



Counseling Wives

Helping Them Heal After Their Husband's Porn Use

Ministry Leaders Guidebook No.4

One of the biggest lies about pornography is that it's an individual person's problem. The viewer is the only person watching it, so therefore the viewer is the only person impacted.

Unfortunately, both research and countless personal testimonies have proven that to be a lie. Several surveys found that, after discovering their husband's compulsive sexual behaviors (including pornography), wives often experience symptoms of trauma.¹ One found that 70% of participants experienced PTSD. Another found that 77% often felt violated by their spouse's sexual behaviors.² And it won't take long to find dozens of comments from hurting wives on the Covenant Eyes blog.

The most heart-wrenching of those comments come from wives who sought advice from their pastors, only to have their pain compounded. Pastors may tell the wives to just forgive their husband, forgetting that forgiveness does not mean that actions should not have consequences. Or they counsel the wives to avoid divorce at all cost even when the husband is unrepentant and outright abusive. Or they may tell her that she needs to take better physical care of herself, disregarding the myriad of biological causes for different body shapes, let alone the fact that one woman is never enough for a mind that has been trained on the variety of porn. (For stories from wives of where her church (and other) support failed her, see <https://beyondbetrayal.community/challenging-the-support-your-stories>.)

Caring for the wife, whether directly or through how you counsel her husband around his pornography use, is of utmost importance. Your care for her as a victim is a reflection of the Gospel and God's heart for justice. As former social worker and relationship coach Leslie Vernick says, "You represent God to the victim who asks for your help and justice. *Does God care about what's happened to me?* I know you want to represent Him well. And the best place to start is with compassion and care so the victim feels heard, believed, and loved."³

Since 2000, we at Covenant Eyes have been "all-in" on helping men and women break free from digital pornography. We've also been a leader in **educating** men and women about why they click where they do. This Guidebook is the fourth in a series that we've created specifically for ministry leaders who are being confronted with a growing number of people dealing with pornography. It's important to note

that this particular Guidebook focuses on wives of porn-using men, but sometimes it may be the wife using pornography and the husband feeling betrayed. Porn is, after all, not a man's issue, but a human issue.

After reading this and our other Guidebooks, you might begin to realize that the issue is big. You might start to realize that you alone don't have the time or tools to help your people! That's why we're here to help with dedicated, church-serving staff, resources like this Guidebook, and quality software. If at any point while reading this Guidebook you need a lifeline, please contact us at **church@covenanteyes.com**.

Chapter 1

Understanding Her Trauma

Because pornography is viewed as a private sin, a couple's recovery often begins in secret. They might want to protect their reputation and good standing in their church or social community. The wife might hope desperately that what she discovered was an exception, not part of an ingrained habit. Or, if it's a younger newlywed couple, they may hope that the marriage itself solves the porn problem. As such, months or even years may go by before a couple comes to you for help and counseling.

This means that wives may be at different places in their recovery. One wife may have found out about her husband's porn use recently; she may need help processing her emotions, which may be in complete flux. Another wife may be at the point of abandoning the marriage. Her bitterness and anger may be deeply ingrained by the time she comes to you. What you perceive as an overreaction to a very common sin may, in fact, be the product of years of "hope deferred" that have made her heart sick (Proverbs 13:12a).

When working with wives, whether in the form of individual or couples counseling, your first step is to identify where she is in her own recovery process.

Assessing Her Safety

One of your top priorities is to determine whether the wife and her family are in any physical danger. Counselor and researcher Lisa Taylor has identified a strong correlation between pornography use and domestic violence. While this guidebook does not address handling abusive or illegal behavior, you may want to familiarize yourself with state and local laws regarding domestic violence and be ready to support the family's safety needs during this time.

Just as there are five stages to the grieving process, researchers have identified distinct phases to recovery from betrayal trauma. The Association of Partners of Sex Addicts Trauma Specialists (APSATS) has identified the phases as the Safety and Stabilization phase, the Remembering and Mourning phase, and the Reconnecting phase.⁴ (Our model below also incorporates elements from an older model by Kristina Coop Gordon and Donald H. Baucom.⁵)

Safety and Stabilization Phase

- In this first stage, the wife will search for an understanding of why the betrayal occurred, such as whether this was a habit from childhood, or whether a traumatic event in the past makes him fear intimacy with her.
- She will experience trauma symptoms that keep her emotionally, mentally, and even physically in flux. Feelings may include fear, hurt, anger, numbness, and disbelief.
- Her biggest need is to be and feel safe. She may need help identifying what will help her feel that way.
- She may behave in ways that are uncharacteristic of her, especially while she seeks safe spaces to express her rage, sorrow, and fear.
- She may feel or even act like a “bad” Christian as she wrestles with issues like why God allowed this sin into their marriage.
- She may need help establishing (or re-establishing) barriers and boundaries (such as sleeping in a different room).
- She may need help processing her emotions, especially negative ones, without condemnation from herself or others.

Remembering and Mourning Phase

- In this stage, the wife will begin to grieve the loss of life as she knew it.
- She may tell and retell her story as she works to make sense of it.
- She may still be triggered at times, but may feel bolder and more willing to fight for her rights than she used to.

Reconnecting Phase

- She will begin moving forward with a new set of beliefs about the relationship and start putting the event behind her.
- She will come to terms with what forgiveness means for her, and how it is connected to reconciliation with her husband.
- She may be required to make changes to her relationship with her husband so that it can continue (or end, if necessary).
- She may need help understanding what God is telling her about the future of her marriage. (Be careful not to pressure her into either staying or getting divorced. God may lead one woman to end her bad marriage, and call another to stay in it. That is ultimately between her and God.)
- She may reframe her story from the perspective of a survivor and a thriver.

Note that traversing these stages is not a linear process, nor does it guarantee the marriage will be healed. By the time a couple approaches you, for example, the wife may be in the Reconnecting phase:

- She may believe that her husband will never successfully quit porn, that he's an unrepentant liar, and that it's time for her to give up.
- Forgiveness may feel like an impossibility for her until she is physically separated from her husband through divorce.
- Counseling may be the last-ditch effort to salvage anything good from the marriage.

While you will need to reinforce Biblical truth in love and help her set boundaries at all stages, each stage will require a different level of care. For example, the Safety and Stabilization phase is not time to address any sins or need for growth in the wife's life: though if she is dealing with her trauma through dangerous coping mechanisms this will need to be brought up early. Identifying and helping her move past any sin or behavior that has her stuck *beyond* her trauma may be appropriate for the Reconnecting phase, though not at the cost of ignoring unrepentant porn use on his part (see Chapter 4 on addressing her behaviors).

Chapter 2

Answering Questions and Dismantling Myths

As you counsel a wife through her betrayal trauma, listen for the lies she believes about porn use and pray for wisdom on how to gracefully counteract them with science, psychology, and the Gospel. We've included answers and rebuttals to some of the most common questions and lies here.

Why does he look at porn?

There are many reasons men watch porn. In some cases, the porn use stems from childhood abuse. In others, he simply stumbled across porn at a young age, and was not prepared to deal with it. One study reports that 93% of boys are exposed to Internet porn before the age of 18.⁶ This early exposure almost inevitably leads to a struggle with pornography into adulthood. Regardless, chances are high that he has been watching pornography for years—probably long before he ever met his wife—and his brain may have literally rewired itself to only be turned on by porn.

There are more immediate causes, or “triggers,” to consider as well. Work stress, a sense of futility, a fight, a revealing image on Instagram, even something as simple as being tired: all of these can act as triggers that lead him to turn to porn. For that matter, watching porn may itself lead to a vicious cycle of watching more porn to comfort himself in his shame.

You can read more about the reasons men watch porn, and learn tips for counseling them, in *Men and Porn: Why They Watch and How to Help*.

Regardless of the reasons a husband watches porn, one thing is important to reiterate to the wife: His use of pornography is not her fault. That's true even if one of her behaviors could be called a trigger. Everyone experiences stress; everyone experiences rejection. Even if he claims that he watches porn because his wife won't have sex with him, or some sin she commits against him, *he is responsible for his own actions*. (We'll discuss how to handle the wife's own sins and unhealthy coping mechanisms in Chapter 4.)

Why does he prefer porn to sex with his wife?

Some men seem to prefer looking at pornography over intimacy with their wives. There are a few reasons for this. First, some men crave respect and measure their own worth in terms of adequacy. Sometimes they fear really being known because it will result in the wife discovering his defects. Porn and masturbation may feel like safer alternatives to him than sex with his wife because he knows that porn girls will never say "No"—never discover his inadequacies—and he never has to worry about meeting their needs.

There's a neurological side as well. The chemical vasopressin, which is released during the sexual act, bonds the man to his sexual partner.⁷ With repeated pornography use, he is bonding himself to images on a screen. Given that many men were exposed to pornography during childhood, he likely chemically bonded with the women of pornography long before his wife entered the picture.

To those addicted to pornography the "intensity" of the experience of surfing porn (created by a huge, but damaging, neurochemical hit) becomes what they crave. This intensity, much of which is created through novelty, is not reproducible in marital sex.

In other words, a wife may not be "enough" because his repeated porn use has increased his tolerance for chemical rushes in the brain. As a result, monogamous sex doesn't excite his brain. Increasingly, young men report experiencing erectile dysfunction with their wives or girlfriends because of this retraining.⁸ No woman,

no matter how she looks, or how available she's willing to be, can give a man the variety pornography does *because she is only one woman*.

Remind the wife that she does not need to “become enough.” The husband needs to rewire his mind to make her his standard of beauty and desirability again. Some women carry a great deal of shame around having tried to compete with porn in (and sometimes outside) the bedroom. Consider letting her know that trying to recreate the porn experience only reinforces the addictive neural pathways in his brain. This may help her realize that she doesn't have to compete; rather, he needs to heal. Then, when she's ready, the couple can explore the process of sexual reintegration built on intimacy.

Why does the husband blame the wife?

Like all those struggling with an addiction, male porn users exhibit distorted thinking and a distressing lack of empathy. One of the most common forms of “cognitive distortion”— along with minimizing, rationalizing, and justifying—is blaming. Thus, men will claim that if their spouse were prettier or thinner or more open to sex or less of a nag, that they wouldn't need to turn to the fantasy that pornography provides. Even if men don't say these things, their wives will often wonder such things about themselves. Frequently wives will tie their own self-worth to their husbands' opinions of them. A decrease in self-esteem is common after a betrayal; a 2015 study found that 96% of the 73 respondents reported that their body image had been negatively impacted by discovery of the betrayal. When asked to rate their pain, around their damaged body image, on a scale of 0 to 100, 70% rated it above 50. Many of these women were already years into their healing journey.⁹

When you hear a man blaming his wife, understand he is trying to justify his addiction and simultaneously protect himself from the shame that accompanies sexual sin. If he is not ready to take responsibility for his own behavior, “he will say anything to convince [his wife], and even himself, that he does not have a problem. Blaming [her] is an easy way to save face,” explains Ella Hutchinson.¹⁰

Should a wife just forgive her husband's porn use?

Porn causes serious personal, relational and societal harm. Before counseling on forgiveness, consider what Biblical justice may look like within each individual relationship. Prioritizing justice is helpful for a few reasons.

First, for the traumatized victims of this sin (particularly the wife, but there may be other victims), justice is a necessary part of their healing. Research shows that people heal faster when the community validates that there were wrongs done to them.¹¹

Justice is helpful for the porn viewer as well. Porn use *should* come with consequences. Research shows that addicts who suffer serious negative consequences are much more likely to give up their addiction than those who do not.¹²

Still, are we not commanded to forgive each other (Matthew 6:12)? Yes, of course; and it will be important for a wife's long-term mental well-being to forgive her husband. However, even as you help her work towards forgiveness, remember a few things:

- Forgiveness, especially of betrayal, is a long process, not an event, which requires grieving of the pain and a deliberate decision to set aside the desire to retaliate.
- She may have layers of anger and bitterness built up, possibly over the course of years. Before she can get to the point of forgiveness, you may have to help her work through these emotions first.
- Forgiveness is for her own spiritual health and healing and does not mean trusting or staying with the one who betrayed her. Trust should only be given to those who have earned it. A repentant husband can rebuild that trust, though it will take time.
- Forgiveness does NOT mean she should just "forgive and forget," nor does it mean that she should be required to tolerate the behavior in the future. She has the right to set boundaries and to require that he stops using porn. While she needs to understand that his recovery will take time, she also has the right to enforce consequences when boundaries are crossed. Setting boundaries is important, and we cover this topic in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Setting Boundaries

Often, when trying to repair a relationship broken by pornography use, one person feels responsible for all of the healing and ends up resenting it, while the other person doesn't take on enough responsibility and becomes self-centered and controlling.

As such, it's vital to help couples, especially those who desire to heal their relationship, to establish relational "boundaries." Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend describe a boundary as a personal property line, the line where you end and someone else begins.¹³ A boundary defines what is the wife's responsibility (her feelings, attitudes, choices, and behaviors), and what is her husband's responsibility.

Creating good boundaries, which will usually be set by the wife but may be set by the husband as well, will help him quit porn and help her decide whether he has become trustworthy. Although it is normal for a wife's heart to lag behind his behavior change, Vickie Tiede explains that the husband's behaviors should become her "trust barometer."¹⁴

As you counsel a couple, emphasize the importance of good boundaries in helping him to kick his porn use, helping her to regain a sense of safety and helping the relationship to heal. Many couples have a good sense of what's needed. According to one study, the top boundaries adopted by couples were:

- attend counselling (81%)
- adopt technology accountability (77%)
- put limits on media viewing (71%)
- cease acting out behaviors (71%)¹⁵

Wives frequently have other boundaries they want in place to help ease their anxiety, many of which fall into the category of “greater transparency.”

It’s important to note that boundaries are *not* about punishing the husband for bad behavior: though the cognitive distortions of addiction may make it seem that way to him. For the husband, boundaries instead provide a concrete way to avoid relapse and rebuild the trust he has broken. For the wife, boundaries are about structuring the relationship so she does not have to take on responsibilities that are not hers (such as “policing” him), and establishing space so she can heal. Without boundaries, personal and relational healing will be much more difficult, if not impossible.

Physical boundaries

There are times when physical separation is important. For many couples, this means a period of abstinence while both partners recover (and in fact, it’s considered a best practice in many of the best porn/sex addiction treatment models). The wife may need to tell her husband, “I cannot be sexually close with you until I see that you are serious about rebuilding genuine intimacy.” Your role as a pastor will be to help the couple understand that a period of abstinence may be an important step to healing for them both, and to help them find other ways to rebuild intimacy (emotional, spiritual, recreational, and proximal) as the wife feels safe to do so.

Other potential boundaries that can provide space for her (and the children) to heal include:

- **Protect the children:** A husband’s porn use can easily spill over into the lives of the couple’s children, especially if they use a shared computer or tablet. Have the couple install Covenant Eyes on all the devices in their home.
- **Third-party mediation:** As a pastor or spiritual leader, you may already be in the role of mediator. If you don’t feel equipped to handle the mediation yourself, prepare a list of recommended counselors or others who may be willing and able to act as the mediator. This person will ideally provide an impartial view to help both partners avoid irrational responses to specific circumstances.

- **Physical reassurance:** When the wife is ready, encourage the husband to initiate non-sexual, physical intimacy with the wife, connect with her emotionally, and pay attention to her when she talks. If she has been triggered into trauma symptoms, a (previously agreed on) touch from her husband can help bring her back to the present and regain control over her emotions.
- **Exiting volatile situations:** If the wife notices things getting heated, she should remove herself from the room. She should say, “If you speak to me that way, I will need to leave the room.” He can be counseled to do the same if she is becoming verbally abusive, though learning to tolerate and make a safe space for her anger will help with the relational healing.
- **Physical separation:** Personal space and time away is important. Depending on the state of the marriage, this time away may involve an intentional afternoon for the wife to go off on her own, or it may involve sleeping in a separate bedroom for the wife to avoid the negative emotions that come with sleeping next to her husband. If things become either abusive or unresolvable, one partner may need to move out of the house for a time, or even permanently (see Chapter 6 on Pornography and Divorce for more information).

Note: in some cases, pornography use is accompanied by physical or mental abuse. If so, the wife may not disclose this abuse right away until she feels she can trust you. We highly recommend the handbook *Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused*, edited by Covenant Eyes friend and partner Brad Hambrick, for navigating these potential situations.

Accountability boundaries

The only way for a husband to establish healthy behaviors and rebuild trust is to become accountable for his actions, demonstrating to his wife and others, over time, that he wants to change and is changing.

Early on in the establishment of boundaries, though, accountability can feel like policing behavior. Help both the husband and the wife understand that policing is not the point. She is not there to be the mother or the babysitter of her husband;

she is simply asking for openness. The more open the husband is, the less the wife will feel she needs to snoop, and the more she will feel she can trust him.

Accountability software: Recommend that the husband downloads Covenant Eyes Screen Accountability™ on all his devices. Covenant Eyes will send periodic, highly blurred screenshots of his activity to an ally of his choice. She may also want to lock down specific apps on his phone, or even have him trade in the smartphone for a non-internet-enabled phone.

Full disclosure: You may want to recommend a licensed counselor to do a guided therapeutic disclosure for the couple. This is especially true if the husband uses porn compulsively. Ella Hutchinson explains that without this step, husbands will often keep hiding, either lying outright or only telling partial truths. A guided disclosure session will help him move toward a lifestyle of full honesty.

Check-ins: Unless the wife specifically does not want to know, encourage the husband to tell her if he slips, and also give her regular updates of his recovery process.

Recovery: Encourage the husband to seek out counseling, a support group, or an accountability group. This will be critical for him to overcome his porn habit. Encourage the wife to ask about the steps he's taking to recover, what the group discussed, etc. (You may want to help the wife find a support group for herself as well.)

Verbal reassurance: Encourage the husband to really open up to the wife about his feelings. For instance: regular voluntary reassurance that he is working through things, sharing his positive and affirming thoughts about her, or not going to bed with unresolved conflict. You can also encourage him to apologize regularly to his wife: when her betrayal pain and trauma is triggered, any time he himself is feeling remorse or whenever they are conversing about the betrayal.

Should a wife receive her husband's accountability reports?

If a couple chooses to install Covenant Eyes, the wife may decide she wants to receive her husband's reports. This is fine; she has a right to know details about her husband's porn use and recovery.

However, advise the couples in your care to work together to pick someone else to act as the husband's *primary* ally. That may be you as the pastor, someone in his support group, or a friend or family member. This other person, and the rest of his support team, will have the responsibility of talking the husband through the heart issues that lead him to porn, helping him identify triggers, and helping him choose healthier behaviors when the urge to watch porn hits.

Wives who are struggling with working out how much they actually need to know (and not know) in order feel safe should be taking this to their own support team (i.e., counselor, coach, support group).

For more information about the importance of boundaries, see the post "Boundaries for Couples Facing Porn Addiction" by licensed counselor Kay Bruner on the Covenant Eyes blog at <https://www.covenanteyes.com/2014/05/14/boundaries/>

Chapter 4

Addressing the Wife's Behaviors

One of the most common temptations when counseling a couple is to put undue weight on a wife's role in her husband's porn use. A husband may accuse his wife of being a nag or refusing him sex. He may accuse her of driving him into porn because of those behaviors.

Certainly, the wife *is* a sinner. All of us are! And it's even possible that the wife's own sins have served as triggers for his porn use. However, as you counsel the couple, it's important to remember two main things.

First, the husband is ultimately responsible for his own behavior. Do not allow him to blame-shift, even if his wife *is* sinning against him. Point him to Jesus' own suffering; even as people sinned against him, he himself did not sin, or even take his rightful vengeance.

Second, one survey found that 68% of wives experienced a spiritual crisis revolving around negative feelings toward God, toward the church and other Christians in general, or both.¹⁶ She has come to you because she is hurting from her husband's sins, and addressing her sins too early in the recovery process may only serve to deepen that crisis. It would be the equivalent of an overweight person going to a doctor for a broken bone and being told to join a gym. You may need to directly address her sins at some point; but at best, doing so now would not help her recovery from the betrayal trauma due to his porn use, and may even hinder that recovery. *This may be true even if she asks for help with her own sins.* She may believe that he'll change his behavior if she's a better wife when in reality, his porn use probably began long before he ever met her.

At the beginning of your counseling, gently deflect any questions about her sins, even if they come from her directly. Remind them both that, at this stage, the focus is twofold:

- His pornography use
- Her need for recovery.

Remind them of Matthew 7:3: it is more important to look at the log in the husband's eye than the speck of dust in hers.

That said, there may come a point in counseling where it is appropriate to address her habitual sins, especially as they relate to her husband's pornography use. Here are some potential signs to look for before you actively address them.

We primarily discuss sins in this section, since as a ministry leader you will likely be looking at behaviors through the lens of sin. However, she may be involved in other potentially unhealthy behaviors, such as compulsive house cleaning, that interfere with the health and recovery for both of them. There may even be behaviors that could be addressed through a sin lens, such as anger, that are not inherently sinful. For example, her angry response, especially early in the recovery process, can instead be tied to God's righteous call for justice.

In other words, look at all her behaviors through the lens of compassion and gentleness. One behavior may be sinful, but it may subside as her recovery progresses. Another behavior may not be sinful, but may need to be addressed.

When she has reached safety and emotional stability.

Remember the Three Stages of Recovery earlier in this book? In the Safety and Stabilization stage, her emotions are in flux. The immediate pain is the sin that has been committed against her. Were you to address any of her own sins at this stage, you would simply be adding to her emotional burden—something her husband may be doing already, in trying to blame-shift. At this stage in the counseling process, your focus should be on helping her heal emotionally and helping him break the porn habit. When, however, you notice that she has reached more stability later in

the Remembering and Mourning phase or in the Reconnecting phase, she may be ready to hear gentle challenges around her own behaviors or sin.

When you have proven trustworthy.

Chances are, if a wife or couple comes to you for counseling, it is because they trust you as a spiritual authority. Unfortunately, this trust can be remarkably fragile.

Writing on victims of abuse, Rachael Denhollander observes:

“[A] victim desperately needs what you preach and promise. Surely, someone who understands holiness and sin, justice and perfect love, will understand the depth of the evil they have experienced.

“This means how you respond will become intertwined with the survivor’s understanding of Christ and the gospel. [...]

“When a victim discloses [...] they are likely to minimize or downplay what they’ve experienced, often only disclosing even a small part of what has been going on to see if you are safe. What the victim has been through is almost certainly far worse than you will initially hear.”¹⁷

While Denhollander is writing about victims of abuse in particular here, this is also true of many wives of porn users. Unfortunately, many churches have the reputation of caring more about appearances than the hurting wife. Some have even accused the wife of being to blame for her husband’s porn use. When she first comes to you, a wife likely won’t reveal the full details of the marital issues, but may instead focus on his pornography (and often she will not give the full details there).

It may be wise not to focus on her sins at all in this season, unless she brings up the issue first. Most women are already aware that they have sinful patterns that are

affecting them, and most admit they have done things they've regretted (some of which are sinful) in their anger at their husband once his secret is out. At the very least, do not focus on her sins until you are confident she has disclosed the full scope of the problem and she has gotten help with her trauma. Even then consider things prayerfully before you address specific sin patterns that you have observed in her life.

When he is showing the fruits of recovery

Whether you are counseling the husband, the wife, or both, you will likely be providing tools for both her recovery from trauma and his freedom from pornography, particularly through the creation of boundaries (see Chapter 3). When the husband is showing visible progress toward freedom, it may be time to begin addressing any patterns of unhealthy behaviors that she brings to the marriage. Signs may include the following:

- The wife says he's making good progress. (Her reporting of his behavior should take precedence over anything he says about himself.)
- Evidence that he is following boundaries.
- A posture of repentance vs. defensiveness.

Remember, though, even if he is making good progress on his recovery, she may still need to heal from her trauma before she can face her own behaviors.

When her "stuckness" become a hindrance to the marriage

Sometimes a husband can be truly repentant and actively seeking recovery and reconciliation with his wife, but the wife is still displaying a great deal of emotional volatility. Your first bit of guidance should be for her to seek counseling for her trauma. The reality is that healing from trauma, particularly where there is complex post-traumatic stress disorder, takes time: three to five years is fairly typical.

Does that mean that sin, or spiritual immaturity, aren't factors? They may or may not be. It's important to be led by the Holy Spirit here and go gently. If after a few years of excellent recovery on the husband's part and trauma recovery on her part you are seeing bitterness and anger, it may be appropriate to bring up the topic

of spiritual growth and/or sin. Even so, be careful not to imply that her immaturity or sins are *causing* the husband's sins.

If she has a history of anger and/or violence that precedes discovery of her husband's porn use, bear in mind that living with an addict can cause trauma symptoms to surface/re-surface. So even in such cases, begin with encouraging trauma treatment before introducing the idea that repentance and growth are likely in order. Keep in mind that many women are already aware of their sins and shortcomings around the betrayal and in the marriage and, like their husbands, need you to show grace to them as they face these.

It may also be true that the husband is unrepentant, and the wife's only recourse is separation and divorce. She may be overwhelmed by bitterness and anger. In this case, it may be appropriate to forsake attempts to help the husband break his porn habits, and instead, turn your attention to her healing, growth, and, in time, sins (in that order) *for her own sake*. Addressing these can help her move on in life. (See Chapter 6 for more details.)

Chapter 5

Counseling on Sexual Topics

At some point during the process of counseling a wife and/or her husband, the topic of their sex life may come up. Be extremely careful when you discuss it! Sex is a powerful gift of God, but because it's so powerful, it's also easy to address it in a harmful manner. Consider also that in an era of reckoning among American churches for sexual abuse at leadership levels, a mishandled conversation could open you to other problems. If you're a male counseling a wife without her husband present, you may want to postpone the conversation by asking the husband to be present for those conversations, or by referring her to a different counselor. If you must address their sex life one-on-one, try to keep details as limited and general as possible.

That said, you will likely need to address the couple's sex life at some point. In particular, the couple may need wisdom in how to navigate 1 Corinthians 7:1-5 during the recovery process.

Early in the process, most counselors recommend a period of intentional abstinence. Encourage the couple to prayerfully consider abstinence for a period of at least 45-90 days. This is a boundary for their recovery. By intentionally remaining abstinent, neither partner can use sex as a weapon against the other.

However, in cases where the husband has withheld sex from the wife for long periods, such an abstinence period may support the intimacy disorder aspect of his addiction and further harm the wife. Let her decide what she needs to feel safe and support this. If she decides on a period of abstinence, once that's over, encourage

them to re-evaluate their recovery process and determine whether they should extend the period of abstinence (which is normal and healthy for many reasons), or whether it would be physically and emotionally healthy for them to embark on a sexual re-integration process. (Lisa Taylor particularly recommends the book *The Best Sex for Life* by Dr. Patricia Weerakoon for more information.)

Encourage the husband to pursue intimacy in other ways.

Popular psychology tells us that men generally have a higher sex drive than women. While this may or may not be true as a generality, it's certainly true that porn has been training the husband to use women, or at least images of them, for sexual gratification. Men with a pornography addiction use sex to disconnect. Part of his recovery will involve learning how to engage in intimate actions, eventually including sex (after the period of abstinence is over), for *connection*.

Have the husband consider how he treats his wife. Does he expect her to be readily available whenever he wants sex, like porn stars? If so, he needs to retrain himself on how he thinks of her. You may want to suggest other ways for him to pursue intimacy. Take her on dates. Give her back massages. Take care of the dishes. An understanding of the five love languages, as outlined by Gary Chapman, may provide more concrete ideas. Importantly, encourage him to pursue this intimacy without pursuing sex. The idea is that he may need to rebuild her trust that he cares about her as a person, not just a sex object.

Look for deeper causes for her rejection.

Occasionally, husbands report that their wives are unwilling to have sex with them. If you hear this, treat this information with extreme caution. Counselor Lisa Taylor notes that it's extremely rare to meet a wife with a long-term abstinence boundary whose husband is actively working on rebuilding trust and intimacy. If you hear this from a husband, take time to investigate. It is entirely possible that his definition of sobriety includes behaviors that make her feel unsafe physically or emotionally (such as masturbation without the use of pornography).

Another possibility is a history of being sexually abused—an unfortunately common reality for women. A wife may reject her husband’s advances because of some other, deeper trauma. Addressing such issues may be beyond your training. If such information comes to light, encourage her to seek separate counseling to address that issue.

Chapter 6

Pornography and Divorce

Divorce is often a difficult topic for ministry leaders to address in general, let alone in regard to its application to pornography. In fact, ministry leaders within the same denomination, or even within the same church or organization, may come to different conclusions.

For the purposes of this document, we will outline a few key points here:

1. God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16).
2. Divorce is justified in the case of adultery (Matthew 19:1-12).
3. Lust, including pornography, is an act of adultery (Matthew 5:27-30).
4. God describes himself as a divorced husband (Jeremiah 3:8).

Our advice, therefore, will be based on the assumption that a couple should seek reconciliation when safely possible, but that there will be circumstances when a divorce is appropriate. (Please note that this advice assumes only the use of legal pornography, and no other sexual sins or abuse.)

The Church Discipline Model

One model for when to consider advising divorce is found in Matthew 18:15-17, which describes three phases of spiritual discipline. In the context of pornography, it looks like this:

- First, a wife is to confront her husband about his porn use.

- If the husband does not seek healing, then the wife is to bring the issue to two or three other Christians.
- If he still refuses to change his behavior, they are to bring the issue before the entire church (or your ministry community, if in a different organization).
- If he still remains unrepentant, he is to be treated as a non-believer.

Your own involvement in the couple's counseling may indicate that he is in either of the first two stages of discipline. It may be that counseling is a fruit of his repentance after his wife's confrontation, or it may be her attempt to bring him into that second stage of repentance (whether she's thinking about that passage or not).

Before asking her if she's considered divorce, discuss with her whether it would be appropriate to walk the husband through these stages of church discipline. If in bringing his pornography use before the whole congregation he remains unrepentant, then it may be time to present separation and/or divorce as a scripturally sound option.

Note that it is less common but possible that the husband shows the fruits of repentance, but the wife's unforgiveness is the barrier towards reconciliation. If in personal counseling she does not move towards forgiveness (if slowly), be extremely cautious in how you discipline her for any potential sin. It is entirely possible, for example, that her husband has been engaged in undisclosed illegal activities, and her perceived "unforgiveness" is an act of protection for herself and her family, including her husband. Even though you may know part of the couple's story, do not presume you know all of it.

Remember, both divorce and reconciliation are to be presented as *options* for her. Do not put undue pressure on either option. There may be more to staying in a marriage with an unrepentant husband than meets the eye, such as extreme financial vulnerability, and there may be more to a divorce in spite of appearances of recovery than meets the eye, such as undisclosed abuse. As she considers the future of her marriage, we recommend that she prays through the simple truth of Proverbs 3:5-6: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."

Conclusion

Do Something

This guidebook has walked through some of the major pitfalls and strategies for counseling wives. Leader, part of caring for the people in your ministry means providing care and support for the wives of porn users. It means helping her heal from the trauma of her betrayal. It means caring for *her*, not just her marriage. Whether you counsel her personally, counsel them together as a couple, or simply care for her by counseling her husband in how to treat her, she needs your support.

Remember, by caring for her as a victim, you reflect the Gospel to her. You are an earthly reminder of God, who hates oppression and who cares for, hears, and loves his people. As Isaiah 58:6,8 show us, it is in breaking the yoke of sin—both for the sinner and the victim—that God’s heart is revealed:

“Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke? [...]
Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you;
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.”

Get Personal Help For Your Ministry

Restoring a marriage is not just as easy as saying “forgive and forget.” Wives need healing from their own trauma. Now that you have greater empathy for them, you might want to take steps to create a culture of healing and protection for your ministry. Covenant Eyes is here to help! We offer a number of resources specifically to help you act and take a stand against pornography within your church. Learn more at covenanteyes.com/churches or contact our Church and Ministry Outreach Team at church@covenanteyes.com.

Recommended Resources

For the last decade, Covenant Eyes has been gathering and producing a number of resources dealing with all aspects of pornography, from prevention to the neuroscience to recovery. The following resources are hand-picked as some of our most helpful for you as a ministry leader. Be sure to check out our blog and other ebooks at www.covenanteyes.com.

Counseling Resources

Porn and Your Husband: A Recovery Guide for Wives

When a wife discovers her husband's porn use, it can be devastating... but people often forget that wives need healing too. This ebook provides a framework for her own recovery, as well as guidelines for her role in saving her marriage.

<https://www.covenanteyes.com/marriage-advice-my-husband-watches-porn/>

Overcome Porn: The 40 Day Challenge

Available as a free email series or as an app for iPhone® and iPad®, this challenge provides 40 days of biblical information about the science of pornography and how accountability is key to recovery.

<http://learn.covenanteyes.com/porn-free-challenge/>

Hobbies and Habits: Fighting Porn with Purpose

Intentionally light on theology, this book looks at the practical side of porn recovery, and provides strategies to not just quit porn, but replace it with healthier behaviors.

<https://learn.covenanteyes.com/hobbies-and-habits/>

Further Pastoral Resources

The Prepared Ministry: Policies that Heal and Protect from Porn

This deeply practical guidebook outlines four key behaviors of organizations that are successful in helping their staff and people defend themselves against pornography. It's a 15-minute read that could change how you lead your organization.

[Learn.covenanteyes.com/ready-ministry-guide](https://learn.covenanteyes.com/ready-ministry-guide)

Men and Porn: Why They Watch and How to Help

You know the stats. A lot of men look at porn. Christian men. Non-Christian men. Rich men. Poor men. But, Ministry Leader, do you know why? Have you ever looked deeper than, "Hey, you must have a lust problem," and dug into the hearts of the men you talk to? This book will teach you the top 7 reasons men are attracted to porn, and give you action steps to help you counsel them well.

learn.covenanteyes.com/hooked-ministry-guide/

Female Porn Users: Why They Watch and How to Help

For far too long, many have presumed pornography to be exclusively a "man's issue." In reality, women make up 30% of all pornography users. Porn and masturbation are not just men's problems. They're human problems. This ebook will teach you the top 4 reasons women are attracted to porn, the lies women believe about their porn use, and action steps to help you counsel women who are struggling.

<https://learn.covenanteyes.com/ashamed-ministry-guide/>

Endnotes

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Contributors

Writer | Lisa Eldred

Editor | Chris McKenna

Designer | Rachael Moss

Special thanks to Lisa Taylor for her invaluable input and guidance on this book.

Lisa Taylor is a New Zealand-based clinical counselor specializing in partner-of-sex-addict trauma and sex addiction. She works with Naked Truth Project in the UK, and is a board member of Christian Sex Addiction Specialists International.

Lisa's books on the topic of sex addiction and betrayal trauma include the award winning *Beyond Betrayal: How God is Healing Women (and Couples) from Infidelity*, *Beyond Betrayal Couple's Guide* and *There's WHAT on my Phone?* (youth fiction). Connect with her at **beyondbetrayal.community**.



www.covenanteyes.com



+1 989.720.8000



1525 W. King St., PO Box 637
Owosso, MI 48867

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