



Dealing with Your Spouse's Pornography Use and Sexual Addiction

Pornography use isn't a new phenomenon, but it is growing in incidence due to the internet. It is even rampant in the clergy: 51% of pastors say cyber-porn is a temptation that they could give in to, and 37% say it is currently a problem for them (Christianity Today, Leadership Survey, 12/2001). Another study from Christianity Today (2000) found that 18% of clergy admitted to visiting a sexually explicit site at least a couple of times per month. If it is that bad in the clergy, it is most likely worse in the general population. A Focus on the Family poll (October 1, 2003) found that 47% of the families they surveyed said that pornography is a problem in their homes. And pornography use isn't limited to men. Thirty-four percent of female readers of Today's Christian Woman's online newsletter (Fall, 2003) admitted to looking at pornography.

Jesus said "that anyone who looks at a woman [or man] lustfully has already committed adultery with her [or him] in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). He goes on to say that you should do everything you can to avoid this temptation. Regardless of the rampant use of pornography, it isn't a good thing, and it isn't what God had in mind for a marriage. Listen to the wisdom of Solomon in Proverbs 5:

My son, pay attention to my wisdom, listen well to my words of insight, that you may maintain discretion and your lips may preserve knowledge. For the lips of an adulteress drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave. She gives no thought to the way of life; her paths are crooked, but she knows it not. Now then, my sons, listen to me; do not turn aside from what I say. Keep to a path far from her, do not go near the door of her house, lest you give your best strength to others and your years to one who is cruel, lest strangers feast on your wealth and your toil enrich another man's house. At the end of your life you will groan, when your flesh and body are spent. You will say, "How I hated discipline! How my heart spurned correction! I would not obey my teachers or listen to my instructors. I have come to the brink of utter ruin in the midst of the whole assembly." Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers. May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer-- may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love. Why be captivated, my son, by an adulteress? Why embrace the bosom of another man's wife? For a man's ways are in full view of the LORD, and he examines all his paths. The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him; the cords of his sin hold him fast. He will die for lack of discipline, led astray by his own great folly. (NIV)

Use, Abuse, and Addiction Defined

There are differences between the use and abuse of pornography and addiction to pornography.

- ❖ *Use* is when someone engages in an activity that can be stopped at will.
- ❖ *Abuse* is when someone engages in an activity and it affects them negatively to a degree.
- ❖ *Addiction* is when someone engages in an activity repetitively often to avoid painful feelings and continues that behavior even when it isn't wanted. The intensity and frequency of the behavior also typically increases. The addictive cycle is self-perpetuating in that the addict feels guilt and shame about acting out and then, because the guilt and shame is painful, acts out again. Sexual addiction produces a high, just like drugs and alcohol, by stimulating the pleasure center of the brain. The consequences can include marital disharmony, divorce, lost jobs, public humiliation, financial loss, affairs, and legal problems. Some addicts have held a secret life for many years. Most addicts lie to cover up their addiction. The lying is often as destructive as the acting out because it ruins trust and compounds the betrayal. Both men and women struggle with sexual addiction, with estimates that up to 28% of addicts are women.

Sexual acting out can include a number of activities

- ❖ Pornography, online or printed. It can be masochistic, sadistic, bisexual, heterosexual, homosexual, or child porn.
- ❖ Chat rooms can be just chatting or include sending pictures with provocative sexual conversations, with or without actual performance of sexual acts such as masturbation.
- ❖ Phone sex.
- ❖ Frequent masturbation, often while viewing pornography or chatting online.
- ❖ Massage parlors that offer sexual acts.
- ❖ Prostitutes and one-night stands.
- ❖ Affairs.
- ❖ Voyeurism and exhibitionism.

The Spouse's Feelings

The spouse's reactions include the following:

1. **Dislike.** Just having their husbands look at porn makes most women uncomfortable. It feels like a betrayal to have their husbands lusting after other women. Women feel significantly more insecurity about their own bodies and sexual performance knowing their husbands are looking at “perfect” women. Men justify their behavior by saying, “All men do it. It isn’t a big deal.” Men have a different reaction when their wives look at porn: Some find it sexually exciting, and others don’t like it, especially if the sexual relationship in the marriage is absent.
2. **Pressure.** Both men and women feel pressure regarding their sexual performance when they know their spouses are looking at porn. It is not uncommon for a husband to ask his wife to do things during their lovemaking that he has seen in porn and push her to be sexier or more aggressive, passive, or provocative. If this is a change in their lovemaking, this feels uncomfortable and creates a dilemma. Addicted spouses may want sex several times a day and will pressure their spouses to be available to them for sex anytime. The other spouses may give in to things that are uncomfortable in order to feel connected and desirable, to keep the peace, to keep the addicted spouses from being tempted to act out, and to avoid anger and reprisal.
3. **Emotional Pain.** If the acting out is frequent, regular, or recently discovered, the spouse will experience lots of painful feelings, especially if the acting out includes personal contact with a real person. Here are some of the feelings: betrayal, rejection, disgust, fear, anger, hurt, jealousy, confusion, panic, sadness, shock, denial, and self-doubt.
4. **Shame.** It feels shameful to admit this problem to other people. It feels like a personal failure to admit your spouse is seeking sexual satisfaction in ways other than through marital intimacy. Spouses also worry about the ramifications of exposing their partners to other people, especially if it will cost a job. Spouses also feel responsible for their spouses acting out because they believe they should have been better partners to prevent it.
5. **Rejection.** Some spouses withdraw emotionally and physically from the relationship when they are engaging in their addiction. Spouses feel more rejection when there is another real person involved in any way and when marital and emotional intimacy is absent.
6. **Obsession:** Once spouses find out that their partners are engaging in sexual addiction, there is a compulsion to check up on the spouses to make sure it isn’t happening again. People are usually obsessed with finding out the whole truth when they initially discover their spouses’ sexual acting out.

The Spouse's Boundary Choices

Spouses deal with pornography and sexual acting out a number of ways. It depends on the health of the marriage, the addicted partner's ability to change and willingness to get help, the non-addicted spouse's ability to forgive, the severity and length of the addiction, and the non-addicted spouse's feelings about divorce. The non-addicted spouse's options for boundaries include the following things:

- ❖ Ignore or deny it.
- ❖ Tell the spouse it isn't okay and why. Ask that he/she not do it again.
- ❖ Set boundaries on what you will and won't do in the bedroom.
- ❖ Set a zero tolerance boundary (no porn, no sex with others, ending of an affair, and/or no sexual chatting, etc.)
- ❖ Ask for controls on the computer or remove the computer from the home.
- ❖ Ask your spouse to get help if it is a continuing and serious problem. This would include counseling, 12 Step groups, an accountability partner, and/or treatment programs.
- ❖ Get support for yourself. Tell someone close to you, read books, attend 12 Step groups, or attend individual or couple counseling.
- ❖ Work through the problem together in a healthy way with both partners getting help through support groups and therapy.
- ❖ Live together separately. Abstain from sex in the marriage, sleep in separate bedrooms, and have emotional distance without someone moving out of the house. This is done during very painful times such as when the acting out is first revealed, when spouses need to protect themselves from contracting their partners' sexual diseases, or when spouses are unsure if their partners are faithful.
- ❖ Separate or divorce.

The Spouse's Dilemma

Sexual addiction isn't an easy thing for a spouse to deal with. There are a number of things that will help you come to terms with the problem.

Powerlessness You can't make your spouse care about your feelings, get help, or want to stop. You can't make a spouse admit that what he/she is doing is wrong. And, you can't make him/her

stop—especially if it is an addiction. When you admit your powerlessness, it keeps you from trying to force change and allows you to make decisions that take care of yourself.

Boundaries You can set boundaries that put limits on what is acceptable and unacceptable to you and what you will and won't do in response to your spouse respecting your limits. If your spouse doesn't respect them, the ultimate threat is to divorce, but you don't want to use this threat lightly, quickly, or for problems that aren't really serious. Boundaries include the use of the computer, whether you put a filter on it that prevents adult content, and the sharing of all passwords.

Policing: Most people want to know if their spouses do "it" again. The need to know is strong because the shock of finding out what was going on behind your back is real, and you don't want to experience it again. You do need to find out the truth initially, so you will know what you are dealing with and make decisions that protect yourself physically, financially, and emotionally. You will have to decide if you want to know everything in detail or in general. Most people want to know everything, and if the spouse doesn't tell, it is difficult to re-establish trust. But if you decide to stay, at some point you need to be able to let go and let your spouse take care of his/her own recovery and sobriety. You will need to trust that God will let you know the truth when you need to know it. It is stressful for you and destructive to your marriage for you to have to act as an untrusting detective continually.

Forgiveness: You can't forgive until you know what you are forgiving and have worked through the process. Forgiveness doesn't mean you have to trust or reconcile. Trust has to be rebuilt slowly by your spouse being trustworthy. This will take time, and your spouse will have to work through this with you. You will have to forgive even if your marriage ends, but most importantly, understand that forgiveness takes time, and give yourself time to work through the grief stages of shock/denial, anger, bargaining, sadness, and acceptance. Don't be hard on yourself during this process.

The Best Approach

The best approach includes the following things:

1. **Honesty.** Be honest about how you are feeling about the sexual acting out and how it is affecting your relationship. Be honest about what you need. Be honest about the grieving process that you need to go through. Be honest about the struggles you are having.
2. **Boundaries.** When you are ready, state your boundaries. State them with consequences for violating them when you are ready to enforce them. Don't do anything that is uncomfortable for you. Until you are ready to follow through, just state what your needs and feelings are. You can also say things like, "I am not sure what I will do if this continues." "I don't agree that looking at pornography is okay." "I won't tolerate you having sex with anyone else." "I won't accept you going into chat rooms." "I won't have sex every time you demand it." "I won't do things sexually that are uncomfortable for me." You also need boundaries to protect you from financial loss and sexual diseases.

3. **Detachment.** When you detach, you live your own life and take care of your own needs, recognizing that your spouse is separate from you and needs to manage his/her own life. You allow your spouse to be responsible for the problem, and you recognize you are responsible for your own reaction to it. Without detachment, spouses get too enmeshed in the problem and lose themselves in the process. As much as possible, try to maintain your life and not let it be all about your spouse's problems.
4. **Support.** You need to get support for yourself so you can get stronger and clearer on the problem and how to respond to it. You need to do this whether or not your spouse gets help. Sexual addiction is a difficult thing to deal with, and you shouldn't walk through it alone. When you meet with other people who are going through similar things, it gives you hope and validation. This can include 12 Step groups, counseling, books, or a mentor.
5. **Prayer.** Continue to pray for your spouse, yourself, and your marriage. Pray that the Holy Spirit convicts him/her if there is still denial about the problem being an addiction. The Holy Spirit can use your honesty, boundaries, and actions to convict your spouse. Pray for wisdom with timing and grace, especially if your spouse is trying to stop and is getting help for the problem. Trust God with the outcome.
6. **Triggers.** Remember, you have triggers too. You will react to anything that reminds you of the sexual addiction. It could be a look, a phone call, being on the computer, not answering a cell phone, a touch, a movie, or anything else that reminds you of the acting out. You need to deal with your triggers so you can handle them in a way that doesn't make you react in ways that are destructive and out of control. The healthiest situation is to be able to share them with your spouse and have your spouse care about your struggle, but to remember it is up to you ultimately to deal with your own problems in a way that heals the relationship, if that is your goal.

Therapy for Sexual Addicts

Therapy is a lengthy process for sexual addicts. Effective therapy needs to go deep to identify and heal the wounds and to teach the addict to deal with pain and stress in a different way. It also needs to deal with the triggers and to change the acting out behavior. It needs to teach the addict to deal with the fantasies, triggers, thoughts, and urges. Women often find that their sexual addiction is rooted in a need to be loved (love hunger) less than the need for sex. Marriage therapy needs to identify the problems in the marriage that resulted from the addiction and the patterns that are destructive to healing the marriage.

The Healing

It takes time to process what has happened and to rebuild the relationship through honesty, grieving the losses, and accountability. The question is how much to tell. The addict is afraid to tell it all for fear that the spouse will leave. The spouse usually wants to know everything. The addicted spouse needs to tell what the non-addicted spouse wants to know. If he/she doesn't, the spouse will continue to expend energy toward figuring it out, and trust won't be rebuilt. The non-addicted spouse needs to decide how much he/she wants to know about the addicted spouse's temptations and slips. The benefit of knowing is that there is honesty in the relationship rather than secrecy, but it also causes the spouse to be more focused on the addict's recovery and can cause emotional distress. Healing will include rocky times in the relationship on both sides. It may also include slips. Addictions are strongholds, and they aren't torn down easily. A commitment to the marriage by both partners can allow trust, fidelity, and love to return.

You will know your spouse is sincere about getting help if:

1. Your spouse is being honest about the addiction and what has happened.
2. Your spouse wants to get to the root of the addiction and is willing to get whatever help is needed to do so.
3. Your spouse is broken emotionally and spiritually.
4. Your spouse is able to accept your feelings and boundaries and give you space to heal.
5. Your spouse is willing to make whatever changes you need, with a good attitude and to re-establish trust.
6. Your spouse is willing to get help and be accountable.