

Sex addiction is real and treatable, Chabad centre believes

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Frank talk about sexual addiction before a mixed audience might seem unlikely under chassidic auspices, but refraining from judgment is a guiding principle at this centre that offers support to those recovering from various unhealthy compulsions.

Chabad Lifeline, which was founded by the Lubavitch community, offers crisis intervention, counselling, support groups and referral on a non-sectarian basis to people with drug and alcohol problems, as well as addictive behaviours, such as gambling, eating disorders or emotional dependency, and their families.

Increasingly used are services related to sex addiction, led by Jennifer Kotry, a certified sex addiction therapist, possibly the only practising one in Quebec.

Last year, 13 per cent of Lifeline's clients came for sex addiction.

Staff members, including director Rabbi Benyamin Bresinger and his wife, Karen, the clinical director, who has a master's of social work from Rutgers University, are all certified professionals.

Since 2011, Chabad Lifeline has been located in a gracious old house on Côte Ste. Catherine Road, near the Jewish General Hospital (JGH), which owns the property and with which Lifeline closely collaborates, as it also does with McGill University.

The centre is an outgrowth of Project Pride, a modest drug rehabilitation and prevention program started in Montreal by Rabbi Ronnie Fine (Karen Bresinger's brother) in 1989.

The Bresingers recently invited professionals in the health and educational fields, as well as anyone interested, to an open house where they explained how Lifeline has developed and expanded.

Some 2015 statistics were cited to emphasize the impact they believe the centre is having:

- 845 support group sessions and workshops were held;
- 16,150 visits were made to the centre;
- 345 new clients were assisted;
- 210 people are currently in Lifeline's Aftercare Recovery Program;
- 85 families in crisis were supported, and 46 minors were seen in-house.

"Our motto was and still is, 'You never have to be alone again,'" Rabbi Bresinger said.

There's no bureaucratic red tape. "If you come to us in crisis, we will find someone to be with you within a few hours. If treatment is needed, it is arranged within three days. We have no waiting list," he said.

This is all made possible without any government funding. Lifeline relies entirely on private donations to meet its

\$500,000 annual budget. More than half is derived from a raffle.

"No one is turned away. Our intake, counselling and most of our groups are free," Rabbi Bresinger said. "We do have two clinicians [including Kotry] who are fee for service, with a sliding scale offered."

Introduced at the open house were two new team members: Malorie Moore, recent recipient of an MSW from McGill and a certified yoga and mindfulness instructor. She gives courses in these practices twice a week.

Moore believes the mind/body connection they nurture is beneficial in overcoming anxiety associated with addiction.

A Université de Montréal graduate, Jona-

than Sbrollini, is the new youth co-ordinator. Over a couple of years, Lifeline has been expanding services to children and young people up to age 24, especially what Rabbi Bresinger calls "the hidden victims" – those who have addicted parents or siblings. The basement of the centre has been renovated for youth programming.

Sbrollini, who is a rehabilitated former drug and alcohol abuser, emphasizes healthy habits for young people, such as nutrition and exercise.

But it was Kotry's presentation on sex addiction, and its flip side, the relatively newly coined sexual anorexia that caught the listeners' attention.

She acknowledged that it remains controversial whether these are true addictions. They are not listed in the DSM – the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – the standard of the American Psychiatric Association. But the American Society of Addiction Medicine now does recognize them, she said.

An exploding manifestation of sex addiction is Internet pornography viewing, Kotry said. She cited a figure of 68 million porn site searches every day.

She treats men and women (although

not those whose behaviours are criminal). Female sex addicts are under-diagnosed, she believes, because of the shame still attached to women's promiscuity, as well as their tendency to deny they have a problem. One in three adult visitors to porn sites are estimated to be women, she said.

Sexual anorexia refers to an obsessive avoidance of sex, often because the sufferer feels he or she is a "bad or unworthy person."

Both addiction and anorexia are "intimacy disorders," Kotry said, which prevent or sabotage relationships.

In any therapy, she insists that the partner – if there is one – also be involved.

A new support group led by Kotry, meeting every two weeks, is "Love, Romance and Sex Addiction" for women that offers direction in dealing with dependent behaviours.

As for whether, this being a Chabad program, there is a hidden agenda to make Jews more religious, Rabbi Bresinger responds in the negative. "Our goal is only to help everyone be healthier and happier people." ■

For more information, visit www.chabad-lifeline.com.

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Rabbi Benyamin and Karen Bresinger run Chabad Lifeline, a centre for addiction recovery and prevention.