

INTERNET PORNOGRAPHY AND SEXUAL ADDICTION

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THE PLAGUE OF SEXUAL ADDICTION

We are surrounded by sexual stimuli. Magazines, films, television, clothing styles, night club acts and Internet web sites increasingly expose sensual body parts to any willing onlooker. Media often include explicit descriptions of the types of physical acts that until recently were considered to be perverted or shameful. The pornography industry is now estimated to do \$12 billion in business annually. Engulfed by images that trigger excitement at every glance, it is no wonder that the unsuspecting steadily dismantle personal boundaries and at times permit themselves to be enticed into committing the unthinkable.

Of all forms of sexual stimuli Internet pornography is clearly the most popular. This is primarily due to three distinguishing traits. Internet pornography is **available** because it can be easily accessed on almost any lap top or desk top and is frequently even sent to those who have no interest in it, **affordable** because it is commonly downloaded free of charge or purchased for a small fee by means of a credit card, and it is **anonymous**, viewed behind locked doors in the privacy of the home or office.

Many porn site visitors are "recreational users" and not sexually addicted per se. For others, on the other hand, repeated exposure to pornography can result in sexual addiction, defined here as the condition where the procurement, viewing and/or participation in that which sexually stimulates becomes the central organizing principle of life.

Sex addicts are preoccupied with experiencing excitement, repeatedly act out regardless of the costs, fail to learn from experience, and are unable to stop themselves from using despite vigorous attempts to do so. Sex addicts obsess on sexual fantasies as a primary life coping strategy and require ever increasing amounts of sexual stimuli over time in order to maintain excitement. They eventually ignore important social, occupational and recreational ties in order to devote themselves to sexual activity. Finally, they will often lie to conceal their activities. In fact, one of my favorite definitions of an addiction is that it is anything you have to lie about.

Sex addicts act out in many different ways. Besides using pornography, they may frequent strip clubs, exchange sexually explicit talk in chat rooms, hire prostitutes or hire themselves out as such, masturbate compulsively, practice voyeurism, expose themselves to the unsuspecting, or engage in serial affairs, sometimes with people they barely know. Male sex addicts tend to seek visual stimuli while female addicts are more likely to preoccupy themselves with pseudo-relational encounters such as those that are found in Internet chat rooms. Despite their devotion to sexual escapades, sex addicts typically experience sex as neither pleasurable nor intimate.

HOW IS PORNOGRAPHY AFFECTING YOU?

If concern about your use of pornography influenced your decision to read this article, answering the following questions may prove to be helpful.

Do you lie about the amount of time you spend on the Internet or about your usage of pornography or sexually explicit chat rooms?

Do you find yourself spending increasing amounts of time on the Internet?

Are you avoiding social or family relationships or responsibilities in order to spend time on the Internet?

Do you hide your computer practices from family members by, for example, late night usage, secret passwords or by erasure of histories?

Is your Internet usage jeopardizing your employment status?

Are you spending money on sexually explicit Internet activities?

Are you masturbating while online (or having "spontaneous" orgasms?)

Are you ashamed of your Internet activities?

Do you find yourself anticipating your Internet time during the day?

Has your Internet usage led you to take risks with sex or with people you contacted online?

Are you having increasing problems maintaining concentration when not on the Internet?

Does realizing that your Internet activities may eventually be discovered cause you embarrassment or fear?

A "yes" answer to any of these preceding questions indicates that you may have a sexual problem with the Internet. To evaluate your problem more thoroughly, it is recommended that you use any of these free instruments you may access on the web.

1. Cybersexual Addiction Test (www.netaddiction.com/cybersexual%5faddiction.htm)
2. Male Sexual Addiction Screening Test (www.sexhelp.com)
3. Women's Sexual Screening Addiction Test (www.sexhelp.com)
4. Sexual Compulsives Anonymous (www.sca-recovery.org)<http://www.sexaa.org>)

ORIGINS OF SEX ADDICTION

Certain background factors are known to predispose people to developing sexual addictions. Future sex addicts tend to come from families that do not discuss emotions easily and often pressure their members to act or at least pretend to act as though they were perfect. Children growing up in these environments do not experience unconditional love, in fact, they only experience approval and attention when earned by good performance.

A majority of sex addicts were exposed to sex in some form at an early age. Many grew up in homes where pornography was plentiful even though it may have been concealed. A high number were sexually abused as children either through direct physical contact or through premature exposure to sexual images or discussions. As children, they typically were neither invited to ask questions about sex nor to establish personal boundaries through saying "no" to adult demands. Many came from religious homes although they typically experienced family life as characterized by double standards.

The result of such an upbringing produces adults who lack confidence that they can obtain genuine love and acceptance and who see themselves as shameful and defective. Sex may be viewed as the one sure way of obtaining good feelings, even if it is morally condemned and considered to be repulsive. Therefore, sex becomes a necessity for psychological survival although the addict who seeks it always is tremendously conflicted.

Sex addicts also tend to have addictive personalities. In fact, virtually all sex addicts have a second addiction accompanying their problem with sex. In my experience, the most common co-addiction is to work (and the accumulation of money), but alcohol, drugs, gambling, eating disorders and self-mutilation are also included in this list.

FINDING HELP FOR SEX ADDICTION

Anyone who suspects that they might be sexually addicted, especially if they have never obtained help, may be feeling despair to some degree while reading this article. Knowing that their behaviors are out of control but fearing that the consequences will eventually catch up with them, they face ruining their lives and their reputations. At the same time they are terrified at the thought of disclosing their problem to another person and risking the shame of being known as having failed morally.

The first thing a sex addict needs to do is to obtain information that will help him or her understand the problem. Reading this article is a good beginning, but additional help may be obtained through the web sites and books mentioned here. Learning more about sex addiction will not only be useful, but feels relatively safe because it does not require entrusting one's secrets to another person.

Second, the sex addict needs to face the denial that has insulated him or her from recognizing the seriousness of the problem. Sex addicts avoid admitting their actions and their frequency, the seriousness of the consequences, and their failure to exercise self-control. They rationalize their behavior as normal ("everybody needs a little sex"), as controllable ("I can stop anytime I want to"), will blame others, especially spouses, for causing them to act out.

Third, a bold commitment to truthfulness is absolutely necessary to overcome sexual addiction. Sex addicts are among the most brazen liars and deceivers of all clients I have ever worked with. Even after their activities have been exposed and they have begun receiving help, sex addicts will often continue lying to the very people from whom they have requested help.

Deception may take many forms: outright lying, speaking half truths, giving information that is technically accurate but designed to mislead, and by concealing facts that would put the sex addict in an unfavorable light. Recovery requires no limitations on truthfulness with the sex addict's family, his/her recovery groups and his/her counselors.

Fourth, because no sex addict will overcome the problem alone, the person in recovery must develop partnerships with those who can help. Other sex addicts who are also recovering are among the most promising people to fill these roles. Fellowships such as Sexaholics Anonymous, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous and Celebrate Recovery offer people opportunities to share openly, learn from others and build caring relationships in an atmosphere free of shame and stigma. Pastors, professional counselors and psychologists often provide important and specialized assistance as well.

Note that one group that is not included on this list is spouses. Although many wives (and sometimes husbands) of sex addicts frequently crave the opportunity to be their partner's most important helper, there is no one in a worse position to help. This is because the addict in recovery must reveal facts that are deeply embarrassing and face some serious defects of character in an atmosphere free of fear and self-consciousness. Nothing will shut down such a spirit of openness more quickly than the presence of a spouse, typically because the very things the addict most needs to discuss are a major source of hurt and pain in the spouse's life.

Fifth, it is usually necessary for the addict in recovery to limit or eliminate access to the Internet, at least temporarily, and/or to develop accountability for online activities. In some cases removal of the computer from the home or office is advised. Strategic usage of passwords and filters, enlisting partners in accountability agreements such as Covenant Eyes, and positioning computer monitors to guarantee viewing by office mates or family members are also effective means of reducing pornography's enticement.

Sixth, those in recovery need to receive help for secondary addictions and to and obtain counseling for the underlying issues that drive the addictions. While halting online sexual behavior is an important focus for personal change, only by addressing psychological wounds, resentments, and distortions of thinking and belief can the man or woman in recovery have a fair chance to practice long term abstinence successfully.

Seventh, and finally, the family members of the addict, especially the spouse, must also obtain help. This idea may strike some as unfair or at least counterintuitive since, after all, it is the addict who has the problem, right? Spouses need to understand, however, that because of the extreme stress of living with an addict, their perspectives about what constitutes healthy and unhealthy relationships become altered. Typically, they also develop habits of coping that are at times unproductive and which may even create new problems. Fellowships such as S-Anon can help family members develop tools to maintain balanced lives. Professional services such as individual and marital counseling will also prove to be valuable.

If any who read this article conclude that their pornography practices are at this time "recreational", it is hoped that the information provided will serve as a warning of the dangers that may come with habitual use. Tackling any addiction is a daunting challenge, but pornography's pervasiveness and the shame that accompanies sexual problems makes facing sexual addiction particularly demanding. Therefore, those who are struggling with sexual addiction are encouraged to act immediately to counter the damage and to regain the dignity and self respect that is only possible once pornography no longer exerts master control over one's life.

Suggested Readings

1. Arterburn, Stephen & Kroeker, Fred (2000.) Every Man's Battle. Water Brook.

A practical guide with a Christian emphasis for men seeking more self-control for their sexual drives.

2. Carnes, Patrick (1983). Out of the Shadows. Comp Press.

The original work that described sexual addiction in a manner that the general public could easily understand.

3. Laaser. Mark (2004). Healing the Wounds of Sexual Addiction. Zondervan.

The essential guide for the Christian man or woman addressing or learning about sexual addiction.

4. Schaumburg, Harry (1992). False Intimacy: Understanding the Struggle of Sexual Addiction. Navpress..

A seminal work that exposes sexual addiction as a problem with spiritual roots for which there are biblical solutions.

Here are several online instruments, available free of charge, that can help you understand whether your problem classifies as a sexual addiction.

Heterosexual Male Sexual Addiction Screening Test (www.sexhelp.com)

Women's Sexual Addiction Screening Test (www.sexhelp.com)

Sexaholics Anonymous Test (www.sa.org)

Sexual Compulsives Anonymous (www.sca-recovery.org)

Sex Addicts Anonymous (www.sexaa.org)

Cybersexual Addiction Test (www.netaddiction.com)