

Facing Up to Pornography and Sexual Addictions

“How could this have happened?” agonized a retired pastor and his wife, devastated by their adult son’s confession that he had become addicted to pornography. Growing up in a Christian home does not guarantee immunity to the sexual poison permeating our society. Pornography generates billions of dollars worldwide in revenues from magazines, videos, strip clubs, escort services, telephone sex, pay-per-view cable channels, and websites.¹ Pornography accounts for 12% of websites, 25% of search engine requests, and 72 million visitors a month worldwide. Some of these visitors, quickly bored or repulsed by what they see, move on. At least 5% of these visitors, however, are already addicted, and another 10% will likely become addicted to the instant and anonymous gratification of online chatrooms and videos.² These facts challenge us to address a problem that undoubtedly affects persons in our churches and in our communities. First, however, we need to understand how pornography can ensnare and corrupt.

The United Methodist Book of Resolutions, 2004, defines pornography as “sexually explicit material that portrays violence, abuse, coercion, domination, humiliation, or degradation for the purpose of arousal” and also labels as pornographic any sexually explicit material depicting children.³ Unlike art that elicits awe and respect by celebrating the beauty of human bodies and erotic love, pornography portrays men and women as sex objects, titillates, creates unrealistic expectations, deadens the ability to experience real intimacy, and may encourage potentially dangerous attitudes and behaviors.⁴

Research shows that viewing pornography can cause physiological changes in the brain that may influence behavior and relationships. Pornography, especially when viewed in a high state of arousal, creates an imprint of the experience that impels the viewer to come back for more of the stimulant effect. Over time, persons viewing pornography may become desensitized, requiring more explicit and more deviant materials to get the same effect. Research documents a high correlation between frequent use of pornography and sexual abuse and violence. Children and youth have confessed to acting out what they have seen, and sexual offenders often report a history of viewing pornography⁵. In *Out of the Shadows: Understanding Sexual Addiction*, Patrick Carnes notes that persons who become addicted to pornography may easily escalate to voyeurism, self-exposure, adultery, prostitution, sexual harassment, and assault.⁶ Carnes describes an “Addiction Cycle” that begins with obsessive thinking about sex, followed by unique rituals or routines leading up to and enhancing the excitement of compulsive sexual activity. Once in this cycle, addicts cannot control or stop themselves; afterward they may seek release from their shame and guilt by obsessive sexual thinking, starting the cycle all over again.⁷

Addicts may rationalize that their compulsions have no adverse effect on their marriages, families, or work. Their secret lives, however, often cause them to withdraw, neglecting their families, work, and other responsibilities. Feeling unworthy of genuine love, they may turn to illicit sex more frequently to ease their increasing isolation. Once addicts realize that their lives are out of control, skilled therapists and caring communities – Twelve Steps programs in particular – can help them examine their behavior, break out of their isolation, and reclaim a sense of personal worth. Because secrecy deepens the bond of any addiction, talking about it with trusted advisors is often the first step toward healing.⁸

What can the church do?

- Affirm sexuality as a God-given gift that can enrich our lives and relationships.
- Teach reverence for the human body and respect for the feelings and needs of others.
- Make clear that anyone may be vulnerable to pornography's addictive lure.
- Note that Jesus' warning about committing adultery in our hearts (Matthew 5:28) addresses the deliberate choice to welcome and entertain tempting thoughts and fantasies, which may occasionally present themselves to anyone.
- Equip parents and teachers to help children process their likely exposure to pornography, whether accidental or deliberate.
- Provide information through teaching, programs, and print material to help people understand and face up to this problem.
- Research locally available trained counselors and groups for referral of addicts and families seeking assistance.
- Speak out against public displays of pornography and against media that qualifies as "soft porn" and glorifies risky behavior.
- Express concern for the actors and models exploited in pornographic videos and materials, recognizing that some of them may be victims of sexual trafficking.
- Encourage parents to monitor their children's internet and cell phone use, noting the dangers of visiting chatrooms, sexting, responding to strangers on line, and posting personal information.
- Counsel parents and other adults to view media programming with children and youth, calmly discussing the underlying messages to which they are exposed by asking reflective questions. ("What would you do in that situation?" "What might happen next?")
- Welcome and include recovering addicts, holding them accountable to their healing programs and establishing behavioral covenants to protect others, especially children and youth.

We cannot afford to ignore the devastating consequences of pornography and sexual addictions, nor can we safely assume that members of our congregations or of our families are not – or will not – be affected. Sound education, prevention, and recovery support ministries can help keep individuals, families, and communities healthy and safe.

Sources:

¹ William M. Struthers, *Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009), p. 20

² Michael Castleman, "6 Ways Porn Can Hurt Your Sex Life," www.aarp.org

³ *The United Methodist Book of Resolutions*, "Pornography and Sexual Violence," p. 166

⁴ Rev. Cynthia Abrams, "Sex and the Church: Pornography and Sexual Addiction," www.gbcs.org

⁵ GCSRW, "Prevention of the Use of Pornography in the Church," www.gcsr.org

⁶ Patrick Carnes, *Out of the Shadows: Understanding Sexual Addiction* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2001), p. 37-38

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19-23

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4-7

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Resources for Facing Up to Pornography and Sexual Addictions
Reading List
Organizations and Websites

Reading List

Cybersex Exposed: Simple Fantasy or Obsession?, by Jennifer Schneider, M.D., Ph.D. and Robert Weiss, LCSW, CSAT (Hazelden Information Education, 2001). The authors explore pornography use and other sexual behaviors on the internet, using case studies to illustrate how such practices may become addictive and how to seek healing from sexual compulsions.

Every Heart Restored: A Wife's Guide to Healing in the Wake of a Husband's Sexual Sin, by Fred and Brenda Stoeker, with Mike Yorkey (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2010). This book offers guidance for wives whose husbands are addicted to pornography and sex and who are struggling for sexual purity.

Lonely All the Time: Recognizing, Understanding and Overcoming Sex Addiction, for Addicts and Codependents, by Ralph Earle, Ph.D., Gregory Crow, and Kevin Osborn (NY, NY: Pocket Books, 1998). This easy-to-read book explores sex addiction and co-addiction in family systems, describing causes, symptoms, and a comprehensive approach to recovery.

Many Roads, One Journey: Moving Beyond the Twelve Steps, by Charlotte Davis Kasl, Ph.D. (Harper Perennial, 1992). The author explores the wisdom inherent in Twelve Step and other models of recovery, suggesting ways to adapt them to a variety of experiences and beliefs. She also explores societal roots of addiction and dependency and ways to address them.

Out of the Shadows: Understanding Sexual Addiction, by Patrick Carnes, Ph.D. (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2001). The author describes sexual addiction as a “pathological relationship” that becomes more important than anything else. As tolerance increases, sex addicts, like alcoholics, need the “mood-altering experience” just to feel normal; then they may quickly escalate from pornography addiction to more dangerous behaviors, often with devastating consequences. Dr. Carnes offers hope and advice for recovery, recommending Twelve Step groups and similar strategies in particular.

Treating Pornography Addiction: The Essential Tools for Recovery, by Kevin B. Skinner, Ph.D. (Provo, Utah: Growthclimate Inc., 2005). The author explains how pornography affects the mind of the user and becomes addictive. He outlines steps for rewiring the mind and breaking free.

Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain, by William M. Struthers (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009). The author, a Christian neuroscientist and researcher, explores various aspects of pornography's effects on sexual behavior and intimacy. He describes the healing process as sanctification, making daily decisions to see the image of God in each person, appreciate women without “consuming” them, and move “beyond objectification to real relationship, presence and intimacy” (p. 189). He lists helpful books and websites at the back of the book.

Women, Sex, and Addiction: A Search for Love and Power, by Charlotte Davis Kasl, Ph.D. (NY, NY: Ticknor & Fields, 1989). The author explores the cultural conditioning that tells us “sex is love, sex is power, and sex makes us important” (p. 10) and its impact on women in particular. She discusses the link between spirituality and sexuality, providing guidance for healing from addictions to sex and romance, as well as sexual codependency.

Your Sexually Addicted Spouse: How Partners Can Cope and Heal, by Barbara Steffens and Marsha Means (Far Hills, NJ: New Horizon Press, 2009). The authors share research, personal experiences, and case studies that portray partners of sex addicts as post-traumatic stress victims,

rather than co-dependents. This book offers practical wisdom for such partners and for those who want to help them heal.

Untangling the Web: Sex, Porn and Fantasy Obsession in the Internet Age, by Robert Weiss, LCSW, CSAT (NY, NY: Alyson Publications, 2006). The authors discuss how to identify and address pornography addiction. They also offer helpful suggestions to parents concerned about their children's exposure to pornography and sexual content on the internet.

Organizations and Websites

Cornerstone Intimacy and Healthy Sexuality: Creating Hope and Healing for Families Dealing with Sexual Integrity Issues (Atlanta, GA), www.cornerstoneprofessional.net. Visit this website to learn about therapy (intensives and ongoing support), training, and conferences; sign up for an e-newsletter; and read reviews of recommended books. For more information, call 770-457-3028.

Internet Behavior Consulting Company (IBC), www.internetbehavior.com. Visit this website for research reports, training events, an e-newsletter, and an Internet Sex Screening Test.

Parents Television Council, 707 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 2075, Los Angeles, CA, 90017, www.parentstv.org. This nonprofit research and education organization lobbies for enforcement of broadcast decency standards and publishes a newsletter to inform parents of negative and harmful media messages, as well as family-friendly programming.

Porn Harms, a project of Morality in Media, 1100 G Street NW #1030, Washington, DC 20005, 202-393-7245, www.pornharms.com. The website offers expert commentary on the negative effects of pornography, including a blog, webinars, and a Facebook link.

Setting Captives Free, www.settingcaptivesfree.com, offers an online free, anonymous 60-day Bible-based program titled "Way of Purity," as well as resources for recovery from other addictions.

Sexaholics Anonymous, www.sa.org describes its Thirteen Step program and White Book, provides links for locating meetings and therapists throughout the nation and the world, announces upcoming events, and offers brochures for download and purchase.

Society for the Advancement of Sexual Health (SASH), www.sash.net. This website provides a Sexual Addiction Screening Test, an e-newsletter, conference announcements, and other resources.

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