

Treating Compulsive Sexual Behaviour and Its Impact on Relationships

A Clinical Guide

Dr Robert Hudson



‘I am delighted to commend this book by Dr Robert Hudson, alumnus of the London Diploma in Psychosexual and Relationship Therapy. He guides the reader through compulsive and addictive sexual behaviours, supported by valuable case examples and workbook exercises. We are led to consider the impact on relationships, couples interventions, and the role of shame, trauma bonds, conflict resolution, and the creation of safe therapeutic space. Practical guidance on non-conflict communication, healing ruptures, relapse prevention, and recognising restimulation is included. Clearly laid out and accessible, this book will be an essential resource for training providers and practitioners.’

Judi Keshet-Orr, *Founder and Course Director, London Diploma in Psychosexual and Relationship Therapy; UKCP registered; Fellow COSRT*

‘*Treating Compulsive Sexual Behaviour and Its Impact on Relationships: A Clinical Guide* is grounded in both professional and lived experience. Written by one of the UK’s pioneers in this field, it honours those who have moved beyond struggle with the support of partners and allies. It stands as testimony to human resilience and the healing power of connection. Robert navigates the tension between clinical pathology and hopeful relational recovery with clarity and compassion. The integrated workbook offers reflection, exercises, and connection-building tasks, demonstrating his expertise as a relationship psychotherapist. This guide is valuable for clients and clinicians alike.’

Bernd Leygraf, *Consultant Psychotherapist, CEO Naos Institute*

‘*Treating Compulsive Sexual Behaviour and Its Impact on Relationships: A Clinical Guide* is an essential guide for couples working towards restoration and healing from the devastation of betrayal. It highlights the essential fundamentals of couples therapy for compulsive and addictive sexual behavior and instructs couples how to navigate the challenges and pitfalls of couples therapy when a loved one has CSBD. Additionally, it provides beneficial tools, exercises and journal prompts to cultivate insight for couples seeking to repair intimacy and trust.’

Stefanie Carnes, *PhD, CSAT-S, CST, CPTT, Clinical Sexologist, LMFT*



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Treating Compulsive Sexual Behaviour and Its Impact on Relationships

Treating Compulsive Sexual Behaviour and Its Impact on Relationships is a practical guide to understanding the impact of compulsive sexual behaviour (CSB) on intimacy, trust, and emotional connection in relationships. Written from the unique dual perspective of professional expertise and lived experience, this book explores how CSB impacts individuals and couples and offers a path toward recovery, healing, and genuine connection.

Providing a unique blend of clinical insight, personal storytelling, and a dedicated, practical workbook for couples, this guide provides clinicians with practical exercises, guided reflections, and strategies for communication to form the basis of therapeutic interventions, supporting couples in navigating the challenges of rebuilding trust and intimacy following the results of CSB in their relationship. Readers will benefit from accessing a clear framework for understanding CSB, while also learning key skills for immediate application to their practice. Downloadable exercises to accompany the book are available at www.routledge.com/9781041218418. Each exercise is self-contained, practical, and aligns directly with its corresponding chapter. These handouts can serve as clinician session tools, client homework sheets, or supervision resources.

Written with a compassionate and destigmatising approach, this book is essential reading for any mental health professional working with individuals or couples impacted by CSB, such as psychotherapists, counsellors, or psychologists. It may also be of interest to individuals with lived experience of CSB.

Dr Robert Hudson is a UKCP-registered psychotherapist, sex and relationship therapist, and certified sex addiction and trauma specialist (CSAT-S supervisor). He is an accredited member of the College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists (COSRT), a member of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (MBACP), and a trained EMDR trauma therapist. Dr Hudson has extensive experience working with individuals, couples, and groups affected by compulsive sexual behaviour, intimacy issues, and relational trauma. His clinical work focuses on helping clients and couples navigate the challenges of trust, betrayal, and recovery. He has developed and facilitated numerous treatment groups, workshops, and therapeutic retreats in the UK and internationally. In addition to his

clinical practice, Dr Hudson provides clinical supervision, training, and teaching in the fields of compulsive sexual behaviour, trauma, and relationship therapy. He regularly contributes to professional development programmes for therapists and is actively engaged in research aimed at improving understanding and best practice in this specialist area.

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Dr Robert Hudson

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To all the couples who have bravely navigated the complexities of compulsive sexual behaviour within their relationships – may this book serve as a beacon of understanding, healing, and hope.

To the partners who have shown unwavering love and support, and to those who have endured in silence, this dedication stands as a testament to your resilience and courage. Your stories inspire this work, and it is with deep gratitude that I dedicate this book to you.



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Above all, I wish to acknowledge the couples and clients whose stories lie at the heart of this work. Though anonymised to protect confidentiality, their courage, honesty, and resilience continue to remind me of the profound human capacity for healing, connection, and renewal.

Note to the Reader

Treating Compulsive Sexual Behaviour and Its Impact on Relationships: A Clinical Guide is written for psychotherapists, counsellors, addiction specialists, coaches, and trainees supporting individuals and couples affected by Compulsive Sexual Behaviour (CSB).

Each chapter explores theory and clinical perspectives, followed by a Clinical Workbook section for professional use with clients, individually, as couples, or in groups. The workbook exercises integrate psychoeducation, therapeutic prompts, and guidance for trauma-informed, evidence-based interventions.

These materials are intended for use within professional contexts, not as self-help resources. Practitioners are encouraged to adapt the exercises to client readiness and therapeutic goals.

Whether used in practice, supervision, or training, this guide aims to support compassionate, accountable, and effective clinical work with those impacted by CSB.

I hope this guide serves you well in your clinical work.



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Introduction

In the depths of human relationships lies a struggle often shrouded in secrecy, a battle fought silently within the hearts and minds of countless individuals and couples. It is the struggle against compulsive sexual behaviour (CSB), a force that can erode the very fabric of intimacy and connection in relationships.

My name is Dr. Robert Hudson, and in this book, I invite you to delve into the complexities of CSB and its far-reaching effects on intimacy and connection. As a seasoned psychotherapist specialising in CSB and recovery, I have borne witness to the profound impact of this hidden struggle on the lives of individuals and couples alike.

For years, society has grappled with misconceptions surrounding CSB, often dismissing it as a mere moral weakness or lack of self-control. Yet, beneath the surface lies a complex interplay of psychological, biological, and environmental factors that have contributed to its development and perpetuation.

This book builds on that understanding by framing CSB as a psychological condition often rooted in trauma and other complex factors. CSB can significantly disrupt daily life and cause profound emotional distress. Written as an extension of my professional practice, it is designed as a guide and recovery resource for professional therapists, counsellors, and other practitioners, who support individuals, couples, and families affected by CSB.

This book is written for psychotherapists, counsellors, coaches, addiction specialists, and all professionals supporting individuals and couples affected by CSB. It is also intended as a core resource for professional training and development programmes that prepare practitioners to work with this population.

Each chapter is accompanied by a *Clinical Workbook* section designed to be used by therapists in their practice with clients, individually, with couples, or in groups. These structured exercises integrate psychoeducation, therapeutic prompts, and clinical guidance aligned with each chapter's theory. They support trauma-informed, compassionate, and evidence-based interventions, helping professionals translate clinical concepts into applied therapeutic work.

Through my work with clients, men and women from all walks of life, I have come to understand the intricate web of emotions, traumas, and underlying issues that trigger CSB. By combining this specialist knowledge with my expertise in

psychotherapy and relationship and psychosexual therapy, I provide insights rooted in humanistic, cognitive, and psychoanalytic and psychodynamic behavioural models. This combination has enabled me to produce a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing the pervasive issue of CSB.

But this book is not just about pathology; it is about hope and healing. It is about empowering individuals and couples to confront their hidden struggles, reclaim their agency, and forge deeper connections rooted in authenticity and mutual understanding.

Throughout these pages, you will encounter stories of courage and resilience, stories of individuals who have dared to confront their inner struggles and embark on a journey of self-discovery and transformation. You will find practical tools and strategies for navigating the complexities of CSB within the context of intimate relationships, as well as insights into the role of trauma, shame, and stigma in perpetuating this cycle of suffering.

This book is the product of two parts, my professional evolution and my personal journey. From unravelling the complexities of human relationships to addressing the nuances of compulsive behaviours, I have embarked on an exploration of the human psyche, informed by the profound moments in my own life, that have shaped my perspective on the intricacies of human experiences.

There was a time when, in the shadows of my triggers and desires, I found myself trapped in a complex web of love and CSB. The attraction of transitory connections and the pursuit of a perpetually elusive satisfaction led me down a path of self-destructive behaviours. It was a journey that tested the limits of my mental health and emotional well-being while also straining the bonds with the person I was in a relationship with and those who cared about me.

This chapter narrates the crucial moments that sparked my realisation and recovery journey, a moment of clarity in which I felt the need to break free of the chains of my own love and CSB. Admitting that I had a problem and that my life became unmanageable, enabled me to accept my vulnerability and seek psychological support engaging with the Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA). This became my first step towards recovery.

Navigating psychotherapy sessions and SLAA support group meetings, I unravelled the layers of my compulsive behaviours, addressing the underlying causes such as my trauma, low self-esteem, insecurities, and emotional wounds that triggered my destructive pattern or behaviours. Each day became a victory over the compulsion that once held me as a prisoner.

As I engaged with my personal therapy, recovery, and sobriety the compulsion loosened over time. I discovered how to love myself, be transparent, and connect in a healthy way. This book is a testament to the possibility of recovery and renewal, a journey from the depths of CSB to a place of self-discovery, acceptance, the pursuit of genuine, healthy, and fulfilling relationships, and the post-traumatic growth process that followed.

Above all, this book is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the power of connection to heal even the deepest wounds. Whether you are struggling with CSB yourself or supporting a loved one on their journey to recovery, know that you are not alone. Together, we can shine a light on *Treating Compulsive Sexual Behaviour and Its Impact on Relationships* that threaten to tear us apart and cultivate a culture of empathy, understanding, and healing in its place.

Welcome to *Treating Compulsive Sexual Behaviour and Its Impact on Relationships*.



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Part I

Understanding the Struggle

How Compulsive Sexual Behaviour
Impacts Relationships



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Understanding Compulsive Sexual Behaviour (CSB)

Definition: Causes and Symptoms

Compulsive sexual behaviour (CSB) is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, much like peeling away the layers of an intricate puzzle. Each layer reveals something new about the human experience, where psychological needs, relational dynamics, and societal pressures intertwine.

CSB represents a heterogeneous and often distressing clinical presentation. Conceptually, it involves repetitive, uncontrolled engagement in sexual behaviours despite adverse consequences, and is associated with significant distress and functional impairment across multiple areas of life. Clinicians working with individuals and couples affected by CSB are often confronted with the intersection of personal psychological needs, relational dynamics, and broader cultural influences.

Case Vignette

Sebastian, a 36-years-old marketing executive, has been in a committed relationship with his partner Monica, 32-years-old, an accountant, (not their real names) for six years. They live together in a quiet residential area and are planning to get married. Over the last two years, Sebastian has been travelling a lot for work. During this time, Monica began noticing changes in Sebastian's behaviour that began to strain their relationship. He became increasingly withdrawn, spending more time on his smartphone and computer. This led to a decline in intimacy between him and Monica. He would avoid physical closeness and was emotionally distant, creating a sense of isolation for Monica. His behaviour also affected their communication, with Sebastian becoming defensive and secretive when questioned about his activities.

After one particular argument, Sebastian confessed to frequenting adult websites, and subscribing to several explicit content platforms. His engagement with these sites grew from an occasional pattern to a regular, and daily compulsive habit.

As the truth surfaced, emotions ran high, and their relationship teetered on the edge. Monica felt hurt and betrayed by Sebastian's behaviour. She began to question his loyalty and trustworthiness, fearing that his CSB could lead to infidelity. The emotional distance grew, resulting in frequent arguments and a sense of disconnection. Monica felt that she was losing the relationship they once had, and

a lack of transparency from Sebastian made it difficult for her to understand the seriousness of the problem.

When Sebastian sought treatment, the couple pursued a multimodal approach including individual CSB-focused therapy, couples therapy, and structured recovery interventions. Their clinical journey illustrated common dynamics: secrecy and disclosure, the partner's experience of betrayal trauma, the role of relapse, and the potential for improved communication and relational repair through structured interventions. Through therapy and recovery, they embarked on a formal disclosure process and later shared their vulnerability and a commitment to understanding, confronting the impact of CSB on their connection.

As they forged a path towards recovery, they discovered a renewed sense of intimacy and resilience, turning the page on their tumultuous chapter and embracing a future marked by growth and a deepened bond.

As We Embark on Our Journey Defining Compulsive Sexual Behaviour (CSB)

To understand the complexities of CSB and its impact on intimate relationships, it is essential to lay a solid foundation by identifying core features of the condition. Recognised features are primarily considered to be a persistent inability to control sexual impulses/urges, an engagement in sexual behaviours despite the negative consequences (significant distress, and the detrimental effect on relational, occupational, and personal functioning), and an over-preoccupation with sexual activity, one that often dominates cognitive resources.

Understanding these key features and based on what we know from previous research in this area, CSB can be understood as repeated, sexually driven actions that disrupt everyday functioning, escalating beyond personal control, that create an unhealthy reliance on the mood-altering effects these behaviours provide. In this framework, sexual behaviour may function as a maladaptive coping mechanism, with symptomatology rooted in psychological distress and often linked to trauma histories.

Understanding the Aetiological Conditions

The aetiology of CSB is best understood as multifactorial, potentially stemming from a combination of psychological, biological, and environmental factors. In a chapter from his 1983 book, *Out of the Shadows*, 'The Making of a Sex Addict', Dr Patrick Carnes makes the case for a link between trauma and addiction, highlighting evidence that individuals grappling with CSB often experience intense feelings of "trauma shame", described as a "Profound sense of unworthiness and self-hatred rooted in traumatic experience"¹ which serve to numb negative emotions and mask underlying wounds, particularly those inflicted during childhood. This shame-driven cycle perpetuates the compulsive nature of sexual behaviours, making it challenging for individuals to break free from their destructive patterns.

The role of neurobiological mechanisms is supported by emerging research, related to reward processing and impulse control. Neurobiological studies in this area suggest that some individuals show differences in brain regions linked to impulse control and self-monitoring, often in connection with depressive symptoms, highlighting the close link between compulsion, mood regulation, and shame. Research on the stress response also indicates that many clients with CSB experience heightened arousal and difficulty regulating cortisol, leaving them more vulnerable to using sexual behaviour as a way of coping with stress or emotional pain. For clinicians, this underscores the importance of addressing both biological vulnerabilities and the client's psychological and relational context when planning treatment.

Environmental factors involve societal permissiveness, digital accessibility of explicit material, and cultural narratives about sexuality, all of which may exacerbate vulnerabilities.

Clinical Presentation

Symptoms of CSB manifest in various ways, including:

- **Compulsive Sexual Activity:** Engaging in sexual behaviours excessively and impulsively, often to the detriment of other areas of life.

Here are some examples:

- Johnathan frequently engages in casual encounters, often seeking out new partners despite being in a committed relationship. This behaviour has caused strain on his relationship with his partner and has led to feelings of guilt and remorse.
- Sarah spends excessive amounts of time watching pornography, sometimes forgoing important tasks or neglecting responsibilities at work in favour of satisfying her sexual urges.
- Kin regularly visits strip clubs and sex workers, spending large sums of money on these activities despite struggling with financial instability.
- **Preoccupation with Sexual Thoughts:** Persistent thoughts or fantasies about sexual activities that interfere with daily functioning.
 - Lisa finds herself constantly fantasising about sexual encounters, even during work meetings or social gatherings, which distracts her from focusing on the task at hand.
 - David experiences intrusive sexual thoughts that disrupt his ability to concentrate on his studies, leading to poor academic performance and frustration.
 - Emily's mind is frequently consumed by thoughts of sexual experimentation, making it challenging for her to engage in meaningful conversations or maintain platonic relationships without sexual undertones.

- **Difficulty in Controlling Sexual Urges:** Inability to resist impulses to engage in sexual behaviours, even when aware of the negative consequences.
 - Michael struggles to resist the urge to visit online chat rooms for explicit conversations, often giving in to the temptation despite his desire to stop.
 - Jessica finds it hard to refrain from engaging in risky sexual behaviours, such as unprotected intercourse with strangers, despite being aware of the potential health risks.
 - Kirk feels compelled to masturbate multiple times a day, sometimes excessively, even when it interferes with his work schedule, personal relationships, and physical injury.
- **Continued behaviour Despite Negative Consequences:** Persisting in sexual behaviours despite adverse outcomes, such as relationship problems, legal issues, or financial difficulties.
 - Despite experiencing a sexually transmitted infection and facing strained relationships with family and friends due to his sexually active lifestyle, Tom continues to engage in casual sex without regard for the consequences.
 - Even after facing legal repercussions for soliciting sex workers, Ryan continues to seek out sexual services, resulting in further legal trouble and financial strain.
 - Despite losing his job due to viewing explicit content on his work computer, Jack continues to engage in similar behaviour at home, jeopardising his chances of finding new employment and maintaining stability in his life.

The Impact on Couple Relationships

CSB not only affects the individual struggling with the condition. In their paper ‘The traumatic nature of disclosure for wives of sexual addicts’, Steffens and Rennie examine the effects of betrayal on cheated partners, who bear “a great burden” and experience “disruption in response to the out-of-control sexual behaviours of the addict”.² Making the cause for the effects of infidelity as being “consistent” with trauma, Steffens and Rennie conclude that “acts of infidelity within the context of sexual addiction” are themselves traumatic experiences.³ This effect and a breakdown in trust are common themes in couples where one partner grapples with CSB. This behaviour can lead to profound emotional pain, feelings of inadequacy, and a sense of betrayal in the betrayed partner, further exacerbating the relational strain.

Therapeutic Perspectives

Treatment of CSB within couple relationships typically involve an integrative approach:

- **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT):** Focuses on identifying and restructuring maladaptive cognitions and developing behavioural control strategies.

Explanation: CBT helps you recognise and change negative thought patterns and behaviours associated with CSB.

Example: In CBT, you might learn to challenge thoughts like “I must satisfy my sexual urges immediately” with more balanced thoughts such as “I can tolerate discomfort and delay gratification.”

- **Psychoanalytic and Psychodynamic:** Explore unconscious conflicts, early relational trauma, and shame dynamics underlying CSBs.

Explanation: This approach examines how early experiences, and unconscious conflicts influence your CSB. It explores your past to understand why you might be drawn to certain behaviours.

Example: Through psychoanalysis, you might uncover that feelings of abandonment in childhood contribute to seeking validation through excessive sexual encounters in adulthood.

- **Systemic:** Examines relational patterns, communication styles, and interactional cycles that may perpetuate CSB and relational distress.

Explanation: Systemic therapy focuses on how the interactions and communication patterns between partners or within a family might contribute to CSB.

Example: A systemic therapist might explore how conflicts or emotional distance between partners contribute to one partner seeking sexual fulfilment outside of the relationship.

- **Existential:** Encourages individuals to confront questions of meaning, responsibility, and authenticity, reframing sexual behaviour within the broader context of purpose and value.

Explanation: Existential therapy helps individuals confront questions about the meaning of their existence and how it relates to their compulsive behaviours. It encourages finding purpose and fulfilment beyond immediate gratification.

Example: In existential therapy, you might explore how pursuing sexual gratification might distract you from addressing deeper questions about what truly brings meaning and fulfilment to your life.

Clinical Implications

Effective intervention requires attending to both individual symptomatology and relational dynamics. Clinicians are encouraged to adopt trauma-informed, non-pathologising, and integrative frameworks to support clients. Structured disclosure processes, relapse management planning, and partner support are critical components of treatment.

In the following chapters, we will look at each of these aspects, exploring the intricate interplay between CSB and couple relationships and offering insights and strategies for healing and recovery. Through understanding, empathy, and evidence-based interventions, we can navigate Treating Compulsive Sexual Behaviour and Its Impact on Relationships of CSB and cultivate healthier, more fulfilling relationships.