



Porn Stole My Sex Life

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Published November 2018

“Porn stole my sex life” is a common complaint amongst the clients I work with. Whether it’s from the men who’ve found themselves hooked on porn or the partners who find themselves replaced by it. Each situation is of course unique, but the story is a common one and one that is becoming more wide spread.

Mike was 46 when he came for help with what he called an addiction to porn. At the first appointment he described how his wife of 15 years was devastated by the recent discovery of porn on their home computer; catalogues of thousands of images and videos collected and collated, late at night. Mike was keen to explain that his wife was not a prude and not anti-porn, but someone who was angry and bitter at being denied a sexual relationship with her husband, only to find he had created one elsewhere. Mike talked of how he had struggled when their twins were born 8 years ago, which coincided with starting a new job and moving house. He’d always enjoyed porn recreationally, but with the stress of work and new-born twins, porn became a regular refuge. It began as a quick and easy way to switch off before going to bed, but over time it took longer and longer to find anything novel enough to arouse him. Consequently, he often didn’t get to bed till the early hours and he added exhaustion to his list of reasons why he rarely had sex with his wife. The more upset she became about their lack of intimacy, the guiltier he felt about his secret habit, and the harder he tried, unsuccessfully, to give it up. On the few occasions when they did have sex, he found it increasingly difficult to climax without fantasising about the porn he’d recently viewed. His wife complained about his obvious distraction and what pained Mike most now, was discovering that over all these years, his wife, who he dearly loved, had spent the last 8 years blaming herself.

Mike’s experience of porn wrecking his sex life is a common one, though use of porn is still a question that’s not routinely asked of clients who present with sexual problems. Over the rest of this article we’ll look at the most common sexual difficulties affecting men with problematic porn use, but first a quick update on the controversial use of the term ‘addiction’.

Addiction or compulsion?

In June this year, the World Health Organisation announced that Compulsive Sexual Behaviour Disorder (CSBD) will be included in the next edition of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) which is due for adoption at the World Health Assembly in May 2019. CSBD is characterised by a persistent pattern of failure to control intense, repetitive sexual impulses or urges, resulting in repetitive sexual behaviour over an extended period (e.g., six months or more) that causes marked distress or impairment in personal,

family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning. The ICD also states the behaviour must not be a symptom of another underlying condition and distress must extend beyond moral conflict. Importantly, CSBD will be classified as an 'impulse control disorder' not an 'addictive disorder' until further research has been undertaken to identify if the processes involved in the development and maintenance of the disorder are similar to those currently classified under behavioural addiction, such as gaming and gambling. However, I have no doubt that wherever CSBD finally finds its home, the grassroots name will continue to be 'addiction'. In the same way as 'substance misuse disorder' will always be known as 'drug addiction', whatever the experts say.

One of the reasons we're unlikely to see the language change is because of the prevalence of porn addiction recovery networks on the web and other social media platforms. Two of the best known online self-help forums for overcoming porn addiction, no-fap.com and rebootnation.org have members in excess of 250,000, with an estimated equal number of regular followers. What both of these sites have in common is an ever-growing membership whose main motivation for quitting porn is to get their sex life back.

Porn & sexual dysfunctions

There have been a number of studies exploring the link between sexual dysfunctions and pornography use. PIED (Porn Induced Erectile Dysfunction) made headline news last year when the BBC reported on the unprecedented number of young men seeking help for erectile difficulties. Meanwhile a growing body of research has been published providing evidence of the links between sexual problems and excessive porn consumption. To date, 26 studies have shown that repeated exposure to high levels of sexual stimuli lowers the arousal threshold, leading initially to problems with delayed ejaculation, then erectile dysfunction and then low libido and reduced satisfaction in partnered sex.

In the early stages it may be difficult for someone to notice the changes that are happening. Our sexuality is impacted by so many different factors so if it takes slightly longer to get an erection or experience orgasm one day, there's no immediate reason to think it's a problem. Furthermore, when this happens whilst watching porn, switching to a different image will almost certainly resolve the issue quickly. The endless novelty that porn provides means that sexual difficulties are rarely experienced online. But as the body gets increasingly sensitised to highly erotic, rapidly changing visual cues, it becomes more desensitised to a regular partner.

When I met Jez, age 24, he was fully aware his erection difficulties were linked to porn and he had already seen a urologist to rule out any organic issues. He joined one of our recovery programmes and successfully gave up porn and learned the art of mindful masturbation. As we were drawing towards the end of therapy Jez had begun a new relationship and was fearful of disappointing his new partner. In previous sexual relationships he had always relied on Viagra, but he wanted this time to be different and prove to himself that he could enjoy sex without any artificial aids. We talked about how he could transfer his new found mindful masturbation skills to partnered sex and he courageously chose to tell his boyfriend about the struggles he'd had in the past. His fears never materialised and he was delighted to share with his new recovery friends that he was thoroughly enjoying an intimate sexual relationship for the first time in his life.

Whilst the link between porn use and reduced sexual performance and satisfaction is obvious for some clients, there are others who may not have made the connection. One review paper suggests "one simple test healthcare providers might employ is to ask, "whether the patient can achieve and sustain a satisfactory erection (and climax as desired) when masturbating without using Internet pornography. If he cannot, but can easily achieve these goals with Internet pornography, then his sexual dysfunction may be associated with its use." (Park et al, 2016)

But is porn always the problem?

Asking about porn use is important, and if the sexual problems can be resolved by giving up porn, or significantly reducing it, then stopping may be an obvious first step to take. But for many men (and women), viewing porn is a pleasurable part of their sexuality and something they don't want to lose. Porn can cause significant difficulties in couple relationships, especially when a partner discovers what they perceive as a secret second life with porn. They may feel rejected, insecure and betrayed and an inexperienced counsellor may be too quick to concur that 'porn has stolen their sex life'. But there may be other explanations.

In the book, *His Porn, Her Pain*, Marty Klein says "If you don't want sex with a real person, it's either because you don't desire the person you're with, or because you have issues about sex or closeness. That's when watching porn is a lot easier than creating good sex." (Klein 2016). There are many reasons why someone might start experiencing sexual problems within their relationship, and even if one partner is viewing porn, that doesn't mean the porn is necessarily to blame, and certainly not that they are 'addicted'.

John was 58 and his wife had asked him to seek help for porn addiction. Following an extensive assessment, it became apparent that John was not a porn addict and he had no desire to stop using it. There was no history of addiction, no evidence of escalation and the function of his behaviour was purely for sexual relief. His wife perceived his porn use as infidelity and whilst he agreed that there were times when he chose to view porn rather than have sex together, he believed it was part of his fundamental human right to choose how he enjoyed his sexuality. They began couple counselling to explore their differences of opinion and try and find a way of moving forward together. Within joint sessions it became apparent that they had always struggled to communicate their intimacy needs, including sexual ones and over the past 20 years their sex life had become increasingly unsatisfying for both of them. They agreed to start a psychosexual sensate focus programme and by the end of therapy both reported enjoying a more intimate and rewarding sex life and they had reached a compromise on John's porn use, which incidentally, had significantly decreased.

The misdiagnosis of both porn and sex addiction is one of the main reasons why it has continued to be misunderstood and viewed with suspicion by some professionals. When clients present with sexual dysfunctions or relationship difficulties, it's essential to ask about pornography use. Indeed, it is my belief that as internet porn and social media become increasingly used throughout every area of society, it should be routine for therapists to ask about frequency of technology use and the impact it has on our clients lives, regardless of why they present. But the presence of pornography does not automatically mean that it is the cause of their sexual or relational difficulties, even if the client thinks that it is. It's imperative that other explanations are also explored, such as ambivalence about the relationship, attachment issues, unresolved sexual shame or abuse, and of course, possible biological issues. However, when it comes to addiction, it's often a case of also/and, rather than either/or.

Adopting a biopsychosocial view

Sexual problems and addiction are best viewed through a biopsychosocial lens. Both will have predisposing, precipitating and maintaining factors hiding within a client's biology, psychology and social environment. And both can find that cause and consequence are so closely intertwined that it's almost impossible to separate the two. Like all addictions, porn addiction starts as a pursuit of pleasure, but as neurological pathways rewire in the brain and psychological dependency builds (Klucken 2016), it becomes a primary coping mechanism for the challenges of life and a way of escaping emotional pain. And as compulsive patterns of behaviour take hold, many withdraw from intimate relationships, and over time more and more life challenges and emotional pains appear. The cycle of addiction was ever thus - more pain leads to more compulsion, leads to more pain, leads to more compulsion.

It is of course essential to address core issues when working with any sexual problem, but one of the challenges of porn addiction has always been that until a period of abstinence is achieved, it may be impossible to identify and access the deeper unconscious and relational causes. A further challenge when working with porn addiction is that whilst excessive porn use may have caused the sexual difficulties, many will continue to resort to porn fantasies in an attempt to overcome the physical difficulties creating another endless catch22.

Reclaiming sex

When we run our recovery programmes we always start by exploring the group's hopes and fears and whilst some fears revolve around the programme 'not working', many are linked to fears that it will. Most commonly the men in our groups are scared that sex without their compulsive behaviour will be boring and unfulfilling. Some fear that they will never be able to experience desire, arousal or orgasm without pornography and the younger men who have been brought up with internet porn often question if masturbation is physically possible without it!

For men hooked on porn, dopamine excitement has often become fused and confused with testosterone arousal and one of the first tasks is to help them find their own natural libido. Psycho-education on sexuality as well as addiction is also essential, along with developing relapse prevention strategies and working on underlying issues. For those in relationships, couple counselling is usually required and for many, psychosexual therapy to overcome sexual dysfunctions.

I believe that every human being has a right to enjoy their sexuality in a way that is meaningful and enjoyable for them. Sex should be positive, pleasurable, confidence and esteem building, mutually fulfilling when partnered and respectful of self and others. I also believe that we have the right to choose how we express our sexuality, whether that's through monogamy, polyamory, celibacy or any other kind of sexual and relationship lifestyle. Pornography, especially when it's become addictive, can rob people of that choice. Thank fully, we can help them to take it back again.

References

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