

The Porn Circuit

Understand your brain and break
porn habits in 90 days

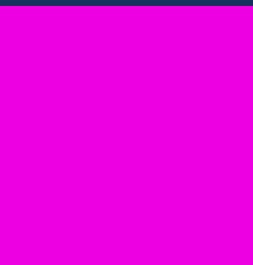
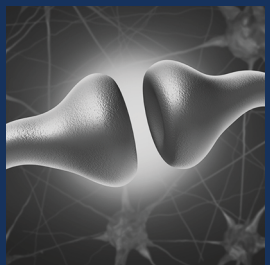






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Introduction:

Stop Looking at Porn, You Sicko!

Comedian Bob Newhart has been making people laugh for decades. One of my favorite skits features Newhart playing the role of a therapist.¹

After one patient describes her fears of being buried in a box, he advises her to listen carefully to two words and incorporate them into her life. “Are you ready?” he asks. “Here they are...

“Stop it!” He shouts.

When she seems puzzled by the therapy, he says, “This isn’t Yiddish, Catherine. This is English: Stop it! You don’t want to go around in life being scared of being buried in a box, do you? It sounds frightening. Then stop it!”

As Catherine brings up other phobias and problems, she receives the same advice. She suffers from bulimia. “Stop it. Are you a nut of some kind?” She has self-destructive relationships with men. “Stop it!” Newhart shouts. She fears driving. “Get in the car and drive, you kook! Stop it!” For reasons apparent to most people, poor Catherine doesn’t feel comforted and demands more from her therapist.

“I don’t like this therapy at all. You’re just telling me to ‘stop it,’” she confronts.

“Okay, let me give you 10 words that I think will clear everything up for you,” he says. “Do you want to get a pad and a pencil for this one? Are you ready? Here are the 10 words. Stop it or I’ll bury you alive in a box!”

Hopefully, no one meets a therapist like this. But unfortunately, this is the pointless counsel that many people give themselves or to others regarding porn use: “Stop it!”

No one likes to admit they feel out of control, but then pivotal moments come along that wake us up to what our habits are costing us.

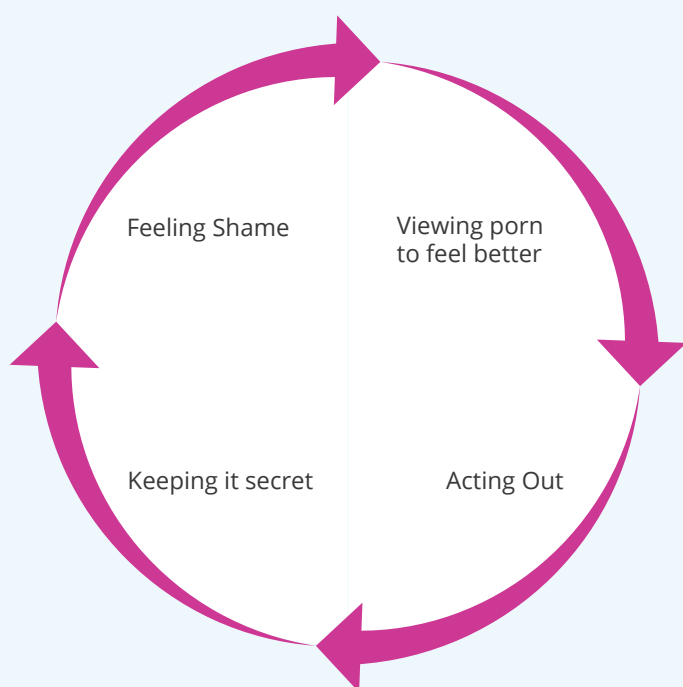
The perception of these costs can vary. A person may be troubled or even disgusted by

their pornography use, or it may be having a disturbing effect on their sexual thoughts and behaviors. Pornography can have negative impacts on relationships, from ignoring loved ones in order to spend time with porn to pornography destroying intimacy, which can lead to divorce. Pornography often reduces sexual potency, including premature ejaculation and erectile dysfunction.²

Others may realize that pornography use conflicts with their moral or religious beliefs. They may recognize that the men and women in porn are real people that are typically victimized, especially women. "This is someone's daughter," they may recognize. Women in porn are often treated with violence, and are required to perform sex acts that are abusive.³ Pornography contributes to sex trafficking, and the victims of sex trafficking become part of the pool of video and images circulated online. Between 14,500 and 17,500 sex slaves are trafficked into the U.S. each year. Another 300,000 American children are at risk for trafficking each year.⁴

After binging on porn, many men and women feel ashamed of having given in again. They promise themselves, others, and even God that they will never again view erotic images, videos, or stories, or enter online sex chatrooms. Typically, this promise is little more than a repeated plea that echoes through their memory. They may even experience periods of abstinence from porn, whether a couple of days, a week, or even a month, but eventually they fall again.

The vicious circle:



If a person could just "stop it," quitting porn would have happened by now.

For some, a vicious circle plays out: viewing porn to feel better, acting out, feeling shame, keeping their secret, viewing porn to feel better, acting out, feeling shame, keeping their secret... The merry-go-round continues, and though nauseous from this spinning, escape seems unrealistic.

Others may feel no shame about using porn and may see it as a recreational activity. But they still might recognize its adverse impact on their sex life, work, and family. They may realize that they need porn and masturbation just to feel normal. They may notice that their porn use has escalated to more varieties, or to scenes they feel (or once felt) are hurtful, disgusting, or inappropriate.

“The classic question posed is, ‘Can you stop looking at porn for 30 days?’” asks Dr. Mark Laaser, an author and sex addiction therapist. “If you are truly addicted, your brain will go on a five-alarm fire in about seven to 14 days.”²

“Do you notice that you are tempted to look at pornography when you are experiencing problems of mood?” Laaser asks. “When you are stressed, depressed or anxious, do you go to porn? Are you noticing there is a mood-altering quality to this for you?”

The coming chapters will discuss the neurology of how pornography often leads to a cycle of dependency. The research of neurologists will explain how obsessions with pornography take root, and why these habits, or even addictions, are so hard to break. By uncovering this research and discussing it in everyday language, people can hopefully begin to make personal and positive changes. Therapists will explain that though the mind can get stuck on an obsession, with knowledge, understanding, and discipline old patterns can be exchanged for new and positive behaviors.

“When you understand how the brain works somewhat better, you can use that information to literally enhance your own perspective, broaden your own sense of your capacities and, with that awareness, learn to focus on other things knowing that if you focus on other things consistently you can change what’s there. You can change the way that real estate is used,” says Dr. Jeffrey Schwartz, a leading expert in neurology.³

Rather than provide neurological and sociological excuses for addictive behaviors or for acting out, this information is designed to open doors of understanding. Science shows us that the brain was designed to learn, and, in the words of Yoda: “You must unlearn what you have learned.” For many, it is time for a renewing of the mind.

Knowledge precedes understanding, and understanding precedes change.

Volumes have been written on this topic, and readers will discover a multitude of resources for further review. The coming pages will provide an overview of concepts and a synopsis of modern research. This is not an exhaustive resource, but this is written to provide you with a general understanding. Yes, our incredible brains can work against us, but new positive neural pathways and habits can form.



Chapter 1:

Your Sexy Plastic Brain

Our biggest sexual organ rests between our ears.

The brain is where we truly experience intimacy, pleasure, love, and satisfaction. But it is also where we create negative feelings, bad habits, destructive compulsions, and addictions.

Compulsively viewing pornography is a prime example.

It should be easy to say, “I think porn is causing pain in my life, so I’m just not going to look at it anymore.” After all, when you touch a hot stove, your brain says, “Ouch, that burns. No more of that!” You may accidentally burn yourself in the future, but you won’t intentionally plop your finger on a burner. If shame and negative feelings follow porn use, and a person promises themselves and others not to look at it again, shouldn’t that be enough to ensure they will not seek out porn weeks, days, or even hours later?

Unlike the hot stove, porn is exciting. It can completely capture someone’s attention. It distracts a person from any other thought, and through orgasm it delivers a potent dose of euphoria. In a simple scenario, the brain says, “I saw porn. I masturbated. It felt good. In the future, let’s do it again. Really, I need this again. I’m not sure I’m getting what I need. How about a little more?” Mix in the anxiety and excitement of using the forbidden, the fear of being caught, and even secrecy, and the brain learns even faster during these intense emotional bursts. With each repetition the brain receives powerful cocktails of signals and hormones that ensure future cravings.

Interestingly enough, our brains have the right idea, but the process has been hijacked leaving a sense of dissatisfaction and longing. We were created to say, “My spouse is attractive to me. When we bond it captures my complete attention. When we touch, I feel aroused, cared for, loved, and I enjoy a spiritual connection. I feel not only a physical rush but also a deep bond with my spouse and sexual satisfaction. This person is part of me. Let’s do that again soon.”

People, unlike any other animal, were designed to have sex with their spirit, soul, and body, says sex addiction therapist Dr. Doug Weiss, author of *Clean: A Proven Plan for Men Committed*

to *Sexual Integrity*. Porn not only leaves out the spirit and soul, but also the tenderness and love expressed through a spouse's body, their words, their giving, and on and on.

Unlike real intimacy, there are multiple parts missing from the pornography puzzle. A common gripe among porn users is that it is not ultimately satisfying, and they are left wanting. There is so much missing. Many find looking at porn is not enough and seek ways to act out what they see in porn. It should be no surprise that pornography use is correlated with a 318% increase in infidelity.²

So, why are so many people engrossed by what leaves them unfulfilled while bringing harm to their relationships?

The answer is rooted in the neural pathways of our incredible brains. Through experiences in youth, adolescence, and adulthood, we consciously or unconsciously map routes in our brains that allow for arousal and pursuit of a reward, even if that reward becomes less and less fulfilling.

Learning What You Like

Believe it or not, men are not born ogling the boobs of big-breasted brunettes or blondes or whatever a man fancies. Nor were women born excited by erotic stories, videos, or whatever a woman finds compelling.

Have doubts? Then why in some cultures do women walk around uncovered from the waist up and men couldn't care less, while in most cultures cleavage is considered immodest or sexually tempting? The same is true of fetishes, which are essentially objects, such as a shoe, a foot, or lace or fur on a garment. Why does one person find an item of clothing or an object uninteresting, while others instantly think of sex?

It is learned.

You learn to associate sexual arousal with specific stimuli, writes Dr. Norman Doidge in *The Brain That Changes Itself*.

Doidge explains that "human beings exhibit an extraordinary degree of sexual plasticity compared with other creatures."³ By "plasticity" he means that our brains and our sexuality are molded by our experiences, interactions, and other means of learning, which is why people vary in what they say is attractive or what turns them on. The brain actually creates neural pathways that label a specific type of person or activity as arousing.

What we find arousing cannot merely be explained by evolution. Biological explanations are often too simplistic, Doidge argues. Strong muscles on a man might predict he can protect his offspring, but a woman may find a man's voice more attractive than the surface of his body.

In past centuries, women in art were often large by today's standards of super-thin fashion models. Doidge calls these preferences "acquired tastes:"

Acquired tastes are initially experienced with indifference or dislike but later become pleasant — the odors of cheeses, Italian bitters, dry wines, coffees, patés, the hint of urine in a fried kidney. Many delicacies that people pay dearly for, that they must "develop a taste for," are the very foods that disgusted them as children.

In Elizabethan times lovers were so enamored of each other's body odors that it was common for a woman to keep a peeled apple in her armpit until it had absorbed her sweat and smell. She would give this "love apple" to her lover to sniff in her absence. We, on the other hand, use synthetic aromas of fruits and flowers to mask our body odor from our lovers. Which of these two approaches is acquired and which is natural is not so easy to determine. A substance as "naturally" repugnant to us as the urine of cows is used by the Masai tribe of East Africa as lotion for their hair — a direct consequence of the cow's importance in their culture. Many tastes we think "natural" are acquired through learning and become "second nature" to us. We are unable to distinguish our "second nature" from our "original nature" because our neuroplastic brains, once wired, develop a new nature, every bit as biological as our original.⁴

This will come as sad news to many. The attraction, compulsion, and even addiction to porn are learned behaviors, which means people play a huge role in their own habituation. Don't blame it on biology or evolution. Coming chapters will further review biological and evolutionary arguments, and Doidge, Weiss, and other scientists will put those simplistic arguments to rest. People hunt porn because they taught their brains that it is arousing, an outlet of sexual expression, and a means of escape.

Do you recall the ghost Marley talking to Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*? Scrooge asks Marley why he is chained.

Marley replies, "I wear the chain I forged in life, I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it. Is its pattern strange to you? Or would you know the weight and length of the strong coil you bear yourself? It is a ponderous chain!"

So too, the chains of pornography are forged in life through learning and repetition. Often this learning begins in adolescent and teen years when the plastic brain is learning its first expressions of sexual desire and coping with new demands and stress.



Chapter 2: Your Brain's Sexual Cocktail

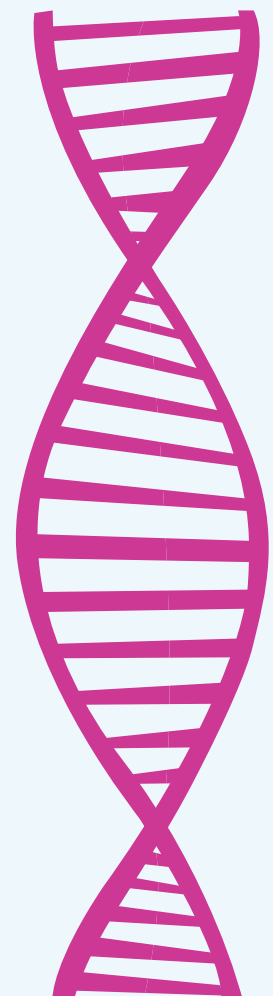
The Neurochemicals Behind Sex

Habitual experience is only part of the learning equation. After all, people experience a variety of activities that never stick. In fact, you probably do some things over and over in an attempt to learn something new and get incredibly frustrated at your lack of progress.

So why does porn have such an impact? Why do many therapists, psychologists, and neuroscientists insist it is addictive? In a nutshell, it has a lot to do with the therapy term “attachment.” Therapists and neurologists use this term to describe how the brain neurochemically bonds and remembers how to react to a stimulus.

“It’s not so much the stimulation [the image, video, experience, etc.], it’s what is done with the stimulation,” Weiss said. “The initial arousal of novelty will be there, but that is not much of a threat until it’s attached to the sexual experience [through masturbation].”¹

Pornography attachment can be very strong because masturbation and orgasm produce a fireworks display of neurochemicals and repetition builds neural pathways to enable patterns of behavior. The episodes are even more enhanced with other feelings, including fear of getting caught, secrecy, and novelty. This chemical and hormonal explosion takes learning to a whole new level. People often remember their first orgasm, including where they were and how it happened, even if that experience happened decades ago. Yet, they probably don’t remember much else about that day, unless it was their wedding day or the events were traumatic.



This brain chemistry plays a major role in creating neural pathways that establish patterns of behavior and triggers that spark a person to engage in specific behavior. To better understand how these chemicals enable sexual learning, here is the basic list and the roles they play.

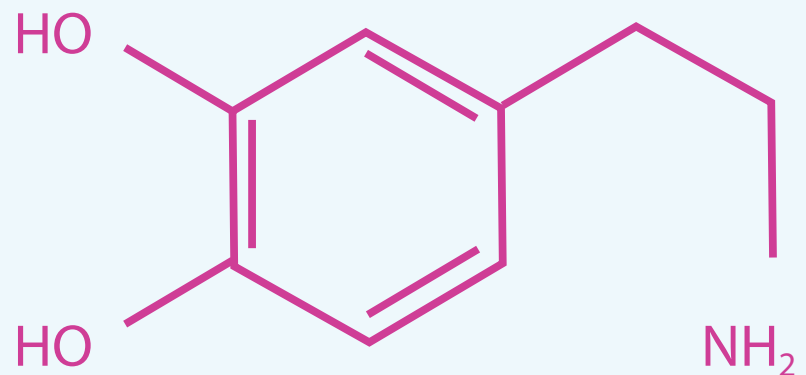
Dopamine

Dopamine is one of the superheroes of the brain because it has so many powers.

If someone could siphon away your dopamine, it would be worse than sitting in a vault of Kryptonite. Even Superman wouldn't do much of anything. He might not even eat or drink. Dopamine focuses your attention on whatever task is at hand and motivates you forward.

It activates or enhances rewards circuitry that make you feel good, and it also plays a major role in memory. It helps us to recall what is important in our environment, and to remember the appropriate response to a stimulus, according to bioneurologist Dr. Williams Struthers.

Dopamine



Dopamine “fuels the tension and craving for meeting a need,” he writes in *Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain*². That’s why dopamine is released in response to all drugs of addiction, and plays a role in many disorders affecting motivation and attention such as obsessive-compulsive disorder and behavioral addictions.

Essentially, dopamine helps the brain remember what is interesting and how to respond to it. It focuses the mind on a specific task while other concerns are ignored, saying, “Hey, do this now!” It provides a neurological reward that feels good, and assists in cravings for more of the activity.

Without doubt, dopamine is either a superhero or a super foe, depending on whether an activity affects a person positively or negatively.

Testosterone

Often cited as the male hormone (although women have it in lesser amounts), testosterone dramatically increases sexual arousal and desire, Mark Kastleman writes in *The Drug of the New Millennium: The Brain Science Behind Internet Porn Use*.³ It is a hormone that is released in

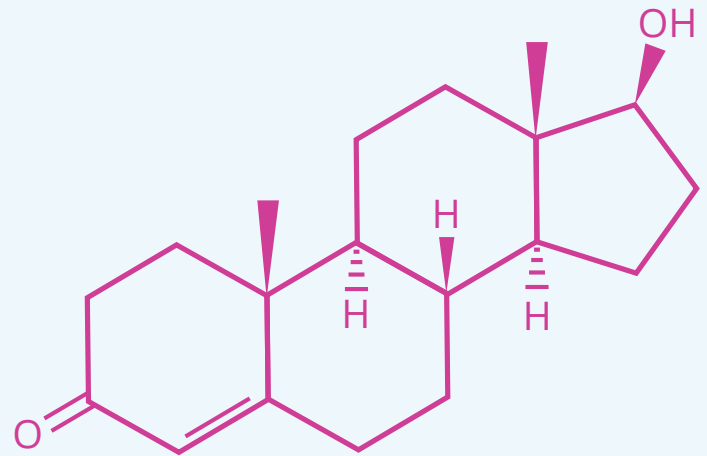
men throughout the day, but when sexual cues are picked up by the brain the testes increase production.

That's why castration is used to remove sexual drive in eunuchs and sex offenders, explains Struthers.

Pornography (and the mental fantasizing that it enables) crafts a brain that constantly generates testosterone and heightens sexual desire. With this ever-present sexual desire, the brain is ready to interpret any signal (external or internal) and ramp up the perceived need for sexual activity. Interestingly, men with strong feelings of commitment to their spouse tend to have lower testosterone levels. This may be a reason why these men may be less likely to commit adultery.⁴

Because testosterone is slow to dissipate, men who habitually view pornography cause their own chemical imbalance. This high testosterone level increases their sexual awareness far above normal. Sexual fantasies are sparked by everyday objects and even modestly dressed women are seen as provocative.

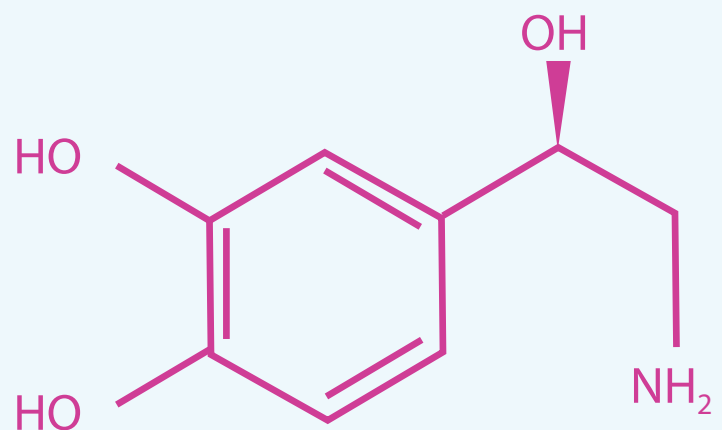
Testosterone



Norepinephrine

Norepinephrine is a neurotransmitter often associated with stress and the fight-or-flight response, helping us to be more alert. It also acts as a hormone for sexual arousal and sexual memory, and it helps us burn emotional experiences in our minds. Whether it's a wonderful sexual experience with our spouse or a provocative sexual image, the information is stored for easy recall with the help of norepinephrine.

Norepinephrine



Oxytocin

Oxytocin is often referred to as the bonding hormone, and big releases arrive when mothers and fathers hold their newborn babies. It is often called the cuddle hormone because oxytocin levels rise when a couple snuggles, hold hands, or express other forms of intimacy. Oxytocin is one reason a kiss is so powerful.

It also plays a big role in sexual bonding to one's mate and triggers the contractions during male orgasm. In his seminars, for example, Dr. Todd Bowman of Lifeline Counseling Center encourages married couples to enjoy face-to-face sex that provides as much skin contact as possible for the greatest release of the bonding chemical.⁵

Because oxytocin is also released in climax, it can have a negative impact for the porn user. Instead of bonding to a real mate, the porn viewer's brain bonds to the image, video, or situation, especially when the activity is reinforced through repetition.

Vasopressin

Working in concert with oxytocin, vasopressin also encourages the feelings of bonding and is slowly released during sexual activity and at climax. As with oxytocin, the release of vasopressin during porn viewing and masturbation works to cement a person's attachment to this behavior.

Endogenous Opiates

People were designed to have an amazing sexual experience. The body produces natural or endogenous opiates, which during climax provide pain relief and a sense of transcendence and euphoria. Think opium, naturally produced by the body.

Serotonin

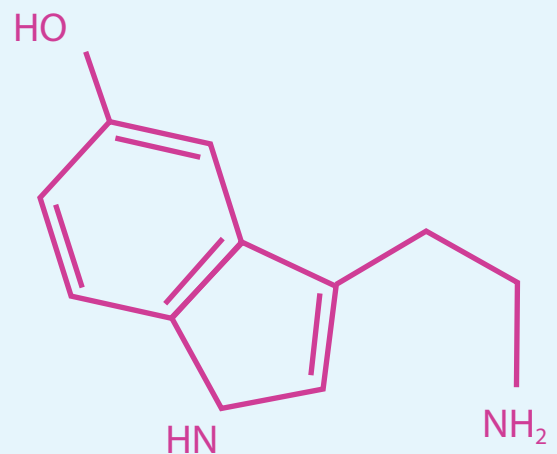
Serotonin is released after climax and brings feelings of calm, wellbeing, and satisfaction. High serotonin levels also decrease sexual motivation. These factors help explain why men are often accused of being ready for a nap after sex.

A Chemical Recap

Certainly, more is at play than this basic neurochemical list, but it provides a starting point to understand how people perceive sexual cues, allowing those cues to gain our attention, which allows us to act.

When a man sees his mate or pornography and is sexually stimulated, including imagination, his arousal is increased and his thoughts are focused through dopamine, testosterone, and norepinephrine. If sex or self-sex is pursued, these chemicals further focus his brain's

Serotonin



attention and narrow his thoughts on the sexual experience. These and other chemicals are also active in women during arousal, but in addition, perceptions, feelings, lengthy memories, and cognitive choices play a larger role.

During sex or masturbation, people get the sexual version of tunnel vision as more of these initial chemicals are combined with the slow release of oxytocin and vasopressin. Worries and concerns often fall away and the mind focuses on sexual release. The contractions of orgasm are connected to the brain's release of endogenous opiates. As well, these opiates and dopamine shut off the portions of the brain responsible for anxiety, adding to the euphoria the removal of fear. Then the brain receives serotonin, adding feelings of wellbeing and satisfaction.⁶

Of course, your skull is more than a chemical bathtub. All of those hormones and neurotransmitters are actually interacting with the physical brain and its neural connections. The next chapter will explore how the brain forms its compulsiveness and addiction toward pornography.



Chapter 3: Stuck in a Rut

Carving Paths for Addiction

As a young boy growing up on a farm, I kept a fishing hook and line under a rock near our pond. Set in a southern Kentucky valley between two wooded hills, this pond was fed by a winding creek and a natural spring, and it teemed with bass, catfish, and blue gill.

Using my trusty pocketknife, I would strip off a branch from the nearby woods and tie on my line just like Huck Finn. Under rocks and logs I found worms and grubs that I used for bait.

My favorite spot to fish was near the pond's dam, where water overflowed and the creek continued weaving its way across the valley to other farms. The creek followed a narrow pass between the banks of two steep hills where sycamore, cedar, and oak trees lined its banks. The fishing was good and in one particular afternoon I caught 22 for a family fish fry.

When I was in fifth grade my dad bought a second house in Florida, where I attended school far from my old Kentucky home. I recall that we returned to Kentucky for the summer one particular year, and I ran through the woods toward my familiar fishing hole. The path through the woods was grown over, but I remembered the way. When I arrived at the pond, I found it shallow and covered with algae. Meanwhile, the creek bed that led away from the pond had doubled in size.

Over time, the overflow of water had eroded the dam to its base. With the continued flow of water the creek had grown wider and deeper. The hills on each side of the creek were deeply gouged by erosion and 50-year-old trees were toppled. The once shallow creek bed was now 15 feet to the top of its bank, and yet the water washing through only covered my shoes.

If the initial damage had been found early, the ever-deepening cut in the hillside would not have been so severe. But neglect had carved its path. Refurbishing and restocking the pond would take work and determination... and plenty of it.

The Broadband Stream of Pornography

Our modern culture delivers a constant flood of sexualized media and pornography that wears at the banks of the mind. In decades past, pornography was limited in availability, especially to minors, but the advent of the Internet ensures hardcore and fetish pornography is always available to an ever-younger audience.

The late psychologist Al Cooper said this modern allure of pornography was driven by a Triple-A Engine. Porn is available, affordable, and anonymous.

Available. There are millions of pages of Internet pornography, a continued growth of Internet enabled devices, and open WIFI is widely available.

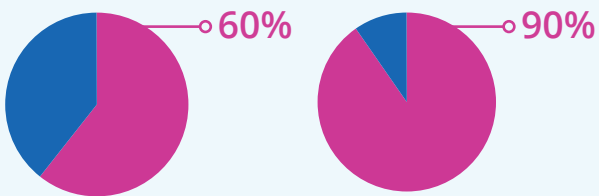
Affordable. 90% of people only view free porn online.²

Anonymous. Pornography is used secretly on a variety of Internet-enabled devices.

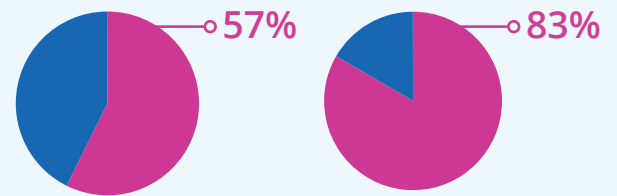
Similar to how the overflow stream broke the dam of our family pond and carved out the hillside, continued use of pornography carves neural pathways in the brain, according to Dr. Struthers.³ Recognize the damage early and deep neural pathways can be prevented, but if the stream of pornography continues, a neural pathway will develop and it will take significant work and determination to alter.

Often these neural pathways for pornography become engrained in the formative years of adolescence, and this is especially true in today's Internet culture. By age 18, 90% of boys and 60% of girls are exposed to Internet pornography.⁴

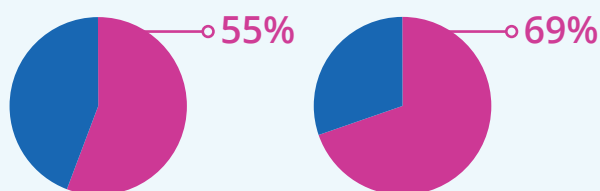
Porn Addiction Starts at a Young Age⁵



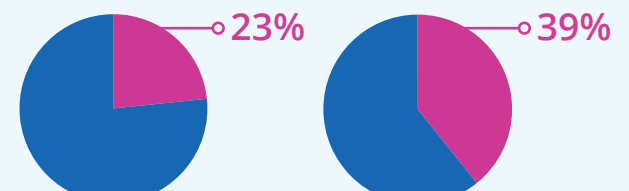
By age 18, 90% of boys and 60% of girls are exposed to Internet pornography.



57% of girls and 83% of boys have seen group sex on the Internet.



55% of girls and 69% of boys have seen porn showing same-sex intercourse.

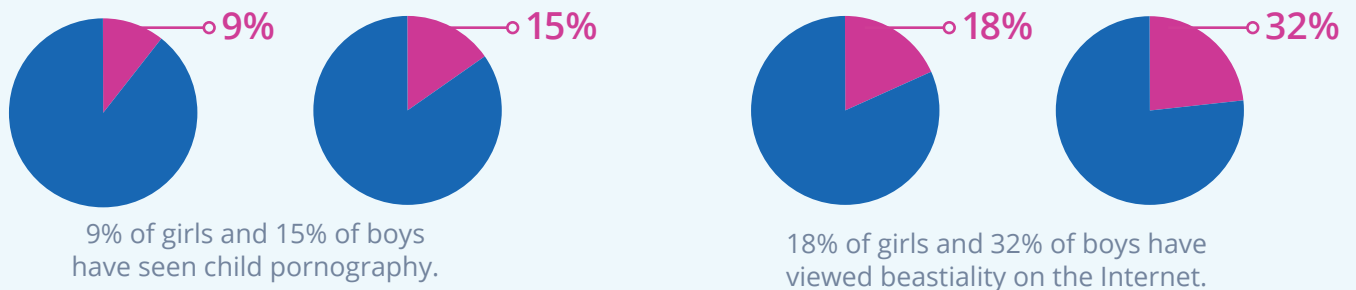


23% of girls and 39% of boys have seen online sex acts involving bondage.

Whether porn use becomes habitual in youth or in adulthood, one theme persists. Pornography, Dr. Laaser says, becomes a salve of escape that is used to tend to wounds, whether emotional, physical, sexual, or spiritual. Have a bad day? Medicate it with porn and masturbation and the brain will get a spritz of neural chemicals that will provide a temporary respite. Feeling the pains of youth or the past? Run to the refuge of porn. Soon, porn and masturbation are just a part of life, or even what many therapists characterize as an addiction.

The relief it brings is fleeting, however, and the porn binge is less and less satisfying, leading to cravings for more. Those cravings can lead to many forms of acting out.

The largest consumers of Internet Pornography are kids ages 12 to 17.⁶



Carving Neural Pathways

The lifelong ability of the brain to wire and rewire its neurocircuitry is referred to as brain plasticity or neuroplasticity. For instance, the brain can increase or decrease the strength and number of synapses that communicate an emotion or feeling. This allows information or memories to flow more or less quickly.

This brain neuroplasticity also operates under a dynamic of “use it or lose it.” Do an activity more often and the brain will create neural pathways that make an activity easier to think about and complete.

Just as a creek bed doesn’t gouge out its course in a day, the same is true in creating neural pathways of porn use. Repetition matters. But because sexual activity launches such an amazing fireworks show in our brains, it takes less repetition to build these porn pathways than it would for us to engrain cravings for other activities.

Because porn provides a state of arousal, the brain also creates pathways that make initial arousal easier. Suddenly, porn and sex with a partner aren’t the only experiences that are

arousing. As the porn pathways deepen, people in everyday life become objects of sexualized fantasy, and inanimate objects, clothing, and situations not designed for sex become sexually charged.

To better understand the porn rut, it's important to explore scenarios common to porn use and even addiction.

Sensitization

A person who uses a pornographic image or story and masturbates for the first time begins a learning process of how to respond to porn in the future. With repetition the brain responds not only to the initial stimulus, but also to related stimuli. After a person becomes sensitized, very little is needed to trigger a response; a superhighway is connected to the rewards circuitry. This superhighway has many entrance ramps; sexual cues are seen everywhere and sexual fantasizing comes easy.

Triggers

Cigarette smokers can name a list of activities that spark a physical and mental desire for a smoke: drinking a cup of coffee, finishing a meal, sipping alcohol. These cues are called triggers, and when presented the brain gets a shot of dopamine that motivates a person to smoke, ingest nicotine, and fire the rewards circuitry of the brain.

Triggers also surface for porn and masturbation, and these sensitization cues can vary greatly from person to person depending on their gender, marital status, environment, and the types of porn and activities they use. Simply being home alone is enough to prompt many people to rush to their computer in search of porn. Some people lie awake at night, taunted with thoughts of getting up to view porn online and masturbate while the family sleeps. Why? Because they hold not only memories of using the computer for porn, but also of opportunities of secrecy, and even of getting up or staying up for a late night fix.

These compulsive feelings are engrained from repetitive and powerful experiences. Dopamine flows easily in response to the learned pornographic trigger driving a person to act out, and the sensitized neural pathway leads easily to the rewards circuitry where opiates fire.

Desensitization

Though not true for everyone, many porn users find they need a greater amount or more intense porn to activate a state of arousal. The brain has decided after multiple porn excursions that this amount of dopamine is excessive. So it has reduced the amount of dopamine in response to porn, and it has reduced the number of dopamine receptors for the neural circuits associated with porn use.

To escape this desensitization, people, and men especially, expand their pornographic tastes to more novel stimuli. What was once considered hardcore — a heterosexual couple engaged

in intercourse — is now considered mundane, Dr. Doidge says.⁷ Varied forms of sex mixed with force, violence, and humiliation are now fused into today's pornographic scripts.

Hypofrontality

Compulsiveness is a good descriptor of hypofrontality. Many porn users feel focused on getting to porn and masturbating even when a big part of them is saying, "Don't do this." Even when negative consequences seem imminent, impulse control is too weak to battle the cravings.

Putting It All Together

These mechanisms of porn habituation are as ensnaring as a chemical addiction, Dr. Struthers explains.

Through this process of learning, the neural circuits for a porn habit are sensitized, becoming broad superhighways with multiple on-ramps. These on-ramps are the direct result of a sensitivity to sexual cues that are seen in a growing variety of stimuli. The pornographic brain sees cues for arousal everywhere and because porn is part of the regular diet, testosterone keeps men especially on high alert.

When sexual cues are strong enough, dopamine spurs the pornography user to act out, which releases more of the neural chemicals that focus attention. In men, the neural pathway for masturbation leads to a quick release of opiates during ejaculation.

Struthers explains:⁸

Like a path is created in the woods with each successive hiker, so do the neural paths set the course for the next time an erotic image is viewed. Over time these neural paths become wider as they are repeatedly traveled with each exposure to pornography. They become the automatic pathway through which interactions with women are routed. The neural circuitry anchors this process solidly in the brain. [...] All women become potential porn stars in the minds of these men. They have unknowingly created a neurological circuit that imprisons their ability to see women rightly [...]

Repeated exposure to pornography creates a one-way neurological superhighway where a man's mental life is over-sexualized and narrowed. It is hemmed on either side by high containment walls making escape nearly impossible."

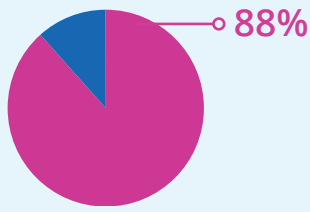
Meanwhile, as this highway grows more engrained, often people become desensitized to the pornography they have been using and seek more images or porn that are more novel. As this

tolerance expands, people often become disgusted with their own pornographic pursuits...but do it anyway, broadening the cues that lead to arousal.

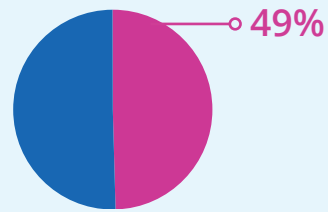
“When pornographers boast that they are pushing the envelope by introducing new, harder themes, what they don’t say is that they must, because their customers are building up a tolerance to the content,” Doidge writes.⁹

When the temporary escape has passed, many look at themselves and see the widening and higher banks of their pornographic stream. Their lives, both sexually and non-sexually, seem shallow and covered with algae. The dam has long been broken and so many once beautiful things are uprooted.

Pornography and Aggression¹⁰



88% of scenes in porn films contain acts of physical aggression.



49% of scenes in porn films contain verbal aggression.



Chapter 4:

32 Flavors: Why We Like Sexual Variety

A wife who stumbles on the Internet tracks of her husband's porn tour is often shocked at the number of images and videos in this cyber harem. Why so many? Why so varied?

As we discovered in previous chapters, people learn sexual attachments over time and with practice. Dopamine likes novelty. Men and women who struggle with porn become desensitized to the original images that turned them on. Exploration to increase dopamine rewards often leads to a collage of porn similar to the type they originally liked or to a library of widely varying interests.

People, and even some scientific studies, have offered simplistic answers to explain the depth and breadth of a porn user's cyber trough, but the real reasons lie in the neurochemistry of our incredible brains.

Simplistic Explanations for Why We Love Variety

A prevalent explanation for a man's cyber brothel is that guys are acting on their evolutionary impulses to breed as many females as possible. This concept is based on a phenomenon known as the Coolidge Effect, which has been seen in testing a variety of mammals since the 1950s.

The scenario goes like this: a male rat is placed in a cage with a willing female with which he excitedly breeds until he is satiated. Though he's no longer in the mood with the current female, as soon as another female is introduced he immediately overcomes his boredom and mates with the new gal. He becomes bored again, until a new female is introduced, and the scenario repeats itself until the male rat is physically exhausted.

A number of analysts, citing these studies, believe that evolution tells guys, "Get it while the getting is good. You are exposed to a limited number of possible mates on the savannah of life, so when the opportunity presents itself, take advantage of it." The same can be said of eating high fat foods and engaging other behaviors that propagate the species or ensure survival. And since this applies to other mammals, it must be all-consuming for people too.

Similarly, another simplistic explanation is that guys are not designed to be monogamous in the first place. Evolution urged them to roam, find herds of women on the open plain, and compete to mate with as many as possible. That's why guys skip through a multitude of Internet mates or are constantly targeting new females to breed; they are not designed to find a lifelong mate but to spread their seed far and wide.

One Australian study¹ placed men and women in a room and showed them the same porn film 18 times. Initially, they were aroused, but after watching the same movie over and over, they became uninterested. But lo and behold, when a new porn flick was introduced the subjects gained new interest. This test is similar to others,² so to some analysts it proves that people get bored with the same mate and need to roam to keep sex interesting.

Advances in Understanding

But more and more therapists and neurologists say these studies fall flat.

Doidge argues that instincts, like that of the rat, resist change, and that human sexuality is not based on instinct. The human libido isn't hardwired by biological urges, but rather it is often finicky and altered by an individual's psychology, experiences, and sexual encounters.

Doidge writes:³

Much scientific writing implies otherwise and depicts the sexual instinct as a biological imperative, an ever hungry brute, always demanding satisfaction — a glutton, not a gourmet. But human beings are more like gourmets and are drawn to types and have strong preferences; having a "type" causes us to defer satisfaction until we find what we are looking for, because attraction to a type is restrictive; the person who is 'really turned on by blondes' may tacitly rule out brunettes and redheads.

Rats are only attracted by sight and scent, Dr. Weiss says. But people have many ways to become attracted, such as sharing an affinity toward specific entertainment, politics, ideas, religion, and situations. Their childhoods and adolescence contribute to their sexual desires, as do the rest of their experiences in life. People experience emotional and cognitive levels, including fantasy or imagination, that are unavailable to the rat.

"Every guy or gal reading this has seen a man or woman at a distance who they thought was attractive until that person opened their mouth," Weiss says. "So attraction goes way beyond the physical for human beings."⁴

As for the theories that suggest familiarity lessens sexual interest, Weiss says those studies are flawed. Lots of people like to watch Charlie Brown at Thanksgiving or Christmas, but show the same film 18 times and just about anyone would grow bored. Then introduce the movie *Captain America* and watch a group gain interest.

“Show me 12 red blocks and I’ll want to see a blue one,” Weiss says.

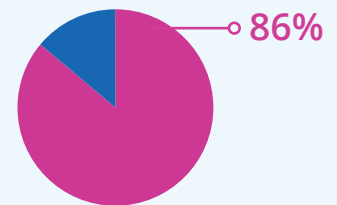
So why isn’t one porn image enough?

As was explained in prior chapters, people learn through life experience to be sexually aroused by body types, places, and situations, and this list of sexual interests can be very short or a mile long.

In the past, a single image would have been enough to arouse a man who now looks at a stream of Internet pornography to maintain the same arousal, says therapist Dr. Peter Kleponis, the founder of Integrity Restored.⁵ Over time this man has neurologically attached his brain to be most aroused when viewing a wide variety of images and acts.

“He conditions his brain to only really be sexually aroused to this constant parade of different women, of different sexual images,” Kleponis says.

Porn and Anonymity⁶



86% of men are likely to click on porn sites if no-one else will know

The Neuroscience Behind Porn

Indeed, the variety of porn on the Internet has an appeal. But the reasons behind it are more complex than a rat’s attention to a parade of new mates.

As stated in previous chapters, because of neural plasticity our brains and our sexuality are molded by our experiences, interactions, and other means of learning, which is why people vary in what they say is attractive or what turns them on. Through interactions, explorations, and even fantasy neural pathways are established that define a specific type of person or activity as arousing.

This may help explain why men combing through Internet pornography often delay orgasm until they find an image “worthy” of climax.

In fact, some porn addicts have no interest in variety.

“With over 25 years of working with sex addicts, there are some men — and women for that matter — who stick to vanilla, whatever vanilla is,” Weiss says. “They are neurologically attached to vanilla, and they never up that.”⁷

This means some people who use pornography — even addicts — never sink deeper into porn than the models of Playboy or Playgirl.

So What About 32 Flavors?

So why do some people who were once programmed for vanilla now require many more flavors at the ice cream bar? The brain likes novelty, Kleoponis reports, especially if it perceives a possible release of dopamine or other neural chemicals that are natural rewards that provide feelings of comfort or euphoria.⁸

“The immediate attraction will give you a little bit of a rush or a sense of novelty, but that will wear away quickly if it’s not reinforced by the neurological release of masturbation,” Weiss says.⁹

The opiates released during orgasm help seal the deal that this new and novel sexual concept is not only arousing but worth returning for in the future. Add it to the shelf of hot stuff: this one is a keeper. With repeated interaction the arousal becomes more ingrained, and with more exploration the brain adds more containers found to be exciting, even things a person once found disgusting.

As Doidge describes:¹⁰

Porn websites generate catalogs of common kinks and mix them together with images. Sooner or later the surfer finds a killer combination that presses a number of his sexual buttons at once. Then he reinforces the network by viewing the images repeatedly, masturbating, releasing dopamine and strengthening these neural networks. He has created a kind of “neosexuality,” a rebuilt libido that has strong roots in his buried sexual tendencies. Because he often develops tolerance, the pleasure of sexual discharge must be supplemented with the pleasure of an aggressive release, and sexual and aggressive images are increasingly mingled — hence the increase in sadomasochistic themes in hardcore porn.

Why have pornographers added so much aggression and violence to today’s porn? Because they are trying to keep their customers satisfied. But apparently, it’s never enough.



Chapter 5:

Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing, Baby

Dumping Porn Improves Marital Love Life

The pornified brain sounds a lot like Mick Jagger; it can't get no satisfaction.

On the surface it sounds absurd. Pornography offers endless opportunities for arousal. If a human masturbates to a wider range of images or videos, shouldn't that satiate? The simple answer is no.

Dr. Doidge explains that porn is more exciting than satisfying because we have two separate pleasure systems in our brains: one for *exciting* pleasure and another for *satisfying* pleasure.

The exciting system, fueled by dopamine and anticipation, is all about appetite, such as imagining your favorite meal or a sexual episode.¹

The *satisfying* system involves actually having the meal or having sex, which provides a calming, fulfilling pleasure. This system releases opiate-like endorphins that provide feelings of peace and euphoria.

Pornography, Doidge writes, hyperactivates the appetite system.² But the satisfying system is left starving for the real thing, which includes actual touching, kissing, caressing, and a connection not only with the body but also the mind and soul. The satisfying system releases oxytocin and endorphins, and bellows, in the words of Marvin Gaye, "Ain't nothing like the real thing, Baby."

The porn-saturated brain is fixated on sex, Struthers explains,³ but real sex is intended for intimacy. The pornified brain is ready for multiple partners, images, and sexual possibilities, but it is intended for a narrow focus of exclusive sharing. Porn's neurological superhighway is built for speed, but satisfying sex is designed for the slow and evolving discovery and appreciation of a loving partner. Porn provides few off-ramps (masturbation) that offer fleeting escapes that hasten the need for more. Meanwhile a committed couple can have long and satisfying encounters with many off ramps for creative expressions of intimacy that are not genitally oriented.

Doidge writes:⁴

Pornographers promise healthy pleasure and relief from sexual tension, but what they often deliver is an addiction, tolerance, and an eventual decrease in pleasure. Paradoxically, the male patients I worked with often craved pornography but didn't like it.

How Porn Hurts Marital Sex

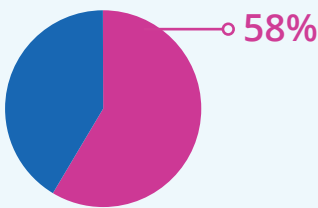
Pornographers want people to believe that viewing porn is harmless entertainment and that it can even spice up one's love life, but the opposite is true. Rather than encouraging intimacy, research shows that porn steals it away.

Porn encourages selfishness rather than an exchange of intimacy. Especially among men, who are more visually stimulated than women, porn teaches that women are objects for their lust. Women are just body parts, used for personal gratification.

Pornography trains men to be consumers,⁵ to treat sex as a commodity, to think about sex as something on-tap and made-to-order. As Dr. Mary Anne Layden writes, "It is toxic miseducation about sex and relationships."⁶

- In Dr. Gary Brooks' book, *The Centerfold Syndrome*, he explains that because the women in porn are only glossy magazine pictures or pixels on the screen, they have no sexual or relational expectations of their own. This trains men to desire the cheap thrill of fantasy over a committed relationship that requires them to connect to another human being. Pornography essentially trains men to be digital voyeurs: looking at women rather than seeking genuine intimacy.⁷

Porn Decreases sexual satisfaction¹⁰



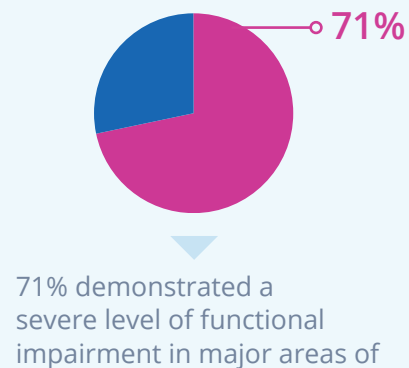
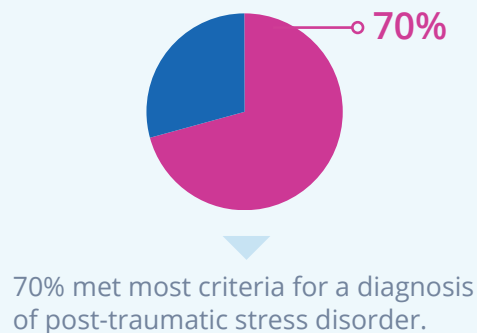
58% of men say they view porn once a week or more, and the more frequently men view it, the more they are likely to say they are less satisfied with sex and relationships.

- According to a study published in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, after only a few prolonged exposures to pornographic videos, men and women alike reported less sexual satisfaction with their intimate partners, including their partners' affection, physical appearance, and sexual performance.⁸
- Another study that appeared in the *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy* found similar results. When men and women were exposed to pictures of female centerfold models from *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, this significantly lowered their judgments about the attractiveness of "average" people.⁹

- Dr. Victor Cline's research has shown that sexual arousal and excitement diminish with repeated exposure to sexual scenes, leading people to seek out greater variety and novelty in the pornography they view.¹¹
- French neuroscientist Serge Stoleru reports on how overexposure to erotic stimuli actually exhausts the sexual responses of healthy young men.¹²
- Dr. Dolf Zillmann reports when young people are repeatedly exposed to pornography, it can have a long-lasting impact on their beliefs and behaviors. Frequently, men who habitually view pornography develop cynical attitudes about love and the need for affection between partners. They begin to view the institution of marriage as sexually confining. Often, men develop a "tolerance" for sexually explicit material, leading them to seek out more novel or bizarre material to achieve the same level of arousal.¹³

Dr. Judith Reisman summarizes it well: Pornography causes impotence — an inability to function with your own sexual power. "If he has to imagine a picture, if he has to imagine a scene, in order to actually reach the heights of completion with this person, then he's no longer with his own power, is he? He has been stripped. He has been hijacked. He has been emasculated. He has, in effect, been castrated visually."¹⁴

In a survey of 63 wives of self-identified sex addicts:¹⁵



Porn and Erectile Dysfunction

If the concerns above were not enough, many men become so habituated to pornography that they experience erectile dysfunction when they are with their spouse. Rather than performing better, as pornography promises, many men find that they can only achieve consistent and sustained erections with porn.

Drs. Marnia Robinson and Gary Wilson explained in *Psychology Today* that overstimulation with pornography creates changes in the brain that make a man less responsive to the

physical pleasure of a real woman and hyper-responsive to Internet porn.¹⁶ As discussed in Chapter 3, men become sensitized to Internet porn, but desensitized to sex in general, which requires more and more stimulation to achieve arousal. When preparing for real sex, the pornified brain fails to get its dopamine surge and the signal to the penis is too weak to achieve erection. But turn on an Internet device with unlimited pages of novelty, and boom, the plumbing works.

A fast-growing online community of people who call themselves “Fapstronauts” complain that porn is the root of their problems with ED and premature ejaculation. “Fapping,” slang for masturbating to Internet porn, is causing these people so many troubles they banded together for support. One online community claims 50,000 members, and their goal is to encourage each other to avoid pornography and masturbation for 90 days in the hope of never going back.¹⁷

Real Satisfaction

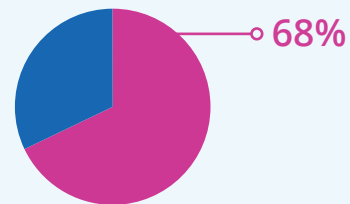
Because of the brain’s plasticity, people once consumed by porn can rearrange their neural networks to enjoy only sexual intimacy with their spouse, and studies show these relationships to be the most satisfying.

For instance, male porn users often believe more partners will bring greater satisfaction. But a 2011 study of long-term committed relationships (with a median duration of 25 years) showed the opposite. The study showed that the longer a man was in a relationship, the more likely he enjoyed relational happiness and sexual satisfaction. Women, in turn, enjoyed sex less

Cybersex and relationships¹⁹

In a survey of women (and some men) who experienced serious adverse consequences from their partner’s cybersex involvement:

- ▶ Partners commonly reported feeling hurt, betrayed, rejected, abandoned, lonely, isolated, humiliated, jealous, and angry.
- ▶ Partners often compared themselves unfavorably to online images.
- ▶ Partners overwhelmingly felt that cyber affairs were as emotionally painful as offline



In 68% of the couples, one or both lost interest in relational sex.

during the early years of their relationships and experienced greater satisfaction later.¹⁸

Another study in 2010 showed that couples who delay sex until their wedding night enjoy more stable and happier marriages. They also rated the quality of sex and the satisfaction in their relationships 15% and 20% higher respectively than couples who had premarital sex.²⁰

The results of these studies are nothing new, Dr. Weiss says. Studies and surveys of married couples have shown positive sexual satisfaction results for decades.

Weiss says:²¹

The research shows that people who have consistent sex inside of a marriage — spiritually connected sex — have the best sexual satisfaction over time. The person that has the most sexual partners has the least level of sexual satisfaction as adults.

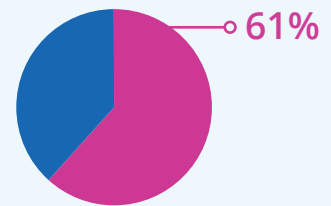
Unlike a porn video or a magazine, sex with a real-life committed partner has many points of arousal and satisfaction, from words and tones of voice, to touch, to the temperature of skin, and many other interactions. Yes, dopamine likes novelty. For the porn user that means more porn, but in a committed relationship novelty never has to end.

“Fortunately, lovers can stimulate their dopamine, keeping the high alive, by injecting novelty into their relationship,” Dr. Doidge writes.²² “When a couple go on a romantic vacation or try new activities together, or wear new kinds of clothing, or surprise each other, they are using novelty to turn on the pleasure centers, so that everything they experience, including each other, excites and pleases them.”

For minds and marriages wounded by porn, great sex and true intimacy will not arrive overnight. Repairing brokenness in marriage requires real work and determination.²³ Building trust takes time.

The next chapter will explore how to retrain one’s mind, but check out a list of resources on page 41 to learn more about counseling services, seminars, and other resources.

Porn and Marriage²⁴



Those who are happily married are 61% less likely to look at porn.



Chapter 6:

Habits of Freedom

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Your Blueprint for the Next 90 Days

As sheets of snow fell, two high school buddies and I had a daring idea.

Hanging in the barn was the rusty hood of a Volkswagen Beetle, and our thoughts went downhill from there, literally. Its rounded shape, narrow in the front and wide in the back, made the car hood the perfect giant sled. And the most dangerous slope we could think of was a straight shot down an old logging road that descended what we simply called “the mountain.”

On the left side of this steep and rutted gravel road a hill rose dramatically, but to the right a bank fell sharply to a wooded valley.

Fresh, unpacked snow can make for slow sledding. So to get the trail started we got a running start at the crest and then all three of us recklessly leaped onto the curved hood. It bored down the road, but soon careened over the right edge toward the valley where we smashed into a tree. Bruised, aching, and laughing about it, we then devised a plan to correct the failed track.

We dragged the hood to the place where we veered off the logging road, and then walked the hood the rest of the way down the hill. By doing so, we created a groove in the fresh, deep snow, so that the next time we rode down the hill we could avoid the original path that led to the uncomfortable crash.

At the top of the hill again, less reckless and more intentional, we got another running start. The makeshift sled shot down the road, and when we reached the exit to where we had crashed we leaned to the left to stay on track. We flew past the danger point and gained such momentum that the hood propelled the three of us across a creek at the bottom of the hill.

The new pathway that we took time to build had been the key to our success.

Carving New Pathways is Hard

Similar to correcting sledding paths, neurologists show that to overcome bad habits and addictions, a person needs to build new and positive habits in his or her life, which will in turn create new and positive neural pathways. Simply avoiding bad habits leads to failure. Spending time thinking about avoiding porn can bring up the mind's storehouse of images, videos, and encounters, which can lead to anxiety and tension that begs for release. New and rewarding pathways are needed to avert crashes.

Neurologists agree that the old pathways that exit toward uncomfortable behaviors and acting out won't go away, but intentionally creating new pathways allows a person to avoid swerving off the edge toward the crash. Over time and after building new and positive habits and ignoring paths to porn use, the cravings for porn and the constant cues for sexual thought will diminish and willpower will return. With practice, patience, and perseverance, freedom from porn can be the new reality.

While that sounds simple, dopamine-driven habits developed over years of repetition are extremely difficult to ignore in favor of new healthy alternatives. Men and women who have masturbated to pornography since adolescence have massive numbers of pathways and cues that lead them back again and again to pornography. The desire feels more like a survival need, similar to food, water, and shelter. Avoiding acting out feels unhealthy, both physically and mentally. How will they cope with stress, boredom, painful memories, sexual impulses, and even their daily routine?

Often when the porn struggler thinks about avoiding pornography, the desire and obsession for acting out becomes even more intense, dominating his or her thoughts and fantasies. Because personal resistance to these porn cues is so weak, acting out is typically not far away, and with each failure the notion of being free sounds like a fairy tale. It's typical for a man who is struggling with porn to convince himself that no man is really free from pornography, avoidance only occurs in short spurts, and living without pornography will cause his mind, his marriage, and his life more problems than wellbeing.

Of course, with help and work, men and women do break free from bad habits and addictions, including those who feel unable to break free from masturbation and pornography. Instinctively, the vast majority of those struggling with porn know that freedom is possible. They are just unsure of how to get there.

There is likely no single magic formula, no one-size-fits-all recovery system, but therapists and neurologists point to common strategies and steps that lead to real and long-term freedom. The coming pages will briefly explore a handful of those concepts and will point to resources for further investigation. Books and therapy practices are built on these strategies, so it will be impossible to review each of these selections to their full extent within a few paragraphs. However, this cursory discussion can be a valuable start.

Eureka!

Most of us have had moments of clarity that often came after working at a problem for some time. This might happen in a classroom where a student finally understands a formula, or a new parent cuddles their baby and unlocks the door to a love they have never experienced. It might be an insight into the future that helps a person decide to take a new job, or for lovers to marry.

Finding a eureka moment of decision comes with a stark realization and a clarity of purpose. Recovery from porn needs a eureka moment, a splash of cold water, a wake-up call, a line drawn in the sand. Thought, knowledge, and understanding are needed to understand porn is the problem and that escape is paramount.

In the case of pornography, this “aha” moment may come amid a crisis. When a person’s secret love affair with porn is discovered by loved ones it can cause heartbreak, disappointment, and anger. In 56% of divorce cases, pornography is listed as a major contributing factor to the split.¹ The knowledge that one’s marriage can be part of such a dismal statistic can be highly motivating and can spark a new point of clarity.

For other pornography users, they may simply recognize how far they have sunk into their secret life. They review the lies they tell, the time they lost, and how hopeless they feel, and then understand that they are no longer in control over this area of their life. A man may discover his porn use has resulted in erectile dysfunction when having sex with his spouse. A person may discover that porn is destroying marital intimacy both in and out of the bedroom.

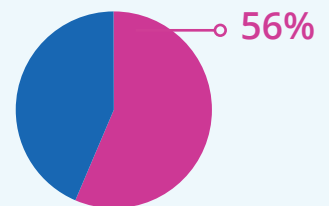
The porn user may recognize how porn is harming society. Porn hurts the people who consume it and the people they love,² but it also hurts the people who are trapped in the pornography industry,³ including the women and children who are trafficked.⁴

Meanwhile, the tenants of every major religion denounce pornography and the abuse to which it contributes. To adhere to one’s faith and to draw from its principles can be a major motivator and asset to recovery.

Moments of clarity about pornography are everywhere. Finding one or several to cling to is a first step to escaping porn.

Though she writes to food addicts in *The Hunger Fix*, Dr. Pam Peeke calls this moment of clarity an EpiphaME, personalizing the word epiphany.⁵ She says that people will recognize

Porn is a key factor
in divorce cases:



56% involved one party
having “an obsessive interest in
pornographic websites.”

when their EpiphaMe has occurred because they will stop making excuses to others and themselves. They will start a 180-degree attitude change toward recovery.

To help people get a sense of their current attitude, she encourages them to write down every excuse that comes to them for 24 hours.

“When that excuse maker is gone, you’re home,” she writes. “That dopamine receptor is yours — you own it [...] Feed your soul, not your addictive beast.”

Of course, making the choice to change is the start of a formidable battle. Now, the time has come to take action.

Goal Setting

Every action plan needs a starting point and tasks to complete along the way. A person who is committed to escaping porn’s trap will need to set goals, Dr. Laaser says.⁶ In a moment of shame or pain a person can easily say, “No more. I’ll stop.” But true clarity and committed resolve requiring a plan.

Laaser and several other therapists and neurologists say the first step to escaping pornography is to pull out a calendar and establish a 90-day goal in which porn and masturbation are to be cut off.⁷ A person may use the calendar on their smart phone or computer if they like, but they should use a calendar they will look at every day.

Dates of celebration should be noted to recognize progress, such as Day 3, Day 5, Day 7, Day 14, Day 25 and so on. Positive treats or rewards will vary from person to person, but it’s valuable to reward and recognize those milestones along the way.

The long-term goal is to actually stop the porn and masturbation cycle completely, but 90 days of escape is the first goal to achieve. And for many it will look like a mountain, a period of porn and masturbation abstinence they have not known for years or even decades.

This time period is awash with peril. In the coming paragraphs we’ll review more action items, techniques, and tricks to stay strong in the fight, but one factor is important to mention here. Giving in to either porn or masturbation will set back the recovery time. It is self-defeating.

It’s time to use the brain to fight back. The prefrontal cortex is the decision-making logical part of the brain, and each time that a person resists temptation and each time a positive habit is reinforced, the prefrontal cortex gets stronger. That means a person’s willpower grows and the cues and cravings for porn use grow weaker.

People who have tried to quit porn before without success have allowed their brain to accept a lie. “I’ve been doing well. I need a little relief. One more time won’t hurt.” Giving in to the temptation will increase recovery time, stall one’s progress, and worse, make the effort a failure.

Failure is Not an Option

If a person does act out, they should take note of how the fall occurred and avoid that temptation. Get back to a 90-day plan and don't give up. If the fall is an isolated slip, Dr. Laaser says restarting the 90-day clock isn't necessary. But a deep binge with porn or a series of falls means it's time to restart the 90-day period of abstinence.

Abstinence

Is sex with a spouse allowed during this period? That can be a difficult question and may need to be answered by a person's therapist, someone with an outsider's view of the struggler's condition and state of mind.

Dr. Laaser says no. In fact, Laaser requires his patients to sign a 90-day abstinence contract, which means not only no self-sex but also no sex with one's spouse.

Why? First of all, he says, a person needs to learn that they won't die without sex, especially for 90 days. But more importantly, the person struggling with pornography or sex addiction needs to work proactively about learning true intimacy.

"The abstinence contract on the front end is entirely about neurochemical detox," Laaser says. "It's resetting the brain in terms of sexual expectations. Generally, the 14th day is the wall. As you get past the 14th day, things will get easier."⁸

After 30 days of abstinence, an individual will begin to feel more confident. Many people in recovery say that after 30 days they feel more focused in their daily lives and even more energetic.

So, if it takes 14 days to detox and 30 days to begin to gain confidence, why the focus on 90 days of abstinence even with a spouse? It's all about genuine intimacy. For someone with an obsessive porn habit or an addiction, the focus has been on personal and immediate gratification. The people in porn are used; the porn user gives nothing. Especially for men, porn equates to selfishness that typically extends to their marital life. This even includes the overemphasis men can have of their sexual performance, pride or fear about their prowess, and where sexual performance is equated to their manliness.

Varying cultural, social, and psychological issues have robbed a porn user of their potential for intimacy. And this 90-day period without sex is an optimal time to learn and grow.

"Couples often are making that classic mistake of all addicts: that sex is equal to love or sex is equal to intimacy," Dr. Laaser says. "During the 90 days, we're trying to teach the couple to have intimacy in spiritual and emotional ways first and then eventually sexuality becomes an expression of that intimacy."⁹

What does intimacy look like? There is no formula for intimacy; it's unique to each couple but it has a lot to do with giving and sharing. Consider reading, praying, cooking, and taking walks together. Many couples have forgotten how to play and have fun together. Couples need to explore non-sexual means to express intimacy, and after the 90-day break, they will find this discovered intimacy will make their sex life even stronger and more fulfilling, Laaser says.

Clean House

Ninety days will seem like a long haul for a person starting this journey, and it will be impossible to avoid temptation if there are secret stashes. When Cortez decided to invade the world of the Aztecs in 1519, he burned his ships so there was no easy way to back out.

People committed to battling porn must set their “porn escape routes” ablaze.

Whether the porn stash is in plain view or hidden in the garage, it all has to go up in flames. I recall a friend who invited his 12-step program sponsor to his home where they built a bonfire and roasted his porn videos. There were no marshmallows, he said, but watching the videos burn brought warmth to his soul and strengthened his resolve for genuine recovery. Today, he is porn free and leads a Celebrate Recovery¹⁰ group in Michigan.

Clean Computers and Mobile Devices

Internet pornography is likely the greatest source of porn temptation for people today. WiFi access is everywhere and laptops and mobile devices make porn access a click away.

You may recall from chapter 3 that Dr. Cooper described a Triple-A Engine that draws people into online sexual activity: accessibility, affordability, and anonymity.

THE TRIPLE-A ENGINE



These three factors work like three legs on a stool: remove just one of the legs and the stool will fall (or at least make it awkward to sit on).

The leg easiest to break is anonymity.

Many therapists agree that Internet accountability software is one of the most effective ways for a person to protect themselves or their loved one online. Accountability software monitors how the Internet is used and delivers a report to trusted friend, spouse, or mentor. It encourages a person to think before they click and avoid temptations, which builds up the willpower and decision making of the brain's prefrontal cortex. It also allows mentors to provide guidance and arms them with accurate information for in depth conversations with the person who is struggling.

In 2011, a university study showed that using Covenant Eyes Screen Accountability with a motivating friend as an accountability partner has a major impact on abstinence from porn. John Y. Lee, a doctoral student of clinical psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary tested a technique called Motivational Interviewing (MI), which provides knowledge about how porn negatively impacts people with conversations that encourage and reinforce the person's confidence that he or she can avoid pornography. People who received both MI and Covenant Eyes reported a 66% decrease in relapse episodes in the four weeks after receiving the interventions, compared with a control group.¹¹

Lee wrote:

First, not only can both Covenant Eyes and MI be effective in reducing the frequency of pornography use, many participants in the study were able to completely eliminate porn use after entering the study and reported zero relapse episodes. Second, Covenant Eyes and MI, when used together, appear to contain much promise in helping people really make a change in their pornography use patterns.

A key to making an accountability relationship effective is to be honest about the triggers, cues, and issues a person might face.

"If you have an accountability partner, tell him what your landmines are so you are not fighting alone," Dr. Doug Weiss writes in *Clean*. "If you don't have an accountability partner, get one.

"All natural predators look for the animal that has strayed from the herd. Be honest and get accountable so your brain doesn't get the best of you. Honesty can be as simple as having Covenant Eyes Screen Accountability software on your phone and computer. When your wife, pastor, or accountability partner gets the report on your Internet travels, this is a form of honesty that can protect and help you lead and maintain a clean life."¹²

When protecting a computer, many people first think of Internet filtering in an effort to block inappropriate content. But an Internet filter without accountability is a waste of money for adolescents, teens, and adults.

Filtering alone can be compared to a picket fence in a yard. A person searching for a way around the fence can bang on its boards, until he finds a loose one. Or worse, they find a way to unlock the gate.

With Covenant Eyes Screen Accountability specifically, the knocks on the fence typically show up on reports.

This by no means disparages filtering the Internet. Filtering can be very helpful. But filtering alone doesn't help a person reorganize their neural pathways.

On a regular basis subscribers to Covenant Eyes say that because they have made the right choices on their protected computers and mobile devices repeatedly, that the temptation for porn at a convenience store or video store is no longer an issue.

New Habits, New Pathways, and Dopamine Rewards

As stated before, simply avoiding porn isn't the only answer. New positive activities are needed. Keep in mind the neurological concept of "use it or lose it." Avoid an activity and its desire will wane, pursue an activity and it will become more engrained.

New and positive habits need to be introduced, and they need to be rewarding and entertaining.

Yes, entertaining!

"It's not an uncommon cross addiction for the average addict to be a workaholic also," Dr. Laaser says. "So finding ways to recreate, relax, quiet time, those kinds of things are some of the new healthy habits."¹³

"Having a hobby is one of the ways we could reward ourselves," Dr. Laaser says. "I was talking to a guy today who said, 'I've always had carpentry skills, but I've never taken time to build anything.' Well, have a goal that one of your healthy habits is to do some woodworking at least a few times a week."

Exercise is another beneficial habit, and it feeds the body dopamine and endorphins. Starting an exercise routine may feel rough at first if it has been a while, so dial the routine up slowly. Soon the exercise will make a major difference in physical as well as mental wellbeing.

"This approach (of introducing positive habits) makes plastic sense because it grows a new brain circuit that gives pleasure and triggers dopamine release which, as we have seen, rewards the new activity and consolidates and grows new neuronal connections," Dr. Doidge

writes. “This new circuit can eventually compete with the older one, and according to use it or lose it, the pathological networks will weaken. With this treatment we don’t so much ‘break’ bad habits as replace bad behaviors with better ones.”¹⁴

Whatever rewarding activity is pursued, it needs to be an activity that is reoccurring. Building new rewarding neural pathways requires time and ongoing repetition. Doidge repeats the neurological mantras:

1. Neurons that fire together wire together. Repeating a pleasurable activity instead of the compulsive activity, such as porn use, forms a new circuit that is gradually reinforced instead of the compulsion.
2. Neurons that fire apart wire apart. When a person refuses to act on a compulsion, like porn and masturbation, it weakens the link between the activity and the idea that it will provide relief.

Doidge teaches that delinking is crucial because while acting on a compulsion eases anxiety in the short term, it worsens it in the long term.¹⁵

Finally, choose positive habits wisely. Rewarding activities that could trigger acting out should be avoided. For instance alcohol, provocative movies, and public beaches (where sexual temptations can flare) may need to be avoided, especially during this 90-day recovery period. A person usually knows what activities can lead to temptation, and they must be avoided as rewards until the person’s decision-making routine is powered up.

Three-Second Rule

When watching TV, walking through the mall, or driving past billboards, temptation can strike when least expected. Many therapists recommend using the 3-Second Rule, which involves three steps: Alert, Avert, and Affirm.

1. **Alert:** Realize that you see something inappropriate. It may only take a split-second to recognize a tempting situation.
2. **Avert:** Close your eyes or look away. These first two steps should be instantaneous.
3. **Affirm:** Give yourself a mental high-five to congratulate the effort. Say to yourself, “I saw that by mistake, and I quickly looked away. I’ve been clean for (enter number of days) and I’m going to stay that way.”

Pure Thought

“For as he thinks, so is he.” Proverbs 23:7

This verse from the ancient writings of Solomon is backed by neurology. Allowing the mind to replay pornographic memories and fantasizing about pornography and sex can keep those neural pathways flowing. From the concept of “use it or lose it,” fantasizing about porn and sex equates to “using it,” or practicing the very thing you are hoping to avoid.

How a person expends mental energy has a direct impact on their neural pathways. Literally, mental practice can equate to physical practice.

For example, Dr. Alvaro Pascual-Leone, chief of the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, which is part of Harvard Medical School, conducted an experiment in which he taught two groups of people to play a musical piece on a piano. None of the subjects had studied the piano and they were shown which fingers to use and heard how the notes should be played.¹⁶

The first group sat in front of a keyboard for two hours for five days and imagined both playing the sequence and hearing it. The second group spent the same amount of time physically playing the piece. After the five days, each group was asked to play the musical sequence and a computer was used to measure the accuracy of their performances.

The results: the group that had only imagined playing the piano played the musical notes on the fifth day as well as the actual players had on their third day. If given just two additional hours of actual practice, the imagining group performed to the same level as the group that spent all of their time physically practicing.

Doidge writes:¹⁷

One reason we can change our brains simply by imagining is that, from a neuroscientific point of view, imagining an act and doing it are not as different as they sound. When people close their eyes and visualize a simple object, such as the letter ‘A’, the primary visual cortex lights up, just as if it would if the subjects were actually looking at the letter ‘A’. Brain scans show that in action and imagination many of the same parts of the brain are activated.

Inappropriate thoughts can be combatted with positive thoughts, such as thinking of a new hobby, playing music, repeating an inspiring quote, or some other positive activity. Mental and physical escape routes should be prepared in advance to ward off sexual thinking. Of course, each time temptation is resisted the person’s decision-making power grows stronger.

Addressing the Pain of the Past

In the movie *Forrest Gump*, the lead character decides to go for a therapeutic run. And looking back on his life, he needed therapy. He never knew his father, he had been bullied throughout

youth, he had lost his best friend in Vietnam, his mother had died of cancer, and his true love had left seemingly for good. After finishing his cross-country trek he reflects, “My mama always said you got to put the past behind you before you can move on.”

Although ineffective and addictive, pornography and masturbation are used as a salve for pain, anxiety, depression, self-doubt, anger and other unhealthy feelings. These emotions and misgivings are often deeply rooted, stemming from childhood, teen, and even adult trauma, abuse, or wounds. All families have healthy and unhealthy qualities, and even mistakes “create wounds in the human spirit,” Dr Laaser teaches.¹⁸

Blaming others and avoiding responsibility for porn use or sex addiction will not help someone get well, Laaser writes, but the person should acknowledge the wounds they suffered and accept that they did not deserve them. Rather than burying painful memories, which may include physical, mental, and sexual abuse, these memories need to be brought to the surface where they can be discussed and reviewed with a good friend or a counselor.

Paths to overcoming wounds of the past can’t be covered within a few paragraphs here. But self-discovery, study, and counseling to overcome scars are a vital part of the recovery process.

Vigilance

The road to recovery is a heavyweight bout. A boxer keeps his gloves up to protect his face, his elbows down to protect his ribs, and his eyes focused on his opponent’s every move. In recovery, lowering one’s guard is like begging for a sucker punch. Stop being vigilant and the addictive habits can ease back into life and again claim control.

HALT

Physical care is vital to vigilance. HALT is the acronym often used by therapists to remind people of when they can be most vulnerable. It stands for:

- hungry
- angry
- lonely
- tired

Simply going to bed on a regular schedule to get a good night’s rest can help one’s brain be more focused on positive habits and more alert to fight temptations. Not only eating but also eating well can improve mood and feelings of wellbeing. Regular exercise keeps the mind more focused, the body feeling great, and improves sleep.

People in recovery have fresh memories of their obsessions, and they must be on guard to dodge and block the cues, triggers, and temptations that face them daily. Because the memories of pornography and the neural pathways that were created for porn will remain, vigilance must be part of everyday living.

It's vital to be aware of people, places, and things that contribute to unhealthy thoughts and exposure to temptations. This requires a personal inventory. What may be tempting to one man or woman may not be for another. For example, a person may have to allow some friendships to fall away if those friends actively push porn or leave it lying around their homes. A convenience store or video store that sells porn must be bypassed. The point is to create boundaries that insulate a person from temptation as much as possible.

A person should learn to associate porn with something negative or toxic so that they know how to block when a punch (in the form of a trigger or cue) is thrown at them. Porn has plenty of negatives, but it must be perceived by the individual as ugly. Porn is demeaning and abusive. It steals away the intimacy of a marriage. It creates the demand for sex trafficking and modern day slavery.

Learn to hate porn. As Weiss writes, "You will never destroy an enemy you embrace."¹⁹

Positive Thinking

When I was very young, I quickly discovered that you never used the word "can't" around my great-grandmother, whom everyone called Mam Maw. "Can't," she said, is a convenient excuse for a lack of patience, perseverance, and hard work. She had grown up in hard tack farm life, drove teams of mules through plow fields during The Great Depression, and survived two husbands. If she asked you to weed her flower garden, for instance, you would never say,

"Mam Maw, I can't get this done before dark." You knew what she would say next: "'Can't' never did anything."

Florence "Flo Jo" Joyner, the world's fastest woman who captured three gold medals in the 1988 Summer Olympics, offered an even better mantra: "Believe, achieve, succeed."²⁰

Studies show that the *Little Engine Who Could* had the right idea. Telling one's self, "I think I can," produces results. Positive thinking often begins with positive self-talk or unspoken thoughts that are optimistic in the face of challenges. Positive thinking lowers rates of depression and distress and improves coping skills during times of hardship or stress. It can even increase lifespan.²¹

Twenty years ago, Dr. Robert Brooks found that many of his patients were swimming in an ocean of feelings of inadequacy. So he encouraged his patients to swim to what he calls "islands of competence," areas of their lives that are sources of pride and accomplishment. Encouraging patients to focus on strengths rather than weaknesses and on optimism instead

of pessimism had a ripple effect that helped them confront situations and issues in their lives that were problematic. Expanding these islands allowed new islands of competence to emerge and feelings of inadequacy for individual situations grew shallow.²²

These feelings of competence can also lead to healthy interests. For instance, a man who has skills in carpentry can apply them to help needy or disabled families in his community. And giving time to others can further improve feelings of accomplishment.

One exercise is to write down specific strengths. This is no time to be modest. Being a hard worker, being a person who is organized, and having specific skills and talents are all things to write down. Whatever is noble, right, pure, admirable, and excellent, think on these things.

Becoming Something New

Whether the person started using porn in adolescence or adulthood, their goal is not to become what they once were. One's mind can never return to innocence. Rather it can grow into something new.

Brain activity is like Play-Doh, and everything a person does shapes it. If the Play-Doh started as a square and it's rolled into a ball, it's possible to make a square again, but it won't be the exact same square. The molecules of the Play-Doh have been rearranged. The "cure" doesn't mean returning to the preexisting state.²³

"The system is plastic, not elastic... An elastic band can be stretched, but it always reverts to its former shape, and the molecules are not rearranged in the process. The plastic brain is perpetually altered by every encounter, every interaction," Doidge writes.²⁴

Men and women who immerse themselves in 90 days of abstinence with a personal hope for freedom will begin a process of change — a change that can create within them positive desires, fresh competence, and steadfast willpower. The old mental tracks will remain, but can be ignored for new positive habits.

Each person makes a unique journey with individual outcomes. After more than a year of freedom, many describe their sexual desires with positive confidence and self-assuredness. Others view their recovery as a fragile freedom.

Whether characterized as cast iron or fragile glass, freedom is achievable and worth fighting for one day at a time.

Today is someone's new beginning.



Resources

In addition to the books and resources already mentioned in this book, the following will provide insights into understanding and recovery. Visit the Endnotes of this book for more details of cited resources.

Websites

False Love: Overcoming Sexual Sin from Pornography to Adultery is a seminar series by Brad Hambrick that opens doors to recovery - www.bradhambrick.com/falselove

ACBC-certified counselors has a site that can help an individual find a counselor by zip code and by country - <https://biblicalcounseling.com/find-a-counselor/>

RECLAIM Sexual Health is an anonymous, online recovery program that helps struggling individuals break free from pornography addiction and other unwanted sexual behaviors - reclaimsexualhealth.com

Books

Clean, A Proven Plan for Men Committed to Sexual Integrity. By Dr. Doug Weiss. 2013 Thomas Nelson.

Closing the Window: Steps to Living Porn Free. By Tim Chester. 2010 IVP Books.

Healing the Wounds of Sexual Addiction. By Dr. Mark Laaser. 2004 Zondervan.

Sampson and the Pirate Monks. By Nate Larkin. 2007 W Publishing Group.

Counseling

Comfort Christian Counseling specializes in therapy for sex addiction, offering couples three-day intensive counseling and other resources - comfortchristiancounseling.com

Heart to Heart Counseling Center, Dr. Doug Weiss, offers telephone counseling, three-day intensive programs, and other resources - www.sexaddict.com

Faithful and True provides intensive workshops, counseling, education and a variety of other resources. www.faithfulandtrue.com

PURELIFE Ministries provides a long list of resources, including at-home and live-in counseling intensive programs - www.purelifeministries.org

Transformed Hearts Counseling Center offers mental health counseling services and resources for individuals, couples, and families. The center specializes in intimacy issues and healing from sexual addiction - www.transformedhearts.com

Remove the Internet Secrecy: Decrease the Temptation

Screen Accountability™ software analyzes screenshots to determine whether they contain explicit material. Then, images are blurred to hide private information and graphic imagery. A handful of these blurred images that are representative of your Internet usage are then selected and sent to your partner. Screen Accountability provides more holistic insight into what we actually look at on our screens.

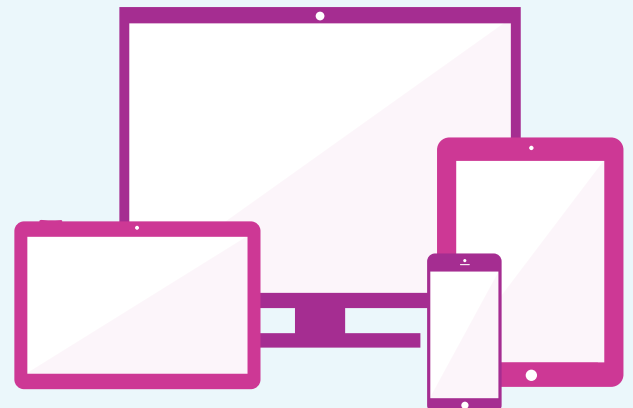
This makes you think twice about where you go online. It gives you discipline to pause and think about how your actions impact your life and the lives of others. Making good decisions online provides repeated practice so that good decisions are easier to make offline as well.

These reports also allow you to have specific and informed conversations with others about how you use the Internet, drawing others around you to help you meet your goals.

Sign up For Screen Accountability at www.covenanteyes.com

Screen Accountability is available for:

- ☐ Windows
- ☐ Mac
- ☐ iPhone®
- ☐ iPod touch®
- ☐ iPad®
- ☐ Android™ smartphones and tablets





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