My husband (or boyfriend) has been looking at porn and I need some answers!

Feeling betrayed, confused, distraught, devastated, or at fault for this? You are not alone and you have not caused this behavior. We’d like to help. Below are a few thoughts to consider, some action steps, and some links to get you connected to the help you may desire.

“Sexual betrayal feels like a personal attack – it is a wound that pierces the soul.”
– Debra Laaser, 2008, Shattered Vows, p. 52

“Whether the problem is seen as yours, his, or the culture’s, and whether sexual betrayal is a onetime slip or an addictive pattern, all sexual sin is profoundly wounding to a wife. When husbands are fantasizing or lusting after women, whether it is for real women or images of women, a wife feels compared, objectified, and unchosen. Sexual sin is like a cancer. It has secret cells of pain that, if not found, acknowledged, and treated, will multiply and eventually kill your spirit and your relationship.”
– Debra Laaser, 2008, Shattered Vows, p. 87

WHY DOES MY HUSBAND LOOK AT PORN?

BASIC DISCUSSION

LET’S START WITH 4 BASIC THOUGHTS; THEN WE CAN EXPLORE FURTHER.

1. **Men’s brains are wired for visual stimulation.** Dr. William Struthers’ book offers a fantastic explanation (from a Christian perspective – and not in an effort to “make excuses”) of how the male brain is designed to be captivated by the sight of the female’s body.¹

2. **Internet pornography offers unlimited access to sexually stimulating content, within the context of an anonymous and affordable environment.**² In fact, in our current age of constant access to wireless technology, where the Internet is increasingly porn-saturated, *in order to not view sexually explicit content, deliberate protective measures must be taken.* It’s no longer necessary for a person to intentionally seek out pornography; nowadays, pornography will come to you. “One study reports that 93% of boys are exposed to Internet porn before the age of 18.”³ How protected we are from the onslaught, how prepared we feel for the battle, how anchored in accountable and meaningful relationships, and how equipped we are with healthy coping skills may all impact how we respond to pornography.

3. **Advanced brain imaging scans now show us that viewing pornography creates a neurochemical high in the brain that compares closest to the high of using Heroin.** The pleasure centers of the brain are impacted, neurochemicals are firing (i.e.,
norepinephrine, dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, vasopressin, testosterone, endogenous opiates), and connections are made that reinforce the desire to repeat the behavior.\(^4\)

4. The chemical “high” of arousal, pleasure, and euphoria all serve to reinforce the false message that porn is an easy escape. More on that below.

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**THE PATHWAY TO PORNOGRAPHY**

The pathway to pornography addiction is varied. For some, it starts with early, unintentional exposure. For some men, earlier psychological scars play a significant role in their porn use. If they grew up in an environment where they experienced or witnessed abuse (physical, emotional, spiritual, or sexual) or neglect, the chemical high of viewing pornography may have offered a ready-escape from fear, chaos, loneliness, powerlessness, rejection, hurt, or anger. Perhaps pornography became a way to numb pain, forget a problem, or escape a situation by providing a quick, cheap substitute that promised instant gratification or immediate reward. The problem is that pornography satisfies incompletely, and only briefly. And then that painful feeling returns, and so does the need to medicate again, and again...

Sometimes, even though pornography brings a reward (for example, the chemical high produced in the brain during sexual arousal and release), it also brings shame (for example, men whose value system says that viewing porn is wrong and displeasing to the Lord and their spouse). Then, sometimes that very (porn-produced) shame drives the person to want to “medicate” again, by viewing porn.

Mark W. Gaither of Redemptive Heart Ministries\(^5\) explains that part of the addictive cycle is attributed to experiencing “toxic shame,” or the belief that he is horribly broken and beyond hope. Normal shame would result in feeling that he has done something wrong that has broken your relationship. Toxic shame results in your husband believing he is unlovable, and fearing that if he allows you to draw close, you will notice his flaws and lose respect for him. Thus, it feels “safer” to turn to the always-willing, always-happy girls of porn. Viewing pornography can result in feeling like even more of a failure, feeding into his toxic shame, which causes the cycle to continue. Eventually he may build up internal justifications and defenses (i.e., It’s your fault; everyone else is doing it; it’s no big deal; at least it’s not an affair, etc.) so that he no longer has to experience the shame.

Pornography also offers a fantasy world where men can imagine themselves being desired by eager and seductive women. Pornography is compelling because it offers a (seemingly) simplified version of sex, that’s not nearly as difficult as navigating an authentic relationship. As he watches porn, virtual sex can easily become more appealing because it does not require any of the difficult work that real relationships and real sex require.\(^6\) Pornography is entirely focused on his desires and his pleasure, with no requirement to invest energy in smoothing things over after the argument earlier in the day, so that his spouse will be likely to feel more
romantically-inclined towards him later in the day; no risk of negative feedback or rejection in any way; and no need for pleasing a spouse; etc.

For more answers to complicated questions about your husband’s (or boyfriend’s) use of porn, Covenant Eyes provides a free e-book (a 30-page PDF) called “Porn and Your Husband; A Recovery Guide for Wives.” It provides the most concise yet comprehensive answers we’ve found. Or, click here for our list of recommended books.

**WHY AM I NOT ENOUGH?**

“During sex, natural opiates are released, along with dopamine, creating a pleasurable experience. However, repeated stimulation, particularly through porn and masturbation, eventually builds up a resistance. It’s like a drug; the more he gets, the more he needs.”

“In simple terms, you’re ‘not enough’ because his repeated porn use has vastly accelerated his tolerance for these chemical rushes, far beyond the levels of monogamous sex with you. In particular, pornography has trained him to be turned on by variety, which no single woman can provide. It also explains why he may have turned to harder porn or acted out through an affair—he’s looking for the rush that you, through no fault of your own, can never provide.”

We want to clarify: you cannot satisfy his current sexual appetite or demands, due to the impact that pornography has had. However, with the right support and diligent work on his part – his brain can be re-trained and chemically re-wired to experience satisfying intimacy again in the long term.

**IS THIS MY FAULT?**

Despite what you may hear from friends, family, or even certain counselors – the leading sexual addiction professionals consistently conclude: “What you need to remember is that your husband would struggle with pornography regardless of whom he married. His use of pornography is not your fault.”

“Often men have the tendency to blame-shift, claiming that if you 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. Often wives will tie their own self-worth to their husbands’ opinions of them. A drop in self-esteem is common after a betrayal.”

“If your husband is telling you such things, he is trying to rationalize and justify his desire for porn by shifting the blame to you. By blaming you, he protects himself from shame and avoids any suggestion he is not adequate. If he is not ready to take responsibility for his own behavior, ‘He will say anything to convince you, and even himself, that he does not have a problem. Blaming you is an easy way to save face,’ explains Ella Hutchinson.”
“You could be the most beautiful, supportive woman in the world and he’d still turn to porn. Remember, even Tiger Woods cheated on his supermodel wife.”

**GAUGING USE OF PORNOGRAPHY**

When it comes to sexual behaviors that are causing problems within a marriage, Dr. Michael Sytsma, Nationally Certified Counselor and Certified Sex Therapist, offers a continuum that is helpful. Even *infrequent* sexual acting out (like watching porn) still causes problems in a marriage and needs to be addressed. At the same time, we want to distinguish that all pornography viewing is not necessarily indicative of a full-blown pornography or sexual addiction.

It may be helpful for you to consider the continuum below as you try to assess the severity of your situation. We compare the continuum of problematic sexual behaviors to that of drug use/abuse/dependence. A trained professional will offer recommendations that fit with a careful assessment of your circumstances, rather than applying a one-size-fits-all model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Undisciplined Sexual Behaviors</th>
<th>Abusing Sex</th>
<th>Dependent on Sex</th>
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**AND NOW WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO?**

**SEEK COUNSELING AND SUPPORT FOR YOURSELF.**

You need support as you deal with the trauma of this recent revelation. Attending your own individual counseling and getting involved in a group of spouses are two of the most important steps you can take in your healing journey. If possible, we encourage you to consider finding a therapeutic group for spouses or a support group like Journey [http://hopequestgroup.org/journey1/#sthash.8m6nWa2l.dpbs](http://hopequestgroup.org/journey1/#sthash.8m6nWa2l.dpbs). Searching for a counselor? Read our [Questions to Ask](http://hopequestgroup.org/journey1/#sthash.8m6nWa2l.dpbs); check out our list of [Counseling Referrals](http://hopequestgroup.org/journey1/#sthash.8m6nWa2l.dpbs) or [Weekend Intensives](http://hopequestgroup.org/journey1/#sthash.8m6nWa2l.dpbs); or feel free to [Contact Us](http://hopequestgroup.org/journey1/#sthash.8m6nWa2l.dpbs) and we’ll do our best to guide you through the process of finding the best help for you. We’ve spent an extensive amount of time learning about “best practices” and meeting with local professionals who focus on addressing sexual issues so that we can help you navigate this process.

**CHOOSE AT LEAST ONE SAFE WOMAN TO SHARE YOUR HEART WITH.**
Deb Laaser defines safe community this way: “It is a place where you can open your heart, admit your inadequacies, own your mistakes, share your anger and grief, or just vent. You can be you, with all of your flaws, and still be accepted and encouraged and loved. In return, safe women will also share their stories, be vulnerable, and not try to fix you. They will listen to you, comfort you, and encourage you. That is safe community.”

Ask the Lord to help you find the right help for you and your family. We are often reminded that we were made to be in meaningful community; pray for the Lord to help you find at least one person to walk with you in this journey.

“As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” Proverbs 27:17

“If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!” Ecclesiastes 4:11

“Surely you need guidance to wage war, and victory is won through many advisers.” Proverbs 24:6

Melissa Haas notes that during this time, most family members are probably considered “unsafe” because they will often either blame you, or try to eliminate your pain, potentially encouraging you to leave the relationship immediately. Melissa shares the following indicators of safe people and unsafe people:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Safe People</th>
<th>Unsafe People</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Accept and love me unconditionally</td>
<td>• Condemn me or blame me for my husband’s problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Are Comfortable with grief. They don’t try to lighten the mood or distract me or do something to stop the tears. They offer a shoulder and they cry with me.</td>
<td>• Deny or minimize the sin of my spouse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Don’t gossip about me or my husband.</td>
<td>• Try to “fix” me or “fix” him by suggesting things I should or should not do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Don’t try to fix my problems or offer solutions. They simply listen, encourage me, and pray.</td>
<td>• Give unwanted advice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Don’t need my love or approval to be okay. They can handle my angry</td>
<td>• Cannot keep confidences.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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outbursts and stormy emotions because they know who they are in Christ.

- Are aware of their own brokenness.
  Humility and integrity are the hallmarks of their character.
  
- Only stay in relationship with me when I am happy and hopeful. They are too uncomfortable with or embarrassed by grief and anger to allow me to feel negative emotions and to mourn.

- Are more concerned about relating to me and loving me than about giving me advice.
  
- Are arrogant and self-righteous.

- Are sensitive to the Holy Spirit’s work in my life.
  
- Are unable to see the Holy Spirit at work in me. This would apply both to non-believers and immature believers who walk more in the flesh than in the Spirit.

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**Consider praying for discernment as you begin to seek Godly counsel for your next step.**

**Pray that He would give you wisdom to know when, how, and with whom to share. Pray that He would help you to hear His quiet voice amidst the chaos of your circumstances and perhaps the loud voices of others in your life.** Also ask for discernment regarding your husband, for insight regarding his world, his thoughts, his experience, and his heart.

“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.” James 1:5

“Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.” Jeremiah 33:3

“The LORD said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the L ORD, for the L ORD is about to pass by.” Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the L ORD, but the L ORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the L ORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the L ORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.” 1 Kings 19:11-12

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**SET BOUNDARIES; BE WILLING TO FOLLOW THROUGH WITH CONSEQUENCES.**
If your spouse is addicted to pornography (aka: unable or unwilling to stop in spite of prior efforts to quit or in spite of negative consequences), in order to interrupt the addictive cycle, someone struggling with addiction usually has to experience the full weight of the consequences of their choices before anything will change. In large part, the rationalizations and faulty logic that excuse their choices have become so loud, it takes more than “another conversation” to break through. The Covenant Eyes © e-book “Porn and Your Husband” offers a section with tips on “Tough Love.”

Ask the Lord to give you the courage to have difficult conversations or to set difficult boundaries, to follow through with consequences,

“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” Galatians 5:9

“A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.” Proverbs 25:11

Come to the Lord with this particular struggle and ask Him for help in trusting Him and overcoming your fears. Ask Him to help you see His care for you, even where you feel completely forsaken by Him right now.

“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.” Ephesians 6:18

“Send me your light and your faithful care, let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell.” Psalm 43:3

“Lord, you understand; remember me and care for me.” Jeremiah 15:15
Step number one in setting boundaries is often, “I will not protect your secret any longer.” This doesn’t mean you broadcast the problems to anyone who will listen. It does mean that you prayerfully and thoughtfully pursue safe people you can turn to for help, support, and guidance. And then you actively engage in that process – for yourself – regardless of your husband’s willingness to engage in his own recovery journey. Which brings us to the next point...

YOUR HUSBAND NEEDS TO BE WILLING TO ENGAGE IN HIS OWN RECOVERY PROCESS.

This will most likely include individual counseling; a support group; personal support; Internet accountability software for his phone, computer, and tablet; and “radical amputation.” In other words, he will need to make intentional, deliberate choices to recognize his triggers and avoid engaging in the rituals that he practiced in the moments (or hours) leading up to using porn. But his recovery process is his responsibility and you cannot walk that path for him.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Click here for our list of recommended reading.
Click here for our list of counselors and weekend retreats/intensives.
Click here to reach us if you need more specific help.

ADDITIONAL ANSWERS

For more great answers to your complicated questions about your husband’s (or boyfriend’s) use of porn, you can access the free e-book here.

http://www.covenanteyes.com/blog/struggling/resources-for-wives/ Topics include: Why does he look at porn; How can he watch porn and say he loves me; Why does he prefer porn to sex with me; Why am I not enough; Is this my fault; Is this it for our marriage; 3 stages of recovering from betrayal and moving towards forgiveness; What do I do now; Having productive conversations; Tips for tough love; Internet safety and accountability; Finding a counselor; Additional resources; Books for you; Books for your husband; Events; Software; Websites; and A parable of hope.

ADDITIONAL HELPFUL FREE DOWNLOADS FROM COVENANT EYES

Your Brain on Porn http://www.covenanteyes.com/brain-ebook/
Hope After Porn  http://www.covenanteyes.com/hope-after-porn-how-their-marriages-were-saved/

1 Dr. William Struthers, Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain
2 Dr. Al Cooper, a psychologist who studies Internet Addiction has named “The Triple-A Engine” that makes “Internet pornography so dangerous: accessible, affordable, anonymous.” As cited by Dr. Mark Laaser during “Healthy Sexuality and Sexual Addiction” lecture 9/28/13 Atl. GA.
3 Sabina, Wolak, and Finkelhor, “The Nature and Dynamics of Internet Pornography Exposure for Youth.” For more statistics about children and the Internet, download “Parenting the Internet Generation” at CovenantEyes.com/ebooks.
4 The following books address the neurochemical piece of pornography and sex: Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain by William Struthers; The Porn Trap by Wendy Maltz and Larry Maltz; The Invisible Bond by Barbara Wilson; and Hooked: New Science on How Casual Sex is Affecting Our Children by Joe S. McIlhaney Jr. and Freda McKissic Bush.
6 Lisa Eldred, p. 8
7 Lisa Eldred, p. 9
8 Lisa Eldred, p. 9
9 Lisa Eldred, p. 9
10 Weiss, Partners. As cited in Lisa Eldred, p. 10
11 Hutchinson, “7 Questions Wives of Porn Addicts Often Ask (Part 2).” As cited in Lisa Eldred, p. 10
12 Lisa Eldred, p. 10
13 Dr. Michael Sytsma, personal communication, 9/27/2013
14 Debra Laaser, 2008, Shattered Vows: Hope and Healing for Women Who Have Been Sexually Betrayed, p. 52