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The Truth Behind Porn

Pornography is becoming ever-present and ever more sophisticated. The days of explicit magazines and pin-up girls are long gone – that’s not hardcore enough for our modern era. Porn is everywhere and accessible at any moment. Pornography plus the internet equals a sexual tidal wave of erotica—prerecorded, real-time, virtual reality and catering to any fantasy you desire.

Porn has stayed in the shadows but now it’s coming out and it’s shaping society.

Billions of hours of pornographic material are watched every year. *Psychology Today* published an article describing studies that showed that on a weekly basis 26% of women and 80% of men watch porn. In the last six months, roughly 73% of women and 98% of men have watched porn. Now the percentages are growing for both men and women and women are becoming just as active on porn sites as men. So this isn’t just a guy thing, it’s a human issue.

Looking at someone lustfully couldn’t be more abundant than in the area of pornography. Leading pornography researchers, professors Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillman who have extensively studied the effects of pornography, revealed that in all the official research that’s been done, the message is that there are no overall benefits to porn. *None*.

On the other hand, research by Dr Philip Zimbardo, a psychologist and professor at Stanford University, has revealed that repeated use of porn causes the brain to be rewired in a completely new way that demands constant stimulation.

How does porn do this? Well, when you watch porn it provokes the brain to pump out an intense barrage of reward-signalling hormones. Our brains learn from this experience and so form new neural pathways leading to lasting changes in the brain that cause a deep craving for a repeat of this quick fix. That’s why porn is so addictive.

Imagine walking across a field. The first time you do this you’re probably treading on bumpy soil and grass, but if you continue to walk the same route across the field every day, eventually a trail will appear on the ground, the grass will die off and the mud will get flattened by your steps. After a while, a clear path will form and you’ll go to that path every time you want to cross the field. Every mental activity we undertake creates new neural pathways like walking across a field.

What’s different about watching porn, though, is that as the reward signals associated with watching porn are so overwhelming, the natural neural pathways the brain has developed that connect arousal to natural turn-ons become overrun. So it’s more like driving a heavy truck over the field of your mind – the deep ruts churn up the naturally complex web of associations in your mind. The result is that you become dependent on porn for enjoyment and less satisfied in actual sex. This explains the correlation between the growth of porn and a surge in cases of erectile dysfunction – we call it P.I.E.D (porn-induced erectile dysfunction) – with some studies suggesting that up to 40% of men under the age of 40 may experience P.I.E.D.

Is porn replacing sex?

Statistically, people are having less sex than they were back in the day and maybe porn is one reason that explains why, because if they're not doing it, they're now watching it. According to recent surveys, it would appear couples often turn to porn to compensate for relationship issues as a type of coping mechanism to avoid the stress of facing difficulties in their relationship. It's harder for a couple to have a reasonable sexual interlude when they're both frustrated and withdrawn from each other, so they turn to porn to get alternative sexual pleasure. That's not helpful in the long run. Instead of working things out, they're really cowering away from the issue lurking in their relationship. These issues will arise sooner or later, and then they won't be able to hide behind porn to stay content.

Couples are turning to hardcore porn to provide alternatives to their partner because it is far less demanding and far easier than sex, especially if other difficulties in the relationship are causing issues when it comes to the bedroom. But it's just avoiding the problem. Turning to porn will only make us more isolated and in doing so our sexual and social behaviour will suffer, which then would have a negative impact on our relationships. It's a downward spiral.

An alarming study conducted by Marie-Ève Daspe and colleagues of over 1000 participants showed that *for women in particular, longer relationships were associated with less porn use*, which at a surface level may suggest that porn reduces the chances of a durable relationship. So when things get tough with your partner, resist the temptation to turn to porn. Dealing with the stresses and strains of a real relationship can be difficult but it's so essential for a healthy relationship, which in turn prepares the ground for better sexual intimacy.

Damaging your brain

We mentioned that porn alters the way your brain is mapped, but the *surge* of neurochemicals and hormones released when someone watches porn actually damages the brain. How? The continual and repeated surge upon surge of dopamine caused by long and repeated periods of exposure to porn gives the brain a continual unnatural high. Setting your brain up for an overload of feel-good chemicals might sound like a good idea at first, but just as with junk food, what feels like a good thing, in this case, is not healthy at all. The brain is saying it likes pleasure, but porn provides just too much, so the reward system gets maxed out and becomes worn down.

Over time, in order to fight back from the overload, your brain will actually cut down on its dopamine receptors. Since the brain is worn out, limiting its release of dopamine, this then leaves the user wanting more stimulation to reach the same level of satisfaction. The user therefore searches out harder pornography to get the same arousal, returning to porn repeatedly or seeking out porn that is increasingly intense - to feel that pleasure and high again. So we are essentially presented with a paradox; when it starts out, porn is turning you on, but once a habit is developed the brain then needs more porn to get the same level of activity in the reward system.

Studies have shown that those who watch pornography generally have a smaller reward centre in their brains than those who don't as their brain's reward system has shrunk to compensate for the overload of dopamine. Ultimately, porn users become desensitized so they're less likely to become aroused by what normally arouses. Little things that used to make you feel happy like seeing a friend or playing a favourite sport can't compete with the dopamine flood that comes with porn. Everyday pleasures begin to lose their effect and this includes sex. But while the brain becomes desensitized to pleasure in general, it becomes hypersensitive to sexual triggers because as previously mentioned, repeated porn use widens the neuro-pathways in that direction. Eventually, you are left

with never-ending lust and a life given over to sensuality. This easily spirals from watching porn casually to watching it again and again, week in, week out, maybe day in, day out until you are left with an all-consuming desire. You are left with a sexual appetite never truly satiated.

In porn, you are opting for virtual reality over real life, and that's setting yourself up for potentially harmful habits that won't be healthy for your relationships.

The process of sensitization and desensitization causes dopamine receptors in your brain to degenerate and also affects what's called the *prefrontal cortex* in the brain. This part of your brain is connected to your willpower: i.e. making decisions and choices mainly on behaviour, based on morals, rationality, etc. The prefrontal lobes are involved in exercising control over your emotions, impulses and urges elsewhere in the brain. But when this area is weakened by continual porn use, your willpower weakens and so there is not much left to stop the craving for pornography. As a result, you experience not just a mere desire but an *intense need*. You're left no longer having mastery over your passions and desires but become a slave to your various pleasures. That's not good. With weak willpower you are left at the mercy of every sensation, feeling and desire which comes your way. Maybe this explains the rise of hedonistic philosophy and sensual living across our society today.

Porn damages our humanness in the sense that it weakens the prefrontal region of the brain dealing with conscience and rational decision-making. As a consideration, maybe this explains why affairs and sexual betrayal are becoming increasingly popular - people lack the willpower for self-control.

Damaging your relationship

Porn essentially trains men and women to be consumers, not lovers. Porn encourages us to treat sex as a commodity; to desire the cheap thrill of sexual fantasy over a committed relationship. It sells the idea that you can have someone's body without their heart, and intimacy without the character of love. In porn, you can view that person as just an object of pleasure, and it creeps into our behaviour. It's not difficult to see how treating other people as a means to an end could damage relationships and increase rates of abuse.

Christianity teaches the opposite, that we should desire a committed, honest, permanent relationship before sex, and to love partners in a sacrificial and committed way before engaging in sexual interactions with them as a way of re-enforcing your love as time goes by.

Pornography and Christianity are at odds.

Porn is so damaging because it destroys personhood in the process, replacing the pursuit of a relationship with the pursuit of a pleasurable feeling that can never be fulfilled in life all the time, leaving us unsatisfied.

Porn distorts our expectations which hinders healthy sexual relations. For example, and as mentioned before, sexual tastes are moulded by an individual's experiences. These tastes are acquired and then wired into the brain. Our brains are neuroplastic - they adapt to our habits and decisions. If our experiences and tastes are moulded by hours of pornography, focused searching and clicking, looking for the perfect masturbatory subject, then our brains are in *danger of being wired to a level unattainable with most relationships*.

In one sitting of porn, the user is likely to search for not just one ideal scene but can go to a dozen perfect sex scenes all performing a lifetime variety of sex acts, which most of the time is just unrealistic in real sex. The destructive outcome is that there can be a tendency to withdraw

emotionally from the relationship because the brain has been rewired by porn to connect sexual arousal with porn's fantasies, making it more difficult for the consumer to become aroused by a real person in a real relationship. The outcome is that you can no longer sexually respond to your partner, but you can to porn. A real sex encounter no longer contains the cues that your brain has been rewired to get aroused by.

Studies have shown that when you are addicted to pornography or even just a casual user, you often feel less satisfied with your partner's looks and sexual performance. This can spark insecurity in your partner which is caused more by yourself because of the fact that porn promotes a completely fictional version of how people look and behave. Partners often feel they can never live up to it. You can't spend hours watching surgically enhanced, airbrushed, photoshopped young bodies then expect to be satisfied with one real, imperfect person - this often affects women more than it does men.

When it comes to the stimulation and reward function in your brain, porn and sex compete. Be careful which side you strengthen.

Time magazine released a story explaining how many men and women believe that growing up with their minds marinated in porn since adolescence has ruined their sexual response and ability to have actual intercourse. While in the world, more and more people are content in virtual sex or the likes of porn and explicit TV, Christian theology gives us unembarrassed and positive reasons to value actual sex.

The damage of porn-induced insecurities

But porn doesn't just twist our expectations, porn can also create insecurities - especially in men. Unfortunately, most people learn about sex from mainstream porn, which generally presents men on the larger side. Teenagers and young adults who watch porn assume that large penises are the norm, and use that as their basis for comparison, subconsciously assuming anything outside that exaggerated norm is somewhat lesser. Studies show that 30% of men are dissatisfied with their size.

This insecurity can, for some guys, knock their confidence which in turn affects their sexual relationship with their partner. This insecurity is founded on pornography's lack of reality. The size of the average erect penis from a study of over 15,000 men across the world is 13.1cm, which is hardly the picture presented by porn, and probably comforting for the majority of men to hear. And the average length of a vagina is notably less than the length of the average erect penis, so it doesn't need to be a problem. When it comes to women looking for genuine help or advice regarding sex with their partner, surprisingly it's more common for women to seek help when their partner is too big rather than too small.

And even for guys on the shorter side, that still doesn't have to be a problem because biologically speaking, one of the main anatomical sources of sexual pleasure in a woman is her clitoris. This is where the majority of a woman's pleasure comes from, not her vagina.

So guys, regardless of your size you don't need to be insecure. Relax. You can make it work. This unnecessary insecurity, held by some men, occasionally projected by some women, is based on an assumption often inspired by porn. For both partners, when it comes to sex, instead focus on how to connect. Be intimate. Be caring. Be patient, both with yourself and with your partner. Be confident. Practice and perfect your seduction and technique. Give each other time and try to forget the expectations or even the insecurities porn may have given you. If you and your partner both begin to see sex as a genuine expression of love then sex will not be about the pleasure you get but the pleasure you give, and in that case, both you and your partner will be free from any expectations and

will likely enjoy the experience more in the end.

But the effects of porn run deeper still.

Damaging moral intuitions

Let's ask a controversial question - *is porn cheating?* Yes and no. For example, is it really *faithful* to confess love to your partner while in the privacy of your mind you may pretend to have sex with someone else via porn? Think about it. I fail to see how that isn't a subtle form of cheating. No doubt this has been a reality for countless relationships today. Now some may manufacture any reason to justify that it's OK to use porn and that it isn't cheating, but in reality, would they still feel like this if they were to catch their partner with it, in the moment, pleasing themselves over the thought of someone else? Should you be okay with that, or does something within you tell you that isn't really loving, loyal nor faithful? Is your relationship really meaningful if it's not exclusive? Are they really special to you if they're not the only one you desire?

But that's not all. In a survey of 1,500 men, 56% admitted their tastes in porn had become increasingly extreme or deviant, seeking out pornography that is increasingly hard or even illicit. Many porn consumers eventually find themselves getting aroused by things that used to disgust them or that they might have previously considered to be inappropriate or unethical, such as categories like *cheating, teen, mom, stepsister* or even *abuse*. But it's not just men. Statistically speaking female porn users are roughly 100% more likely to seek out categories like *rough sex, gangbang, bondage, double penetration* - categories that subtly blend aspects of abuse into sexual intimacy, so it's clear women are also more regularly seeking out more extreme depictions of illicit sex. After long enough, for both male and female porn users, things that they thought were disgusting or degrading can start to seem normal, acceptable, and more common than they really are. And when people believe a behaviour is normal, they're more likely to try it out.

A 2015 peer-reviewed meta-analysis of 22 different studies from 7 different countries concluded that there is little doubt that on average, individuals who consume pornography more frequently are more likely to hold attitudes supporting aggressive sexual behaviour and engage in actual acts of sexual aggression.

Additionally, it is well established that there is a direct connection between the consumption of online pornography and human trafficking. Porn fuels the sex trade by building demand. It is not uncommon for someone to speak out against human trafficking while at the same time watching online pornography that fuels so much of that very trafficking. We lose something of our ordinary human sensibility, becoming indifferent and desensitised to things which in our more sensible moments we genuinely care about.

Take this seriously: quit porn

Porn is a killer. It twists our mind, our ideas of sex and our relationships, yet we return to it. We are desperate. The ancient biblical proverb rings a bell, "*Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly.*" The fact of the matter is that we need help, we need our minds renewed. And thank God that we can change. **There is hope.** Our brains are malleable, for the most part they can still be rewired back to their original natural setting; Isn't that good news?

I remember struggling with an addiction to porn; It felt like a drug. *It is a drug.* There were moments when my brain felt like it had been pumped with a ton of cocaine with the sole focus of wanting to watch porn. Who would have thought it would be so brutal? I was ashamed, frustrated and disgusted

with myself. It revealed a gaping inconsistency between what I apparently believed and how I lived; claiming to be Christian but living contrary to Christian doctrine on the sacredness of sexuality. I felt like a hypocrite. I was a hypocrite. Removing it from my life was a weight lifted off, and unsurprisingly at the same time I began to quit porn I also found myself finding greater satisfaction in the normal day-to-day experiences and activities of life.

It's time we all draw a line when it comes to pornography. It decreases our sexual satisfaction, disconnects emotional involvement in sexual experience, lowers our views of the opposite sex, desensitizes us and puts us on a path of addiction. Take it seriously.

If it helps, remove the internet secrecy, avoid what sparks temptation and distract yourself with meaningful and productive interests. Be wise: don't bring electronic devices into your bedroom. Change your lifestyle to exclude porn.

One of the best ways to do this is to be in an honest and trustworthy community where you can be accountable to one another; accountability is not a second-best or a crutch for those who always "mess up." Accountability is not a last resort; it is a lifestyle. Accountability reaches deeper than the surface, it is not just a regular willingness to confess your wrongdoings to another of a trusted character, it is more than this. It is also a willingness to receive encouragement, motivate one another, edify each other and bear each other's burdens.

Restoration - a Christian response

For me, a major motivation to quit porn was the influence of my faith - my trust in God's forgiveness and the power of the gospel; this is what pulled me through.

According to the Christian worldview, *sexuality is God's idea*. Sex is a God-given gift to humanity for the context of a faithful, truthful, permanent relationship. Sex was created to be enjoyed between one man and one woman who are in a covenant marriage until one of them dies (Matthew 19:6).

Sexuality is God's sacred wedding gift to human beings.

This means sex, rather than being something merely casual, meaningless, cheap and simply pleasure-based, is instead held in high regard and ought to be treated as a solemn joy. Any expression of it outside those parameters constitutes an abuse of God's gift because it goes against what it is intended for. Pornography discourages and discredits the objective high value of sexuality that God has placed on it. This is why pornography is recognised as "sexually immoral."

Pornography twists our ideas of sex, and since sex is a God-given gift to humanity for the purpose of covenant relationships, porn mocks God. It's like buying someone a gift and finding them using it as a toilet brush.

In the New Testament, the word most often translated as sexual immorality is *porneia*. This word is also translated as "whoredom," "fornication" and "idolatry." It means a surrendering of sexual purity. From this Greek word we get the English word pornography, stemming from the concept of "selling off," or prostitution. Sexual immorality is selling something precious, treating people as tools, it is taking something sacred, using it and throwing it away. Purity is intended to be released in the security of marriage, not casually over pornography.

Biblical prohibitions against sexual immorality are often coupled with warnings against "impurity" (Romans 1:24; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 4:19). This word in Greek is *akatharsia*, which means "defiled, foul, ceremonially unfit." It connotes actions that render a person unfit to enter God's presence. Those who persist in unrepentant immorality and impurity cannot come into the presence

of God. Jesus said, *“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God”* (Matthew 5:8). It is impossible to maintain a healthy intimacy with God when our bodies and souls are given over to impurities of any kind. Why? Because according to the scripture the bodies of believers are intended to be the *“temple of the Holy Spirit”* (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). When believers use their bodies for immoral purposes, they are profaning God’s holy temple with acts that do not recognise the value and sacredness of their sexuality.

So the reason Christianity opposes pornography is not because it has a low value of sex but quite the opposite; because it holds such sexuality, marriage, and sex itself in such high regard.

The issue is that we are all sexually immoral. I am, you are. We have all paid our part in mocking our sexuality and the sexuality of others in ways that dishonour God’s intention for us. But on the cross, Christ paid a massive price for our lust, and this should change the way we see our sin: it exposes pornography as something repugnant, something from which we should want to flee. We can see the ugliness of pornography in many ways. We can see it in the way it pollutes our minds, robs our affections and exploits others. But looking at the cross, all the ugliness of sin is exposed.

The point is this: the more deeply we internalize the message of the gospel, the more we will see the repulsiveness of our sin. The more we meditate on what Jesus endured on the cross—the curse of God—the more we will loathe our sin. The more we think about the mysterious rift between God the Father and God the Son experienced at the cross— *“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”*—the more we will sink under the thought of our sin. It is then that we can echo what one theologian wrote, *“when we behold the disfigurement of the Son of God, when we find ourselves appalled by His marred appearance, we need to reckon afresh that it is upon ourselves we gaze, for He stood in our place.”*

Conclusion

The obsession with porn is a result of idolizing sexual pleasure as an ultimate need. Porn promises pleasure and we view pleasure as the pathway to our fulfilment, but when the pursuit of pleasure brings no lasting fulfilment, then what? What do you turn to next? More pleasure? Yeah, like that’s going to work. We are more indulgent than ever before and more unfulfilled than ever. Hedonism has failed us. The lust of the flesh cannot be satisfied. If you base fulfilment on sexual pleasure, you’ll need more and dirtier.

There are many things in the world that tempt to offer us lasting fulfilment, but they are all temporary. It’s only our need for God that can truly fulfil this promise. The more the porn-enslaved person embraces the gospel, the more they realize that the very things they are sinfully seeking in pornography are actually found in God. Porn makes false promises that offer to satisfy the soul, but only God delivers true fulfilment.

In the face of Christ, we meet a God who loves sinners, who welcomes home filthy prodigal sons and daughters, who promises eternal life with Him. The more we meditate on the cross of Christ, the more we will see God’s ruthless pursuit of reckless sinners and the more we can be satisfied in that love. Once you embrace that, really believe and put your confidence on that foundation, the more your desire for porn among many other things will fade.