

A Road Map for Recovery

Leaving Pornography Addiction and Discovering Life

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“This will be the last time”

“It wasn’t as bad as other stuff I’ve seen”

“It’s not like I look at it everyday”

These self-reassuring statements are a small sampling of comments I hear from men who struggle with viewing pornography. They wonder if they are really addicted. Many of them hide in secrecy for years trying to resolve the unwanted behaviors on their own. The secret struggle often creates more hopelessness and feelings of powerlessness over this mysterious force that seems to keep sabotaging their best efforts.

In their pain and frustration, many of them ask me the following questions:

“How can I tell if I am really addicted to pornography?”

“How do I know if I really need to get help for my behavior?”

“What’s involved in overcoming these unwanted behaviors?”

I will answer these questions in an attempt to outline a road map for understanding and overcoming an addiction to pornography and discovering a new way of living life.

How can I tell if I am really addicted to pornography?

Simply stated, 1) if you want to stop the behavior, 2) but you can’t, and 3) the behaviors are causing life-damaging consequences, 4) then you’re probably addicted.

It’s common to wonder if addiction only counts for those guys who look at pornography multiple times per day. While this is certainly a pattern of addiction, the definition can also apply to a much broader type of behavioral pattern.

For example, I’ve worked with individuals who look at pornography only three times per year. One might look at this sporadic pattern and wonder how three viewings of pornography in one year’s time could be considered an addiction. Let’s look at what three viewings per year could do to such an individual.

First, he’s going to keep his behavior a secret from others because he’s embarrassed about it. This secrecy is going to produce shame. Shame is a feeling of being broken, damaged, or defective. He might briefly say things to himself like, “what’s my problem?” “Why do I keep going back to this when I know it’s wrong?” His shame is going to produce anxiety and

depression that will be difficult to ignore. He will have to create a “false self” for others to see so they don’t wonder if he is someone who looks at pornography. His false self will make it difficult to genuinely connect with his wife, his children, and with God. He will worry about being discovered. He worries what others will think of him if they ever discover his secret behaviors. He always feels like he’s not as good as other guys who don’t appear to struggle. The shame and stress will create a low-grade misery that will be difficult to escape.

Sounds pretty life-damaging to me!

While there are varying degrees of intensity on the continuum of pornography addiction, even occasional viewings of pornography can deeply affect an individual. It’s not only the images of pornography that change the way men view women and close relationships. The secret shame and stress associated with violating one’s own standards of conduct on a repeated basis also causes individuals to live far beneath their divine potential.

The anxiety surrounding the definition of addiction is usually linked to the fear of being labeled a “pervert” or “weirdo”. In actuality, when an individual stops fighting the worry about labels and starts moving toward a life of sincere recovery, he won’t care what label applies to his situation.

The freedom and joy he will experience as he releases the shameful secrecy and pain of self-betrayal will wash out lesser fears linked to how others might perceive him.

How do I know if I really need to get help for my behavior?

Men who struggle with pornography problems usually do so in isolation despite their best intentions and efforts to quit. In their isolation, they make deals with themselves such as, “if I slip one more time, then I’ll get help”, or “let’s see how the next week goes and then I’ll decide if I need to get help”. These mental gymnastics keep the individual stuck in their old patterns of addiction because they continue to make up new rules and exceptions. In other words, the line of accountability keeps moving.

Dr. Mark Laaser, a noted author and therapist on the subject of sexual addiction, always asks his clients the following question when he begins his work with them: “Do you want to get well?” He says that if the individual can’t answer that question, then he will have difficulty helping them. It’s my belief that if the answer to the question is “yes”, then breaking out of isolation to get help will be much easier.

I encourage men I work with to do some self-education on the topic of pornography addiction so they can begin to understand the landscape of recovery. I want them to understand what it will take for them to undo the grip of pornography and make long-term lifestyle changes. Virtually every guy I’ve worked with tells me they initially underestimated how much help they needed.

A person who truly wants to be rid of their behavior will do everything they can to completely eliminate the unwanted behaviors. Although asking for help will produce momentary embarrassment, the long-term benefits of a life without pornography are worth the effort.

Sometimes people approach recovery with the desire to eliminate the problematic behavior without considering how the problem became so unmanageable in the first place. Stopping the behavior is actually the easiest part of recovery. The long-term changes associated with undoing the thinking patterns that create the addiction is a much deeper process.

Dallin H. Oaks explained it as follows, “A person [with a pornography addiction] is like a tree that bends easily in the wind. On a windy and rainy day, the tree bends so deeply against the ground that the leaves become soiled with mud... If we focus only on cleaning the leaves, the weakness in the tree that allowed it to bend and soil its leaves may remain. Similarly, a person who is merely sorry to be soiled by [their addiction] will [slip] again in the next high wind. The susceptibility to repetition continues until the tree has been strengthened.”

Since recovery is more than just stopping unwanted behaviors, it's critical to enlist the help of others who can offer support in the form of education, accountability, and encouragement.

What's involved in overcoming these unwanted behaviors?

I've broken down the process of recovery from pornography addiction into the following stages. Each will be explained briefly.

1. Step into the light
2. Transform the behavior
3. Discover life without pornography
4. The long-term recovery journey

Step Into the Light

When an individual views pornography in secrecy, those behaviors usually continue to stay secret. There is tremendous effort exerted to ensure that the behaviors are not discovered. This secrecy puts tremendous emotional pressure on the individual which reinforces the need to continue viewing pornography. The most powerful ways to break out of this cycle of secrecy is to “step into the light” and tell someone else about the secret behaviors.

Who is the safest person to tell? Consider the following suggestions: The confidant should be someone who 1) can keep confidences, 2) is helpful and encouraging, and 3) will be around to offer support long-term.

If an individual is married, their spouse needs to be at the top of the list. Additionally, church leaders are powerful sources of counsel and healing. Trusted friends, parents, or counseling professionals are also important supports to consider.

This is often the most difficult step due to embarrassment and fear. It's likely that the fear of being discovered has been around since the individual had their first exposure to pornography. For many people, this first exposure happened in early adolescence.

Virtually every individual I've worked with has felt tremendous relief in their first meeting with me after telling their story of struggling with pornography. They describe feeling a literal release of the terrible burden of secrecy that has been with them for years. They finally have a taste of what life will be like without the additional weight of their secret behaviors.

There is a tendency for those who struggle to want to tell only a portion of the secret behaviors. This is what I call “spotlighting” behavior. While spotlighting is certainly better than keeping others entirely in the dark, it doesn’t allow the full scope of the problem to be resolved. Turning on all of the lights allows the entire problem to be understood more completely.

It’s important for those struggling with pornography addiction to complete a full inventory of secret behaviors that will eventually be shared with a trusted confidant. Most 12-step programs have excellent information on how to create a full inventory.

If an individual is married, sharing this inventory with their spouse can often be a delicate and sensitive process. Some spouses can be traumatized by too much detail early in recovery. I highly recommend reading a book on disclosure such as “Discussing Pornography Problems with a Spouse” by Dan Gray and Rory Reid or “Disclosing Secrets” by Jennifer Schneider and Debra Corely for further information on this topic.

Transform the Behavior

It’s important to use the momentum generated from disclosure to power through the behavioral transformation phase. As stated earlier, this is actually the easiest part of the recovery journey. Behavioral change will often come quickly (within a few months) and will give much-needed encouragement and hope to continue in long-term recovery. This is the time for an individual to experience the successful transformation of how they understand their relationship with triggers and sexual urges.

This transformation phase requires a tremendous amount of education, practicing certain skills, and connecting with a support system. If there has been a history of viewing pornography, the brain and body have been programmed to respond to sexual triggers in a predictable way over the years. It will take dedicated practice to re-route these tendencies. The good news is that the brain can be healed with committed effort!

The specifics of how to create these behavioral changes is beyond the scope of this article. I recommend seeking out professionals who are trained in treating pornography addiction to help with this stage of recovery. There are structured ways to learn how to implement these new ways of thinking and behaving.

Discover Life Without Pornography

This phase of treatment is often bittersweet experience for those who pass through it. The “bitter” part is the withdrawal from the powerful chemical high associated with pornography addiction. This can often take weeks to overcome. Some individuals experience strong physiological withdrawal symptoms that can create irritability, insomnia, fatigue, and other bothersome symptoms.

Like detoxification from drugs or alcohol, denying the body the regular bursts of dopamine, serotonin, adrenaline, and other chemicals associated with pornography addiction will create powerful physical cravings. This withdrawal will begin in the initial stages of recovery, but can last longer, depending on the individual’s history of pornography use.

I encourage individuals to lean into the pain of withdrawal and rely on their tools and support gained in the transformation phase to help train their brain learn to live without the chemical cocktail associated with their addiction.

Withdrawal can also create a feeling of loss and confusion about how to live life without the addiction. It can feel like mourning the death of an old friend. This loss will eventually disappear as the individual pushes forward in their recovery efforts and discovers new ways to do life without the influence of the addiction.

The “sweet” part of this stage is the newfound awareness of how enjoyable life can be without pornography! There are some exciting discoveries in this phase of recovery. For example, the five senses become more active and engaged with the world. I have clients tell me that they can feel, see, and hear things that they never noticed before. They are often amazed at how much pornography numbed-out their senses. They start to re-connect with God, with their families, and with themselves. As an individual becomes re-sensitized to life, they will experience additional motivation to continue in their recovery journey.

The Long-Term Recovery Journey

Recovery can be compared to launching a satellite into orbit. It takes tremendous energy to get a rocket out of the pull of earth’s gravity. As the rocket gains momentum, less power is needed to put it into its desired orbit. Eventually, the satellite is released into orbit and only requires small and consistent bursts of energy to keep it positioned in orbit. The satellite will stay in its correct orbit as long as those consistent corrections are applied.

Early recovery is often full of intensity, energy, and earth-shaking changes. Long-term recovery looks nothing like this. Instead, it’s made up of finely-tuned course corrections that keep the individual positioned in a healthy lifestyle. If an individual is constantly battling triggers and relapses, they will never get to really enjoy life and experience the long-term growth available to them.

Most individuals will pass through the first three stages of recovery within 6-12 months. The behavioral changes in these stages create stability necessary to do the long-term work of relapse prevention and life changes. As stated previously in the metaphor of the wind and tree, this stage is the work of strengthening the trunk of the tree.

Individuals risk becoming over-confident at this point in recovery. They often believe that they’ve “arrived” and don’t need to work as hard. While they have most certainly arrived at a new place of living life, it’s important to maintain their gains and understand clearly how to keep building a life free from the destructive pull of pornography.

Recovery is the process of restoring things to their proper state, creating a fresh view of oneself and one’s relationships, and healing the sources of pain that created the need for the addiction in the first place.

It’s critical to maintain the same system of support during this stage of recovery for regular accountability and close support. Support systems can provide much-needed feedback and observations as the individual creates the long-term adjustments critical to their full recovery.

Conclusion

A man lost in a large city stopped to ask for directions. He wondered if he was so far off course that reaching his destination would be impossible. The individual helping him reassured him with these words, “Don’t worry – you can get there from here.”

Regardless of how an individual believes they've strayed from their goal to be healed from the effects of pornography addiction, they can get to full recovery by following the road map of a structured recovery. Regardless of how deep they believe their addiction has taken them, they can use the same agency that put them in the addiction to help them get out of the addiction. Stopping, asking for help, and carefully following the steps of recovery will make life without pornography a reality.

And the best news is that healing from an addiction to pornography not only offers an individual an opportunity to stop life-damaging behaviors, but also creates a completely new way of living life. Individuals who commit to full recovery will discover a new version of themselves previously unimagined.



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