

Podcast #25 -- Why Men like Louis C.K. Like to  
Masturbate in Front of Women

Why do men like Louis C.K. like women to watch them masturbate? There is no question that what seems autoerotic to one party, the man, may very well feel like sexual assault to the other, the woman. And such men have to face the consequences when the woman involved feels abused.

One question that remains, however, is what drives a man to want to act out this scenario? If—and only if—we are interested in the meaning of such behavior to the man, to the culprit, and if we go into such an analysis without in the slightest bit seeming to excuse that behavior, then we might find an interesting psychological dynamic.

As a therapist, I've seen a few men who have this particular fantasy and who have, on occasion, even acted it out, setting up a situation in which they

masturbate and a woman, usually their imagined or real sexual partner, is supposed to sit there and watch.

Here's the bottom line when it comes to the psychological meaning of this behavior. Most of these men, it turns out, are driven by anxiety. The exhibitionistic fantasy originates in the man's need to reassure himself that his penis, his manhood, is ***not*** bad, defective, or insignificant. A key part of the imagined scenario is that the woman is fascinated and excited by the display—and it is this excitement which affirms the man's positive sense of masculinity and momentarily relieves his anxiety. This dynamic is usually unconscious.

Of course, the actual woman recruited to play a role (there was implied and real coercion in the Louis CK examples...the women were not sexual partners) in this fantasy almost invariably feels controlled, degraded, and/or ashamed. That was certainly the experience of the Louis CK's victims. But here's a key point that one has to think about if one wants to have the fullest

understanding of the psychology behind such acting out...it's this; The woman's feelings of humiliation do not necessarily imply that the exhibitionist's main psychological goal is to humiliate her.

Often, the man is up to something else entirely. He needs to set up a situation, over and over, in which he can escape anxiety; he's not primarily out to make women suffer. Still, he uses her as a kind of mirror that, in his mind, reflects back admiration and excitement, not horror. That is the payoff for the perpetrator. The woman, as in Louis CK's example, just feels used.

When a man's anxiety is high enough, the sexual fantasy becomes a compulsion and blots out any genuine empathy he might feel. ***Anxiety and guilt frequently cause people to become completely self-centered, desperate to do anything to get rid of it. The search for some relief from distress can trump empathy.*** In fact, his inability to grasp the effect of his exposure is a good measure of his psychological disturbance.

This internal struggle does not excuse C.K. for abusing his power. But from a psychological point of view, power is a crucial part of the picture only in as much as men like C.K. have the social, economic, and/or professional means to put their fantasies into practice—to coerce their sexual objects to behave in ways that fit their fantasies. For the powerful, their wishes become the world's command.

To understand these men, we need to understand how sexual fantasies function. In addition to being a private daydream, a fantasy is usually embedded somehow in a person's sexual preferences—the particular scenarios, positions, body types, and story lines that turn them on. The job of the fantasy in a person's psychology is to counteract, usually unconsciously, the inhibiting effects of guilt, shame, worry, helplessness, and/or inferiority. When the fantasy *lifts the roadblock* to pleasure, the result is excitement. All fantasies work this way, regardless of how emotionally healthy the person is.

For example, some people especially enjoy being dominated in bed. This fantasy and—if they can get it—the resulting act help such people momentarily transcend their guilt and anxiety about hurting or overwhelming a partner. The sexual scenario of being overpowered “works” because the partner’s apparent strength counteracts the inhibiting effects of worry and guilt.

In a similar way, when a man masturbates in front of a captive audience and can believe she is enjoying the sight, it “works” for him because it offers reassurance that his penis, the symbol of his masculinity, is desirable, not noxious. ***There is nothing inherently pathological about exhibitionistic scenarios if they are part of consensual erotic play.*** It’s always meaningful, but not necessarily abusive or pathological.

With Louis C.K., however—as with other men who are compulsively drawn to this type of situation—the underlying anxiety is likely so intense that their judgment becomes grossly impaired. Swept away are all

other considerations, from the woman's feelings to the possibility of getting caught.

An explanation is not an excuse. Men like Louis C.K. have a responsibility to deal with their neuroses in ways that do not harm other people. That is what therapists are for. But if we want to understand why such a man is aroused by masturbating in front of women, the answer lies not in the power he is exercising but in the anxiety he is attempting to assuage. Such anxiety makes him unable to understand and respect women as people but, instead, drives him to use women as a means to a psychological and erotic end.