

Should Adult Sexting Be Considered for the DSM?

Brenda K. Wiederhold

IN THE WAKE OF THE NEWS about the unfortunate events that led to the resignation of Anthony Weiner, aged 46, from the U.S. House of Representatives, we ask: Should adult sexting be considered a deviant behavior worthy of inclusion in the DSM?

Former Rep. Weiner's fall from grace began when he accidentally posted a link to a lewd photo of himself on a Twitter account that he used to communicate with constituents. He subsequently admitted that he had been sexting both photographs and messages to various women before and during his marriage.

Sexting can be defined as "sending, receiving, or forwarding sexually explicit messages, photographs, or images via cell phone, computer, or other digital devices."¹ To date, much of the research has focused on adolescents and young adults, the age group most involved in this activity.

An online survey of undergraduate students found that nearly two-thirds had sexted nude or semi-nude pictures of themselves, mostly to their boyfriend or girlfriend. About a quarter sexted someone they wanted to hook up with or date, and 15% sexted people they had met online only.² While being sexy or initiating sex were the primary motivations of this group, an earlier pencil-and-paper survey by this same author found that self-expression was a primary motivation.³

Some authors place sexting in the category of cyberbullying,⁴ which it certainly can be when used by adolescents to harass other teens. But what about adults? Do we know anything about why adults use sexting and if it is associated with other high-risk sexual behaviors?

To date, research to answer this question is limited. One study of young, mostly Hispanic older adolescents and young adults aged 16–25 found that 20% used sexting. The women who used it were slightly more likely to enjoy sex and slightly more likely to exhibit histrionic behavior.⁵

Perhaps it is just that some politicians lack the internal controls, such as conscience, or the external controls, such as police, to guard against what may be perceived as deviant behavior. Sexting among consenting adults is not a crime, and some adults would not consider sexting with a person other than a spouse "cheating" in a marriage. Others, however, might think that such behavior is a sign of a sex addict. Is it deviant behavior? Is it any different from watching porn movies, with or without your partner?

Mr. Weiner's lapse of judgment brought to light that, in the age of Facebook and Twitter, cyber privacy cannot be guaranteed. Moreover, as clinical and research professionals, we need to be mindful that other issues may contribute to the reasons why some of our adult clients may engage in sexting.

We believe there is a need for more research on adult sexting. What drives people who are married or in a committed relationship to text sexual messages and photos to someone other than their spouse? Does this behavior vary by gender and age? We need to understand the etiology of and treatment options appropriate for such behaviors.

In the relatively new field of cyberpsychology, we strive to learn about the many challenges of current behavior that social networking makes possible. Certainly, such research will help us to prepare for the many behavioral changes that advances in interactive technology will inspire.

References

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Brenda K. Wiederhold
Editor-in-Chief

