

Covert Incest

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Covert incest (Adams, 1991) occurs when a child plays the role of a surrogate husband or wife to a lonely, needy parent. The parent's need for companionship is met through the child. The child is bound to the parent by excessive feelings of responsibility for the welfare of the parent. The demand for loyalty to the lonely, needy parent overwhelms the child and becomes the major organizing experience in the child's development. While there is no physical, sexual contact in this form of incest, inherent in the relationship is an archetype of feelings and dynamics more comparable to young love than a nurturing parent-child alliance. They become psychological or emotional lovers. As adults, these children struggle with commitment, intimacy, and expressions of healthy sexuality.

It has also been labeled emotional incest (Love 1990), but this label misleads by implying an absence of sexual damage. In fact, the developing sexuality is the major battlefield where the demand for loyalty to the parent and, the wishes of the developing self, clash. Feelings of entrapment and guilt weave themselves into the developing sexuality. Feelings of entrapment and guilt weave themselves into the developing sexuality. Erotic urges toward a love object other than the parent are experienced as disloyal. Forced to declare loyalty to the needy parent, the developing sexuality is shrouded in feelings of over stimulation, danger, engulfment, rage, ambivalence, and shame.

Covert incest severely prejudices the adult survivor's capacity for love, companionship, and a satisfying erotic life. Extremes of under arousal and over arousal prevail in the sexual expression of covert incest survivors. This corresponds to the extremes of addiction and anorexia found in the sexual expression of sex addicts (Carnes). Unless the covert incest is resolved, each attempt at intimate contact reinforces the incestuous template of entrapment and disloyalty. The subsequent rage is filtered back through the sexuality and is ultimately discharged against the self or others. Here lies the apex of the addiction to the trauma in the life of the covert incest survivor.

Sexuality becomes an escape, an attempt to sooth distress, and a way of self-definition: all, hallmarks of the sex addict. The covert incest survivor, having never felt enough for the needy parent, is left feeling deeply inadequate and unworthy. Sex becomes an attempt to compensate for this pain. Inadequacy and feeling unworthy are frequently reported core feelings of sex addicts as well. The addiction is used as an attempt to override this very dangerous threat to the self. In time, the solution becomes the problem (Dayton, 2000) and sexuality is entrenched with the classic hallmarks of addiction: preoccupation, compulsive behavior, damaging life consequences, inability to stop in spite of attempts to do so, tolerance, despair and depression, and deprivation (anorexia) as a means of control.

Not all sex addicts are covert incest survivors and not all covert incest survivors are sex addicts. However, the sexual trauma of covert incest can be a virtual breeding ground for sexual addiction given the nature of the dynamics and impact on sexuality of this form of incest. Four major barriers exist in attempting to identify covert incest. They are as follows:

1. Romanticizing the disorder (these children are often seen as heroes and saviors rather than victims).
2. The absence of physical, sexual contact (it remains difficult for clinicians and the lay public to believe that damage can occur without physical, sexual contact).
3. The search for repressed memories (clinicians often assume a surrogate partnership must mean there are repressed memories of physical, sexual incest).
4. Feeling idealized and privileged (covert incest survivors feel idealized and privileged, not abused).