



Effects of Pornography on Relationships

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Pornography is not a new issue in relationships; however, the expansion of the Internet appears to have increased pornography viewing and exacerbated pre-existing tendencies (Cooper, Boies, Maheu & Greenfield, 1999; Young, 2008). One key factor in this increase is the convenience, affordability, and the anonymous nature of Internet pornography (Cooper, 1998; Young, 2008; Young, Cooper, Griffen-Shelley, O'Mara, & Buchanan, 2000).

Many individuals never anticipate or expect that viewing pornography will negatively influence their lives, yet this often significantly impacts the user as well as his or her family, workplace, and community. The couple relationship, in particular, often feels the most negative effects of pornography (Manning, 2006). This fact sheet will review some of the impacts of pornography on partner relationships and provide steps toward healing a relationship hurt by pornography.

Negative Impacts

Pornography can have negative consequences for both the user and his or her intimate partner. Some of the common damaging effects of pornography for users can include addiction, isolation, increased aggression, distorted beliefs and perceptions about relationships and sexuality, negative feelings about themselves, and neglecting other areas of their lives (Maltz & Maltz, 2006; Manning, 2006). These negative consequences often carry over into other aspects of their lives, especially family and couple relationships. Within couple intimate relationships, pornography can have negative impacts in the following ways (Bridges, Bergner & Hesson-

McInnis, 2003; Landau, Garret & Webb, 2008; Manning, 2006; Schneider, 2000a; Schneider, 2003):

- User faces difficulty becoming sexually aroused without pornography.
- User loses interest and engages in fewer sexual experiences with partner.
- Partner may view pornography use as infidelity and a betrayal to the relationship.
- Partner feels sexually inadequate and threatened by pornography use.
- Partner may feel that certain sexual activities desired by user are objectionable.
- Both user and partner experience a decrease in relationship sexual satisfaction and emotional closeness.
- Relationship trust decreases due to dishonesty and deception about pornography use.
- One or both partners may be concerned about children's exposure to pornographic materials.

Steps Toward Change

While the negative impact on relationships can be challenging to overcome, healing is possible. It is first essential that an individual want to make the steps toward recovery. Others may encourage steps toward change, but only the user can ultimately make the transformation (Landau, Garrett & Webb, 2008). Without internal motivation, change will likely be superficial or short-lived. Second, the user must implement strategies to strengthen motivation to quit pornography. Some of these may include:

1. **Become aware and understand how pornography creates problems.** For individuals struggling with the addiction, it may be important to set aside time to honestly evaluate the impact of past pornography and possible future outcomes to strengthen their resolve to change. For partners, an open conversation about the negative effects may be helpful (Corley & Schneider, 2002; Zitzman & Butler, 2005). While it is a difficult topic to approach, both partners should have time to express how the pornography usage makes them feel without interruption and judgment from the other person. If the conversation begins to turn into an argument, partners can agree to take a break and come back to the topic after anger and frustration have subsided.
2. **Re-evaluate and identify values to provide motivation for change.** Individuals who take time to reflect on their values, beliefs, and goals, as well as how they want to be viewed by themselves and others may result in motivation to change (Young, 2001, 2008).
3. **Face the fears of what life would be like without pornography.** There is usually a reason why individuals choose to use pornography in the first place, so removing this habit from their lives may be challenging (Young 2001, 2008). Identifying and admitting specific fears about quitting pornography is an important step in ultimately resolving those fears.
4. **Take responsibility for self-recovery.** While other people can provide support and encouragement, only the individual can ultimately decide if he or she has a desire to change and is willing to do so (Landau, Garrett & Webb, 2008). With the guidance of an experienced counselor, individuals who want to change can develop an individualized plan that will help them be accountable and build on successes that will aid them in long-term change (Schneider, 2000; Schneider & Weiss, 2001; Zitzman & Butler, 2005).

the private nature of pornography, individuals often struggle with wanting to discuss their issues with others. However, without assistance from a qualified and skilled counselor or therapist for the individual and family, it can be nearly impossible to break free of this deeply rooted behavior (Landau, Garrett & Webb, 2008; Zitzman & Butler, 2005). A qualified and skilled counselor can be integral in helping individuals and families to overcome personal and relationship issues. Counselors may also suggest getting involved in a treatment program and/or establishing a 24-hour support and accountability system.

Additionally, creating a pornography free environment by discarding any pornographic materials as well as preventing any future access to these materials by using an Internet-filtering service or eliminating cell-phone Internet access may be helpful safeguards (Maltz & Maltz, 2006; Schneider, 2000b). It may also be helpful to place the computer in a commonly accessible area in the home as an additional precaution to reduce temptation to access pornographic materials.

Lastly, creating an action plan for alternative positive activities may be helpful for the user to break old patterns of behavior and build feelings of self-worth and confidence. Some suggestions for users may include exercise, sports, starting a new hobby, cultivating friendships, or any other healthy activity that the user enjoys (Maltz & Maltz 2006; Schneider, 2000b). Through spending time on healthy behaviors, individuals often boost physical and emotional health and support the user in finding strength to create a porn-free lifestyle.

Partner Coping Techniques

Having a partner with a pornography addiction can be very challenging and spouses often feel responsible or blame themselves for their partner's behavior (Schneider, 2000a; Schneider, 2003). Support groups or talking to a qualified individual may provide the partner with a safe place to share frustrations and learn coping skills. It should be remembered that it is impossible to make others change; only they can choose to make the choice to change. With this in mind, partners need to be encouraging and supportive of their partner's decision to change. Admitting an addiction is not easy for the user, and loving and compassionate partners can encourage change and help the user

Taking Action

After an individual is motivated and ready to change, additional steps are needed in order to successfully quit the pornography habit. Because of

find positive methods of working through the addiction (Maltz & Maltz, 2006; Zitzman & Butler, 2005). In order to provide this support, partners may also need to seek out support to deal with their own pain through this challenging time. Taking time to engage in healthy activities may also help partners to boost their emotional and physical health and regain self-esteem.

Healing as a Couple

When both individuals are committed to working together to have a healthy relationship, they can begin to repair their relationship. While this process may take time, if both partners are willing, it is possible to build or rebuild a loving and connected relationship. Because of the nature of pornography use and its possible effects on relationships, guidance from a qualified counselor or therapist can be helpful during the healing process. Couples may also choose to seek counsel with a trusted religious leader to provide support and guidance during this process. Some of the areas that may need to be addressed include issues of trust, gaining empathy, and moving from anger to forgiveness (Bird, 2006; Maltz & Maltz, 2006; Zitzman, & Butler, 2005). Gaining communication skills and new ways of approaching intimacy as a couple may also help the relationship. While the process of healing as a couple can be challenging, through time and the help of qualified individuals it is possible for couples to renew trust, improve communication, and increase intimacy.

Seeking Help

There are many resources available for those seeking help. In addition to finding a qualified therapist or counselor in your area, some may choose to ask a trusted clergy member for additional resources. There are also several online resources:

- www.sexaa.org **Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA)** This group helps men and women overcome sexual addictions through a twelve-step process. They provide referral information for finding an SAA meeting in local areas as well as providing SAA meetings via Internet chat and telephone conference calls.
- www.cosa-recovery.org **Codependents of Sex Addicts (COSA)** A twelve-step program for men and women whose lives have been affected by another person's sexual behavior. They also provide referral information on

finding local meetings as well as telephone conference calls.

- www.aasect.org **American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists (AASECT)**, a national organization that helps locate qualified sex therapists and counselors.

Regardless of how users find help to cope with their addiction, it is important to seek additional aids and tools to be fully successful in mastering and controlling pornography addiction.

Conclusion

Involvement in pornography is often a taboo subject to discuss in society, and yet it can be very destructive to individuals and their relationships. Pornography viewing behaviors can be challenging to overcome, but if there is a desire to change, healing is possible for both individuals and their relationships.

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