

LIFE MATTERS: PORNOGRAPHY AND OUR CALL TO LOVE

We are created with a desire to love and be loved. We long to be known, understood and accepted for who we are. Ultimately, God alone is capable of such perfect knowledge and love. Yet, authentic intimacy in marriage offers a glimpse of this happiness, at least in a finite way.

Pornography, in contrast, distracts us from our call to love. When we are preoccupied with pornography, our mind and heart easily lose sight of what holds real value, including those who are close to us. Instead, we start to view others through a lens of self-gratification. No one intends to trade his or her need for real love with a cheap thrill. It subtly slips away as one becomes distracted and disconnected from self, others, and the reality that one's mind and heart are changing. When someone is hooked on pornography he or she can lose the ability to be captivated by love.

Impact on Youth

Some parents think, "This will never happen to my child," but young people are particularly vulnerable to exposure to pornography. The Internet has greatly increased this vulnerability, mainstreaming access into the homes and bedrooms of American families. A broad-based 2009 survey of American youth ages 8-18 found that 84 percent have Internet access in their homes and 33 percent in their bedrooms.¹ In one survey of college students, 93 percent of young men reported that they were exposed to online pornography before age 18.² Another study found that by the time they reached the young adult years (18-26), 86 percent of young men and 31 percent of young women on college campuses reported that they have accessed pornography to some extent.³ These data certainly heighten the concern that our youth have the potential to become addicted to pornography.

Teenagers are influenced by online pornography at a time in their lives when they need healthy messages about human sexuality and the body. Research indicates that the average age of first exposure to online pornography is approximately 14 to 15.⁴ Teens experience a heightened awareness of their bodies as they grapple with their sexual desires and the importance of their peer relationships. Teens are exploring the world and testing how they measure up or fit in. They often introduce each other to sexual images in a social context. A teen's initial encounter with pornography is often unwelcome, but boys are more likely to later seek it out. Sexual desire, like our appetite for certain foods, can be conditioned through experience. It creates a road map that can start to drive desires and patterns of arousal. Pornography is not a normal part of healthy exploration. It creates a fantasy world without the risks that exist in real relationships. It can often create a sense of shame that youth connect to their sexuality. Some will move on, but generally those who became addicted started when they were teens or preteens.

Neurological Impact of Pornography

Pornography is believed to function like a "drug" that stimulates the brain. Neuroscientists point to three fundamental effects that addiction has on the brain: 1) "desensitization," a numbing of the brain's ability to experience pleasure; 2) "sensitization," an increased sensitivity to triggers and memories related to the addictive behavior; and, 3) "hypofrontality," the reduced activity of the frontal brain, decreasing impulse control and creating a negative mood.⁵ These effects remind us that pornography robs our joy, and where there is little joy, there is often never enough pleasure.

Based on recent brain imaging studies, behavioral addictions—like gambling, food, and Internet gaming—



have been found to meet the above three criteria for causing changes in brain circuitry.⁶ They are related to pornography addiction in that they are all behavioral/process addictions, as opposed to chemical addictions. Internet pornography possesses characteristics very similar to Internet gaming addiction, and could arguably be more potent, as the object of compulsion is sexual arousal. This explains why some who are trying to break their addiction to pornography report having the same type of physical "withdrawal" symptoms that are experienced by those breaking an addiction to drugs or alcohol.

Emotional Impact of Addiction

Some of the original studies of sexual addiction found common emotional factors among the families of adult sexual addicts.⁷ One of these emotional factors relates to growing up in a family that was emotionally disengaged. Thus pornography can be used as a way to feel connected and close, at least on the viewer's own terms. It can also become a "solution" to dealing with stress by seeking comfort. As this behavior continues, an individual robs himself (or herself) more and more of the opportunities to learn from difficulties and to grow in character. This cycle is reinforced by shame. Many make comparisons of themselves to others ("I must somehow be lacking") and therefore remove themselves from relying on God and others for support. Shame makes an individual more vulnerable to continue using pornography as solace from pain.

The Impact of Pornography on Marriage

A number of studies have found a correlation between pornography and an unhappy marriage. One study discovered that those who watched X-rated movies were 25 percent more likely to become divorced and 65 percent more likely to have an affair.⁸ In 2008 researchers found that 18- to 26-year-olds reported significant correlations between acceptance and use of pornography and “desires for delaying marriage, financial independence between spouses and lower levels of child centeredness.”⁹ One married man recalled his experience:

“My life almost fell apart. My wife found out that I had been struggling with lust and pornography. I lost her trust and almost lost our marriage. It was at that breaking point, when I realized that I couldn’t put my life back together on my own. A trusted group of peers challenged me to regain control of my life, to remain accountable to them and to God, and to return to a life of purity.”

The Spiritual Impact of Pornography

All addictions, and in particular pornography, affect our relationship with God, a relationship that rests largely on the development of trust and obedience in childhood. Whether or not we succeed in becoming trusting and obedient greatly impacts our openness and connection to God. Rather than trusting real affirming love, pornography creates a dependence on itself for satisfaction.

Sexuality, in which man’s belonging to the bodily and biological world is expressed, becomes personal and truly human when it is integrated into the relationship of one person to another, in the complete and lifelong mutual gift of a man and a woman (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2337).

Fathers have a particular role in supporting the family through their purity. As protectors of the family, they need to guard their own purity. If men are living purely they will be more apt to take measures to protect their children from the influences of various media. Fathers struggling with purity will be less likely to guide their family and provide leadership in the faith. As purity affects one’s motivation and willingness to receive from God, an addicted father will be less confident in leading his family. “There is a connection between purity of heart, of body, and of faith” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2518).

Our Sexual Integrity

We are created with a basic integrity, or connection, between our mind, body and spirit. In essence, what we think about impacts our behavior. What we choose to do with our bodies impacts our desires and ability to see the value of others. Our sexuality is meant to be a reminder

that we are called to love with our bodies with integrity and purity. Pornography completely distorts this meaning. It says that fantasy will make us happy.

A common root of pornography use is a need to have control in our lives, yet pornography produces sexual frustration and the desire to act out. So what we seek to achieve from pornography in the form of control ends up controlling and enslaving us. But the gift of sexuality is not meant to frustrate or enslave. It is meant to free us in a life-long relationship of complete giving to another.

The commitment and mutual respect within marriage truly fosters this freedom. It is the only context that provides a safeguard for the expression of our sexuality to be a source of peace and joy in our lives.

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¹ Victoria J. Rideout *et al.*, “Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds,” The Kaiser Family Foundation, January 2010, <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/8010.cfm> (accessed March 17, 2011).

² Chiara Sabina *et al.*, “The Nature and Dynamics of Internet Pornography Exposure for Youth,” *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 11:6 (December 2008): 691-693.

³ Jason S. Carroll *et al.*, “Generation XXX: Pornography Acceptance and Use Among Emerging Adults,” *Journal of Adolescent Research* 2:1 (2008): 6-30.

⁴ “Most children have seen pornography online,” The Brushfires Foundation, March 6, 2012, <http://brushfiresfoundation.org/2012/03/06/most-children-have-seen-pornography-online/#more-437> (accessed May 31, 2012).

⁵ N.D. Volkow *et al.*, “Addiction: Decreased Reward Sensitivity and Increased Expectation Sensitivity Conspire to Overwhelm the Brain’s Control Circuit,” *Bioessays* 32:9 (2010): 748-55.

⁶ Marnia Robinson, “Ominous News for Porn Users: Internet Addiction Atrophies Brains,” *Psychology Today*, June 25, 2011, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/cupids-poisoned-arrow/201106/ominous-news-porn-users-internet-addiction-atrophies-brains> (accessed October 1, 2011).

⁷ Patrick Carnes, *Contrary to Love, Helping the Sexual Addict* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 1994).

⁸ Daniel Weiss, “Pornography Infidelity and Divorce” *ROCK*, March 31, 2011, http://www.myrocktoday.org/default.asp?q_areaprimariyid=7&q_areasecondaryid=74&q_areatertiaryid=0&q_articleid=858 (accessed April 30, 2012)

⁹ Daniel Weiss, “Pornography U.—Emerging Adults and Pornography Use,” *ROCK*, April 6, 2011, http://www.myrocktoday.org/default.asp?q_areaprimariyid=7&q_areasecondaryid=74&q_areatertiaryid=0&q_articleid=860 (accessed April 29, 2012).



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