

COMMENTARIES ON THE CHARACTERISTICS MOST OF US SEEM TO HAVE IN COMMON

Introduction

The text of The Characteristics Most of Us Seem to Have in Common was among the first pieces of literature approved by the International Service Organization of Sexual Compulsives Anonymous upon its formation in February, 1990. The Characteristics had already been in use in SCA for several years, having originally been developed among the members in the early New York SCA meetings. The initial Characteristics were refined through a series of workshops, and then further refined over time.

Similarly, these commentaries on The Characteristics developed from individual writing followed by a series of workshops. The resulting text was further refined and developed by individuals and an SCA literature committee.

Each commentary expands on the core Characteristic and describes in a general way how most of us coming to SCA have experienced sexual compulsion in its many forms of expression. It also summarizes how our behaviors and lives can change as we work the SCA Program and pursue recovery.

Characteristic 1:

“As adolescents, we used fantasy and compulsive masturbation to avoid feelings, and continued this tendency into our adult lives with compulsive sex.”

For many of us, our compulsive sexual behavior and fantasizing began at an early age, often in conjunction with the use of pornography. We found that compulsive masturbation, despite its negative physical effects, relieved our feelings of anxiety and helped us cope with the daily struggles and emotional turbulence of life. Feelings of validation were often not something we experienced in our youth. Many of us were neglected, or came from families where emotional expression was frowned upon. We resorted to using sex to feel validation, to numb feelings, and to convert unpleasant feelings of various kinds to more pleasant ones. As we reached adulthood, masturbation and other compulsive behaviors allowed us to escape from reality into a fantasy world. Compulsive sex became a general coping mechanism. The pain of life—especially emotional pain—prompted us automatically to seek the pleasure of sexual release.

In recovery, we strive to feel our feelings, no longer avoiding them, and be capable of sharing our feelings with others. Through prayer and meditation, and by working the Twelve Steps, we learn to become present in our own lives, and in the lives of others. We develop a sexual recovery plan that enables us to achieve freedom from compulsive sex, to bring sexuality into our lives that is integrated, and that enables us to deal with life on life's terms. We examine masturbation as an element of our sexual behavior, and develop individual boundaries around it. In the process, we often take a masturbation inventory, and sometimes make a specific masturbation plan. We let go of unhealthy fantasy and euphoric recall. We avoid allowing emotions to propel us into being sexual as an escape. We develop a connection with our Higher Power, and connect with others through empathy. We enjoy the here and now, keeping busy and engaging in healthy activities.

Characteristic 2:

“Compulsive sex became a drug, which we used to escape from feelings such as anxiety, loneliness, anger and self-hatred, as well as joy.”

Our compulsion seemed like an antidote to the pressures of life, a magical panacea for bad news or stress. Soon, however, we found ourselves turning to it during good times as well as bad. Eventually, any strong feelings led us to our drug. Like the chemically-dependent drug addict, we often strained our finances or neglected our everyday financial commitments in order to further our compulsive sexual activity. Or, we were distracted from taking care of our normal priorities by the opiate of our sexual and romantic intrigues. Even those of us who had achieved sobriety in other areas of our lives found that we still turned to compulsive sex to escape reality.

In recovery, we go through the rigors of withdrawal from compulsive sex. Withdrawal that is not only mental and emotional, but also physical, as our bodies have become used to the sensory and metabolic effects of compulsive sex almost like they would to a chemical drug. We engage with reality rather than seeking to escape it. We strive no longer to use feelings as an excuse or trigger for compulsive sex. Instead, we use *The Tools That Help Us Get Better*, including abstaining from unhealthy behaviors and learning to be social. We seek out the company of our recovery fellows and supportive people, instead of compulsive sexual partners or addictive and harmful sexual outlets. We recognize and remind ourselves that “feelings are not facts,” and process our emotions in positive ways. We invite our Higher Power into our lives, and into romantic and sexual situations. We learn to feel our feelings, and discover that we can feel or handle them, all of them, without resorting to compulsive sex.

Characteristic 3:

“We tended to become immobilized by romantic obsessions. We became addicted to the search for sex and love; as a result, we neglected our lives.”

Romance and the prospect of romance exerted a mysterious and powerful pull over us, as did the allure of sex and love. We found targets for our compulsive desires who were often unrealistic or unattainable. Whenever we began to obsess about another person, we stopped taking care of ourselves. Our romantic obsessions took over our lives, permeating them in every area. Friends became mere sounding boards for our ruminations about the object of our fantasies. Seeking sexual contact, focusing on romance and pursuing romantic intrigue became our top priorities, endlessly fascinating and always urgent. Our non-sexual talents remained unexplored or even suppressed, and we couldn't seem to live up to our potential. Our work and home lives suffered. Sexual compulsion expressed as romantic obsession put our lives on hold for months, years, even decades. Our unrealistic approach to romance meant that we often forsook opportunities for actual and available relationships, and became mired in sexual anorexia.

In recovery, we become aware of our obsessive thinking and behavior and strive to participate in life. We take care of ourselves and stay connected to family and friends, because seeking a romantic partner is no longer our main focus. We discover that we can be social without being sexual, and that we can enjoy our own company. We pursue everyday life without seeing it only through the veil of romantic obsession. When we use the Tool of Dating, we do not look for a partner to fix us, but rather seek out people who are in real relationship with us, and who nourish our desires. We stop obsessing over people and fill our time in healthier ways. Our values are realigned so that we experience balance. We come to realize as we work the Program that our Higher Power provides us with spiritual, emotional, physical and economic security.

Characteristic 4:

“We sought oblivion in fantasy and masturbation, and lost ourselves in compulsive sex. Sex became a reward, punishment, distraction and time-killer.”

When driven by sexual compulsion, we wanted to forget our difficult feelings and transcend our ordinary selves. We avoided reality by escaping into sex, mental or physical. In our fantasies, we became who we wanted to be in order to relate to others in a sexual way. The fantasies we experienced may have had nothing to do with any person we might be having sex with. We used sex to motivate ourselves to

get through the difficulties and pain of life. We sexualized feelings, using compulsive masturbation to cope with life and even to manage our sexual compulsion. Fantasy and masturbation became tools to mediate the conflict between our real and imaginary lives and relationships. Fantasy quite possibly served to distance us from anonymous encounters. We were afraid of intimacy with ourselves and others, and we often lied to others and ourselves. We avoided healthy relationships with others by retreating into fantasy and masturbation. Sex was the source of many of our good feelings, and we retreated from bad ones into our compulsion as if it were an anesthetic. When we felt good about some event in our lives, we frequently used sex to heighten and extend the feeling.

In recovery, we strive to discard destructive fantasy and seek healthy rewards. Following a spiritual path, we stay connected to the world and others, and participate fully in life. Our sexual recovery plan sets out parameters to keep us from compulsive sexual expression and in the terrain of healthy sexuality. We establish sound goals, objectives and rewards for ourselves. We reclaim neglected pastimes and hobbies, or develop new ones. We fill our time with meaningful activities, including service. We learn to take care of and be good to ourselves. We face and embrace reality. By acting with honesty and integrity, and being comfortable with intimacy, we find a life-affirming sexuality that assumes its rightful dimension in our lives.

Characteristic 5:

“Because of our low self-esteem, we used sex to feel validated and complete.”

In our active compulsion, the causes of our low self-esteem were less important than the effects. As children, many of us experienced families that were not nurturing, or that were abjectly abusive. We craved attention and a balm to soothe how we felt, and how we felt about ourselves. Some of us became socially isolated or even sexually anorexic because we felt that contact with people in other than the most superficial ways threatened us. Some of us felt unsafe around others. Some of us had a deep sense of unworthiness, and were consumed by toxic and secret shame. Some of us allowed societal attitudes to our sexuality or other background to affect our sense of ourselves, including as sexual beings. The emptiness and dejection we felt from being lonely, left out, ignored and in some cases ostracized, fueled our compulsive behaviors.

The compulsion told us that the cure for how we felt about ourselves was sex, or romance, or love, or a relationship. When we did have sexual relations, there was never a sense of equality. It felt like our only value was in what we could provide sexually to others. Or, conversely, in acting out our low self-esteem and

disconnection, some of us would routinely objectify or exploit others. Our self-shame often became a vicious cycle, in which our efforts to obtain self-respect through sexual exploits and encounters actually lowered it further. In relationships, we often could not feel love or affection except in sexual situations. If our partner happened to be ill or otherwise temporarily unavailable for sex, it felt like rejection.

In recovery, we no longer need to look for external sources of validation. We distinguish ourselves in healthy ways. We come to accept ourselves as we are, and others as they are. We let go of perfectionism and grandiosity, and we develop humility. We learn to forgive ourselves, and others. As we cross the bridge from our fantasy world to the real world, we gain a sense of belonging to a community. Through progress in our recovery, we come to identify causes and conditions that underlie our negative self-image and feed our low self-esteem, and we work on addressing them. In working the Steps, we learn to be "right-sized," with a self-esteem that is neither too high nor too low, but is based in reality. We find emotional balance. Sex, too, assumes its rightful proportion, purpose and place in our life.

Characteristic 6:

"We tried to bring intensity and excitement into our lives through sex, but felt ourselves growing steadily emptier."

The pursuit of excitement pushed us into violating lines we thought we would never cross, fantasies and activities that violated our values, morals, and integrity. Dangerous or forbidden activities activated our adrenaline. We often pursued sex without thought for our personal safety. Some of our behaviors revolved around having unsafe sex. Some of us told ourselves that using protection was inconvenient, or that it ruined the experience. What counted was the "hit." In some cases, other factors came into play that caused us not to concern ourselves with how our behavior might affect a partner. As we ventured further and further into extremes, residues of shame made us feel unworthy, and alienated us from other people. With each new degradation, we lost another piece of our souls. If we were having sex outside a committed relationship, we felt ever more isolated from our partners, and ever more distant from true intimacy based on honesty. If we were single, we might have rationalized that we were merely "sowing our wild oats," but our actions left us hollow and unprepared for building a relationship with anyone. We were locked into a relentless loop of exhilaration followed by feelings of fear, remorse, dread, and self-loathing. Our inability to break this cycle resulted in abject despair and whittled away at our spiritual self. The insistent need to remedy this "hole in the soul" we could not properly identify compelled us to try to use sex and excitement to assuage what was, in fact, a spiritual emptiness.

In recovery, through the grace of our Higher Power, we no longer need to seek intensity and excitement to escape pain — our spirituality fills us. As we heal, we develop a fulfilling relationship with ourselves, our Higher Power, and outwards to others. We come to value and respect ourselves and others, and change our behaviors to reflect that. We find contentment in previously unappealing activities. We find intensity through sheer joy, which can take many forms, such as getting in touch with nature, participating in service to others, and creating or appreciating art. By living a full and balanced life, we become satisfied.

Characteristic 7:

“Sex was compartmentalized instead of integrated into our lives as a healthy element.”

Many of us went to great lengths to hide our sexual compulsion. Some of us even lived double lives. We operated a secret life, sometimes even creating an alternate persona for acting out. We associated with people who would never interest us in non-sexual contexts, perhaps people who would embarrass us if known by our friends. Some of us kept our sex lives in a box, believing that it bore no relevance to our regular lives. Within that box, some of us often further separated sex from emotion. Others among us infused nearly every aspect of our lives with sex; rarely did we respect others' limits or respect our own right to sexual privacy. We were able to rationalize any sexual activity, no matter how extreme, dangerous or even illegal. Compartmentalization allowed some of us to balance and reconcile disparate sexual desires and activities, as well as conflicts in sexual orientation we had not resolved. We were fragmented beings who partitioned different areas of our lives—especially sex and sometimes romance—as if they belonged to different people.

In recovery, we strive to become whole, and to integrate the compartmentalized parts of our lives. We let go of our obsession with secrecy and strive for integrity in all areas of life. Rather than playing roles, we bring our true selves to situations and choose to share ourselves appropriately. The honesty of being who we are reduces our shame. We develop the ability to recognize and capitalize on our character assets, and learn ways of minimizing or removing our character defects. We integrate sex into our lives as a healthy element. As we become the people we actually are, each of us often finds that this is the person we actually want to be.

Characteristic 8:

“We became addicted to people, and were unable to distinguish among sex, love and affection.”

Just as compulsive sex became a drug for us, so too did people. Our fantasies about other people functioned as a stress-reliever and gave meaning to our lives. We found ourselves compelled to pursue people to all extremes, even violating our personal dignity if necessary. Moral values, integrity, and prior commitments fell to the wayside. For some of us, the need for attention and intimacy led to blurring the lines between sexual and non-sexual relationships; we often mistook sex for love, and affection for sexual attraction. We needed sex or romantic intrigue in order to feel loved. Many of us come from family backgrounds where sex was viewed and spoken about negatively (or not spoken about), where love was transactional and conditional, not unconditional, and where affection was rare, or not shown. It was easy to confuse sex with love and affection. We lacked a reference point. Some of us may have been sexually abused, or be the survivors of incest, meaning that the boundaries around sex, love and affection became blurred, and the nature of healthy sex and intimacy confusing to us. In family units where there was little emotional bonding, we may have developed exaggerated ideas about love, affection and sex. These exaggerated ideas continued into adulthood and took on an addictive quality. We sought love and affection the only way we knew, through sexual activity.

In recovery, we receive the gifts of non-sexual love and non-sexual affection. We learn how sex, love, and affection differ, and we express them appropriately. We set our own boundaries and proceed at an appropriate pace in getting to know people. We are skeptical of instant intimacy, knowing that true intimacy takes time to develop. We let go of the idea that sex or people can somehow cure us of our ills, and seek recovery for our individual circumstances and behaviors.

Characteristic 9:

“We searched for some "magical" quality in others to make us feel complete. Other people were idealized and endowed with a powerful symbolism, which often disappeared after we had sex with them.”

When we were not sexually sober, our only way of reacting to charismatic people was to pursue them sexually — in actuality or in fantasy. We idealized people to whom we were attracted, fantasizing that they were perfect, and we sexualized our admiration. We were entranced by their mystique, which was often largely of our own making. We got lost in the lives of our idols, and felt whole around them. If we

did have sex with people we idolized, our image of them was shattered as we faced the reality of their individuality. Their humanity and the reality of the sex act were at odds with the unrealizable fulfillment we sought. We were disillusioned to discover that they were not perfect. When we touched our idols, the guilt rubbed off on our hands. Though painful to admit, the reality was simple. Our identity issues and the spiritual incompleteness we were dealing with could not be resolved by sex, or another human being.

In recovery, we let go of unrealistic expectations and impossible standards. We take off our "sex-colored glasses." We see people for their human qualities and allow them to be imperfect. We pay attention to red flags and hear what people are saying about who they are and what they want. We use the Tools of the Program to develop acceptance of ourselves and build a relationship with our Higher Power that makes us feel whole. We come to realize that the true magic is the wonder of reality, genuine relationships, a sober life, and the rewards of sexual sobriety.

Characteristic 10:

"We were drawn to people who were not available to us, or who would reject or abuse us."

Because of our attraction to the pursuit of sex partners, sex or romance, unavailable people continually gleamed like shiny new objects never quite within reach. If someone rejected us, it only increased our desire. We found ourselves to be magnets for unavailable or abusive people, including active addicts. We often ignored signs that a person was unavailable, leading us to feel hurt or abused. To an extent, these patterns reflected the dichotomy in us: we were not available to ourselves, and we were not accepting of ourselves.

In recovery, we follow a dating plan or pursue healthy relationships, and we gradually find ourselves attracted to appropriate people. We seek to have a healthy relationship with ourselves and our Higher Power so that we can relate healthily to others. We are not afraid to view first dates as experiments that lead to us asking ourselves, "Do we want a second date with this individual?" We find that it often helps to ask ourselves about a potential new friend or romantic partner, "Is this person truly available to me?" "What is this person saying that I don't want to hear?" "What is this person revealing that I don't want to see?" We take time to get to know the person we are developing a relationship with, and pay heed to potential warning signs. We also take stock of our existing relationships. Is there some deep-rooted incompatibility? We work on our self-esteem and self-respect so that the need to take care of ourselves and safeguard our sexual sobriety outweighs any unhealthy attractions, and other considerations. The former allure of having any relationship with any person just to have sex, or to bolster our sense of self, fades,

and comes into proper perspective. We see people clearly as they are, our conception no longer damaged by compulsive fantasy. We respect the boundaries of the committed relationships of others, and of people who do not return our interest.

Characteristic 11:

“We feared relationships, but continually searched for them. In a relationship, we feared abandonment and rejection, but out of one, we felt empty and incomplete.”

Relationships, even friendships, triggered the fear of enmeshment or the fear of abandonment in many of us. Relationships of all sorts were anxiety-provoking. This included work relationships and family relationships, as well as romantic relationships. We may have experienced abandonment within the confines of family relationships. Fear of abandonment did not mean that we did not want to be in a relationship. We searched for all kinds of relationships, but lacked the confidence to take a first step, make introductions, or in some way signal our availability. We saw others in relationships and wanted what others had. Yet our intimacy issues and low self-esteem interfered. We built a defensive wall against anyone we thought was coming on too strong. Conversely, our sense of alienation and need for validation led us easily to allow unsuitable, insincere and even abusive intimate partners into our lives. Despite our fear of commitment, our aching loneliness led us into new entanglements. We felt that a relationship would somehow fix us, and compensate for our isolation and sense of unease with the world, and we pursued our self-prescribed cure-all relentlessly.

Within our relationships, we felt entitled to everything we wanted sexually, and when we did not get it, we sometimes felt justified in taking it, or exerting pressure. Our relationships, we felt, could not be complete without the right kind and quantity of sex. Fearing that our partners felt the same way and that we would never measure up, or that our relationships depended on sex, our anxiety persisted in all its flavors, such as insecurity, jealousy, stalking, and walking on eggshells. Our feelings of being “less than” made it hard not to feel overwhelmed. In a relationship, we were constantly on guard, fearing that our partner would suddenly end the relationship. Out of a relationship, our inadequacies, real or imagined, took on a life of their own. We were looking for emotional and spiritual wholeness from another human being, rather than working on our spiritual condition and finding healing ourselves.

In recovery, our relationship with our Higher Power is our foundation. We learn to look on our Higher Power as our divine matchmaker. We no longer fear rejection. There may be times when we feel that we do not want to be in a relationship.

Recovery allows us to accept that reality. We feel okay about ourselves, whether we are in a relationship or not. We work on ourselves, and our lives. We find that the more we grow, heal and become whole, the more fulfilling our life is, and the better our spiritual condition, then the better our relationships with others will be.

Characteristic 12:

“While constantly seeking intimacy with another person, we found that the desperate quality of our need made true intimacy with anyone impossible, and we often developed unhealthy dependency relationships that eventually became unbearable.”

In the same way that we continually searched for relationships, we were drawn to and craved intimacy. The quest for intimacy was an integral and pervasive part of our constant and compulsive search for sex, romance and relationships. In our confusion and inability to distinguish among sex, love and affection, we did not recognize this. Our sexual relationships were rarely accompanied by emotional intimacy, which requires honesty, acceptance, respect, and openness. In our desperation, we often settled for less. In a relationship, the obsessive intensity and demands we brought to it were often suffocating. Our dependence in part stemmed from our lack of ability to take care of ourselves. At heart, we were terrified to be who we really were, including sexually, and to share that with others. Instead, we sought to merge with, or subordinate ourselves to, another human being, using sex as the gateway to dependent relationships.

In recovery, we learn to take care of ourselves and to create genuine intimacy in relationships that are interdependent, and therefore sustainable over the long term. We get to experience healthy and fulfilling love. We work on our intimacy and abandonment issues, seeking to be an independent, integrated person who is looking for healthy intimacy as part of a healthy relationship with a similar person. We consciously seek to let go of old dynamics, including codependency, and take appropriate action to accomplish this. We have faith that, with our Higher Power’s help and working the Program, following the example of others, we can transform our life of desperation and clinging need into one of hope, fulfillment and happiness, one day at a time.

Characteristic 13:

“Even when we got the love of another person, it never seemed enough, and we were unable to stop lusting after others.”

The nature of addiction is never to be satisfied, but always to want more, no matter the cost. Promiscuity became second nature to many of us. Emotional connections,

including love, were subordinate to the lust and relentless pursuit of sex that the compulsion generated. Our need for intimacy triggered sexual feelings, and our desire for sex, love, or affection was insatiable. Many of us had limited boundaries, or none at all, so as we sought validation from others, we were unable to maintain appropriate limits in our relationships.

In recovery, we build a strong relationship with our Higher Power, filling the hole in our soul. We lose our sense of inadequacy, making it easier to have boundaries. We learn to value others, and full relationships including love. We are able to commit, and accept that any relationship has its ups and downs, ebbs and flows. We learn to appreciate and be satisfied with what we have, and recognize if it is our addiction that is creating dissatisfaction. We let go of "the disease of more." We abandon sexual intrigue, and inappropriate flirtatious or seductive behavior. We learn to recognize the siren call of the compulsion for what it is: a false promise leading only to more of the same heartache that brought us to recovery in the first place.

Characteristic 14:

"Trying to conceal our dependency demands, we grew more isolated from ourselves, from God, and from the very people we longed to be close to."

Many of us are from backgrounds where fusion, enmeshment and codependency were present in our families of origin. Whatever the origin, we became dependent rather than independent individuals, emotionally at least. We carried these dependency traits into our adult lives and relationships. We found ourselves avoiding difficult situations instead of negotiating to get our needs met. We were loners but pretended not to be. We engaged in imagined relationships and fantasy, rather than sharing our full selves with the real people around us. Our increasing and unceasing efforts to find connection solely through sex, our continuing inability to form healthy relationships, or our ever growing avoidance of sex and true companionship, left us more and more disconnected, isolated and alone. Our obsessive attempts to apply a sensual cure to a spiritual disease left us separated from God, and in dire spiritual condition. We were avoidant personalities, unwilling to address our problems, even though we disliked their symptoms and could foresee their consequences.

In recovery, our needs are no longer so insistent as we develop fuller relationships with our Higher Power and our fellows. We take responsibility for ourselves and our lives. We become present in our lives and available to others. We come to value our independence as individuals, even when in a relationship with another. We repair our relationships with ourselves, our Higher Power and those close to us. We resume or develop healthy hobbies, pastimes and activities. We restore or improve

our work, home and social lives. We find healthy and wholesome connection. We live with integrity and project an honest image of ourselves, with sex as but one element of our existence, not its center.

Conclusion

The Characteristics Most of Us Seem to Have in Common show us the nature of sexual compulsion, and remind us where we are in our recovery, or of where we have been in our compulsion. They contribute to our understanding of ourselves and our fellows in Sexual Compulsives Anonymous. This understanding helps us to develop humility and compassion, and enables each of us to find a personal path to sexual sobriety and healthy sexuality. The Characteristics invite us to do a thorough, honest and soul-searching review for the presence and effect of each one in our lives. Some members identify with all of The Characteristics, some with almost all of them. Other members identify with only some of them. In the same way, some of these commentaries will speak to some members more than others, and their content will be true for some members more than others. In reading and reflecting on them, it is important to remember that The Characteristics Most of Us Seem to Have in Common are a general description, and not a form of criticism, or an inescapable destiny. They are both a map **of** our problems, and a map **out of** our problems. Recovery is a journey, and working on ourselves takes time, patience, perseverance, understanding and compassion for ourselves. We are not alone on the journey. Others who are with us and further along the road can support and guide us as we experience the miracle of recovery, and become the very different people we assuredly can be.

(Extract from "The Characteristics Most of Us Seem to Have in Common" © SCA-ISO)