

Caught in the Porn Trap - For Clergy & Lay Leaders Advising Victims & Their Loved Ones

Sex is not a topic most churches find easy to discuss, whether during weekly services or behind closed doors in a pastor's office.

However, it is also clear that in our culture, our faith communities and their members are not immune from the problems of sexual sin, immorality and use of pornography. In a recent study of 600 men who identify themselves as being religious and having high moral standards, 15.5 percent of the married men and 6.8 percent of the clergy stated that they continue masturbate to pornography while married (Hart, 1994). Another researcher estimates that 10% of Christian men are sexually addicted or are sexually compulsive, and these behaviors usually include the use of pornography (Laaser, 1992). Focus on the Family's Pastors Helpline finds that 35% of their contacts from pastors surround the issues of sexual compulsions or addiction, including pornography use (McCaffrey, 1999).

This document is a response to clergy, who often communicate ill-preparedness for dealing with issues of pornography use, sexual addiction and betrayal of trust in relationships among their churchgoers.

The following pages hold valuable information on the issue of pornography, the reality of sexual compulsions and addictions, and some helpful tools with which clergy and other faith leaders can use as they seek to minister to the broken and hurting who come for help.

How Pornography Hurts

Pornography can be addictive

A person is hooked on pornography when they keep coming back for more, unable to turn down just one more glance. Just like drugs, alcohol or other addictive substances, pornography, through sexual release, brings about significant mood alteration and gives an intensely pleasurable high from one's own brain chemicals (Carnes, 30). Four factors characterize the condition of pornography addiction (Cline, 1996):

- **Addiction:** Porn provides a powerful sexual stimulant or aphrodisiac effect, followed by sexual release, most often through masturbation.
- **Escalation:** Over time, addicts require more explicit and deviant material to get "high."
- **Desensitization:** Books, magazines or films/videos, first perceived as shocking, illegal, repulsive or immoral are still sexually and seen as acceptable.
- **Acting Out Sexually:** There is an increasing tendency to act out behaviors viewed in pornography.

What about soft-core porn?

Though less graphic than most pornography, magazines like Playboy still carry the risk of harm. Soft-core pornography is often the entree to more violent, hard-core material that can lead to the latter stages of sex and pornography addiction.

Pornography hurts relationships

Whether a recreational user or an addict, porn affects relationships with spouses, family members, work associates and even strangers. It is often viewed in secret and this clandestine use of pornography creates deception within a relationship. The signs and symptoms of a chronic porn user are not unlike those of an unfaithful lover. Regarding relationships, pornography also (NCPCF, 1998):

- Portrays women as sex objects and reflects even in the day to day poor treatment of the female counterpart.
- Introduces a third (or fourth or fifth...) partner into the relationship, weakening commitment.
- Promotes the allure of forbidden relationships, namely adultery and prostitution.
- Leads to unreal expectations of sexual fulfillment.
- Promotes fantasization, distracting the user from real life and relationships.
- Stimulates interest in the deviant, such as group sex and torture. Encourages violence. One study said men who use pornography are more likely to rape if they knew they would not be found out (Hall, 1996).

Pornography hurts kids

Studies show boys ages 12-17 are among the primary consumers of pornography--a major source of their sex education. Teaching that sexual experimentation with anyone, anywhere is a major theme considered "fun" in pornography. Pornography teaches that women enjoy being stripped, forcibly abused and raped. Other messages in pornography--drug addiction, prostitution, exhibitionism and voyeurism--are branded in the minds of children as normal behavior. These messages found to hurt adults have an even greater impact on kids. Children are often first exposed to pornography in their own home. Pornography is used by pedophiles to record their sex abuse of children, to lure children into sex abuse and blackmail children into secrecy.

How to help when someone discloses pornography use

Listen. First, hear the person out to get an idea of how he/she views his/her porn usage. While listening, it is important to respond without displaying shock. Maintain an attitude consistent with the seriousness of the situation. Listen for how the person views the situation and what they are experiencing. Does he/she see it as not being a problem? Are their relationships troubled by their porn use? Do they lack control over their porn use, finding it increasing in frequency and severity of content? Why is he/she telling you, and why now?

Assess. Here are a few questions you might ask to help listen and understand better. (Note: This is only intended for initial contact and to get an idea of what has been happening. This is NOT a diagnostic interview.)

- How long have you been viewing pornography?
- At what age did you start?
- How do you obtain your pornographic material (bookstores, videos, cable TV, internet, etc.)?

- Do others know of your use?
- If so, what are they saying about it?
- If they don't know, why not?
- What do you think would happen if others found out, such as your spouse and other family members? (Most men greatly fear revelation, of ending the secret, and fear rejection.)
- Are there other behaviors you are involved in of a sexual nature (such as phone sex lines, voyeurism, compulsive masturbation, visiting sex clubs or prostitutes, child pornography, or sexual assault)?

If the user's involvement is progressive--gets more involved over a period of time, more frequent, or involving different behaviors--the person's behaviors may be sexually compulsive or may indicate sex addiction. This requires outside help--participation in a 12-step recovery group, outpatient counseling or even inpatient care depending upon the severity. If the content or focus of use involves children, specialized treatment is required. If the person has had contact with children for sexual purposes, you must report this activity to local law enforcement and the local children's protective services office.

Confront in love. You have a responsibility to confront the pornography user, and to do so in truth and in love. Pornography use is sexual sin. It can also be a sign of other issues or problems that need immediate attention. Because you have taken time to listen and to seek to understand the person's situation, heart, concerns, and fears, your confrontation will communicate both truth and grace. A confrontation should communicate the following:

"I care about you as a person. I believe that what you are doing is very dangerous for you, impacting your relationships, your emotional health, and your relationship with God. This is a behavior that has to stop. I will help support you and seek to guide you in directions to receive additional support and counseling. I will work with you as to how you will confess this behavior to significant people in your life (such as your spouse). I will pray with you and for you. I will, with your permission, seek to hold you accountable to decisions you make regarding these behaviors and accountable to God."

Define consequences & boundaries. Detail to the person what you will and will not do. For example:

"I will not enable you to continue this behavior. If you do not agree to the help we discussed, it may result in church disciplinary process."

-or- "I will be available to meet with you ___ times per month, but expect you to be seeing your counselor regularly. I'd like permission to discuss your progress with your counselor."

-or- "Because you are struggling right now, I will ask that you step aside from your church leadership activities until such a time as we both agree you can resume your responsibilities."

Refer. Give the person names and phone numbers where he can call for assistance, support, and counseling. Check back with the person to see if the contact has been made. Be aware of community resources, such as 12-step recovery groups and mental health services that can help with compulsive sexual behaviors.

Assisting the pornography user's loved one

Pornography use often severely impacts the user's family, especially the spouse or partner. This "victim" often discovers their partner's use by accidentally finding pornographic material. Or, partners have confronted pornography users about behaviors - like sexual withdrawal - that lead to the user's disclosure. At the critical moment of discovery/disclosure, the spouse or partner may seek help from their church or pastor. This victim (often a wife) will usually come to you with intense and varied feelings of devastation. How can the church community meet his/her immediate needs and assist him/her throughout the healing process?

Listen. A spouse or partner who contacts the church for help regarding pornography will usually do so after discovering the partner's use. She needs the freedom and time to explain what has happened and to express her reactions. Depending upon how the disclosure occurred, she will most likely have any or all of the following responses:

- shame and embarrassment
- shock and disbelief
- betrayed and deceived: trust has been broken and it is very difficult to rebuild.
- anger: "How could he/she? The person I love the most has hurt me the worst!"
- responsibility: for the user's actions or being judged by the spouse/partner as being "not woman (or man) enough."
- fear: "What will happen to our relationship?" "What else might he/she be doing?" "What if others find out?"
- blame: victims may have been told they are the reason for their spouse/partner's pornography use.
- confusion: "How could the person I thought I knew be doing this? What else don't I know about him/her?"
- violated: spouses/partners expect faithfulness. A spouse/partner experiences the other's porn use as infidelity.
- unsure of own personal judgment: "How could I not know this about my partner?"

Respond. She needs to hear from you that her partner's pornography use is not her fault. Stress that her partner is the only one responsible for his choices. Pornography use is a result of individual choice and may be a sign of other issues. Even if he is unhappy in their relationship, that doesn't excuse his actions.

Assess. Pornography use may be an indicator of other problems such as sexual compulsion or addiction. The spouse/partner may struggle with depression or anxiety. How does the pornography user behave? Is the partner aware of any other sexual acting-out behaviors such as calling phone sex lines, having

affairs, etc.? A regular or chronic pornography user may seem withdrawn, depressed, angry and emotionally distant. The user may be asking their partner to engage in sexual behaviors that are uncomfortable for her. What signs is the partner seeing? Does the user see his/her actions as a problem? Has the user been confronted yet? If so, how did he/she respond?

How does the spouse/partner feel/ behave?

Are they depressed? Having sleeping or eating problems, sudden weight loss/gain, hopelessness or suicidal thoughts? Is he/she having symptoms of anxiety-racing thoughts, heart palpitations, or having significant trouble concentrating? If daily activities seem impossible to accomplish and inhibited by symptoms of depression and/or anxiety, strongly encourage the spouse/partner to see a medical doctor and personal counseling. This is a time of crisis for the spouse/partner and he/she needs to be encouraged to seek personal help. The natural tendency is to focus on the user's problem and behaviors, however, the spouse/partner is a victim in this situation and needs help, support, advocacy and, at times, protection from her church.

Offer assistance. Communicate how you can assist the spouse/partner in this situation. Discuss the possibility of helping them confront the user, to offer support and accountability from the church in stressing the importance of the user stopping their destructive behaviors. The church can strongly encourage the user to get help for him/herself and for the family. Perhaps there is someone of the same sex in the church community that the victim can meet with regularly for ongoing support and accountability. Spouses/partners need encouragement to care for themselves and refuse accepting responsibility for their partner's behaviors and behavior changes. The porn user is ultimately responsible for his/her behavior. Help their spouse/partner identify "safe" people with whom she can confide and receive on-going support. The porn user's fear of disclosure to outsiders should be respected, however, in order to heal, spouses/partners should not be bound to keep the "secret" in all relationships. They need an outlet, too.

Refer. This is a crisis for the user, the partner and the relationship. Offer counseling referrals for the user's spouse/partner who needs his/her own safe place to respond to the crisis, support and direction in decision-making and help identifying and applying appropriate boundaries in the relationship. If the user is involved in sexually compulsive behaviors, the need for boundaries is very important to both partners. If a recovery group for spouses/partners is available in your area, encourage him/her to attend. It is extremely helpful for victims to be with others experiencing similar issues in their lives by lessening feelings of isolation. Encourage the spouse/partner to insist that the user seek help separately. You may offer appropriate referrals to area therapists and/or recovery groups.

Establish a checkup time. Arrange another appointment with the victim leaves to see how he/she is coping and to follow through with referrals. This can also include scheduled phone contact. After the initial crisis phase, the spouse/partner needs to know that others (you) understand that the injury takes time and work to heal. The spouse/partner needs to make very difficult decisions around safety issues, remaining in the relationship, etc. Depression often hits weeks after the disclosure, when shock wears off and implications sink in. These wounds are deep and healing takes a great deal of time.

Safety issues/boundaries for the spouse to address:

- Insist no pornographic material be allowed in the home.
- Consider a period of sexual abstinence until the victim is comfortable believing the using partner is seeking help and discontinuing destructive behaviors.
- If the using partner admits or is suspected of acting out sexually with others, consider being tested for sexually transmitted diseases.
- Learn the financial situation by checking bank statements, credit card accounts, cable bills, to see if sexually explicit materials have been purchased.
- If the using partner's behaviors seem compulsive or violent, the victim may be risking domestic violence or sexual assault. Victims need to know that they are not required - by God or their spouse/partner - to endure abusive behavior. The police should be contacted if there is any threat of or actual violence.

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Contact NCPCF for professional consultation or referral information at (513) 521-6227.

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