

STRATEGIES FOR RECOVERY & RELATIONSHIP HEALING

The Porn Trap

The Essential Guide to Overcoming
Problems Caused by Pornography

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 HarperCollins e-books

Dedicated to the men and women

who generously shared their stories and

paved the way for others to heal

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Introduction

I don't like alcohol. I've never used drugs. I don't like tobacco. That's not my thing. My thing is porn.

—ALEX

Twenty-five years ago, we'd never have written a book on pornography. Back in the 1980s when our practices treating sex, intimacy, and relationship problems were just getting started, we truthfully weren't that concerned about pornography. Like many others in our field, we felt that while porn was often crude and degrading, most of it was essentially harmless. In fact, when we would go to sex therapy trainings and read journals and materials in the field, it was often suggested that X-rated videos and pornographic stories were something we could recommend to our clients to help them become more intimate with their partners.

But our view on pornography began to change in the mid-1990s. It was then that we started seeing a troubling increase in the number of clients coming to us with porn-related problems that were interfering with their ability to maintain healthy relationships. It soon became clear how easily sexual interests and desires could be twisted by pornography, away from real intimacy, and toward technological devices, people, and situations that didn't actually exist. Porn's emphasis had moved from helping couples become more sexually intimate with each other to arousing the user to have a sexual relationship *with it*.

That's an important distinction: unlike many early erotic videos, magazines, and books that were produced to help spice up lovemaking for couples, porn began to offer *itself* as the object of desire. Today's porn teaches users to think only about body parts and specific sexual actions, robbing them of the ability to experience romance, passion, and emotional and physical closeness with a real partner. *competes* with partners as a sexual outlet.

NOT A HARMLESS FANTASY

In the ten years since we noted growing problems with porn among our own clients, the sheer volume of porn has grown exponentially, as has the ease of getting access to it. As a result, the number of people across the United States and in the world who have developed—and are developing—problems with it has been increasing substantially. Couples and families break up over porn. Single people say their preoccupation with it makes them feel less capable of establishing monogamous, long-term intimate relationships. Self-identified sexual addicts who have spent years in successful recovery relapse with porn, often in more destructive ways than ever before.

Because using porn often involves high levels of dishonesty and secrecy, those who are caught using it often say they feel isolated, ashamed, depressed, phony, morally compromised, and even in some cases, suicidal. Many are angry, irritable, and unable to sleep. Some tell us porn is leading them on a dangerous path into illegal and risky activities, such as viewing child pornography, having affairs, having anonymous sex at adult bookstores, hiring prostitutes, and viewing porn at work. What we have found really troubling is that many of our clients confide that they are unable to stop using pornography even when they are aware of the negative consequences it is having on their lives. As with alcohol, drugs, or cigarettes, this is one of the signs of a true addiction.

Most porn users we've counseled or spoken with are surprised at how easily porn transformed from an occasional diversion or fantasy to a habitual problem that has the potential to destroy almost every aspect of their *real* lives. What began as fun, escapist sexual entertainment, or a brief but thrilling visit to a taboo world, became a trap. Like quicksand, pornography sucked them in so steadily and quietly that they often didn't even notice they were sinking. For some, porn swallowed up their whole lives, dragging down their relationships, their jobs, their self-esteem, and even their dreams and desires.

But it isn't only those caught in the porn trap whose lives are torn apart by it. The intimate partners of pornography users also seek our counseling. These clients express concern about either being pressured into sexual activities they don't want to be involved in or being sexually ignored. Some feel ridiculed about their bodies, appearance, or sexual performance, which leads them to feel less sexual, both with their partner and in general.

The depth of the problem on the partners of porn users was driven home to us when we learned that two-thirds of the members of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers reported that compulsive Internet use had played a significant role in divorces in 2002 and that well over 50 percent of those cases involved pornography. Eight years earlier, pornography played almost no role in divorce.

Intimate partners not only worry about whether they can continue to live with the porn user, they also often worry about their children being exposed to porn. Their fears are real—it is not uncommon for children to discover a parent's porn stash or mimic a parent's attitudes about sexual behavior and pornography. And if one parent is regularly using porn and the other feels demeaned by it, a child can grow up with a confused sense of what is sexually appropriate and healthy. Partners often feel emotionally abandoned, powerless, and unable to help themselves or their children. Clearly, the porn trap doesn't just trap the user.

WHAT HAS CHANGED?

Nearly all the people who experience porn-related problems say that the ready availability of pornography on the Internet and other electronic devices is at least partially responsible. Porn's promise of easy, commitment-free sexual gratification can be just too hard to resist when pornographic pictures, videos, chats, and games are only a mouse or remote click away, any time, day or night. Our high-tech world allows people to access porn anonymously, without having to face a salesperson knowing they're renting or buying X-rated materials.

Thirty years ago, getting your hands on pornography required time, money, and effort. Today it takes time, money, and effort to *get away from porn*. With unsolicited e-mails, deceptive links, and pop-up windows, porn can make its way into our lives whether we want it to or not. As one man said, “You no longer have to go looking for porn, porn is looking for you!”

Just a generation ago, only a small minority of people would have been considered regular porn users; today porn reaches an unprecedented number of people of all ages and from all walks of life. And it reaches them 365 days a year, 24/7. In the United States alone, forty million people visit Internet porn sites at least once a month. Some visit for only a few minutes at a time, while others stay for hours on a regular basis. A whopping 25 percent of all daily Internet search engine requests and 3 percent of all downloads are for pornography.

As you might expect, most regular porn users are male (75–85 percent), but the number of females using porn has been growing in recent years. You may be shocked to learn—we know we we—that youth under the age of eighteen have become one of the largest consumer groups of porn. With this earlier start, it’s no wonder that people are getting hooked faster, more seriously, and in greater numbers than ever before.

WHY WE WROTE THIS BOOK

Seeing the growing impact porn was having on the lives of our clients and listening to their painful and touching stories, we knew we had to do something more to help them than we were able to do in our traditional practice. We began to research the issue and quickly found that the number of people with pornography-related problems was growing rapidly and their problems were becoming increasingly severe. What used to be a small problem for relatively few people had grown to a societal issue that was spilling over and causing problems in the lives of countless everyday people. We asked other therapists, especially sex and relationship therapists, about their experiences, and found that they had seen the same trend—seeing very few clients with pornography problems a decade earlier, but seeing it become a central issue in their practices today.

We began to look for articles and books that could help our clients, but found a lack of information we thought would be helpful. Research on pornography’s long-term effects has not been a priority in our society. Our culture tends to avoid discussing sexual issues openly and seriously. Most of the studies that have been done focus narrowly on relatively brief exposures to mild forms of porn trying to determine whether pornography causes sexual violence. And none of the research included porn use in natural settings, where it is usually accompanied by masturbation. In addition, we found only a handful of studies that dealt with the effect of porn use on an intimate relationship or an intimate partner.

As sex and relationship therapists, we know that pornography use is a relationship issue. Porn affects the user’s inner life (the relationship he has with himself), as well as the interactions he has with his partner and other family members. Regular porn use often interferes with a person’s ability to maintain good self-esteem and experience mutually fulfilling sexual intimacy with a partner. Dealing with pornography is not solely about stopping a behavior or overcoming an addiction. It also involves reclaiming a sense of personal integrity and manifesting attitudes and behaviors that promote healthy sexual intimacy. Nothing we found in our research discussed pornography use and its repercussions

with this type of emphasis.

Since we couldn't find the kind of resource that we felt our own clients and others needed, we decided to write something that would fill in the gap. After many conversations with our colleagues and a thorough study of the professional literature, we began to put together a plan for *The Porn Trap*. We set out to write a book that would plainly and compassionately address pornography issues from a self-esteem and relationship-based perspective—presenting stories, ideas, and insights from real people who have dealt with porn problems, and providing the wisdom of counseling professionals.

In order to protect and honor the confidentiality of our clients, we advertised for interviewees and also talked to volunteers who were referred to us by other therapists. As the interview process got underway, we were impressed by the courage and openness of our contacts. They were willing to share very intimate stories of pain and healing out of a desire to help others escape the trap. Rob, for example, told us he hoped sharing his story would spare others the pain he went through getting caught with child pornography on his computer, and subsequently losing his job, his marriage, and the respect of his family and friends. “Pornography is not only an individual problem, it’s a social and cultural problem. I hope my story helps someone else so that they won’t feel so alone and ashamed, and will get the help they need.”

We also gathered information from intimate partners of people overcoming porn problems. Karen, a twenty-eight-year-old beautician, spoke of feeling traumatized when she found her new husband’s hidden computer file containing sexually provocative pictures of young girls. “The idea of having a child with him suddenly scared me,” she said. “What does it mean that he is turned on by that stuff? My trust level fell to zero. It’s taken us several years and a lot of counseling for me to feel safe going forward with our plans to start a family together.”

Finally, we interviewed therapists, addiction specialists, and pastoral counselors who address pornography problems in both individual and group therapy settings. Their generosity sharing their unique strategies and techniques makes this book an even more valuable tool to those in trouble.

We hope that *The Porn Trap* helps break the silence surrounding pornography for anyone whose life has been damaged by porn. This book can be your lifeline for getting out of the trap, helping you confront your problems honestly, without judgment or shame, and providing you with the information you need to make your own decisions about if, how, and when to quit using porn.

WHAT TO EXPECT

We chose the name *The Porn Trap* because it communicates the danger that pornography use can hold. It also describes how many people feel when they realize pornography is causing them serious problems, but don’t want to or can’t give it up. What’s more, the analogy helps us to organize the stories, research, exercises, and tips into a structure that mirrors the healing journey many people go through—from the first time they see and experiment with porn, to sinking deeper into the trap, to feeling desperate, and eventually discovering how to free themselves.

Throughout the book you will read true stories of people addicted to pornography, or otherwise hurt by it, who decided to change their lives. They often had to endure a lot of suffering before they

could see their situations clearly and be ready to make a change. Their stories are dramatic and may at times be difficult to read. They demonstrate how easy and exciting it can be to get sexually involved with porn in spite of having mixed feelings about it. But in the end, these stories are hopeful and uplifting, showing how even the worst porn-related problems can be overcome with the proper knowledge and support.

Most of the stories and quotes in the book come from the interviews we did with porn users and their partners. We have changed names and identifying details to protect confidentiality. In some cases, we have edited material and created composite accounts based on our professional expertise in order to clarify their remarks.

This book addresses a full range of pornography-related problems. It can be helpful to you whether you have just begun using porn, have a well-established habit, or are already involved in a recovery program to quit using it for good. *The Porn Trap* provides an understanding of porn addiction with simple but effective healing strategies. The book is designed to help you:

- identify and evaluate the impact of porn,
- decide whether it's time to quit using porn,
- learn how to stop using porn and deal with cravings,
- rebuild self-esteem and restore personal integrity,
- heal a relationship harmed by porn use, and
- develop a thriving and satisfying sexual life without porn.

In the old Tarzan movies, when someone fell into quicksand, Tarzan would swing in on a rope and rescue them. This book is the closest we can get to offering you a Tarzan-like rescue. Here you'll not only find the tools to pull yourself out of the trap, but you'll also learn how to stay out. We're not going to lie: becoming porn-free, if that's what you decide, can be a really difficult thing to do. Just like an alcoholic drying out, you'll probably experience denial, cravings, and setbacks that will need to be addressed. Even with this book, we recommend seeking the support of a trained therapist or counselor who can help you figure out what course of action to take and navigate it successfully.

You can read this book privately for your own personal needs, or you can use it as a springboard to spark discussion with others. You can read it to understand the gamut of problems caused by pornography, or use it as a guide for making change now or sometime in the future. If you are already involved in counseling, a faith-based program, or a twelve-step addiction recovery program, *The Porn Trap* can be used as an additional tool to strengthen and enhance your healing journey.

If you are not a porn user yourself, but someone you care about is involved with it, *The Porn Trap* will help you feel less alone as you approach your own issues. With this book you'll learn how to engage in constructive dialogue and begin to work together from a place of common and mutual understanding.

We have written this book because we believe you have a right to healthy, love-based sexual expression, and that today's multimedia-driven pornography is interfering with that right. While pornography may promise sexual freedom, it can eventually deliver a form of sexual oppression—robbing people of sexual innocence, sexual self-determination, and the skills to experience healthy

relationships based on a loving connection with a real partner. Moving beyond porn's influence can return your personal freedom and give you solid footing to enjoy your life.

I

Becoming Aware

*Learn to recognize the counterfeit coins
that may buy you just a moment of pleasure,
but then drag you for days
like a broken man
behind a farting camel.*

—HAFIZ, 14TH CENTURY SUFI POET

The Hidden Power of Porn

Tony, a twenty-five-year-old grad student, stared out the window and shook his head in disbelief at how quickly he had sunk into the porn trap. “My live-in girlfriend and I were going through a rough time in our relationship. She left town for a few days and I decided to look at porn on the Internet to satisfy me. Up ’til then I’d never been interested in porn. I began on a Friday afternoon looking at the free peeks. By Saturday I was into the sex chats, and by Sunday I had joined a swinger site. One thing led to another—a domino effect. Two weeks later my girlfriend looked in our computer log and saw what I’d been up to. I lied to her about it, said I had been doing government research of all things. A month later she left me. I never realized that porn had the power to upend my life the way that it did.”

Marie, a forty-three-year-old accountant and single mother of two, was surprised by the physical power porn seemed to have over her. “For a long time porn was boring to me. I’d sneak a peek at magazines and videos on rare occasions. Then I discovered masturbating to porn. It was a lot more thrilling than just looking at it. I started craving porn constantly, like a drug. Not wanting my kids to find my porn I switched over to using the Internet. That was a big mistake. On the Internet I could find porn in an instant. The faster I would click the mouse, the more I could see. One night my brain went on overload with the visual stimulation. Next thing I knew, I climaxed. No hands. The computer had control of my mind and body. It was frightening how much power porn had over me.”

Dave is a pastor in his fifties, who despite being married to a woman he loves, defines himself as a porn addict. He is still struggling to come to terms with the power porn had over his life, costing him his former job as a school counselor. “Porn was the best sex I ever had. Tremendous rush. I didn’t have to emotionally connect. I could pick and choose. I chased the golden-haired Eve. It was all very attractive, very mysterious, very cool. But it wasn’t cool when I got caught. Porn has a destructive side. I lost my job and nearly my wife. If you keep doing porn long enough it will ruin your life. I don’t think the power of porn is really understood by most people.”

For many years, using porn has been the shameful secret many of us have shared in common but no one has talked about. Most women are terrified to admit to using porn. Most men assume that other

men do it at least occasionally. After all, “it’s a guy thing,” since at least three out of four porn users are men. But porn still has a sleaziness about it. It’s not something you tell someone on a first or even a fifteenth date. Definitely no one talks about it in a job interview. You certainly can’t tell your mother, although if you are a male your father might expect it. You may bring it up with your friends but probably only in a joking manner.

Most of us would be loathe to think of ourselves as porn addicts or even porn users. After all, we all have a picture in our minds of the typical porn user, and he (or she) doesn’t look or act like us. On the other hand, chances are we probably wouldn’t picture a grad student, an accountant, or a pastor as a porn user either. But that’s who uses porn. Regular people. People like you and me and the person sitting next to you on the plane and your doctor and your mechanic.

Despite their differences, what Tony, Marie, and Dave share, as do most of the people we have interviewed for this book, is their shock at the destructive power of pornography, something they originally got involved in because it seemed simply to promise a harmless good time. “How,” they wonder, “can something that isn’t a drug, isn’t an extramarital affair, isn’t actually sex with someone else, cause such devastating problems as divorce, getting fired, and not being able to get sexually aroused by a real live partner?”

The truth is, using pornography can make you go blind—blind to the power and control it can eventually have over your life. Though we might stare intensely at it, we don’t see, often can’t see, *how and why* it is so powerful. Did you know that porn can actually rewire your brain? That’s one reason why some people who use porn become preoccupied with sex, develop problematic sexual desires, and experience sexual functioning problems. And if your brain has been changed, it can be difficult to see clearly exactly what is happening and how it’s affecting your life.

Porn is an extremely alluring and compelling “product,” capable of delivering sexual pleasure while at the same time setting one up for great pain. Porn is like other controlled substances, such as alcohol and cigarettes, that promise good times, sometimes deliver them, but can end up causing much more damage than pleasure. And unlike booze and tobacco, no one warns us of the potential side effects.

Most of us come to porn unprepared. In school, they teach us about the dangers of alcohol, drug cigarettes, even overeating. But chances are, you’ve never heard a teacher discuss the problems associated with using porn. Porn magazines, books, videos, and Web sites do not come with a list of ingredients educating us about their production standards or potency. When’s the last time you saw a Surgeon General’s warning on a porn product?

Our goal is to help you learn more about porn and the kind of power it can exert over you physiologically, emotionally, and socially. As we explore porn with you, it is our hope that whether you are currently using porn or not, or are the intimate partner of a user, you will begin to understand why porn can end up playing such a significant role in a person’s life. We also believe that the information we share and guidance we provide later in the book will empower you to succeed, if and when you decide to cut porn out of your life for good. Perhaps most important, we hope that what you learn here will help you become more forgiving, both toward yourself and others whose lives have been hurt by porn problems.

Pornography is a difficult and complex issue. It takes time, and a lot of discussion and self-

reflection, to gain an accurate understanding of what it means to you. The more you know about it, the more likely it is that you will be able to talk about porn concerns with others and avoid being stuck in its trap. Free of porn, you can create a life filled with healthy sexuality, satisfying intimate relationships, and a better sense of self-value.

PORN DEFIES CLEAR DEFINITION

In the 1950s *Superman* television series, the townspeople regularly gathered on the street, pointed up at the sky, and exclaimed, “It’s a bird. It’s a plane. It’s *Superman!*” If only it were that easy to clearly identify what pornography is. It’s hard to think of anything more difficult to classify.

Our general sense of what porn is can differ dramatically depending on whether we like it and use it, or fear it and think it should be banned. Porn advocates are quick to call it “harmless visual stimuli,” “free speech,” and “eye candy,” while porn critics call it an “insult to sex,” a “cultural pollution,” and a “sex-crime manual.”

Depending on circumstances and perspectives, porn can function as lots of things: a product, a fantasy, a sexual stimulant, a sin, free speech, a game, a drug, a sexual competitor, a guide, a show, a sexual predator, a perversion, art, a crime, or a joke. We can experience porn as one thing at one time in our lives and another thing later on. Or we can relate to it as several things at once. Our confusion about what to call porn contributes to its hidden power and ability to influence our lives. Without a clear consensus on what it is, as a society we are constantly debating its nature instead of studying its impact and agreeing upon the smartest and healthiest way to deal with it.

In addition, each one of us has our own sense of whether a specific drawing, photo, book, or film is pornography. Whether we see something as pornographic depends on a number of factors, such as our age, sex, upbringing, and cultural background, as well as on how porn impacts us physiologically, emotionally, and morally. This is why couples fight, for example, over whether the *Sports Illustrated* magazine’s annual swimsuit edition is pornography.

More than forty years ago, Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart made the now famous comment about pornography, “I can’t define it, but I know it when I see it.” While his comment generated a few chuckles given Justice Stewart’s notoriously poor eyesight, it brought home the point that porn is in the eye of the beholder. What this means is that when something looks and feels like pornography to you, for you in that moment, it is.

We describe pornography as *any sexually explicit material that is intended to be or is used as a sexual outlet*. Our definition doesn’t rest on how sexually graphic porn is or on the nature of its subject matter, but rather on the *type of relationship* a person develops with the sexual material. Unlike sex education materials, which provide accurate information about sex, and erotic art and literature, which are produced to celebrate the human body and sexuality, the goal of porn is to sexually arouse and, ultimately, involve the consumer in a sexual relationship *with it*.

Porn’s power comes from its ability to provide an experience of sexual stimulation coupled with immediate gratification. Porn asks the potential user, “Why bother with setting the mood, meeting the needs of another person, or even taking off your clothes, when sex can be just a mouse or remote

THE SUPER HIGHWAY TO PORN

The word “pornography” comes from the Greek words “porno” and “graphie,” which literally translate into “the writings of or about prostitutes.” Since its emergence as a product for public consumption several hundred years ago, pornography has continually evolved in form and potency based on new inventions. It got its first big push from the printing press, and then continued to expand its offerings and range with the availability of each new device from still and moving cameras to television, video players, computers, and other digital technologies, such as iPods and cell phones. The Internet has brought porn to your laptop in more ways than one.

As the road to porn has evolved into a superhighway, with multiple routes taking you to all kinds of new places at ever-increasing speeds, porn has remained true to its original association with prostitution. It consistently delivers whatever sexual activity the consumer wants, no matter how extreme, without having to take into consideration the feelings and sexual needs of anyone else. Like prostitution, porn avoids important aspects of human sexuality, such as displays of genuine affection, communication between partners, foreplay, afterplay, and concerns about safety and the consequences of sexual activity. In his 1989 book, *Pornography*, University of Alabama media researcher Dolf Zillman wrote, “Pornographic scripts dwell on sexual engagements of parties who have just met, who are in no way attached or committed to one another, and who will part shortly, never to meet again.”

Over time, porn has dramatically increased in power and effectiveness as a sexual stimulant. For example, sexual drawings were like a dirt road on which a horse-drawn buggy carried sexually explicit images. Then photographs provided the asphalt, allowing users to get to sexual arousal more quickly and with fewer potholes. As pornographic films and videos emerged on the scene, the highway of porn really started rolling, finally reaching concrete superhighway status by merging with interactive chat, live feeds, Web cams, and specialized electronically coordinated sex toys. These new changes have taken porn to new levels of realism and immediacy. Pornography has evolved beyond sexual fantasy into a world of electronically facilitated sexual experience. No matter what on-ramp you take, you can get off almost anywhere these days. And with these new powers porn can easily compete with a real life partner for sexual attention.

One of the reasons so many men and women have “porn problems” these days is that there’s so much of it everywhere, and it is easy to access and afford. It has more of an opportunity to become something of significance. There are more than 400 million pages of pornography on the Internet. As Ned, a sixty-five-year-old single man who looks more like someone’s grandfather than a guy struggling to overcome a porn habit, told us, “I’ve seen pornography go from scarcity to abundance in the last fifty years. I used to have to go out of my way, to special stores and theaters, to get it. Nowadays you’d have to be a clam shell on the moon to avoid coming into contact with pornography.”

Ned’s comment reflects the reality that in recent years pornography has become big business. It is not only produced and distributed by small operations, several major U.S. media corporations have gotten in on the action, and profit. Commercial porn Web sites, magazines, books, videos, DVDs, cable television, etc., generate more than \$97 billion dollars annually worldwide (an increase of 70 percent from 2003 to 2007). In the United States alone, porn revenue is larger than all combined

revenues of all professional football, baseball, and basketball franchises. And you thought athletes were bringing in the big bucks.

Today's pornography has the added advantage of easily presenting almost anything that might appeal to you. From tasteful nudes wearing lingerie to sex with a goat, it's all there. There is definitely something for everyone these days. With so much variety, porn can offer something we haven't seen or done before, something we often can't get in real life. Rob, a forty-three-year-old advertising executive and former porn user explained, "I loved having access to an unlimited amount of free pornography over the Internet. Click, click, click. Wow, there it is. I wonder if this is out there? Click, click, click. Wow, there it is!"

Given that porn presents a peephole into a taboo and forbidden world of sex, to remain effective and exciting in a time when people are being inundated with explicit sexual imagery, porn has to continually push the outside limits of what it reveals. Kirk, a forty-eight-year-old postal clerk who gave porn up last year, shared, "Over the last thirty years I've seen porn become more explicit and edgier. The first girlie magazine I saw as a kid didn't even show pubic hair. When I first saw porn films, soft core was in. It featured a lot of simulated sex, with few or no erections, not many close-ups and dumb plots. Then came hard core, showing close-ups, intercourse, oral sex, and ejaculation, and no plots. Before I quit, what had become 'standard porn' was starting to bother me. Rough blow jobs, facial ejaculation, anal sex, coercion, sex with kids, crude talk, and kinky stuff were commonplace. I couldn't believe what was turning me on."

PORN DELIVERS

Porn's hidden power is not limited to its elusive nature, availability, and compelling styles and formats, but is also based on its ability to produce extremely pleasurable experiences. Let's look closer at these experiences and find out how porn is able to deliver them.

Instant Sexual Turn-On

One of the turn-ons of porn is that it does just that—turns you on. It is engineered to turn us on and then get us off. In this respect, porn has traits in common with sex toys, aphrodisiacs, and medication like Viagra. Porn stimulates the sexual organs of the user, increasing blood flow and in turn, sensations. However, unlike other sexual stimulant products, porn gets stored in your mind, making it possible to recall it for some sexual stimulation at a later time. The mental nature of porn makes it possible to be "using" it without anyone knowing but you.

Most types of pornography come at sex "genitals first," focusing directly and repetitively on images of sexual body parts and sexual activities. Porn's single-minded focus on sex is accomplished by avoiding anything that might in real life get in the way of arousal, such as an argument with a partner, a ringing cell phone, concern about work, or even a tender feeling. As Brian, a nineteen-year-old man who had traded a childhood skateboarding hobby for a porn hobby, told us, "When it comes to sexual arousal, porn doesn't beat around the bush—it gives you the bush!"

Porn is not swallowed or rubbed on the skin. It enters the body directly through your senses, such

as your eyes and ears. This gives it a direct link to your central nervous system, specifically, the pleasure centers in your brain. Porn provides instant arousal, a real enticement in these days of “give to me *now!*” The physiological changes that happen when using porn happen almost immediately: your heart beats faster, your breathing gets shallower, and you start to feel a throbbing in your genitals.

Studies have found that just by being exposed to graphic sexual material, males get erections and females lubricate. The reactions are instinctual. Porn is so powerful as a sexual stimulant that the physiological changes can happen automatically even when the viewer doesn't like the idea of porn or feels uncomfortable with some of its content. In terms of triggering a sexual response, our eyes see no difference between sex on the screen and sex in real life. So as far as your sexual arousal system goes when you are watching porn, *you are there.*

Pornography's effectiveness as a sexual turn-on also appears to relate to its ability to stimulate the production of testosterone, the hormone of sexual desire. We know that male monkeys produce dramatically more testosterone when they watch other monkeys copulate. Testosterone is not only directly associated with sexual desire and libido, it also relates to sexual motivation and aggressiveness. Even though both men and women produce it, the average adult male body produces about ten to fifteen times the amount the adult female body does. So even though you're not ingesting porn directly into your body, simply seeing and hearing the sexual images and sounds most likely changes your hormone level, leading you to feel hornier and more assertive in meeting your sexual needs.

James, a twenty-three-year-old college student who spends more time looking at porn than socializing and meeting new people, told us, “Pornography is pure excitement—what a turn on! You don't have to have a girlfriend. It's great for getting your rocks off.” And Kyle, another college student, adds, “It's everywhere, it works, and it breaks the boredom of regular masturbation.”

Drug-like Euphoria

“Oh come on,” you're probably thinking. “How can porn be like a drug? I can't smoke it, drink it, or shoot it up.” But the fact is that porn can have as powerful an effect on your body and brain as cocaine, methamphetamine, alcohol, and other drugs. It actually changes your brain chemistry. Porn stimulates an area of the brain known as the “hedonic highway,” or median forebrain, which is filled with receptors for the neurotransmitter dopamine.

Dopamine is released when you get sexually aroused. It is also released by other pleasurable activities, such as kissing, intercourse, smoking a cigarette, or taking other drugs. Porn causes the dopamine production in your system to spike. This dramatic increase in dopamine produces a drug-like high some researchers believe is most similar to the high caused by crack cocaine. Sam, a shy young man in real life, explained the effect like this, “Doing porn felt like an incredible rush of life blowing through my veins and the good part was I could always go back for more.”

Using porn also increases production of other “feel-good” chemicals in our brain, such as adrenaline, endorphins, and serotonin. Unfortunately, by overloading your brain with pleasure chemicals, porn reduces your body's own ability to produce and effectively release them under normal life circumstances. This is one of the reasons a porn user may find himself needing higher levels of

sexual stimulation and excitement to become aroused and satisfied. Ted, a thirty-year-old stockbroker shared, “No matter how much porn I looked at, my mind was always ready for more.”

Sedative and opiate drug-like changes can also occur. When porn use is combined with masturbation, the end result is orgasm. And we all know the power of orgasm to create pleasure, numb pain, and generate a state of deep relaxation.

Porn’s power to produce experiences of excitement, relaxation, and escape from pain make it *highly addictive*. Over time you can come to depend on it to feel good and require it so you don’t feel bad. Cravings, preoccupations, and out-of-control behavior with using it can become commonplace. Porn sex can become your greatest need. If you have been using porn regularly to “get high,” withdrawal from porn can be as filled with agitation, depression, and sleeplessness as detoxing from alcohol, cocaine, and other hard drugs. In fact, people in porn recovery take an average of eighteen months to heal from the damage to their dopamine receptors alone.

Power Trip

Nothing beats a feeling of being powerful and in control, especially in something as instinctive and primal as sex. And porn delivers. Using porn as a source of entertainment can give you *the illusion* of being powerful and in control of what is happening. Tim, a reference librarian in his late forties, really got off on the power of porn. He says, “Porn makes me feel like a pasha enjoying his harem. I just show up and sit there. All these women perform for me—dancing, gyrating, and showing their bodies. They’re under my control, performing *for me*.”

Steven, a twenty-nine-year-old mental-health worker, agrees. “The part I liked best about pornography was that I had control over the sexual action. I didn’t have to beg for sex. I could have sex when I wanted, with the kind of person I wanted, in exactly the way that I wanted. I didn’t have to adjust my behavior in any way. It was time for me.”

The sense of power experienced in sports like hunting can be similar to how you feel when searching for arousing pornography on the Internet, on cable TV, or in adult stores. As with capturing prey, you can look for it, circle around it, target it, and then go in for the “kill” by purchasing or downloading the porn. Some porn users tell us that the hunt and conquest feeling that blends with sexual arousal is even more satisfying than having an orgasm. Porn users can also feel quite powerful in being able to acquire free porn, secretly access it, and cover up their porn use so they won’t get caught.

One of the things many people like best about porn is that it allows them to be a voyeur, which may be a power trip of its own, since it involves something that is illegal in real life. Voyeurism is the act of achieving sexual arousal by observing an unsuspecting and nonconsenting person who is undressed, unclothed, and/or engaged in sexual activity. In the role of voyeur you get to look at things you’re not supposed to be seeing. You’re able to watch other people while they can’t see (or stop) you in return. Voyeurs have the upper hand in a relationship because, while they have the prerogative of critiquing, judging, and—with the simple click of a mouse—rejecting someone else, they don’t have to suffer being similarly scrutinized or sexually snubbed.

Of course, intellectually, we all understand that the power pornography gives us isn’t real. The

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