

PRINCIPLE ONE

We admit that we have absolutely no control of our lives.

Sexual sin has become unmanageable.

Confronting Reality: I'm Shackled in My Own Prison

Congratulations! Despite long years of deceit, lies, denial, minimization, fears, shame, and manipulation, you have picked up this L.I.F.E. Recovery Guide or have come to a L.I.F.E. Recovery Group meeting. You have been wanting to, thinking that perhaps you should, pondering if it was the right thing. You have resisted, found excuses, wondered who would find out, and worried about the consequences of getting honest. You've thought that no one would really understand. You've either believed that you have done the worst things possible – things no one else has ever done; or you've thought your stuff is not so bad -- that you really don't need to come to a meeting and admit you need help. Hear these words:

Welcome.

You're in the right place.

We're glad you're here.

Imagine what it must have been like for the Prodigal Son. He just wanted to be home. He didn't think he deserved to return to his earlier status as a son because his sins were so great. He hoped merely to be like one of his father's hired servants. Maybe you're like that: You're just glad to be alive and able to get to a meeting. You'd like to simply be quiet and belong. The Prodigal Son's father, however, rushed out to meet him and prepared a great feast. That is what it is like with God. We want to be "imitators of God, just like little children." It may feel like you're a little boy who has just come on the bus or into the lunchroom or onto the playground and you're expecting to be rejected or at least

ignored. Instead, we rush over to greet you! We've been where you've been. We understand your pain and your fears. We're glad you've come. We can't prepare a great feast, but we can go to coffee later.

Your first assignment is just to get honest. We know that the greatest enemy of sexual purity is silence. We also know how carefully you've guarded your sexual secrets. It's hard to imagine letting them out. There are demons in your mind telling you, "No! You can't talk about that. Someone will go running and screaming out of the room!" We encourage you to confront those demons. Those voices have kept you shackled in your pain for too long. We know, because we're on a similar journey of learning to live in freedom every day. We want you to tell us how bad it got and what it was like to feel powerless over your life. Chances are that others in your group have done some of the same things.

There is nothing - certainly no sexual sin - that separates you from the love of God. No matter what you've thought or what you've done, it's time to come home to the heavenly Father who loves you and is longing for your freedom.

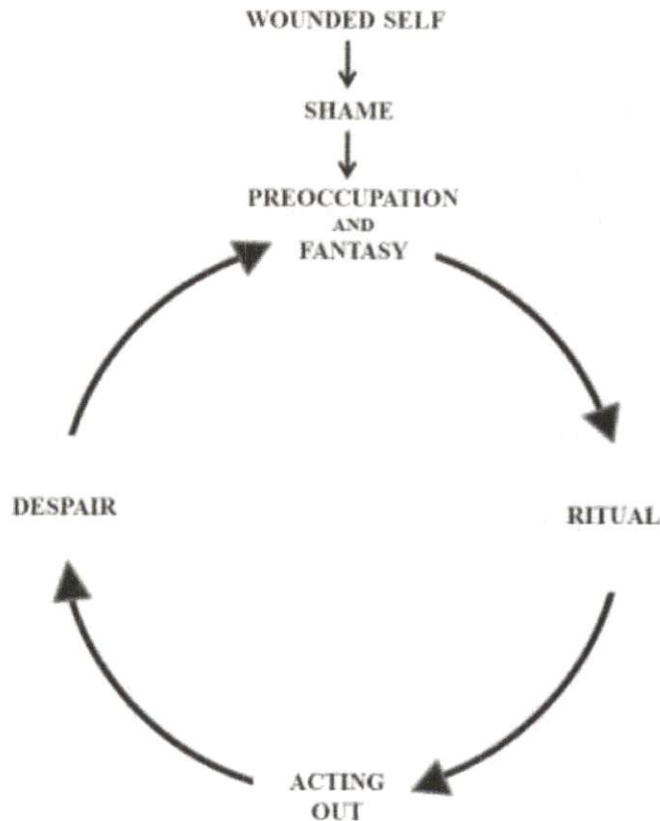
The assignment that you are about to undertake will take great courage. It will be a risk and a challenge. Don't turn back now. Keep putting one foot in front of the other and head for home. The freedom you'll experience is worth all it will take to get there.

Assignment Two - Understanding Our Cycle

In this assignment, you will keep looking at that silent self that has kept you in bondage. The purpose of this assignment is to continue to bring into the light that which has been cloaked in darkness. It is also to show you some things that you will need to work on in a very specific and practical way.

In his book *Out of the Shadows*, Dr. Patrick Carnes first described the predictable cycle that an addiction follows. I've also defined it in my book. You may want to check out those resources for thorough explanations of all the features of the cycle of addiction. Briefly outlined, it looks like this:

CARNES' CYCLE OF ADDICTION



FANTASY is defined as those undisciplined thoughts that you have about sex. It's also been referred to as "preoccupation" – you've been preoccupied with sexual thoughts and imaginings. The next lesson will help you understand more about your fantasies and what they mean.

Sexual thoughts lead to **RITUALS**, which are those things we use to prepare to act out. Any thought or behavior that you use to get from fantasy to acting out is part of your ritual. Most of your work in this assignment is geared to help you identify your personal rituals. A ritual begins with **faulty thinking**, which launches the process long before you actually act out. The downward slide starts with the lies we tell ourselves. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) calls these kinds of thoughts "stinking thinking." They come in different variations at different times. The following descriptions will help you pinpoint your own thoughts that lead you astray.

What have you told yourself about why it is OK to act out? As a Christian, you've had to get around the fact that you are disobeying God's plan for sexual purity. Typically, we succumb to two main categories of stinking thinking:

Justification – For example, we might think that if we do enough good things for God, we are allowed to do a few bad things. It is like we have a balance in our heads - a

formula we have worked out - and we reason, “God won’t mind if I do these sexual things because I did so many other good things for Him.”

The most obvious justification involves thinking about your spouse, “She doesn’t understand me or take care of my needs. If she were just prettier or more adventuresome sexually, I wouldn’t need to do these things.” Maybe some of us believe that being in a marriage will end all of our sexual lust. We think that if we just find the perfect woman, we won’t struggle with temptation. We’ve read 1 Corinthians 7 about how Paul says that we should marry so that we don’t “burn.” When we find that’s not the case with us, our faulty thinking tells us that our sexual struggles are our partner’s fault or that we’ve married the wrong person. We then feel justified in committing sexual sins. We might even believe our acting out is a way we can satisfy ourselves so that we can tolerate remaining in our marriage. In our sick thinking, we see our sexual sin as having the positive benefit of preventing a divorce.

We also tell ourselves that it’s OK to act out as long as “no one gets hurt.” We think that if we can just keep our sin a secret, especially from our wives, then no harm is done.

Entitlement – Sometimes we justify our sexual sins by thinking that we deserve it, which is a form of “entitlement.” Many of us have said to ourselves, “Nobody loves me and no one will take care of me. I have to do it for myself.” We believe no one else understands us and the pain we feel. Down deep, we’re angry about not getting our needs met, and we feel entitled to meet our needs ourselves, including using sex or unholy relationships.

Entitlement also tells us that we do so much, we work so hard, and we’re so stressed that we deserve a reward. Because life is often so difficult, we might even think it’s only fair to do these sexual things. We deserve some comfort and gratification.

Journaling Exercise: Your Stinking Thinking

Complete these following sentences in your journal:

My thoughts of justification include

My thoughts of entitlement include

In addition to our faulty thinking, **painful emotions** also fuel our acting out. They, too, can spiral us into our rituals. Remember, acting out is usually an expression of our **anger**. We are lonely, yes, but it takes anger to get most of us past our moral and Christian beliefs.

Because of some of our painful experiences, both from our childhood, which we will explore in a later lesson, and from more current interactions, we addicts are often very angry people. We are angry with those who hurt us. We are angry with those who failed to love us or meet our needs. We are angry with our spouses or former spouses. We are angry with those who have tried to confront us about our sins. In a nutshell, we are just plain angry. And we use that emotion to sidestep our commitment to purity.

Journaling Exercise: Anger Inventory

Make a list of those people in your life that you feel anger toward. Next to each name, write down what you are so angry about. Remember that you may also be angry with God. King David, the “man after God’s own heart,” was furious with God at times, and he wrote many of the Psalms out of that anger. You also are probably angry with one other important person: *yourself*. Take as much time as you need to complete your list, and prayerfully ask God to help you. The following chart can serve as a guide.

Name	Reason(s)
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

RITUALS

As a reminder, we have been looking at our stinking thinking (justification and entitlement) and our anger because they are the beginning points of our rituals. Once we have justified our sexual sin somewhere in our mind, the next step is to prepare for acting out. These specific preparations are our **rituals**. It is important to identify our rituals, because stopping the ritual is key to stopping the acting out.

Following are some instructions to help you identify your rituals. You may want to make notes in your journal as you think through these questions. You may also need to talk to a man from your L.I.F.E. Recovery Group to get insight into your rituals.

The best way to identify your ritual is to trace backward from your acting out behavior. First, select the sexually sinful behavior that you have done the most. Now remember the last time you did that behavior. What happened before you acted out? Back up in time to the point you first started thinking about acting out in that way. From that thought, what did you do next? And then? Those actions are part of your ritual.

If, for example, you have looked at Internet pornography, start by thinking of the last time you visited an inappropriate site. Retrace your steps to the moment you first started thinking about going online. Did you need to wait for private time, perhaps late at night or when no one else was home? Have you arranged for a confidential account? Do you have a secret screen name? All of those things are part of your ritual.

Rituals may be short, like the pornography ritual just described, or quite long. Some affair rituals take weeks or months to develop. They move from the first time you saw your affair partner, through initial conversations, to various acts of connecting before sex actually happened. Most people who have long-term affairs cross many emotional and moral boundaries before they ever cross sexual ones.

There are as many rituals as there are individuals and forms of acting out. Rituals are part of the cycle of all addicts, no matter how they act out or with whom. Whether your behavior involves solitary activity or crosses the flesh line to include another person (either opposite sex or same sex), you engage in an identifiable ritual. Some may be unique to you. Others are nearly universal. Some rituals may be quite subtle.

Repeat this process of retracing your actions for any of your unholy sexual or relationship behaviors. Start with the most common ones first and then progress to the ones that you may have done only one time.

Use the chart on the next page as a guide to record your rituals. (To accommodate the next exercise, leave some space between each kind of acting out behavior.)

Journaling Exercise: Your Rituals

Acting Out Behavior:	Ritual(s) Associated With It:
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Think and pray about how you were feeling going into your ritual. Were you lonely, stressed, frightened, angry, or anxious? This may take some hard thought and conversation with other members of the group. Have you ever found that the excitement of just being in the ritual is enough to “medicate” the feeling? You may find that different kinds of sexual behaviors are associated with specific feelings. For example, you may find that feeling stressed or anxious leads you to acting out through pornography or cybersex, while loneliness leads you into connecting with an affair partner.

Journaling Exercise: Feelings Behind Your Rituals

For every different kind of acting out behavior, write down (as best you can remember) how you were feeling when you started your ritual. Try using a different color to represent each emotion, like red for anger, blue for loneliness, etc.

Boundaries: The Key to Interrupting Your Rituals

One of the great challenges of healing and building a new life is to intervene on these “preparations” — the rituals – you have used to escalate from preoccupation to acting out. It is one thing to say that you want to stop a particular sin. It is more complicated to stop your ritual behavior.

It is almost impossible to stop the cycle at the acting out stage. You have to intervene before you ever get into your ritual.

A key principle to remember is that once your ritual has started, you will act out eventually.

It is imperative, then, that you create a plan to stop the ritual behavior. You must conceptualize what that plan will be – very specifically. You must outline the **boundaries** you will need to keep you from entering into your ritual. These boundaries are the prohibitions that will keep you safe. They are the guardians of your sobriety.

Think back to a ritual that you described in the writing exercises. **What behaviors will you have to stop to avoid being in the ritual?** By identifying these behaviors, you can determine the boundaries you need.

For example, a man who rents X-rated videos will have to avoid the bookstores that sell them, possibly the neighborhoods in which they exist, alone time in the car that might take

him to those neighborhoods, and the money in his wallet to pay for them. This sounds harsh and very restrictive, but in the early days of establishing sobriety, it is probably necessary. In another example, a man who has affairs will have to avoid one-to-one conversations with any women he is not married to. This sounds unfriendly, but is probably necessary in the early days. For the man whose acting out has been same-sex, he needs clear boundaries around his interaction with other men. These prohibitions can be amended as strength is achieved. I talk to other women, but I would never go out to lunch with them by myself (this being a part of my old ritual). *For now, make a list of boundaries you'll need to put in place for each of your rituals.*

Journaling Exercise: Your Boundaries

Rituals:

Necessary boundaries:

As I emphasized, rituals lead to **ACTING OUT**, which you've already identified in Assignment One. Are there any other forms of acting out you see you need to add to your list? If so, do that now.

The last stage in the cycle of addiction is **DESPAIR**. Another term for this desperate feeling is "depression." The vast majority of sex addicts are depressed. Go back and read the story of David for how he reacted to his own sexual sins. He was a desperate and depressed man. Pat Carnes discovered years ago that almost 75% of all sex addicts have contemplated suicide. Overwhelmed by guilt and shame, many men fear there is no other way to stop the pain.

Journaling Exercise: Your Despair

Write about the most depressing time of your life. What was that like? What were the circumstances during that time? Have you ever thought about suicide? Have you ever acted on those thoughts? Are you feeling suicidal now?

You may find that you need to be evaluated for clinical depression, which means that you see a professional to assess your level of despair. You might start with a counselor or therapist. If warranted, this clinician may refer you to a medical doctor, like a psychiatrist, who can map out a plan of treatment. (Some family practitioners, or internists, will also address depression.) **If you feel suicidal at any time, it's vital you share those thoughts with a professional and get adequate help.**

Additional Ways of Acting Out

Refer back to the cycle of addiction diagram and note that the point of despair leads back into preoccupation and fantasy. Sex addicts seek to relieve their feelings of despair. As crazy as it may seem, the best way to get relief is to start the process all over again. Addicts will return to the high of sexual fantasy, and the cycle repeats.

For some of us, it's important to recognize that we also turn to other behaviors that "medicate" the feeling of despair. Roughly half of all sex addicts are alcohol or chemically dependent. Many are smokers, hooked on caffeine, or on other "normal" drugs. Some turn to behaviors like work, sports, TV watching, or spending. We now know that many sex addicts are multiply addicted; i.e., they suffer from more than one addiction. It's common for many alcoholics, for example, to discover after they have months or years of recovery that they are also sex addicts. In the journey of your healing, you may need to deal with other substances or behaviors that you use to alter your moods.

One of the ways I have looked at it was to remember how my family taught me how to avoid my feelings. We liked to watch TV, eat, smoke, play or watch sports, shop, work, and go to church. My dad had scriptural answers for everything, and that isn't a bad thing, but it did serve to help us at times to avoid what we were really feeling. It will take you some weeks of sobriety from sexual addiction to recognize some of these other behaviors.

Journaling Exercise: Your Additional Behaviors

Based on your awareness now, make a list of other addictions or ways you use to medicate the pain of your acting out.

After all this hard work, take a grace break. Remember that we are all sinners and stuck in the cycle of our own sinful thinking and behavior. Even Paul admitted that he *didn't* do the good things he wanted to do, and he *did* do the things that he didn't want to. He said, "*Oh, what a wretched man am I!*"

Do you think God sent his Son to Earth because we were perfect? God simply asks you to lean on Him more and more each day and, one day at a time, begin to understand how much he loves you. Remember again the story of the Prodigal Son and focus on how the father rushes out to meet his child. God is watching for you to come home and he is preparing for a feast.