

What's a Woman to Do?

How Pornography Affects Women and What They Can Do

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It's not uncommon for well-intentioned observers to inquire about the fuss being made over pornography. Many of them assume that pornography consumption is a victimless pastime. Their line of thinking generally supports the notion that a man who views pornography in isolation is not hurting anyone. They even debate the question of whether or not this same man is hurting himself by viewing pornography.

I would like to challenge these assumptions by sharing how pornography use damages not only the individuals who view it, but especially wives and girlfriends of these same men. I will also include suggestions for how women affected by their partner's pornography use can cope as they begin the journey toward wholeness.

In all of my years of counseling individuals and couples, I have never seen any other behavior produce a pattern of pain and misery as predictable as that which happens to an individual and his marriage when he views pornography. Let me briefly outline the pattern as I see it.

First, long before his wife discovers his pornography use (either by his own disclosure or by her catching him), he will begin to slowly change into someone who becomes more self-centered, irritable, moody, and impatient. He will spend less focused time with his family, seek out more distractions, begin to mentally and even verbally devalue his marriage, become critical of his wife's body and character, feel more spiritually empty, and experience more internal stress. He will become more dissatisfied with his work, become easily bored with things that used to interest him, and feel restless. He will also become more resentful and blaming when things don't go his way.

This transformation may take years, depending on how often he views pornography. If he only seeks it out every few months, he may be able to fool himself that the aforementioned challenges are situational and will pass with time. For those who view pornography more frequently, each viewing produces more disconnection from the man he could become. The repeated viewings and subsequent self-deception deepen this transformation over time. This gradual erosion eventually creates confusion and strife in the marriage. Although each case is different, most wives who knew nothing of their husband's secretive pornography consumption have told me they felt like something was "off" in their relationship with their husband. They usually second-guessed themselves, many of them even reflexively blaming themselves entirely for the disconnection in the marriage.

If undisclosed pornography use has the potential to produce this much confusion and pain in a marriage, one can only imagine the level of difficulty imposed on a wife when these secretive behaviors are actually brought to light.

Shock, denial, anger, rage, depression, self-loathing, isolation, and fear are some of the words that describe what a woman experiences when she learns of her husband's secretive sexual behaviors. Virtually every woman I've worked with has experienced deep shame, embarrassment, and humiliation. Unfortunately, partners will often suffer privately and become more disconnected and isolated from their support systems. Even if they initially react in anger, most of the pain becomes buried as they work to cope with the demands of everyday living.

Most men who reveal their secretive behaviors feel the relief of not having to carry the secret anymore. Ironically, the crushing load once carried by the addict gets transferred to the wife. Burdened by this new and unwelcome challenge, she typically experiences profound fear, anxiety, and confusion.

Many scholars have noted that women betrayed by their husband's pornography use experience symptoms associated with posttraumatic stress disorder, a condition that is equated with feelings of powerlessness, intrusive thoughts and memories, and efforts to avoid the triggers associated with the traumatic stressor. Like war-torn soldiers, these women live in fear that something will remind them of the painful memories associated with the betrayal of pornography. They often become hyper-vigilant - checking computer histories, cell phones, and obsessing over ways to stop his pornography use.

The stress associated with discovering a husband's pornography addiction can produce sleepless nights, food issues (both overeating and undereating), traumatic flashbacks, crying spells, and feelings of hopelessness. The physical exhaustion related to these stressors can cause a once perfectly healthy woman to begin under functioning in her various roles.

Dr. Shondell Knowlton, a marriage and family therapist in Farmington, UT, has compared the experience of learning of a husband's secret pornography use to tipping over a cart of neatly stacked apples. She says that when the metaphorical apple cart gets dumped over, the order and predictability of one's life gets scattered in all directions. Energy previously used for other things gets re-routed to gathering, cleaning, sorting, and re-stacking the "apples." This process is fraught with disorder, confusion, and humiliation.

Many women believe they will automatically recover from the trauma of their husband's pornography use when he stops looking at it. It's easy to imagine how this would be the case. If the behavior that is causing the pain goes away, then the pain goes away, right? Yes and no.

Yes, the pain will decrease as a husband commits to ending his pornography consumption and begins to live an authentic life free from the damaging effects of this addiction. On

the other hand, if women affected by their husband's pornography use don't consciously work to undo the effects of his behavior, they could continue to hang onto unresolved fear, resentment, anger, and grief.

Another comparison helps to clarify this point. If a woman is a passenger in a car driven by her out-of-control husband and he steers the car into a tree, it's unlikely she'll get back into a car with him without some sort of reassurance that he'll be safer next time. Even if he takes driver safety classes and pays fines, she will still struggle to know if he's going to protect her. She will need to work through her own emotional reactions, trauma, and feelings of powerlessness associated with the injuries caused by her husband's irresponsible driving. The couple will need to work through the impact on each of them individually and then work on the relational impact caused by his behavior.

Women who discover their husband's pornography use will benefit from doing some emotional first-aid to help stabilize them so they can set themselves up to do their long-term healing work. I will outline some of the most helpful first steps women can take when they discover their husband's behavior. I will then briefly explain what is involved in long-term recovery for women affected by their husband's pornography use.

First-Aid

1. **Physical self-care** is probably the most overlooked aspect of early recovery for women. Trauma is mostly experienced in the body. The body is designed to protect us from danger. If an individual experiences a serious threat to their safety (emotional or physical), their body will become tense, flooded with adrenaline, and have difficulty calming down. To ignore the body is to ignore one of the greatest resources for healing. I have found that women who make physical self-care a priority heal much faster from the impact of their husband's secretive behaviors. Many women find that getting more sleep, eating healthy foods, exercising, meditating, stretching, soaking in warm water, and slowing down to nurture their physical body can help them shift out of survival mode so they can think clearly.

2. **Spiritual grounding** provides feelings of peace, hope, and reassurance in the face of so much uncertainty. Meditation, prayer, and seeking counsel from clergy are common ways women begin seeking spiritual grounding. Some women feel forsaken by God or their Higher Power when they've been betrayed by those closest to them. Some women find it hard to attend church and spend time with others when they feel so low and vulnerable. If this is difficult, remember that being around others can be healing even if you don't reach out and share. Also, it can help to spend time visiting peaceful locations in nature or listening to uplifting music.

3. **Emotional expression** is critical throughout all stages of recovery, but especially in the early stages. Many women find it helpful to write their feelings in a new journal that they have the option of throwing away at a later date. Emotions can be so strong early in this process that some women worry about putting raw feelings in their regular journal. It's important to have the freedom to express feelings in a healthy non-aggressive

way. Recognize that no feeling is inappropriate. Feelings come and go like the waves of sea, so it's important to give them full expression and movement. Holding on to any strong emotion with the hope that it will disappear only keeps it stuck. Talking with others can also help, which is explained in the next item.

4. **Connecting to others** who can help is also difficult to do, but offers tremendous benefits. It's not recommended that a woman who learns about her husband's behavior broadcast her pain to just anyone who will listen. Instead, it's important to identify a few key individuals who: 1) will keep confidences, 2) can provide a safe place to talk, 3) won't negatively judge her or her husband, and 4) can offer some support and direction. It can be beneficial for the long-term stability of the relationship for a woman to inform her husband that she will be speaking to specific individuals about her struggles. Helpful individuals often include clergy, therapists, parents or siblings, 12-Step support groups, therapy groups, and close friends.

5. **Simplifying life** is certainly a goal for most people, but this is an excellent reason to begin. This is the ideal opportunity to begin saying "no" to extra commitments, evaluating the schedule, and looking for things to cut out. Dealing with the trauma of betrayal is so physically and emotionally exhausting that everything that used to feel easy will suddenly feel impossible. It's important to keep a simple structure in place so there is order and predictability in life. However, a frenzied pace only functions as a distraction and eventually catches up in the form of more hopelessness, feelings of failure, and powerlessness. Helping others can create a sense of purpose as well. It is better to slow down and prioritize those things that will bring the greatest peace, joy, and comfort.

6. **Education** is critical in the early stages of recovery. There are many good resources available to help women understand the scope of the problem. I maintain a readings list for partners available on my resources page of www.LifeSTARstgeorge.com. Education can help validate common feelings and clear up misconceptions about addiction and recovery. One of the best resources available to partners is the book "Your Sexually Addicted Spouse" by Barbara Steffens and Marsha Means.

Long-term Healing

Healing from the effects of a husband's pornography addiction is best compared to grief, loss, and bereavement. The discovery of a partner's secret sexual behavior can cause a woman's life (as she knew it) to flash before her eyes. Recovering from this loss is a process of understanding the shock and anger, processing the sadness of what was lost, and moving toward acceptance of the new life. The new life may or may not include a husband who is committed to long-term recovery. Regardless of that outcome, it's still critical for women to do the long-term work of healing from the impact of secret pornography use.

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