal and acceptable and allows for discrimination against non-heterosexual orientations. "Sexual orientation has a very different meaning to a gay person than it does to a nongay person. Revealing that one is gay, that is 'coming out' is a developmental imperative in the establishment of a positive gay identity. Being 'out' for gay men is a major issue, internally and externally." (Frost, 1998, p. 6) In the 1970's a variety of "coming out" developmental

theories were proposed that described a typical series through which gay individuals progressed to come to terms with an integrated identity as gay or lesbian. (See Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Dank, 1971; Hencken and O'Dowd, 1977; & Troiden, 1979) Additional theories incorporate the psychological processes of culturally sanctioned heterosexist attitudes on the stages of sexual orientation identity development (See Gonsiorek, 1982; Grace, 1977; Malyon , 1982). "These models, however, derive heavily from middle-class, white, non-Hispanic samples from the English-speaking world." (Gonsiorek, 1995, p. 34) Gonsiorek reviews various applications of the identity/developmental perspective with-in diverse populations and concludes that these models are useful when considering the interactive relationship between the individual, sense of self and the surrounding social forces within a specific cultural or ethnic variation. (Gonsiorek, 1995) What is less understood is the emerging influence of the Internet and online sexual activity on sexual orientation identity development. It is becoming more and more valuable for the psychotherapist to be curious about the gay male client's current stage of sexual orientation identity formation and his patterns and choices of online sexual activity.

Psychotherapists may be curious and inquire of their clients about culturally relevant dynamics that occur within different subgroups of men who have sex with men. For instance, many African-American men having same-sex desire and behavior do not necessarily self-identify as gay men. An African-American man who meets men on line for recreational one-time sexual experiences via "bisexual chat rooms" may describe himself in an online written biography that he is "bi-curious". In psychotherapy, he reports that his only sex partners for the last four years have been with men. He experiences a conflict with building a gay male sexual orientation without relinquishing a hard won positive African-American racial identity. Can a person be positively African-American and homosexual?

A male 15-year-old first generation Mexican-American is meeting 20–23 year old men online for sex. 15 – 17 year old sex partners could too easily betray him by disclosing his interest in sex with men at school or among his friends. He risks being “kicked out” of his family if they knew of his homosexual interests. A third generation Korean-American married father of two elementary age children comes to therapy in deep shame and humiliation after his wife discovered him downloading images of men having sex with men. She thinks he is a sexual addict. Is he out of control with online sexual activity or deeply conflicted about his erotic/sexual orientation, or both?

Is the client using online activity as a means to experiment with his same sex fantasies and curiosity or is he at a later stage of gay identity and using the online sexual activity to avoid developing interpersonal and relational skills to form dating or love attachments with men? Gay men living in geographically isolated areas or working in jobs where disclosure of a gay identity would endanger their career may use the Internet for social supports that would be impossible or dangerous to pursue in person. Men in the earlier stages of coming out may use the Internet for a combination of sexual, social, interpersonal needs due to anxieties and fears of being more public in pursuing their interest in gay men. This creates an important context for the psychotherapist to understand that a gay male client’s relationship with his online sexual activity may have a clear, temporal relationship with the client’s stage of coming out.

Men in the earlier stages of coming out may tend to have more fear or negativity about their same sex behavior and may be more likely to conclude that their online sexual activity is compulsive or problematic. This conclusion may be more linked to their ambivalence and anxieties about their current coming out stage rather than problematic online sexual activity. The therapist who fails to assess and understand this distinction may inappropriately form a clinical

impression of compulsive sexual behavior. The more ambivalent and less developed the client is about his gay male sexual orientation identification, the more the therapist must be relied upon to assist the client in avoiding sex-negative pathological conclusions about online sexual activity.

Outpatient psychotherapists are advised to focus less on the harmful or extreme level of the gay male client's online sexual behavior and more about what the client enjoys or hopes to experience during his online sexual activity. Most online sexual behavior is done in the privacy of one's home and infrequently discussed openly amongst friends, coworkers or family. The Internet, with its emerging place in the sexual lives of gay men as well as the vigor with which gay men have embraced this technology makes the unspoken and unprocessed experiences with online sexual activity an increasingly important part of any initial psychotherapy assessment.

For example, a client presenting for individual therapy reports symptoms of depression, hopelessness and fatigue. He has a history of clinical depression and is discouraged about his recent relapse of symptoms. He is aware that sleep deprivation is a significant risk factor for people living with chronic depression. He is hesitant to report that he has been staying up until two or three in the morning chatting in gay men's chat rooms with people all over the world. He is embarrassed by the activity and is unsure about how the therapist will respond to such a disclosure. He has unresolved conflicts about his online sexual activity. He looks at images of very attractive men on the computer and thinks of himself as "ugly" and "unattractive". He is unaware of the corrosive consequences of these thoughts. He may be unaware of any cause and effect relationship between his online activity and the depressive symptoms. A therapist's well-timed curiosity and interest in the meaning of the client's online activity may result in the client realizing his online sexual activity connection with his mood disorder. In the 1980's, psychotherapy for gay men required the psychotherapist to integrate an understanding of the

epidemic of HIV into their clinical work with gay men, so now therapists need to understand online sexual activity as a clinical variable to be discussed in psychotherapy with gay male clients.

Outpatient therapists must also assist the client in understanding if online sexual activity is a deterrent or a support for the client's stated treatment goals. To engage the client in this conversation, it is helpful to avoid a premature focus on problematic or compulsive online sexual activity, and instead focus on the relationship and consequences the online sexual activity with the client's presenting concerns. For example, an alcoholic gay man in recovery may present for individual outpatient therapy. He has been sober for five years and is concerned about breaking his abstinence and relapsing. The therapist includes online sexual activity while gathering assessment information and learns that this client engages in sexual activity with men he meets online three to four times a month. During sex, the client discovers that some of his sex partners are under the influence of drugs. Despite his desire to leave these sexual situations, he ends up completing the sexual activity with the sex partner who is under the influence of drugs. For any person recovering from drug and alcohol addiction, this is a risk for relapse. Many gay men in recovery will not cognitively connect their increasing preoccupation with using drugs or alcohol as a result of their online sexual activity.

For recovering gay men, talking openly and in detail about their relapse concerns and the details of their online sexual life, may be the first time they connect the two in a cause-effect relationship. A therapist who focuses prematurely on either the client's motivation to stay sober or a more intensive chemical dependency treatment intervention will miss the crucial risk factor that brought this client to treatment – namely the unconscious consequences of online sexual activity. His online sexual activity, as it currently stands, interferes with remaining sober.

Gay Men Online Sexual Activity And Individual Psychotherapy

A heterosexually married male client is engaging in secretive online sex with men. He has come to the painful conclusion that he can no longer lead this double life and is seeking therapy to come out to himself and his wife. His online sexual activity has been primarily to access sexually explicit images of men for masturbation. The online masturbatory sexual activity has increased his awareness of his preferred sexual orientation. His wife discovered these materials and believes her husband has a sex addiction. He has concluded he prefers and deeply desires sexual and romantic connections with men. The details of his online sexual activity (masturbatory only, not meeting men for sex) and the consequence of the online sexual activity (increasing difficulty with maintaining denial and splitting defenses) is important information in forming individual therapy treatment goals. The therapist can frame the online sexual activity as “the lifeline” used by the client to maintain his attachment with the denied and feared aspect of his sexual self. Treatment interventions that reinforce his resiliency and determination to understand his same sex attractions via online sexual images can be useful in helping the client move towards the more profound dilemma of disclosing his orientation and ending his marriage. The therapist should assist the client in defining online sexual activity boundaries while continuing to live with his wife. The boundaries for the online sexual activity while he is still living with his wife would be based on issues of respect for his wife, his own personal safety and the risk of a distraction from the painful decisions about not only coming out as a gay man, but ending a marriage with someone he loves. These online boundaries are then re-evaluated if and when he chooses to separate and live independently. The clinical focus for the online sexual

activity is about eliminating the components of the online sexual activity that interfere with movement towards the client's stated desire to come out.

Therapists may support and encourage some gay male clients to participate in online sexual activity as part of the treatment plan. For example, a gay man comes to therapy because he was referred for inappropriate use of the Internet at work. In the course of exploring the details, it is discovered that this man does not have access to the Internet in his home and has recently discovered an intense interest in bondage and restraint as a sexual turn-on. He was using his workplace computers to access Internet sites that provide information and chat room conversations with other gay men who are interested in issues of power and control, restraint and bondage as part of their sexual turn-ons. When the client first appears in the office, he hesitates to disclose any of the content of his online sexual activity but instead wants to focus on the fears of losing his job. It is only after a few sessions that the therapist begins to understand that the client's fears about disclosing the details of his online sexual activity are connected with the client's internal conflict with his emerging awareness of his sexual turn-on. This is a fully out gay man who is in the very early stages of exploring his interest in bondage and the leather community. Once again, the Internet provides the easy access to a wealth of information and contact with other men from the leather community. The client is hesitant to reveal this activity because he has only spoken about it with men online.

A gay male client may be far more at home with a keyboard to explore a part of his sexual self than he is with words and interpersonal contact with another person face-to-face. A well-timed intervention to empathize with the client's predicament when talking about his newfound turn-on and the feelings that may emerge may bring to awareness that his ambivalence may be more about coming out as a person interested in a particular sexual activity rather than

being troubled about his online sexual activity. When the therapist in a curious, inquisitive, non-judgmental manner invites the client to discuss the content of his online sexual activity it will increase the likelihood that this important distinction will emerge in the therapy. In this situation the psychotherapist present positive, affirming perspectives about gay male online sexual activity as a means for the client to learn about his sexual self. Gay men may experience changes or newfound developments in their sexual erotic life throughout their life span and the Internet can make a valuable contribution to the process of learning about these personal erotic turn-ons. If the therapist moves towards a focus on out-of-control online sexual activity rather than the emerging unusual turn-on, it may enable the client to maintain the same defensive strategy he used earlier in his development to avoid the conflicts and tensions that were inherent in discovering his homosexual orientation. This can result in misdirected focus on a pathological or sex negative conclusion to explain a hidden online sexual behavior at the expense of a more comprehensive psychotherapeutic assessment.

Ross and Kauth (2002) are concerned about the limitations in definitions of compulsive sexual behavior that do not take into consideration gay male “episodic excessive use of the Internet”, and individual sexual orientation identity development that interferes with “the expression of reciprocal, affectionate activity”. (p. 50) A long-term psychotherapeutic relationship with individual gay male clients profits by therapists maintaining a more balanced clinical assessment between facilitative and helpful stage specific online sexual activity and the clear cases where both the client and the clinician recognize the obvious dysfunctional sexual Internet use.

Gay Men Online Sexual Activity and Couples or Relationship Psychotherapy

When a same sex couple presents for outpatient therapy, they may not openly discuss their individual online sexual activity. They may be a couple that engages in online sexual activity as a couple and have never discussed this part of their sexual life with anyone else prior to therapy. Therapists working with gay male couples should include an assessment of online sexual activity. These questions can be addressed in individual meetings with each member of the couple or together. It is important for the therapist to initially consider the couple's degree of openness when acknowledging individual online sexual activity in the partner's presence. The couple may be coming to therapy for a completely different stated reason and yet their online sexual activity may be affecting the relationship in ways neither of them understands. Without the ability to openly discuss the online sexual activity these cause/effect relationships are difficult if not impossible to assess. Additionally, the degree to which the online sexual activity is openly discussed within the couple may be a useful indicator of the general degree of openness and honesty within the couple itself. Curiosity about the couple's online sexual activity is a clear statement by the therapist that sexuality will be an integral part of any couple's therapy. It can provide openings for the couple to acknowledge the role of masturbation in each of their lives within the context of the relational sexual life of the couple. Undisclosed or unacknowledged online masturbation activity may be a reflection of one or both members of the couple experiencing discomfort and shame about masturbation. Some gay men may be hesitant to disclose a specific sexual desire to their partner and avoid asking their partner for this desired turn-on and limit the experience of it to online fantasy.

Online sexual activity for gay male couples may be influenced by unclear, poorly articulated boundaries for the sexual monogamy/non-monogamy contract within the couple.

Over the course of the relationship most male couples will make decisions about monogamy or experimenting with a variety of non-monogamous options. A consistent finding about gay male couples is that they frequently differ from lesbian and heterosexual relationships with regards to their sexual behavior patterns Blumstein and Schwartz (1983). Gay men are more sexually active than heterosexual or lesbian couples in the early years of the relationship and over time develop arrangements for sexual activity outside of the relationship. “Gay couples’ acceptance of sexual nonexclusivity is one of the most distinctive features of their relationships” (Kurdek, 1985, p. 250) Online sexual activity may play a role in a couple’s exploration of non-monogamous sexual activity.

For example, a male couple that has been together for five years comes to therapy because of concerns of diminished sexual interest and activity within the couple. One partner wants to “open up” the relationship from a monogamous to a non-monogamous arrangement. He has been exploring masturbatory sex chat online without his partner’s knowledge. The other partner is conflicted about his partner’s interest in sex with other men and has not discussed nonmonogamy with his friends or other gay male couples. One recent study of men who visit all male chat rooms finds, vd/,d; www.facelink.com/hotusn WD that gay men in open relationships frequently visited chat rooms. (Tikkanen & Ross, 2000) Gay men in open relationships will use the Internet differently than monogamous male couples. “The distinction between adaptive and maladaptive cybersexuality is crucial for the therapist.” (Ross and Kauth, 2002, p. 54)

Couples therapy needs to explore the level of honesty and openness within the couple when negotiating or discussing online sexual activity. Couples function more effectively when they openly and honestly discuss individual desires for pursuing online sexual activity. It is vitally important that online sexual activity not violate the couple’s sexual contract and that any

changes in online sexual activity that may impact the sexual relationship of the couple be discussed directly and openly prior to engaging in the new activity. In other words, gay male couples should honor the commitment both of them have made to each other and respect the need to negotiate new boundaries directly and clearly. When the goal of couples therapy helps male couples understand the importance of a honest process rather than adhering to presumed monogamous sexual norms, it allows a male couple to negotiate a sexual contract that works for the unique combination for these two men.

These direct conversations of online sexual activity also allow the couple to bring the role of masturbation openly into the relationship. It is surprising how few couples gay, straight or in between, address the role of masturbation in each member's life. An open discussion of online sexual activity within the couple is an opportunity for understanding when online sexual activity is about masturbation or is about unmet sexual needs between the two partners

HIV status may also play a role in the online sexual activity within a couple. For all gay male couples it is essential to have clearly negotiated boundaries regarding sexual activity and risk for HIV infection. If online sexual activity is a means of making contact with new or additional sexual partners, it must be clear how each person involved in the sexual encounter will participate in safer sex practices as agreed upon by the couple. In other words, can each member of the couple rely on his partner to protect himself and therefore his partner from increased risk of HIV infection? Risk for HIV infection is correlated with frequent chat room online sexual activity. Tikkanen & Ross found that unprotected anal intercourse was more likely to occur between casual sex partners when the men met in gay chat rooms than when contact was made via another venue. (2000) It is important for the couple's therapist to directly ask each member of the couple what is his understanding of the sexual agreement that currently exists between the

couple. Couples engaging in online sexual activity need to be able to discuss their increased risk for HIV infection and consequently alter their sex practices with each other. They may use condoms when having sex with each other as part of a nonmonogamy agreement. Male couples who had been monogamous and had both tested HIV negative may have chosen to no longer use condoms as part of their sexual activity and with the introduction of online sexual activity may now choose to incorporate the use of condoms in all of their sexual activity.

Sero opposite couples (i.e., couples where one man is HIV negative and one member is HIV positive) have additional factors to consider with regard to online sexual activity and risk of HIV infection. The meaning and purpose for online sexual activity may vary for each man due to the differing HIV status for each member of the couple. The HIV negative partner may use online gay men chat room activity to fantasize about sex without a condom. This fantasy may be an unspoken or in private experience not shared with his partner. The restriction associated with safer sex practices is a continual adjustment, which he may have difficulty acknowledging to his partner.

For the HIV positive partner, similar dynamics of loss, fear and privacy may be an important function for the online sexual activity. He may pursue online sexual chat with other HIV positive men and enjoy the fantasy of less restricted sexual pleasure without the fear of associating one's sexual desires with infecting another. The fantasy of sexual activity with a positive partner may also provide a psychological "HIV free zone" that provides a kind of rest from the vigilance and omnipresence of managing life with HIV. The online sexual activity may provide a private space to explore one of the unsolved facets of living with HIV; the ambivalent conflict about who is responsible for protecting whom from infection with HIV. A risk factor in online sexual activity is that the participants may conclude that if HIV is not discussed prior to

the sexual connection, the sexual partner is also HIV positive. This assumption may lead to an increased willingness to engage in unprotected sex as part of this sexual encounter.

The online sexual activity may be an attempt to connect with other HIV positive men outside of the context of the couple. The HIV positive partner may have difficulty expressing his isolation and separateness from his partner related to his HIV positive status. Couples psychotherapy may be one of the few places both members of the couple take the time to try to understand the meaning of their online sexual activity as a reflection of unspoken dynamics within the couple. Therefore, a treatment goal for male couples might be to assist them in distinguishing online sexual activity that may enhance the intimacy within the couple from the online sexual activity that may be a kind of triangulation to avoid a more direct discussion of the painful aspects of being a sero opposite couple.

Online sexual activity for male couples where both members of the couple are HIV positive has meanings connected with issues of monogamy, relationship to living with HIV, and intimacy. Each member of the couple may be at a different stage in his relationship to HIV. There may exist a kind of “stage discrepancy” in relation to HIV for the couple. One person may be relatively newly HIV positive – maybe less than three years – where the other partner may have been living with HIV for more than ten years with all the possibilities of loss and adjustment such an extended time implies. He may have been in a relationship with several other HIV positive men and/or may be a widower from a previous relationship. When online sexual activity enters the life of the couple, each man’s current relationship with HIV may influence the online sexual activity. For example, one member of a couple may be very clear about only wanting to be sexually active with other HIV positive men and only when all parties utilize safer sex practices. The other partner may enjoy sex with HIV positive partners

specifically to experience a less vigilant sexual encounter regarding safer sex practices. Each member of the couple may not be disclosing his online sexual activity for the very reason that it would require the couple to face these differing boundaries in relationship to living with HIV. One of the central factors that brings some HIV couples together to form a relationship is their shared common HIV positive status. They may choose to maintain a monogamous relationship because of the sexual freedom it provides them by not introducing any other strains of the virus into either of their lives. Therefore, online sexual activity would need to be clearly defined as a masturbatory experience and not an opportunity for having sex with other partners.

In all of these different HIV status couple configurations, relationship or couples therapy may be an important circumstance for couples to talk openly and honestly about the role of online sexual activity either as a source of creative problem solving within the couple or as an example of conflict avoidance regarding the sexual concerns of the couple. It is up to the psychotherapist to lead the way in discussing online sexual activity as an important aspect of understanding the overall HIV relationship dynamics within the couple.

Gay Men Online Sexual Activity and Group Psychotherapy

Gay male clients should be encouraged to bring their relationship with the Internet and their online sexual lives to the group. For exclusively gay male groups, discussion of online sexual activity may focus more on the struggle to identify “normal” gay male sexuality and the Internet. For example, a gay men’s group may spend a great deal of time discussing various frequencies and types of online sexual activity as a desire to somehow establish criteria that everyone in the group will agree on as accepted norms for online sexual activity. The group facilitator may prove pivotal in supporting the group to explore differences and the resulting feelings associated with these conflicts and encourage the group to not require consensus among

its members in a misguided attempt to determine “right” and “wrong” gay male online sexual activity.

The boundaries of outside contact between group members, particularly in gay men’s groups, will also be influenced by online sexual activity. It is up to the group facilitator to establish and communicate expected group member behavior regarding online contact between group members. For example, are group members engaging in email or live online chat between group sessions? If so, what is expected of group members to share about this outside group contact during the group meeting? Most men involved in online sexual activity use a separate online identifier as his online name. It is possible that group members engaged in online sexual activity may find themselves engaged in online sexual talk with each other as a result of using a separate sexual online identity. Some group facilitators ask groups to disclose their online sexual name to each other as a means of addressing these potential inter-group crossing of sexual boundaries. Therefore, it is essential that group members in all gay men’s groups are expected to discuss their Internet activity as part of their overall understanding of their relationship patterns and functions.

Group therapy is a powerful treatment modality for clients to increase their awareness and insights about interpersonal relational patterns. The group leaders assessment should include a discussion about the client’s online sexual activity as part of preparation for placement in a gay man’s group. This will hopefully increase group members’ willingness to discuss online sexual activity and be interested in observations from the other group members. For example, a gay man tearfully discloses to the group that he has engaged in unprotected intercourse while having sex with a man he met online. This client is in group treatment to increase his ability to set clear boundaries in his relationships and to increasingly value his self

worth and self-esteem. Through many years of online sexual activity with multiple partners he has learned that intercourse without a condom allows him to retain his erection. For the first time, he discusses his difficulty with erectile functioning and condom use as well as the embarrassment he feels disclosing the choice to have more reliable erectile functioning at the expense of protecting himself from HIV infection. This group psychotherapy disclosure is the first time he talks openly with other gay men about his embarrassing and painful sexual disappointments. His honest disclosure with the group as well as the empathy received from other group members who have similar stories may result in an increased likelihood of more genuine and intimate communication in his relationship with a dating partner. When the therapist establishes group norms for discussing online sexual activity in detailed and respectful ways, it increases the probability of group members exploring their own concerns about the risks involved with online sexual behavior.

Many gay men experience “feeling different” or “like an outsider” within their childhood and adolescent peer groups and family. This outsider status often results in the gay male not developing the necessary skills to develop intimate and honest relationships. A common coping mechanism to manage this outsider status is for gay men to develop a false-self/real-self continuum. The false self as a presentation to peers and family that reduces risk of being perceived as not heterosexual or conforming to traditional male gender role behavior. The real self is carefully protected thoughts, emotions, and yearnings that remain private, secretive or unconscious. As a result, a gay man will often develop a gut feeling to decide where he presents himself in a artificial manner. (as a heterosexual man or at least not an “out” gay man) If a gay male believes presenting his real-self may threaten a significant attachment, he may choose to preserve the attachment by presenting a false-self. This false-self/real-self continuum may have

a parallel process that is re-enacted in group psychotherapy and online sexual behavior. The gay male group member may bring his real-self to group psychotherapy while simultaneously maintaining a false-self “community” with his online sexual activity.

Most gay men create a separate, “false” online name they use for their online sexual activity. This can be a particularly interesting issue in gay male groups. For example, a recently recovering gay male crystal-methamphetamine addict is in group therapy as part of relapse prevention program for his drug addiction. In group therapy he is realistic and honest about his sexual behavior and the increased risk for relapse to drug use. He has clearly stated to the group that he will not date or engage in sexual activity with other men who are using crystal-methamphetamine or under the influence of alcohol and other drugs. In his online sexual activity, he uses a separate online name and engages in sex talk and fantasies that re-enact the circumstances of his crystal-methamphetamine sexual activity. His fantasy online sexual activity is a mental rehearsal that combines sexual arousal and drug use, which can significantly increase his risk for drug use relapse when pursuing an in-person sexual interaction. He is not discussing his online sexual activity with the group. This omission keeps the group members from knowing about a significant relapse risk factor. This may result in a re-enactment of a false-self relationship between the group member and the remainder of the group. A facilitator needs to look for opportunities to inquire about group members online sexual activity and to normalize this discussion among group members. This leadership intervention may support gay male group therapy members involved with online sexual activity to use the group interactions as movement towards progressively more real-self online sexual activity.

Conclusions

Psychotherapists working with gay men must have a working knowledge of online sexual activity. They must be able to differentiate problematic or compulsive online sexual activity from a large array of various gay male online sexual behavior patterns that reflect developmental, situational or culturally normative sexual behaviors. Although much has been written about problematic and compulsive online sexual activity, it is the intention of this article to encourage all therapists working with gay men to see online sexual activity as a continuum of behavior that is culturally normative for gay men. Psychotherapists will be more effective with their gay male clients by conveying interest and curiosity about their clients' online sexual activity, encouraging a client to consider connections between his online sexual behavior and the presenting concerns and difficulties he brings to psychotherapy. Individual, couples and group psychotherapy can provide important and rare opportunities for gay men to explore both problematic online sexual activity and, even more rarely, the culturally normative aspects of gay men's online sexual activity.

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