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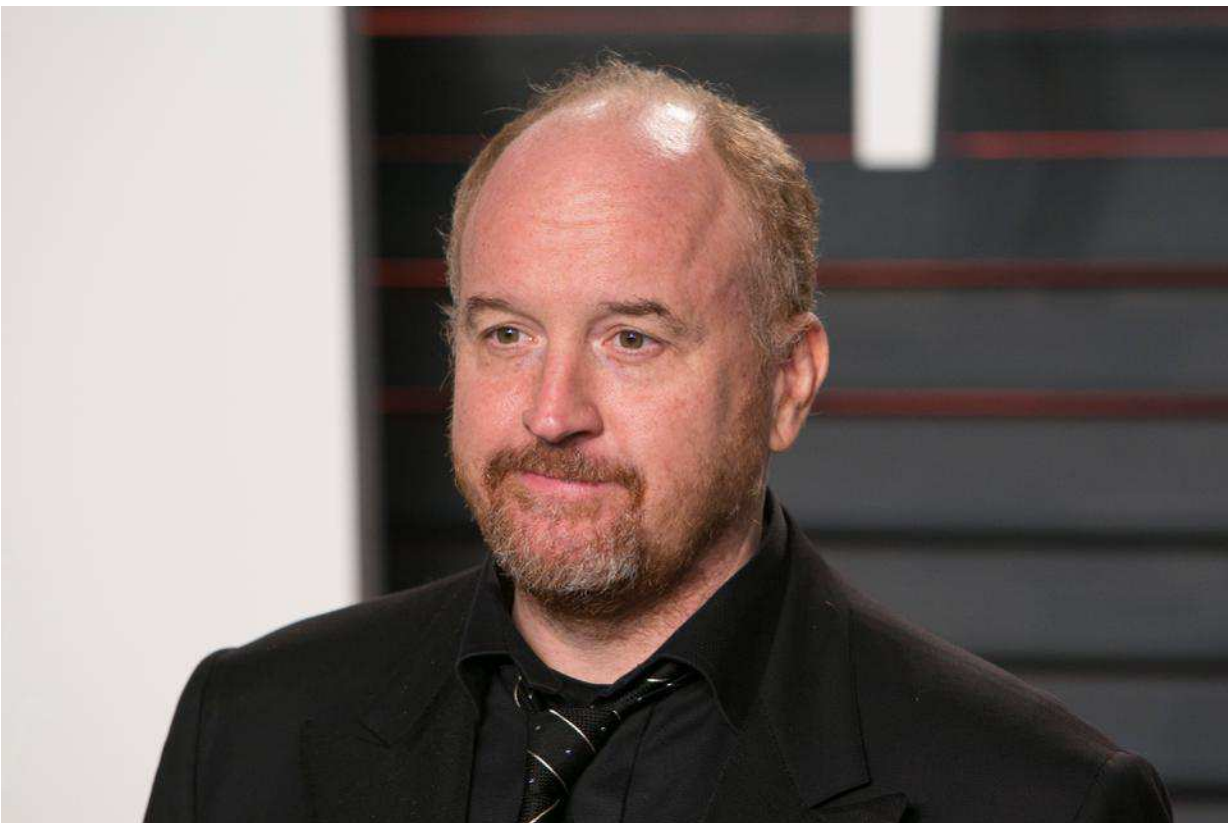


EDITOR'S PICK

Why Would High-Powered Men Masturbate In Front Of Women?

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ADRIAN SANCHEZ-GONZALEZ/AFP/Getty Images

Yesterday, comedian Louis C.K. issued a [statement](#) confirming the accounts of five women in the *New York Times* who accused him of sexual misconduct, including masturbating in front of some of them. Here's an excerpt:

“ These stories are true. At the time, I said to myself that what I did was okay because I never showed a woman my dick without asking first, which is also true. But what I learned later in life, too late, is that when you have power over another person, asking them to look at your dick isn't a question. It's a predicament for them. The power I had over these women is that they admired me. And I wielded that power irresponsibly.”

Louis C.K. is the most recent addition to a growing list of high-powered men to admit to allegations of sexual misconduct. Last month, Harvey Weinstein, another powerful Hollywood creative, went into treatment amid mounting accusations of sexual assault, actions a level beyond what Louis C.K. admitted to. But what these two have in common is allegedly exposing their genitals and masturbating in front of (or on the phone with) their victims. (Director James Toback has been [accused](#) of similar abusive behavior.) It's not the most common form of misconduct—some people may fantasize about doing it, but fewer actually do it. So what makes a person act on this kind of sexual urge?

The behavior falls under [paraphilia](#), a group of quasi-sexual behaviors including voyeurism, exhibitionism and frotteurism (rubbing up against someone, usually in a public space). It can manifest in different ways, from harmless to disordered, when it inflicts mental or physical harm on another person. It likely has to do with one's first sexual thoughts or experiences in childhood, which may develop over time into a paraphilia.

“There's evidence that the way young boys or adolescents develop sexuality -- or paraphilias -- has to do with their first awareness of a sexual experience,” says clinical psychologist [Ben Michaelis](#). “The masturbation thing certainly fits into the classical definition of paraphilia. It's really a type of exhibitionism, and it's almost certainly is traceable to very early events.” He adds that cross-cultural research shows patterns that can vary from country to country, so common paraphilic behaviors in Britain likely differ from those in the U.S., and so on.

But not so many people may act on it in a way that brings the kind of harm that some of the Hollywood stars have. [Constance Scharff](#), an addiction expert, points out that extreme power seems to be a main component—accrue enough of it, and you believe yourself immune to consequences and able to act on your sexual whims, however taboo.

“There are people who are so powerful that they begin to feel that they are above the reach both of the law and of social norms,” she says. “When this idea reaches a pathological state, an individual can begin to feed their predilections without fear of consequence.... This behavior is generally about feeling like you either won't be caught or if you are, there will be no consequences.”

Beyond a heavy dose of power, there's likely a mix of psychological characteristics, including narcissistic traits, reduced empathy, high sexual desire, and a lack of inhibition. “This type of sex offenders have what we call narcissistic traits; usually not a disorder, but strong personality traits, enough to make them believe that they are untouchable,” says [Christian Joyal](#), a neuropsychologist at the University of Quebec who's studied [paraphilia](#). He adds that these individuals may also have reduced concern for other people's plights—or an inability to imagine how the victim might react.

Combine all this with a high sex drive and a lack of physical inhibition, and you get the kind of behaviors Weinstein and Louis C.K. exhibited. “What makes the cases of Weinstein and Louis C.K. special is the fact that they rapidly acted out,” says Joyal, “without the usual wining-and-dining preliminaries, and also without necessarily touching the victims, but with the urge to masturbate in front of (or through the telephone with) the victim. Now, these behaviors, common in the animal kingdom (e.g. monkeys in a zoo), do not usually come to mind for most persons. And even if they do, they are usually cognitively and behaviorally inhibited, due to social norms.”

We’ll never know all the psychological variables that go into these kinds of behaviors—only the men in question and their therapists can really get at that. But the other obvious issue is a larger, social one: why do these behaviors persist for so long, sometimes under wraps for many decades? There may be a financial aspect to it: People who are supremely gifted, creatively or otherwise, possess huge earning power, and a lot of people rely on them for it. So there’s a lot of incentive for them to keep at it—if they’re in treatment or behind bars, they stop making money.

“It is like addiction in this sense,” says Scharff. “We see that the highest earners have the hardest time getting clean. Why? Because they support so many people that the entourage needs them out working, not taking care of themselves in treatment. This situation is similar in that those who are supported by the sexual predator will try to make the consequences go away to keep them out and earning.”

Hollywood elites are obviously not the only ones who perpetrate these kinds of sexual acts—it happens in academia, business, and other fields. Time will tell how the story will continue to unfold, in show business and other arenas, and what the backlash may be.

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