

## 1 **Tool: Abstinence and Celibacy**

2

3 In COSA, we have been affected by compulsive sexual behavior, and this may impact our sexual  
4 intimacy. Those of us dealing with the discovery of a partner's acting out may intuitively reach for the tool of  
5 abstinence or even celibacy. It could be equally appropriate any time we feel the need for re-examining  
6 our relationship with sex or intimacy.

7

8 For some of us, the idea of having sex after learning about a partner's sexual compulsivity can be  
9 frightening and overwhelming. The tool of abstinence and celibacy is used in order to provide space for  
10 healing and safety without the pressure, expectation, or fear of sexual relations.

11

12 *Abstinence* refers to the practice of intentionally not doing something that is generally enjoyable or  
13 routine in our lives, in this case, sex. The tool of abstaining may refer to specific sexual behaviors like  
14 intercourse, or when used more broadly, may include all forms of sex. The duration of abstinence is left  
15 to the individual to decide based on their needs and situation. We even can give ourselves permission to  
16 make this decision based on how we feel on a particular day or in a particular moment. Honoring  
17 ourselves and how we feel at any particular point can be very healing. Early after discovery, it can feel  
18 unsafe and be very confusing to live with an unfaithful partner, let alone be sexually intimate. This tool  
19 allows us the space to clear our minds, get in touch with our feelings, and continue a life in recovery.

20

21 *Celibacy* is a term that denotes sexual abstinence for a longer period of time; this is often associated with  
22 taking a vow. Celibacy may have a religious connotation or significance as well. For some, the vow is  
23 until marriage; for others, for a lifetime.

24

25 Whether abstinence and celibacy is a tool or weapon, depends upon how it is used and with what  
26 intention. Abstaining from sex in order to punish one's partner will hinder recovery. On the other hand,  
27 when used with care, this tool supports our own personal safety and recovery.

28

29 For instance, some face concern over personal safety upon the discovery of sexual activity outside of a  
30 committed relationship including the possibility of contracting a sexually-transmitted infection (STI). By  
31 abstaining from sex in such cases, we set boundaries for our physical safety as we determine healthy  
32 next steps for ourselves.

33

34 Personal safety extends beyond the physical realm to include our emotional, mental, and spiritual safety  
35 as well. Abstinence provides a space that we often need following the discovery of betrayal. While  
36 abstaining, we use the time to recover, possibly from trauma or emotional wounds. We take time to  
37 discover our own self-worth, values, and autonomy. We also seek to clarify and understand healthy  
38 sexuality in terms of intimacy, consent, and awareness, and to establish new, healthier behaviors around  
39 sex.

40

41 When needed, abstinence and celibacy can further our recovery by taking time from sex to consider and  
42 possibly redefine our wants and needs. We learn that our innate humanity is not one-dimensional, solely  
43 focused on being sexually appealing or desirable. We also learn that love doesn't equal sex, and sex  
44 doesn't equal intimacy. Through the careful application of this tool, we discover our sense of what is right  
45 for us, our intuition, and our voice regarding if and when we have sex. Healthy sex is consensual and  
46 considerate of the needs of both partners. We can develop a deeper personal understanding of both  
47 sexual and emotional intimacy.