

## **Pornography 'Addiction' and the web**

**David Goldfoot, PhD**

More and more individuals, predominantly adolescent and adult males, report that they have developed the habit of going to porn sites and either masturbating to the material on screen or downloading it for later use. Curiosity is one of the main reasons individuals identify for their first visit. Such individuals avoid any potential embarrassment of buying material at a convenience store, renting material from a video store, or being seen entering a porn shop. In many cases, the curiosity is quickly satisfied and the individual rarely, if ever returns, faced only with the "trail" left by his browser and the disturbing fact that many porn sites leave "cookies" and in some cases make it very difficult to stop the browser from continuing to load porn sites in the future.

Some people, however, develop a habit -- sometimes an intense habit called an obsession -- with this form of sexual release. I've had clients tell me that they find excuses to leave work or school early in order to spend entire afternoons on these sites, downloading, viewing, and, most of the time, masturbating, sometimes many times a day, to this material. Others stay up late at night to do the same thing. Still others have yielded to their obsession while at work, downloading porn on company computers or viewing it there, frequently with discovery and a resulting suspension or in being fired.

### **Is it harmless?**

Is viewing porn on the web harmless? Is it not "safe sex" in which no person will be risking a sexually transmitted disease or unwanted pregnancy? While that is ultimately a personal decision, it is the case that many clients come for help to stop this obsession because they note that it is ruining their relationships, is focusing their attention more and more on sexualized ways of thinking, and is inducing feelings of guilt and shame that reach clinical proportions.

If you are a person attempting to stop such a porn "addiction"--the jury is out on whether the word addiction is technically accurate for this behavior pattern, but those trying to quit certainly experience the problem as addictive -- then read on...

### **What can I do to stop?**

The concepts originally developed in the drug and alcohol treatment area collectively called "relapse prevention" are the first steps to learn about. They include understanding the "high risk" situations that "trigger" urges. These include identifying when you are likely to engage in this behavior and how you are feeling before you start your "chain of steps" to act out. Things like feeling lonely, upset, sexually aroused from something seen or heard earlier in the day, an opportunity, and many other conditions which increase the chances that you'll act out.

Learning how you give yourself permission do something you are trying not to do is also a central concept to learn in relapse prevention. Called a "thinking error" or a "cognitive distortion" (my patients like to call this thinking "self-bullsh\*t") this form of thinking is essential to recognize and challenge. Examples of thinking errors include "well, this isn't hurting anybody" or "nobody could ever know" or "just this last time, then I'll stop!" We tend to believe these thoughts as we move towards acting out, and then, following completion of the action, we feel terrible about "giving in."

If an individual knows about his high risk factors and his favorite thinking errors, then he can set up a "radar watch" so that he doesn't blindly keep walking into his addictive cycle of using thinking errors to keep justifying his habit.

Sometimes short-term therapy with a clinician trained in relapse prevention is the way to go.

There are also support groups, most modeled on 12-step programs, which also use relapse prevention concepts. A national self-help group called Sex Addicts Anonymous probably has a chapter near you. Check them out. [See our Links page for websites for 12-step sexual addiction help.](#)

### **What if nothing seems to work?**

If all else fails, you have several electronic options:

- Buy a software product that "locks out" X-rated sites. Have somebody else install it for you.
- Contact your Internet Provider and ask for advice about locking out sites. There are "filter" programs and sites ([try 8e6home](#)) that are available for this purpose.
- Use the computer only when somebody else is present. Change ALL habits related to isolating yourself when on the web
- Throw away your modem if you have to.

### **Test yourself**

Here's a self-help test for those using porn sites or X-rated chat rooms, etc:

- 1. I'm spending more and more time in web activities related to sexual arousal.
- 2. I feel bad about going there and want to stop, but I can't.
- 3. My spouse, girlfriend, etc. would be hurt, distressed, or would break up with me if she knew what I was doing.
- 4. I am using these sites instead of giving my relationship the time it needs.
- 5. I use these sites to escape from other problems that are bothering me

If you answered yes to item 1 and yes to at least one of the other questions, then you probably should do something about this habit. The chances that you'll satisfy your curiosity and stop is low. The chance that the habit will become a serious issue in your life is pretty high.

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