

The Pornography Trap, by Brad Wilcox, Victor Cline

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Pornography can be defined in many ways, but in common parlance, it usually means material that is sexually explicit and intended primarily for the purpose of sexual arousal (Cline, 2000). Shortly after Dr. Cline was named an Emeritus Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Utah, he began to expand his private practice as a psychotherapist. In doing so, he was puzzled by a deluge of new male patients, all with addictions to pornography. One evening he commented to his wife, Lois, that he was concerned because pornography was leading these men to broad-ranging sexual addictions, breakups in their marriages, and severe depression. He told her, "They feel shame and guilt. They lie chronically to the people they love. But worst of all, they feel they can't stop what they are doing."



His wife responded, "Well, tell them to quit it. Nobody has to look at dirty pictures or [videos](#). Nobody has to go into a porn site on the Internet. Just tell them to stop looking at that stuff."

Dr. Cline said, "It's not that easy. These men are addicted. They can't stop."

"That's nonsense," his wife argued. "Just tell them to not look!"

It certainly sounds easy enough. If the raccoon would simply loosen its grip on the metal object, the trap could no longer hold it. If those struggling with pornography would just loosen their grips on the habit, they too could go free. Still, the number of dead raccoons and the ever-increasing number of people hooked on pornography indicate that the solution is not quite that quick and simple-and that over and over, the pattern is the same: addiction, desensitization, escalation, and acting out.

Addiction

One young man was introduced to pornography at a friend's home when he was about 11 years old. His natural curiosity combined with the awakening sexual desires of his growing body and soon created an almost overwhelming desire to view more and more. In short order, each exposure to the sexually explicit material was followed by masturbation. Each time he repeated the cycle, the sexual release reinforced his behavior and strengthened the hold the addiction had on him. He felt he could not stop. He says, "I'd tell myself I would never do it again, and then I'd do it anyway." It got to the point where this cycle would recur not just several times in a month or a week, but several times each day. This young man continued in this cycle throughout his teenage years. He says, "Some boys can look back at adolescent years and recall the one or two occasions when they were exposed to pornography. I look back and recall the one or two days I wasn't. It consumed my life. It affected my grades, faith, employment, and relationships." Finally, in his twenties, this man determined to marry, thinking that if he had a regular and acceptable sexual outlet he might be able to quit. He never told his young fiancée about his problem for fear she would refuse to marry him, but she found out soon enough. In fact, it was on their honeymoon. He had stepped away from their hotel room to get something for them to eat, and she busied herself enhancing the romantic atmosphere for his return. After some time, she began to worry that perhaps he had been hurt. She left the room to investigate and found her husband in the hotel gift shop looking through pornographic magazines.

When powerful sexual urges are directly linked with the viewing of anything, the desires to view the same things again are increased. Such conditioning occurs when sex is mixed with violence, abuse, children, or anything. Stanley Rachman (1968), a British psychologist at the London Maudsley Hospital, has repeatedly demonstrated in the laboratory how easy it is to condition adult males into sexual deviancy using erotic stimuli. Other researchers (McGuire, 1965; Evans, 1968; Marquis, 1970) have independently found this same kind of conditioning in out-of-laboratory experiences and identified it as a step to acquiring sexual deviations or illnesses.

To illustrate the addictive nature of pornography, Dr. Cline tells of a married, religious man—a young father in his thirties who could not seem to break the pornography habit. When he finally began acting out sexually, he sought help from Dr. Cline. The man explained, “It’s like being on Crack. I can see what it is doing to me and I want to be rid of the habit, but I can’t seem to stop. Nothing seems to work.”

Dr. Cline decided to give this man a powerful incentive not to look at pornography. He asked him for a thousand dollars and explained he would put it in a special bank account and hold it for 90 days. If the young father could stay porn free, he would get his money back. If he relapsed even once, the money would be donated to charity. With a big grin on his face, the man said, “Fantastic! How did you know that I’m such a tightwad with money? There’s no way I will look at porn if it’s going to cost me a thousand dollars. You couldn’t have chosen a better incentive for me.”

The therapy sessions that followed were productive, and the man stayed porn free for well over two months. However, on day 87, while on a business trip, he went to a porn shop and literally gorged himself. When he told Dr. Cline of his relapse, he was in tears. Dr. Cline said, “Look, I know we said you would lose the money if you messed up even once, but if you made it 87 days, you can make it 90. Let’s keep the money in the account and start over for another 90 days.” The man recommitted, but didn’t even last two weeks. The money went to charity.

Dr. Cline asked his patient, “What if it had been ten thousand dollars or twenty?” The man sadly raised his head, looked at his therapist, and said, “It wouldn’t have mattered how much it was. I’d have still lost it.” Dr. Cline determined to never use that technique again with any patients.

When this man whom Dr. Cline tried to help began viewing pornography, he probably felt he was liberating himself sexually. Instead, he found only enslavement and days full of guilt, shame, fear, and depression. He was caught in a negative, downward cycle. In an effort to ease his depression, he would view pornography, become sexually aroused, and masturbate. Then he would become even more depressed than before and once again turn to pornography as a temporary escape. While at first he had started viewing pornography because it was exciting and gave him a rush, that all changed. Later, he no longer turned to pornography to feel good, but to stop from feeling bad. He was addicted to pornography just as surely as if he were heavily involved with drugs or alcohol. Like a horse with blinders on, he just kept charging toward it with tunnel vision, oblivious to anyone or anything that would stand in his way.

Desensitization

Along with addiction comes desensitization. What was once shocking or revolting becomes commonplace and ordinary. Conscience and constraint are diminished as porn addicts become hardened. One young man said, “Pornography warps the way you see the world. I would hear people talk about a movie or TV program they felt was inappropriate, and I didn’t understand what bothered them. The scenes they were upset by seemed like nothing to me.” Another young man said, “When I was engaged in pornography I was viewing rape, child abuse, incest, and sexual perversions so regularly that I became incapable of understanding the inappropriateness of the material I lusted after. When I would read in the paper about someone getting raped or abused, and I would think, ‘So, what’s the big deal?’”

Another example of desensitization is found in the way many try to justify their involvement in pornography.

Consider the comment of one young college student who made the erroneous assumption, “Pornography can’t be all that bad since everyone does it. All of mainstream America indulges in it so don’t try to tell me it’s wrong.”

Escalation

Following desensitization, the problem usually escalates. In order to get their highs, kicks, and erotic turn-ons, those addicted to pornography develop a desire for more aberrant materials. One man explained, “If I saw something gross yesterday, I need to find something even more gross today. If I see something deviant today, I must look for something more deviant tomorrow.” Another young man said, “After a few months of viewing pornography I found myself less and less satisfied with the soft stuff. I wanted pictures that were more graphic and more extreme. It’s like taking a drug that loses its effectiveness over time. Soon you have to take more and more just to get the same feeling you used to get with less.”

The Internet makes such graphic portrayals accessible and affordable-and allows the viewers anonymity. Accessible, affordable, and anonymous-those three “A” words combine to feed the escalation and create an almost insurmountable challenge for those trying to escape the trap of pornography.

Acting Out

Another consequence of involvement in pornography is an eventual acting out-people trying the things they are viewing. Desensitization and escalation affect judgment to such a degree that those involved seem no longer able to discriminate between what is appropriate and what is illegal and could land them in jail. One such man became involved in sexually harassing female coworkers in his place of work. In the pornography he viewed regularly, the women seemed to “like it.” However, in real life, he and his employer got sued, and the man lost his job. Another man began to act out by exposing himself to youngsters. When he was caught and the pattern of behavior was documented, he ended up losing his wife and family as well as facing criminal charges.

In a more serious case, another man found himself facing a stiff sentence in federal prison for sexually abusing a child-and videotaping the act. The tape was found by investigators who searched his house and discovered an abundance of both adult and child pornography, some purchased and some homemade. The man’s attorney explained, “It began with experimenting with pornography on the Internet, which then led to stockpiling videotapes, which eventually led to his acting out and actually videotaping himself.” The man apologized to the court and to his family saying, “I can’t undo what happened, but I want a chance to make things better.” This man’s plea for help in this difficult circumstance highlights the need to treat those involved with pornography before it gets to such a point.

Treatment

Is there a way to make things better? Is there an effective treatment or cure? The pornography trap is not an easy one from which to escape, but it is possible as those involved admit there is a problem, seek help, become informed, find support, and strive to improve the quality of their relationships and lives.

Admit the Problem

An ancient Japanese proverb states, “A problem, clearly identified, is half the solution.” One reason so many continue to struggle with pornography addictions is due to a growing trend in our society to refuse to see pornography as a problem. One young law student was surprised when he read in the student newspaper that “correlation does not prove causation when it comes to pornography and sex crimes and those who say pornography is a trigger for deviance and/or violence need to be doused with a bucket of science and reason.” The law student said, “Not only do such comments overlook the scientific research and sound reasoning that substantiates such links, it demonstrates how society is trivializing the problem of pornography. We hear phrases like, ‘adult entertainment’ or ‘minor indiscretion,’ and people justify involvement by saying, ‘Boys will be boys’ or ‘It’s just another form of self-expression-a genre of literature and art.’”

One of the most important steps toward a solution is first to admit there is a problem. The raccoon caught in a trap gains absolutely nothing by trying to convince itself there is no trap. Those struggling with pornography must realize that their choices and actions, however private they may seem, have long-lasting and devastating effects for them, their families, and society in general.

Seek Help

Hiding and attempting to cover up the problem is often as hurtful as the problem itself. Those involved in pornography don't usually want to have anyone find out about their personal problems, but as hard as it may be, that disclosure is an essential step toward a long-term solution. Secrets must be brought to light. Only then can they be seen for what they are and be reasonably approached and overcome. One man said, "I didn't tell anyone in my family about my problem and I stopped praying because I felt hypocritical. I determined that all I needed was will power and that once I conquered this on my own, I would again pray and speak openly with my wife." Such thinking seems somewhat akin to someone with a broken arm saying, "Once I take care of this myself, I will talk to the doctor and go to the hospital."

A commitment made to yourself can easily be broken. But when you make a commitment to another person who loves you and who cares deeply for you, there is an increased incentive to change right now. It's fairly obvious that a person who arranges to exercise with a valued friend usually hangs in there longer than someone who does not. When the alarm goes off in the morning, it's easy to turn it off and roll over unless you know that someone you care about and who genuinely cares about you is waiting. People who make public commitments to quit smoking have a much greater chance of success than those who try to do it secretly. Talking to a trusted friend, a family member, a religious leader, a family physician, or a professional therapist is an important way of seeking help in overcoming a problem like pornography addiction. For those who know of God's unconditional love for them, turning to Him and letting Him share in the heavy burden and shame of addiction can, over time, bring "rest unto [their] souls" (Matthew 11:29).

Become Informed

Closing eyes doesn't make problems go away, just as covering clocks doesn't change the time. Those struggling with pornography and those seeking to help them all need to obtain credible information about the problem. While care must be taken that the sources are indeed credible and useful-and that the readings do not stimulate the addiction or acting-out behavior-solid information is always part of the solution. Steven Cramer's (1983) book, *Worth of a Soul* and Patrick Carnes' (1991; 1993) books, *Out of the Shadows: Understanding Sexual Addictions* and *Don't Call it Love: Recovery for Sexual Addictions*, are helpful [resources](#), as is a book called *Lonely All the Time: Recognizing, Understanding, and Overcoming Sex Addictions* (Early & Crow, 1989). A talk Dr. Wilcox (2000) gave on the subject is also available on tape. In 2001, Brigham Young University sponsored a conference on the topic of pornography called, *Cyber Secrets*. Transcripts of the presentations can be accessed on Brigham Young University's web site (www.byu.edu). Other Internet sites, such as www.enough.org, provide information and statistics about pornography.

Build a Support System

Beyond spouses and other family members, some find a needed support in groups of people who have gone through similar experiences. Sexaholics Anonymous (a cousin to Alcoholics Anonymous) is one such group. There are weekly meetings in nearly every major city across North America, and there is no cost for participating. One man said, "I checked the phone book and found out where the nearest meeting was. I attended and began using their 12-step therapeutic program. I liked it because it was spiritual at its core and encouraged me to look to a higher power than myself. That's what I needed." Another man said, "After I attended S.A. for some time, I chose someone there to be my sponsor. It was another man who had achieved significant sobriety. I respected him and liked him. He was someone I knew would not judge me unfairly. He said I could call him anytime I felt myself crumbling. I did and he would talk me through the moment and help me keep the bigger picture in mind. He reminded me to avoid the pitfalls

that would set me back, and to do the positive things in my life that would get me where I really wanted to be.”

Those struggling with pornography must find or develop a circle of examples, mentors, and supporters who can encourage instead of scold, educate instead of embarrass. Once in such a group, it is vital they stay with it. Change takes time. It is a long process and not a single effort. Small victories must be celebrated along the way, and slip-ups must be times for learning. Failure needs to be seen as an event, not as a person. It must always be looked at upon as something temporary.

Engage in Relationships and Life

Many engage in addictive behaviors as a way to avoid becoming engaged with relationships and life. Such escapes are never permanent solutions. Being involved in a relationship and in life requires commitment and honesty, which leaves one open to possible hurt and disappointment. Pornography only distracts those involved from meeting their needs for closeness, control, entertainment, and relaxation in healthy and positive ways. Pornography addicts often keep themselves from the very relationships of trust and caring that should be filling their emotional and social needs. They seek love in pornography, but there is no love, only lust. There is no concern for another, only for self. There is no intimacy, only the illusion of it. There is no relationship to be strengthened, only nameless bodies, dehumanized as sexual objects. Even those attempting simply to satisfy sexual needs through pornography are ultimately disappointed, as pornography presents highly inaccurate and distorted information about human sexuality.

It is, in a sense, sex mis-[education](#) that is created and marketed for financial gain. Those individuals who settle for it are usually no more satisfied in the long run than those who settle for counterfeit money over real money. It may look great at first glance, but pornography offers nothing of value in the long run.

One man said, “The worst part about my involvement with pornography was that I felt so totally alone, completely on my own. I thought I was the only one struggling with the problem and that it affected no one but me. I figured I could take care of it myself. Out of guilt, fear, or low self-esteem (or a combination of all three), I determined to distance myself from everyone until I got my problem taken care of. Alone is not an easy place to be—especially when you really don’t like yourself much to begin with.”

Those who are struggling must reach out, not only for help and support, but also for full lives and meaningful relationships with others. People cannot be helped in isolation. By engaging in relationships and life, they can truly meet many of the needs they were unsuccessfully attempting to meet with pornography.

Hope and Healing

Charlie was an up-and-coming businessman in his early thirties. He had gotten into pornography in his early teens and then with the advent of the Internet found himself wildly out of control. He admitted there was a problem and sought help from a professional therapist. His therapist encouraged him to become part of a support group as part of his therapy and, in time, he found himself 95 percent porn free. Since his greatest temptations to view pornography came in hotel rooms when he was away on business trips, his therapist committed him to ask the desk clerk to block certain television channels at the moment he checked in. The man further committed to call his wife and his sponsor at 9:30 each night any time he was away. Finally, in this way, Charlie was able to resist even the strongest temptations.

Richard, a 23-year-old college student, became heavily involved with pornography when he moved away from home. He finally had the courage to meet with his religious leader and told him everything. The leader was understanding and compassionate. With his support Richard was able to seek help from parents and siblings and became involved with a 12-step support program that led to gradually diminishing relapses. He began dating and pursued his career goals. Two years later, he moved into long-term sobriety and was also happily married. He continues to attend S.A. meetings, but mainly to give help to newcomers.

For those caught in the pornography trap, there is always hope and the possibility of healing. It takes time,

education, and support from others. It takes hard work to build positive relationships and engage in a full life, but it can happen and it's worth it. The grip the raccoon maintains on the shiny metal leads to nothing but destruction. The grip many maintain on pornography leads to the same end. It is time to loosen the grip, escape the trap, and truly be free.

Dr. Victor B. Cline is professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Utah and is a practicing psychologist. Over the past 25 years, he has treated approximately 350 patients who have been addicted to pornography.

Dr. Brad Wilcox has spent the last 20 years working closely with young people in connection with his work as an educator and through his involvement with various youth programs throughout North America. He has spoken informally with hundreds of young men who have confided their involvement with pornography to him.

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