

# Kort's Korner



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## Covert Sexual Abuse of the Gay Male Culture, Leading to Sexual Addiction

In treating and helping sexually addicted gay men, we must understand how homophobic acts constitute covert cultural sexual abuse. Lacking this understanding, we can't heal what I believe contributes to the development and continuation of sexual addiction among gay men. For this article, I'll argue that the claim that "being gay is nothing more than just a matter of sex" is covert cultural sexual abuse. And just as with sexual abuse survivors, as a result of this covert sexual abuse, the world can become overly sexualized for gay men. Over time, many of them grow to believe the homophobic assertion that gay equals sex, and thus become prime candidates for sexual addiction.

Heterosexism is defined as the assumption that everyone is (or should be) heterosexual; the belief that homosexuality is subordinate and that heterosexuality is superior, or somehow more "mature." In *"Healing from Cultural Victimization: Recovery from Shame due to Heterosexism,"* Joseph H. Niesen, Ph.D., details the painful effects of sexual/physical abuse—and heterosexism, which he defines as "a form of cultural victimization that oppresses gay/lesbian/bisexual persons." He states that this stymies individual growth and development, just as [in] individuals who have been sexually/physically abused."

In fact, most of the literature on sexual addiction reports that a high percentage of sex addicts have been sexually abused as children. Various writers have reported different percentages, all of them high. In his book, *Don't Call It Love*, Patrick Carnes reports that an estimated 81% of sex addicts are victims of childhood sexual abuse. In a 1994 article in the *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity Journal*, Mark Schwartz, and William

H. Masters, explore how the development of sexual addiction is fused with earlier sexual development in childhood, and examine various ways in which traumatizing sexual abuse may later promote compulsive sexual behaviors. "Deviant sexual arousal and compulsivity symptoms," they state, result from "the influence of stigma and trauma to unfolding sexuality." Writing about how deviant arousal manifests during adolescence, they see sexual—acting out as a survival mechanism, developed to cope with their "need to depend on other people [who] they fear can injure or destroy them." The symptoms, they explain, "become functional in dealing with anxiety, depression, loneliness and myriad other emotions, and thereby become 'both necessary and distressing.'

Overt sexual abuse involves actual touching; examples include inappropriate holding, kissing, sexual fondling, masturbation, oral sex and forced sexual activity. But sexual abuse and sexual addiction don't necessarily involve physical contact. In *Don't Call It Love*, Carnes talks about forms of abuse in which there's no touching of any kind, sexual or otherwise. He gives the example of a father becoming turned on while talking to his daughter about her developing breasts. The daughter, feeling violated, vainly tries to change the subject. Even though physical touching is never involved, Carnes still considers the father guilty of sexual abuse.

Covert sex does not involve physical touch; Carnes gives the examples of flirtations and suggestive language, propositioning, household voyeurism/

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*"I believe the gay male community is the victim of indirect, covert abuse, and that some individuals develop sexual addiction as a result."*

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*Continued on reverse*

exhibitionism, sexualizing language and preoccupation with sexual development. I believe the gay male community is the victim of indirect, covert abuse, and that some individuals develop sexual addiction as a result.

One definition of sexual abuse in general is when any person dominates and exploits another sexually—violating trust and the implicit promise of protection. Typically, someone who sees himself as “in control” uses his status to control, misuse, degrade, humiliate, or even hurt others—who, by inference, are always inferior. Society’s judging gay men for our sex acts alone and even passing laws against same-sex attraction is covert abuse. A dominant perpetrator—uncle, stepfather, or half-brother who’s familiar, trusted, and seemingly all-powerful—can easily lure a boy into a sexual relationship and force him to comply. Indeed, many studies confirm that in cases of rape, the basic motive is not sex, but power. The abuser’s ideal target is a child who’s still naive, lacking the “immune system” of emotional and intellectual experience that tells him when he’s being violated—and when he should resist and say no!

Consider the gay boys and adolescents lured by heterosexist society into a sexual compliance—forced to role-play at being heterosexual. This parallels the sexual abuse of children. In *Now That I Am Out, What Do I Do?* Brian McNaught writes that “most gay people have been enormously, if not consciously, traumatized by the social pressure they felt to identify and behave as [ . . . ] heterosexual, even though such pressure is not classified as sexual abuse by experts in the field. Imagine how today’s society would respond if heterosexual 13- to 19-year-olds were forced to date someone of the same sex. What would the reaction be if they were expected to hold hands, slow dance, hug, kiss and say, ‘I love you’ to someone to whom they were not—and could not—be sexually attracted? The public would be outraged! Adult supervisors would be sent to prison. Youthful “perpetrators” would be expelled from school. Years of therapy would be prescribed for the innocent victims of such abuse. Volumes would be written about the long-term effect of such abhorrent socialization (as today we lament the ill-conceived efforts to turn left-handed people into right-handed ones). Yet, that’s part of the everyday life of gay teenagers. And there’s no comparable public concern, much less outcry, about the traumatizing effects on their sexuality.”

Many of my gay male clients express severe grief for what they were told, as children, about homosexuality at church or synagogue, in school, and in their families. Many report listening to ministers preach against homosexuality as an “abomination” and “evil.” Every day, gays and lesbians are daily bombarded by newspapers, TV, and religious zealots who believe homosexuality is an abomination. Imagine the trauma felt by gay boys or lesbian girls—lacking emotional and intellectual maturity, as all children do—when they see those they admire, in charge of their welfare, protesting against homosexuality; and realize that they’re one of those very people these homophobic authority figures are talking about! This is covert sexual abuse, an assault aimed directly at one’s sexual orientation and sexuality.

Heterosexuals diagnosed as sexually addicted often have histories of overt and/or covert sexual abuse. They’ve been taught to believe that they are hopelessly flawed, that their affection is inappropriately sexualized. Confused about their sexuality, they come to believe that the world is unsafe and dangerous, and learn to keep sexual secrets. This is the same experience of those who grow up gay in our society, paralleling overt forms of sexual abuse and leading to the core beliefs which, Carne says, contribute to the development of sexual addiction: 1) I am basically bad and unworthy; 2) No one would love me if they really knew me 3) My needs are never going to be met if I have to rely on others; and 4) Sex is my most important need.

Unfortunately, as a result of their covert cultural sexual abuse, gay men are especially vulnerable to sexual addiction. Given this information, a therapist is better equipped to help more effectively with their recovery. It also helps gay men learn that there’s nothing inherently wrong with being gay; the problem is what heterosexist society has inflicted on them. By recognizing this, they—like the survivors of sexual abuse—can shed the victimization and empower themselves

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