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**The Use of the Concept of New Identity in Christ in  
Counseling Sexual Addiction in Young Girls**

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**Introduction**

Sexual addiction, like many other forms of addiction is a form of human brokenness. It requires compassionate caring of the victim for the healing to occur. The causes of sexual addiction are not fully known but many studies associate it to sexual traumas in early childhood. Young girls who are sexually addicted might have been sexually abused in their early childhood and due to dysfunctions in the environments of their upbringing, they have not had opportunities to learn about healthy sexuality. This, along with some distorted views they may have learned from media and society could lead to confusion when they come to the age of seeking their identity in teenage years. As they become adolescents and are seeking to clarify their identity, some might act out sexually, even becoming sexual addicts. Christian theology can help such girls in their attempt to figure out their identity in Christ in such a way that they are able to appreciate themselves and their worth as God’s beloved children.

Unfortunately, some of the way that Christian theology has been used has led to an understanding that has done more harm than good. The dominant way has been to condemn sexual addicts as sinners, rather than victims of brokenness suggesting a simple solution -- repentance in order to be whole again. A better understanding of how people become sexually addicted, a belief in God's grace and mercies for all through Christ Jesus might be helpful in counseling girls who are sexually addicted.

### **I. Understanding Sexual Addiction**

Sexual addiction is characterized among behavioral addictions—problems associated with obsessive thinking that leads to compulsive behaviors. Sexually addicted individuals constantly think about sex and are overly concerned with sexual experiences and highs, which they come to treat as their objects of devotion – their gods. Like many other behavioral addictions, sexual addiction involves a spiritual dimension even if, as Howard Clinebell notes, sex is not at the heart of the addiction as much as how it is used as an “escape from loneliness, guilt, shame, fear of real intimacy and insecurity about one's maleness or femaleness” ([Clinebell, 1998, pp. 137-138](#)). The sexual wounds from violence and abuse or sexually internalized dysfunctional attitudes and inhibitions during early childhood may have distorted the gender identities of most sexually addicted people.

Many sexually addicted people have addictions to other things as well. Some studies about sexual addiction link pornography with sexual addiction. The internet in recent years has promoted the behavior among many people, especially the youth, both in developed and developing world. In a recent article from one of Kenya's newspapers, *The Kenya Standard*, dated January 18, 2011, professional counselors from Kenya raised an alarm over youth addiction to pornography. They blame the easy access to the internet via the mobile phones and computers. Many youth, who are addicted to pornography, the counselors noted, fantasize about sex and could easily end up becoming sexual addicts to satisfy their fantasies and curiosity ([Jamah, 2011](#)). For many sexual addicts in developed world, the addiction is accompanied by chemical dependency and other forms of behavioral addictions.

Girls who become sexually addicted and act on it are particularly more vulnerable compared to boys. On top of risking dangerous

diseases, they are faced with many complicated dilemmas. They also risk becoming pregnant prematurely which adds to the shame and extra burden of deciding what to do with the unwanted or untimely pregnancy. If they decide not to keep the pregnancy, they risk losing their lives during abortion and the accompanying guilt that may plague them for a long time in their lives. Those who decide to keep the pregnancy and give birth may have to raise the baby or babies as single mothers which can be very stressful. If they choose to give the baby for adoption, many face guilt and self-condemnation that they find difficult to get over. Compassionate care is needed in counseling such girls.

Writing about sexual addiction as an African woman has been one of the most difficult projects I have undertaken for a number of reasons. The first reaction I had when asked to write about this topic was doubt about the possibility of women and especially young girls getting sexually addicted. Considering that power is an important dynamic in sexual matters in many societies that I know of, and knowing that sexual addiction, like any other form of addiction involves a compulsive obsession, it was difficult to imagine how young girls who, I assumed in most cases did not have a positive experience or teaching about sex could have compulsive obsessions for sex to the extent of becoming sex addicts. Another difficulty I've had with writing about this article is the lack of resources specifically addressing sexual addiction in women and young girls in particular, which, I thought, confirmed my hunches that this may not be a common behavior among women. I admit that I was naïve to the reality but this project has helped me become a bit more informed. It is with great trepidation that I attempt to suggest how to counsel a group of people whom I have not had a chance to interact with directly. I would like to take the challenge of imagining an approach that I could use to counsel such girls.

Even though I have not directly known any woman who has had an experience with sexual addiction, I think I have gathered some compelling proof that young girls do indeed get sexually addicted and need help. After researching more and having conversations with different people about this issue, I discovered that all kinds of people – women and men alike, young girls included, suffer from sexual addiction. One of the most informative sources was Oprah Winfrey's

show that featured addiction specialist Dr. Drew Pinsky who helps sexually addicted men and women address their intimacy issues which he considers to be at the core of many addictions especially sex addiction ([Oprah.com](http://Oprah.com), Nov 23, 2009). Dr. Pinsky observes that people who have had sexual traumas in their early childhood are more prone to becoming sex addicts. I have known and heard many testimonies of people who have experienced sexual traumas in their childhood years, hence the need for counseling.

## II. New Identity in Christ

“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry” (Col 3:5).

Baptism for Christians symbolizes the dying to the old self and rising again with Christ. As believers in Christ, this marks the beginning of a new life in Christ—a new identity. It was common practice for early believers to take off their clothes in baptism and put on new ones as a symbol of their new identity. Some churches still retain the tradition of wearing new baptismal garments to symbolize this new rebirth. More importantly, the new identity also means putting to death the earthly desires that contradict the spiritual life in Christ as Paul exhorted the Colossians (Col 3:5). Sometimes this transition has been assumed by some to be an automatic process, at least by some of the very rigid, legalistic believers. Thus, if one who has accepted Christ, and hence acquired the new identity, still struggles with the things of the former self, something must be wrong with him or her. After being born again, one should never go back to sin since “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1).

I grew up in Kenya during an era when sin, particularly sexual immorality was considered one of the worst sins. I did not understand about the power of addiction then. It was not until I was in seminary, several years later, when I took a course about addictions and mental illnesses, that I came to understand a bit better about addictions, including sexual addictions. I did not know specifically about sexual addiction prior to that as this was rarely spoken about. What I knew and recited poems and sang songs about, was that people who engaged in immoral sexual activities were sinners who, unless they

repented, were doomed for hell, along with thieves, liars, murderers, drunkards and smokers. When I imagine the burden borne by those addicted, indeed kind of enslaved by the chemicals or behaviors they are addicted to, I find this to be a very harsh judgment for victims. We need to take time to understand the power of the bondage upon them and why they lack of control over such behaviors. As a firm believer in God's grace, I find it problematic to condemn or judge people like that.

As I noted earlier about Dr. Pinsky's link between sexual addiction and early childhood sexual traumas, there are many other studies that indicate that many children who were constantly abused or sexually molested end up being sexually addicted. There are many reports about young girls who were sexually abused by people they trusted in their lives and others who have had a difficult time forgiving trusted adults like their parents who did not protect them from such abuses. One of the stories I heard is from a teenage girl who resents her mother who knew that her father was abusing her sexually but did nothing about it. Reports of others who have been sold to sex predators are quite troubling. Such girls face a difficult time when they become adolescents and are struggling with the issue of identity which is very important at this stage in their life. According to Erik Erickson's theory about developmental stages, adolescence is a phase of struggle between identity and diffusion. The adolescent faces the battle between having a sense of focus and feeling scattered and out of control ([Arnold, 1993, p. 118](#)).

This explains why young people from dysfunctional families or who have had traumatic early childhood experiences have a difficult time controlling their impulses. It also indicates the important need for counselors to address the issue of identity in their work with sexually addicted individuals. The concept of the new identity in Christ could be a great model to use in the important work of counseling such people. I have attempted to propose below, a working model to use in counseling young girls who struggle with sexual addiction. The model requires concerted efforts of both the counselor and counselee. In order for the model to work effectively, the counselor will need to facilitate for the counselee a meaningful way to work through her issues so that she can appreciate the value of her own product and avoid the sense of imposition of the counselor's

values on her. I can think of no better metaphor for the counselor than that of a midwife.

Interpathic “Midwife”

“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1John 3:1).

As a mother of two young daughters, writing about sexually addicted girls feels a very sacred ground to tread on. I believe that it is by God’s grace that I did not experience conditions that would lead me to be a sexual addict. I hope that my daughters, by the same grace will continue to develop their identity in a holistic way. Even though I have neither a firsthand experience nor encountered any woman that I have known, with sexual addiction, I have deep compassion for the victims of the damaging behavior. I am convinced that these individuals are not “sinners” but victims from the testimonies and stories that I have listened to. The Oprah’s show opened my eyes to real suffering endured by sexually addicted people as my brother’s struggle with smoking cigarettes had done for me years ago.

In my attempt to come up with an appropriate way of supporting, through counseling, girls who indeed may be sexually addicted, the idea of interpathy ([Augsburger, 1986](#)) came to mind. According to David Augsburger, interpathy is “an intentional cognitive envisioning and affective experiencing of another’s thoughts and feelings even though the thoughts rise from another process of knowing, the values grow from another frame of moral reasoning, and the feelings spring from another basis of assumptions” ([Augsburger, 1986, p. 29](#)). The counselor is driven by a compassion for the person who may be afflicted by a behavior she or he finds too difficult to overcome. Through interpathy, a counselor can sympathetically imagine that world for herself or himself and attempt to empathize even without having gone through a similar experience. I recall my agony witnessing my twin brother struggling to quit the addictive cigarette smoking habit. I sympathized with him even if I did not fully understand what made it so hard for him to overcome his smoking urge. I loved him so much and appreciated his efforts. This helped me provide emotional support for him as he worked out his plan to quit. I could not do it for him, but as a midwife, I was there for him as he did what he needed to do, offering minimal assistance as he needed. With this background and through the help of God’s creative spirit, I wish

to suggest a similar approach for counseling young girls addicted with sexual addiction. The approach relies on the tenets of narrative theory.

First and foremost, the counselor will need to affirm the worth of the addicted girl who might have been a victim of traumatic childhood experiences. She might be experiencing struggles with her identity. She might have no sense of self-worth. It might be difficult for her to believe that anyone could love her especially if she has never experienced real love in her life. It could take hard work to convince her. I would suggest for the counselor, at least initially, not being too concerned about trying to convince her as this could turn her off. Attentive listening is caring enough at this point and might help cultivate trust that would set her at ease to share important details that would shed more light into the strategies of best counseling her. Listening to her story about her experiences could reveal how she has come to the place she is in life at the moment. Allowing her time and freedom to authentically narrate her story even if it takes time to complete might be a mutual gift for the counselor and counselee. If needed, more than one session can be allowed for this important process. It is OK for the counselor to respond appropriately without necessarily giving too much commentary until she has finished telling the story. It would be appropriate to validate the pain and struggle that might emerge in the story in a human way. This could include expressing appropriately, the anger and hurtfulness of the any injustices, sadness, and joy as the situation calls for (caution should be exercised not to turn the focus of care to oneself). I believe that this could be a powerful way to let her know that the counselor gets it and cares for her. Occasional questions for clarification would be helpful. Through careful listening, one might have a glimpse of her worldview which could provide valuable blocks to help her in reconstruction of her future story using the concept of new identity in Christ. Listening to such a girl is in itself empowering and affirming of her dignity in spite of the self-degrading behaviors she might have engaged in.

The next stage would involve asking the girl, if not already said, the truth she believes about who she is and explain the sources of her beliefs. This is when the Christian counselor notes the impact or any damage or betrayal she may have from her relationship with significant persons in her life. Perhaps her father or another trusted relative abused her. How might she hear about the love of a father as



good news? The counselor has to explain the infinite love of God, the ultimate Father, who unlike human fathers tends His children gently. Perhaps one has to think of another language to describe God's love in a way that draws her close to this ultimate love without alienating her more.

The counselor will also need to pay attention to any distortions in the girl's belief system which may be evident. One can begin to burst some of the myths and help her unlearn some of the socially or religiously damaging messages that only serve to keep her more stuck. Even if she has engaged in the out of control use of her body through perverse sexual practices, there is hope in Christ. The gospel, unlike the law teaches about the forgiveness and restoration in Christ. The love of God for all people, frees us from the burden of sin. Paul's words about new life in Christ in Romans 8:1 can be comforting: "There is therefore now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus, who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit." This can be a good verse to discuss ways of reconstructing a new future story. The counselor can help the girl imagine herself as a new creature in Christ, forgiven and freed from the burden of former bondage to the fleshly desires.

### **Conclusion**

I think there will be bumps on the road. It is challenging to apply such a theoretical model for some girls, but nevertheless, I think that giving them an opportunity to express themselves is empowering in itself. Even for those who may not follow through the process completely, it is still worth a try. The most important thing to remember as a counselor is that, one is neither the Messiah to save the addicted girl nor the one responsible to make the necessary change but a facilitator of the process. Just as the midwife does not give birth herself but supports the mother in the birthing process, so will the counselor in this process. With patience and compassion, a counselor might help a troubled and sexually addicted young girl reestablish a new notion of her identity and new life in Christ. What a privilege to participate with God in such an important process!

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