

## *The Lure of Pornography*

How many of you associate the word addiction with behaviors and people who are out of control? The word addiction can bring up scary thoughts and images.

In the world of addiction treatment there are two major areas of concern: addiction to substances and addiction to patterns of behavior. Substance addictions involve abuse of and dependency upon chemicals such as alcohol, nicotine, prescription drugs, and illegal drugs like heroin and cocaine. Behavioral addictions, often called “process” addictions, involve problematic repetitive behavior patterns involving potentially pleasurable or compulsive activities such as gambling, sex, working, spending, eating, etc. Adding to the confusion is the fact that these potentially addictive behaviors are usually healthy, essential activities with which the majority of the population has little concern or personal struggle with.

According to the dictionary pornography is printed or visual material that contains explicit description or display of sexual organs or activity intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic or emotional feelings. However, whether we view something as pornographic depends also on our age, cultural background, sex, and also our upbringing. Many young people today believe that porn consumption is morally acceptable. Nonetheless, the goal of porn is to sexually arouse and involve the individual in a relationship with the porn. Often the porn addict is not interested in meeting someone to engage in sex; rather the individual is more interested in viewing for stimulation and as a coping mechanism.

But if it is simply looking at video, pictures, etc, how can it be considered an addiction? Let's look at the process of addiction. The website [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com) gives this description of addiction, “The condition of being habitually or compulsively occupied with or involved in something”. This description reflects three aspects of addiction:

- it is something done regularly, repeatedly, habitually
- there is a compulsive quality to it that seems beyond the ability of the individual to control it
- it does not necessarily involve a drug

In everyday usage people are said to be addicted when they pursue or engage in an activity relentlessly. However, it becomes an addiction when it increasingly dominates a person's life and is harmful or detracts from other aspects of their life. Common behaviors associated with pornography addiction are stimulation by the use of pictures which can include books, magazines, computer generated pictures, and even pictures of yourself, your partner, or other people/animals engaged in sexual acts. Bear in mind that some sources of these pictures, while not viewed as stimulating to you, may be perceived as stimulating by the addict. Another source of stimulation is sexually explicit videos. With this source the video may be freeze framed or slowed down when an exceptionally erotic scene is played. A final source of stimulation is art including sculptures, etc. Other important elements associated with the addiction are, of course, the sensory stimulations which is the visual component, but also accomplishment (searching for the most stimulating images) and finally, orgasm.

Before I explain the chemical process of addiction, let's review some of the models of behaviorism to gain a better understanding of how all of this works together. Conditioning is a behavioral process whereby a response becomes more frequent or more predictable in a given environment as a result of reinforcement. Conditioning can occur by combining sexual gratification with any activity, object, or image. Behavioral responses that are quickly followed by a satisfactory result are most likely to become a pattern behaviorally, thus learned behavior. Learning plays a vital role in the addiction cycle. With regard to addiction the payoff is release of some type, release from anxiety, depression, boredom, etc.

To understand how pornography affects relationships one must examine various models to understand the impact in relationships. One model is the imitation model. Basically this model theorizes that consumers imitate what they see. However, not everyone viewing the pornography will imitate the abuses they see depicted.

The next model is the social learning model. This model states that people learn through behavior and that only behaviors that are rewarded will be imitated. The combination of sexual arousal and violence result in more gender stereotyped ideas which revolve around women's place in society. Another model is the sexual script model. A script is a mental representational format which outlines the basic actions needed to complete an action. A script is the rules and behaviors associated with certain actions and we all have them. For instance, when you go to the hospital to visit a friend you observe certain behaviors. Well, pornography also creates a sexual script, a script that emphasizes certain beauty standards, constant sexual availability, excitement of novel sexual practices, and insatiable sexual appetites. However this script does not include affection, foreplay, after play, or consideration for one's partner. With the permission given belief model the pornography viewer tells himself that women enjoy what is happening regardless of their behavior.

Finally the perceptions of social norms model simply skews the viewers mindset to what he considers normal to the point that the user is unable to distinguish and recognize what actually is normal behavior.

You might think, "Why can't the person using porn act more rationally then". The answer is that in an aroused state the individual is more likely to make choices that someone else might consider irrational. So their choices in an aroused state are different than the choices they would make when not in a state of arousal.

## *The Chemical Process of Addiction*

Let's explore how the addictive process works. The likelihood that the use of a drug or participation in a rewarding activity, such as porn, will lead to addiction is directly related to the speed with which it promotes dopamine release in the brain, the intensity of that release, and the reliability of that release.

Dopamine, a neuro-chemical in the brain, not only contributes to the experience of pleasure, but also plays a role in learning and memory, two key factors that transition from liking something to being addicted to it. The reward circuit in the brain includes areas involved with motivation and memory as well as pleasure. Viewing porn stimulates these circuits and then overloads it.

Repeated exposure to an addictive substance or behavior causes nerve cells in certain areas of the brain that are involved in planning and executing tasks to communicate in a way that pairs liking something with wanting it, which in turn drives the individual to go after it. In other words this process motivates us to take action to seek out that particular source of pleasure. Over time, the brain adapts in a way that actually makes the sought-after substance or activity less pleasurable.

In nature, rewards usually come only with time and effort. Addictive drugs and behaviors provide a shortcut, flooding the brain with dopamine and other neurotransmitters. Our brains do not have an easy way to withstand the onslaught. A substance or activity has to be rewarding in order for it to become an addiction.

Because the amount of dopamine released far exceeds that of natural rewards, and it is done more quickly and more reliably, the addictive process has started. With these elevated levels, the person's brain begins to associate the behavior with an outside neuro-chemical reward by artificially raising the amount of dopamine our brains think is "normal", the person creates a need that can only be satisfied by engaging in the addictive behavior. In a person who becomes addicted brain receptors become overwhelmed. The brain responds by producing less dopamine or eliminating dopamine receptors – an adaptation similar to turning the volume down on a loudspeaker when noise becomes too loud. In short, the brain has become desensitized to the dopamine.

As a result of these adaptations, dopamine has less impact on the brain's reward center. So what does this mean? People who develop an addiction typically find that, in time, the desired substance or activity no longer gives them as much pleasure. Once released these chemicals have an immediate effect on the brain and the body, albeit short lived. They have to take more of it or engage in the activity more often or longer to obtain the same dopamine "high" because their brains have adapted – an effect known as tolerance. So the addict repeats the cycle over and over in order to maintain the high they experienced, thus altering the chemical makeup of their brain.

It is at this point that compulsion takes over. The pleasure associated with an addictive drug or behavior subsides – and yet the memory of the desired effect and the need to recreate it (the wanting) persists. It's as though the normal machinery of motivation is no longer functioning.

One of the key functions of the neurotransmitter dopamine is to create feelings of pleasure that our brains associate with necessary physiological actions like eating and procreating. We are driven to perform these vital functions because our brains are conditioned to expect the dopamine rush that accompanies them. Addictive behaviors flood the brain with dopamine and condition us to expect artificially high levels of the neurotransmitter. Over time, the person's brain requires more dopamine than it can naturally produce and it becomes dependent on the behavior to produce it but it never actually satisfies the need it has created.

### *So are you still wondering why pornography is so powerful?*

The short answer is that during the sexual process, the brain begins narrowing its focus as it releases a tidal wave of endorphins and other neuro-chemicals like dopamine, norepinephrine, oxytocin and serotonin. These "natural drugs" produce a tremendous rush or high. When these chemicals are released during healthy intimacy they can be thought of as great. When these same chemicals are released during pornography use and other sexual addiction behaviors, they can be fearsome due to the severe addiction and many negative consequences they produce in the brain and nervous system. All the while, the user has no idea what is happening to him physiologically. Also, the physiological changes such as rapid heartbeat, shallow breathing, and throbbing in the genitals happen almost immediately. The brain's reward center doesn't know what porn is, it only recognizes dopamine spikes that are triggered by stimulating activity.

But it isn't just the dopamine that contributes to the addiction process; there is also the development of a reaction sequence. A reaction sequence is a pathway that is formed in the mind; it begins with a stimulus and ends with a specific response. Once developed this reaction sequence automatically changes the person's emotional state.

You might wonder why a person would choose to view pornography. Initially it might start as curiosity, a pleasurable activity, and an indulgence. However it is also a way to escape stress and other emotional problems. Porn also offers easy, commitment free sexual gratification.

However, also consider the emotional response sequence. The first time the person views pornography they do not understand how the stimulus (porn) triggers strong emotions. The next time they view porn it is not as much of a novelty and they experience these same emotions again.

Let's first look at the various methods porn can be accessed. The internet is a source of tremendous educational opportunities for youth yet it also allows access to sexually explicit material. The same internet that connects friends and family also connects individuals to pornography including child pornography.

Technology has definitely changed our world. Sexual imagery can be accessed anywhere, anytime using portable electronic devices. Users can generate a stream of graphic pornography, a wide variety of virtual sexual activities, and casual, anonymous, or paid-for sexual encounters with a click or a tap. Simply put, we have greater access to highly stimulating sexual content with much less built-in accountability. With the array of electronic devices available today an individual can

view pornography without the fear of personal discovery or embarrassment. Content of the material can range from pinup girls to violence, degradation, rape, and bestiality.

Now that we have a definition of pornography and understand how the addiction develops let's explore how porn affects the user and his intimate relationships.

Most regular porn users are male, however, with the easy accessibility the number of females using porn is growing. Although pornography affects both men and women the types of pornography and how it is used is different. Men are six times more likely to view porn than females and also spend more time looking at porn where, while females view porn, they are more likely to engage in real life sexual encounters and relationships. In addition, youth under the age of 18 can just as easily access porn as anyone else but the impact it has on their developing brain is more important. Researcher Phillip Zimbardo states that porn consumption is rewiring the brains of young men to demand unrealistic levels of stimulation, excitement, and novelty. Are video games teaching young people to desire instant gratification, stimulation, excitement, etc and is porn consumption simply an extension of the emotions generated in playing video games?

Porn affects the user's inner life, mainly the relationship he has with himself. It also affects how he or she interacts with others. Pornography ultimately affects the inner private self. When the addict is viewing pornography he is altering his normal emotional state. But what really happens during the course of porn addiction?

First, porn may start as a form of entertainment and/or as a means to enhance masturbation, or as instant tension release. As addiction develops it is not the sex itself that is arousing but rather the state of arousal, the hunt for that perfect picture, videos, etc. Because of compulsive masturbation erectile dysfunction develops with ongoing pornography use. Furthermore, compulsive masturbation can desensitize the individual to common types of touch and stroking.

The addicted individual gradually loses interest in relational sex and sexual intimacy suffers as a result. Also, the sexual arousal and high associated with viewing pornography lead to the lowering of inhibitions in real life. After a period of time viewing one type of porn loses its effectiveness as a sexual stimulant so the user seeks other types of porn to achieve that same feeling of pleasure or high. This is known as escalation. The next phase is desensitization. What might have once been considered immoral, shocking, repulsive, or unthinkable is now viewed as commonplace and acceptable. In other words the shock value of what they view increases as does the risk they are willing to take. This habituation may lead to the viewing of group sex, sexual contact with animals, anal intercourse, and sadomasochistic practices. Prolonged viewing of pornography leads not only to habituation but also boredom, sexual dissatisfaction among males and females, increased tolerance of sexually explicit material, and a more lenient attitude towards extramarital and recreational sexual relations. The slide into the more extreme varieties of porn is subtle and often without conscious intention.

Men who engage in cybersex may engage in sexual activities they would not otherwise perform. Furthermore, males will carry over new behaviors learned in cybersex onto offline relationships. This activity increases as the online sexual activity increases. One outcome of viewing non-violent

pornography is that the individual will force compliance with their sexual desires on their partner.

Likewise, males who engage in pornography tend to view their mate as sexually less attractive, view them simply as a sex object, and are considered less satisfied with physical appearance and sexual behaviors. Judgments regarding the attractiveness of their partner lower significantly as the result of viewing porn. Moreover, men are more likely to describe women in an overt sexual manner rather than to describe them by their attributes. In addition, men who masturbate to images of risky behaviors and other deviant activities train themselves to focus on the pleasure and excitement of those images rather than the hurtful scenarios they really are.

In a study of x-rated films conducted by California State University they found that women were often depicted as the victim, while the male was partially clothed women were naked, and an acceptance of rape, meaning that while being raped she was depicted as enjoying it. In a sentence, women are a commodity and sexual relations are simply recreational. This results in a trivialization of rape.

Furthermore, many adult videos contain both verbal and physical aggression perpetrated against women. And, as previously mentioned, the victim's response was pleasure or neutrality. In addition, these videos show few, if any, positive behaviors such as compliments, embracing, or laughter.

It is not unusual to use porn as a coping mechanism for stress, anxiety, low self esteem, sadness, resentment, etc. Just as with drugs, when porn is used as a coping mechanism healthier coping skills are not learned and utilized. In fact, addictive pornography use leads to low self esteem, shame, guilt, and a lowering of ability to function socially and in their work life. Last, the addict justifies his addiction with *Permission Given Beliefs*. In effect he tells himself that everyone does it, women enjoy what they are doing and aren't harmed by it, and that using pornography is better than seeking out affairs, after all it isn't cheating. Viewing pornography results in hyper masculinity and trivializing violence against women in addition to changing norms for a relationship.

Moreover, men are more likely to describe women in an overt sexual manner rather than to describe them by their attributes. Overall, pornography increases negative attitudes towards women, viewing women as subordinates who exist only for the male's pleasure, and more strictly defined gender roles. When one person holds demeaning attitudes towards women the result is diminished relationship satisfaction for both persons.

Another consequence of pornography addiction is the eventual acting out behaviors. It means the addicted individual wants to try out in real life the scenes being viewed. Imagine being drawn to a woman in the video who never says no and will never reject them. But these acting out behaviors actually serve a purpose and that is to reduce anxiety.

This can also be the result of becoming less empathetic of the other person's needs and also blunted affect. Stimuli that would normally produce anxiety and/or strong reactions lose their effect over repeated exposure to the material. What was once revolting becomes acceptable,

boring, and commonplace. In addition, viewing pornography increases dominant behaviors in the addicts. The addictive behavior is a pattern that exists over time, escalates in terms of the obsession with the behavior, the frequency of the behaviors, and the risks taken along with increasing disregard for the consequences.

Earlier I mentioned that youth under the age of 18 view porn. Initially the exposure may start as accidental and unintentional, however, any disgust, if present at all, can quickly turn to pure enjoyment. One factor mentioned earlier that contributes to habitual viewing is our technology, high speed internet and a variety of devices it can be viewed on. Another factor is that boys tend to seek pornography either out of curiosity and/or because they seek sexual arousal. Viewers who masturbate will seek out sexually explicit material more often. However, probably the biggest influence is the developing teen brain. The adolescent brain is still developing in areas that govern decision making, judgment, and self control. The responses of teens to emotionally loaded images and situations are heightened at this time and this is due to the part of the reward system with which the brain motivates behavior. In addition, because a teenage boy may not be able to satisfy his sexual urges with a female partner, the use of pornography along with masturbation can quickly become a standard practice. But is the activity really entertainment or is there another reason? Regardless the end result is that what starts out as entertainment and private sexual experimentation quickly pairs sexual excitement with masturbation and can become an addiction.

Victor Cline, an expert on pornography addiction describes the addictive process in four stages. These are addiction, escalation, desensitization, and acting out. The process of addiction as already discussed. The second is escalation. This is the period in which the addict develops a tolerance to the content of what they are viewing. These are addiction, the third is desensitization. The addict loses touch with appropriate sexual boundaries, conscience and constraint are diminished. They lack the ability to view the content of what they see as inappropriate, and to discriminate between what is legal and what is illegal. But desensitization also involves how the addict justifies his behavior. The fourth stage is acting out. Although not all consumers of pornography act out, looking at or talking about sexual images and practices could spur the individual to want to practice these behaviors in real life. At the same time the addict is viewing or talking they are also deepening their dependence on the chemical release provided by the sexual stimuli and behaviors associated with it. In addition, levels of addiction are arbitrary and designed to provide an understanding of sexually compulsive behavior.

## Impact on Marriages, Women, and Children

Porn and a happy partner do not coexist. Pornography alters both sexual attitudes and behavior and it undermines the critical components of a healthy relationship. Women enter the relationship expecting the values to be honored. But pornography sends the woman the sign that something else has her partner's sexual attention. And, the so called reality portrayed in pornographic videos, etc is disturbing to women. Women are not only insulted with the discovery of their partner's pornography viewing, but they also tend to blame themselves for not meeting their partner's needs.

As mentioned earlier, women eventually are perceived simply as sex objects by the addicted individual. They forget that the female they are viewing is someone's daughter, sister, and maybe even someone's wife. The wife feels unattractive as well as sexually inadequate and she feels she is being unfavorably compared to images of eroticism. More than one wife has said, "I don't understand why he looks at that". Not only does the wife feel betrayed, she is also repulsed by the discovery of her husband's pornography activity. Their partner's involvement in pornography is perceived as an affair, an emotional affair they cannot compete with. Whereas the male may believe to have an affair it has to be sexual. This attitude completely is demoralizing for their partners. There is also a decrease in intimacy in the relationship because the addicted person has less emotional involvement in sexual relations, to the point that intimacy becomes nonexistent. And the more extreme the pornography is, the more intense the wife's reaction to the discovery. With pornography as a model it is no wonder the user ends up with unrealistic expectations of a real life intimate partner. Pornography is also an insult to womanhood itself.

One woman said her husband's justification for viewing pornography was because she was not actively sexually intimate with him so it was okay for him to meet his own needs by viewing pornography. As for the wife it is not surprising that loss of trust turns into loss of respect. However, once the issue is brought out in the open the women may choose to leave the marriage, or she may choose to try and fix the porn problem. Asking the addicted person to go to counseling and/or a rehab facility is one strategy. Another is that she will simply become hyper vigilant of his computer use and other behaviors. When the partner becomes vigilant they may also become controlling in that they try to control their spouse's behavior. However, initially, the wife may adopt what is called a *Permission Given Belief*. This refers to the thoughts she uses to rationalize the behavior. One belief may be that their partner's behavior is preferable to him having an affair, and that all men view pornography so it is okay. Many of the sexual problems caused by porn is the result of an over dependence on visual imagery for arousal. Other factors that would normally take precedence such as the sensations in one's own body, emotions, and presence of the partner fade into the background.

For the child who lives in the home they encounter decreased time and attention from the addicted parent. They are at increased risk for encountering pornographic material in the home and/or encountering parent masturbating. They are at increased risk of over hearing a parent engage in phone sex. They are at increased risk of parental separation and/or divorce. They are at increased risk of financial strain on the family. Depending on the age of the child or children,



one may take on the role of support for the other parent. The child is more likely to experience parental conflict and stress as a result of the addiction. The child is at increased risk of premature sexual dialogue before they are cognitively able to understand it. Most importantly, the child is at risk for emotional trauma as a result of the addiction in the family system. But on an ongoing basis the child may be exposed to a parent who is irritable, anxious, grumpy, and angry. Many a child interprets and internalizes this behavior as their fault.

The addiction can have financial consequences as well. There is not only a lot of time invested in the addiction but it can also involve money. The addiction can mean lost opportunities financially as well as eventual job loss entirely. Money is also spent on internet hookups for more explicit viewing of real life hookups. Therefore, it is not surprising that addiction to pornography is a contributing factor in divorce.

Consuming porn may start out as an exciting form of entertainment to enhance and facilitate masturbation, but over time it can shift from a fun activity to an addiction that significantly interferes with other pursuits in life. Nonetheless, even before the first look at porn the person must first accept the behavior as okay.

Even when the user is not actually viewing porn a lot of time is spent thinking about images recently viewed, imagining what they might see next, setting up conditions to be alone so they can access porn, and covering their tracks. For years professionals have described the family as a system, and the system is regulated by rules and roles. It is not unusual for family and family members to maintain that public image of family until such a time as consequences set in that cannot be ignored or denied.

### *Signs of Pornography Addiction*

Those who are addicted to porn will experience difficulties in personal relationships. This occurs because the porn addict isolates themselves from others so they can engage in their addiction. In addiction porn addiction leads to sexual dysfunction which exacerbates the isolation.

Symptoms to be aware of if you are the spouse or partner are:

- decreasing interest in sex
- healthy partner unable to maintain an erection during sex
- his sexual tastes have changed, he may be coercive or ask you to engage in other practices
- your partner spends an excessive amount of time online
- hiding credit card statements or other changes in financial records
- partner is withdrawn (rule out other possibilities)
- when on the computer is partner evasive or defensive

## Cause of Addiction

So far I have covered how addictions develop, what is considered pornography, and how it impacts the individual and interpersonal relationship. But what causes addictions? Why does one person become addicted and not another? What causes a person to fall into addiction? Addiction is not a choice the person makes. There is not one single cause that is responsible rather it is a mixture of nature and nurture.

- Some people suffer from a mental health disorder
- Peer pressure
- Low self esteem
- Genetics - nature and nurture

A person can inherit vulnerability when it comes to addiction. This vulnerability can make them more susceptible to developing an addiction. People who have a mental illness are susceptible to addiction. For example, I know of one person who has bipolar disorder. This individual is now an adult. She has a daughter whom her parents are raising. This person does not want to take psychotropic meds and instead self medicates with heroin. A person who reacts badly to stress and becomes easily frustrated is also at higher risk for developing an addiction. As mentioned earlier, self esteem is another factor. For someone who has low self esteem addiction can provide them a sense of competence and self worth. Nonetheless, addiction in any form is a chronic disease with symptoms, onset, course of progress, and outcome.

For the addict, engaging in pornography is a way to release stress, tension, and any other uncomfortable emotion. Also the chemical change in the brain that occurs while viewing porn creates a temporary feeling of euphoria and eventually the person cannot function without that experience. In other words, it becomes a necessity in order to function.

## *Is Pornography Addiction Real*

There are varied opinions out there on this topic. First, a constant theme that has been a pattern is necessary for addiction to exist. Some professionals consider pornography addiction a sub class of obsessive compulsive disorder and some consider it a psychological addiction. Some do not consider it a legitimate disease even though it shares many symptoms associated with other addictions. To recap, the addiction process of the individual who is not able to control their behavior despite negative consequences; they develop a tolerance to viewing porn. At first the individual may be repulsed by what they are seeing, but eventually it becomes exciting. In short, the person crosses an invisible line as tolerance grows and they engage in the behavior to the point of neglecting social relationships. Although it sounds similar to drug and alcohol addiction, I think there is one difference. Alcoholics and drug addicts will use and/or drink with others whereas viewing pornography is a more solitary activity. I don't think you are going to find a group of men sitting around watching a porn video together. Also I think one reason for this is that there is a certain sense of shame associated with the activity whether the addict recognizes it or not.

Another aspect of the addiction that makes it legitimate is the chemical changes that occur in the brain. The issue here, as mentioned earlier, is that these images stay in the brain whereas with drug and alcohol addiction the chemical will eventually work out of the system. Nonetheless, on a neurobiological level all addictions engage the brains attachment-reward and incentive motivation system as well as the impulse regulating functions. Any pursuit, natural or artificial, such as gambling, shopping, etc. that includes a feeling of motivation and reward will activate the same brain regions that are active in drug addictions.

Eventually the addicted person will reach a point where they experience a major life crisis as a result of their addiction that cannot be ignored. It is at this point they hit bottom. For the porn addict this might well mean loss of job, career, family, but it can also be the result of an internal emotional and spiritual breakdown. Addiction may have been the strategy used to deal with past pain and other unresolved hurts. The addict is caught in a revolving door, wanting to quit porn but yet unable to stay away from it.

Treatment is not intended to cure the addiction. Rather it is about teaching the individual healthy methods and behaviors that will replace their unhealthy behaviors and maladaptive coping skills. To completely get over the addiction the addict first has to admit their ambivalence, if any, regarding the recovery process. They have to have the motivation, desire, and willingness to do the necessary work knowing that they may not regain some of the very important things they have lost such as family.

Recovery means looking at all the painful emotions that addiction tried to suppress. Recovery means acknowledging the problems porn has caused. Recovery means re-defining how you view sex, behaviors associated with intimacy and sexual relationships, and learning new ways to cope with and mediate stress. Recovery is examining Permission Given Belief thoughts that actually neutralize other rational thoughts that would normally turn the person away from

viewing porn.

For the porn addict the images may no longer be available physically, the individual has created their own porn library in their mind. So treatment must also address changing this cognitive process. One way of addressing that is with the use of aversion therapy and also value based decision making.

Although the most frequent cues to engage in pornography viewing are stress, anxiety, depression, boredom, it is my opinion that pornography addiction actually serves a deeper purpose and that is to self-medicate the wounds from his early life. In other words, the individual has learned to use sexuality as a tool to self-medicate and feel good about themselves. It is my belief that many addicts suffering from low self esteem actually starts in childhood. Not all addicts have been abused in their childhood.

We live in a hyper sexual world. We live in a world where privacy in sex is no longer important. In fact it is just the opposite, sex sells. Pornography is not a behavior in a vacuum as many people like to think it is when they state it is harmless. It is paired with other feelings, thoughts, and processes. Pornography sites are the most accessed sites on the internet. Familiarization coupled with desensitization is creating a new generation of men who view pornography not only as harmless but as their right. This has helped create a new paradigm of sexual acceptance.

With the accessibility, affordability, and anonymity of the internet pornography has become sex on command. And while the user may be able to stop for a few days, a couple weeks, maybe even a little longer, the root of the addiction is more than just a behavioral change. The recovery process addresses roots of the addiction, the dysfunctional core beliefs, and the addiction cycle.

It may not be clear to the addict why they fell into addiction. Maybe it is something that just happened. The question is what drives the addictive behavior. Whenever we treat an addict this is always a question to consider. So while the addict learns new coping skills and other behaviors that enable him to live a better life he is always at risk for relapse if he does not address the root cause of the addiction. One part of the root cause is the belief system the individual has created and lives by.

Have you ever heard, for example, a recovering alcoholic describe himself as being in recovery for 17 years? Have you ever wondered why he phrased it that way? Recovery is a lifelong process, you never finish, and you never reach the end because you are always on the journey.

So a tough marriage, a boring job, challenging people does not cause addiction. The availability of pornography does not cause addiction. Low self esteem, difficult life events, and the availability of sexual gratification lead to addiction when a person uses them to seek solace in sex. Feelings become imprinted and the addict learns to engage in the pornography as a coping mechanism to handle bad feelings they are trying to escape.

Finally no matter what you hear or what you read someone addicted to pornography cannot stop the addiction on their own...professional help is required. One reason is that the addict has become entrenched in certain behavior patterns. These behaviors patterns have existed over time

and have served some purpose for the addict regardless of negative consequences.

### *Pornography Addiction and Relapse*

Sexual imagery is everywhere. It is seen on television, billboards, and computers. How does the addict get away from it? But what is relapse in pornography addiction? Relapse can be masturbating to porn or it can be non-masturbation relapse which is sex with other partners. In early recovery both can occur.

As with any other addiction underlying issues need to be addressed and resolved. However, some factors the porn addict has to deal with are first leading a minimal life. This means not only changing behaviors but also finding what gives their life meaning and then living that life. It means changing your daily routine. It means getting your needs met in a different way other than looking at pornography on the computer daily.

After coming out of rehab the individual is still dealing with shame and guilt which can lead to being isolated. As recovery proceeds the individual may not have the desire to engage in an intimate relationship which is another factor that can contribute to relapse.

Current thinking among sex addiction therapists is that addicts will be very prone to relapse if they have not worked through their early childhood issues. Without this, the thinking is that the addict will stay stuck in patterns involving poor coping skills, inadequate emotion regulation, low self-concept, and even intimacy avoidance.

Relapse, in any addiction, is the expected norm. However, how many porn addicts relapse may be difficult to estimate because they don't report their relapse, they stop attending the group meetings.

### *Closing*

Our reliance on machines has an isolating effect on all of us and pornography is delivered most often by a machine. Porn does not come with warning labels like cigarettes and tobacco do. Pornography's power comes from the ability to provide sexual stimulations with immediate gratification and we live in an age of wanting instant gratification. Unlike other sexual tools porn is stored in the mind allowing the user to recall it at any time. It also produces experiences of excitement, relaxation, and escape which add to its addictive qualities and its lore.

However, it is my opinion that the true source of addiction starts in childhood. Addiction occurs when we are trying to find a way to deal with an internal imbalance. We seek outside sources to heal what doesn't feel right inside of ourselves. We see other methods as a way to feel better and cover up the internal issue. Many addicts grew up in dysfunctional families where open expression of feelings was not allowed and where effective problem solving was never modeled. Not all

addicts are physically or sexually abused. Furthermore, the addict has to examine their belief system, their core beliefs, and these are formed in the family of origin. Impaired thinking, which is part of addiction, stems from the addict's belief system.

Again, I believe that low self esteem contributes to addiction and in some cases attachment issues. Let me provide an example. One addict grew up in a home in which feelings were not discussed nor were his feelings validated. For example, if frustrated the message was "you will get over it" instead of hearing "it appears you are frustrated, what do you think is the problem". The point is that this person's feelings were never validated and he grew up with uncertainty, doubting whatever he was feeling and uncertain of his self identity. In young adulthood he went into a career in order to gain his father's approval. In recovery this person realized he had low self esteem all of his life and how his porn addiction, even in teen years, served as a way to numb himself and reduce anxiety. Sex became confused with comforting and nurturing.

Peter Levine, author of The Realm of the Hungry Ghost says it best, "The void is not in the parents love or commitment, but in the child's perception of being heard, understood, empathized with, and gotten on an emotional level". You could call it not being in attunement on the part of the parents. Attunement is being in tune with someone else's emotions.

Once again, not all addictions are rooted in abuse or trauma, but to understand addiction is to realize that a hurt is the center of all addictive behavior. To understand addiction we must ask what relief does the addict hope to find in the addiction. Dismissing addictions as bad habits or self destructive behavior ignores the functionality of the behavior in the life of the addict. The point is that emotional stresses of all kinds in the rearing environment can create long-lasting wounds in the psyche that a person will later try to soothe or numb with addictive behavior.

Pornography addiction is a relationship, it is one in which sexual obsessions replace people. But addictions in general can also be related to whatever brings the addict relief from unrecognized and/or unacknowledged pain. In addition, all addictions share certain traits, poor self regulation, lack of sense of a healthy self, and poor impulse control. The final point is that it is not the activity that defines the addiction but our relationship with it, the external focus of our behavior and attention. One addict describes addiction as "driven-ness", out of control even though the addict thinks he is in control. Everybody hurts, but not all become addicts.