

# Men and Porn

*Insight and understanding for women whose husbands struggle with pornography.*



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# Men and Porn

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## ***Even “Good” Guys Use Porn***

Christian men aren’t immune to the allure—or the devastating effects—of pornography.

When I started working at MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP magazine, I was floored by the hundreds of letters we received from wives agonizing over their husband’s pornography use. Women would express shock, disbelief, and outrage that their Christian husbands—who were usually well-respected to boot—would be drawn into something so base.

But more than anything, their letters were filled with confusion, shame, and loneliness. Not only did they not know how to react to their husbands, they had no idea where to turn. It was all so new and humiliating—and certainly something no one else in the Christian community could understand or relate to—or so they thought.

If you are in a situation right now where you feel those same things—that you are alone and no other Christian family has had to endure this—think again. The problem is huge, and unfortunately with the prevalence of porn, it’s just getting bigger. While we still may not be in a place where a man can talk openly of his problem with porn—or a wife can feel comfortable sharing her concerns—you need to know that just because you’re not hearing about it doesn’t mean no one else is struggling with it.

The stories that follow are but a fraction of the painful impact of pornography that readers, writers, and experts have shared with the readers of magazines published by Christianity Today International through the years. But the wonderful thing about these stories is that they offer a sense of hope—and a renewal of the promise that “all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). It may be hard to believe, but God really can use this bad time for good in the life of you and your family.

Blessings and prayers! ❧

*Caryn Rivadeneira*  
*Managing Editor, Women’s and Family Resources*  
*Christianity Today International*





## ***The Appeal of Porn***

Why men get hooked.

*by Louis McBurney, M.D.*

Laurie\* had collapsed into bed at nine o'clock wiped out, as usual, from eight hours at work, coming home, preparing supper, and getting three school children to bed. She also managed to put a load of laundry into the washer and clean up the kitchen. Her husband, Tim, helped her with the dishes, promised to put the clothes into the dryer, and kissed her goodnight. Now, something had roused her from sleep enough to realize Tim wasn't lying beside her. She liked it when they went to bed together and felt guilty that she couldn't stay awake with him. But when she looked at the clock, which read 2 a.m., she got miffed. This was the second time this week—that she knew of—that he'd stayed up far past his usual bedtime.

*Where is he?* Laurie thought. The first night she awoke to find him gone, she just rolled over and fell back asleep. But tonight she couldn't seem to do that. So after a few restless minutes, she got up to find him. She groped her way down the dark hallway and saw a dim light emanating from the family room. *Tim's watching TV at this time of night?* Laurie thought. *What on earth could he be watching?* She made her way quietly toward the family room and stopped abruptly, shocked at what she saw. On the screen were several naked women in various sexual activities with a naked and aroused man. Tim was on the couch, equally aroused and so totally transfixed he was unaware of her presence.

Laurie was devastated and didn't know what to do. She felt betrayed, humiliated, furious that he'd do such a disgusting thing. As she gasped in horror and disbelief, Tim looked around and quickly and shamefully turned off the TV, then covered himself with his robe.

Laurie and Tim talked until dawn. She immediately assumed he was addicted to pornography and wondered how long this had been going on. Finally, once she was able to really think and listen to Tim's confession, she was convinced he wasn't addicted. Laurie realized she hadn't seen anything during their marriage to make her suspicious until this week. No unusual phone or Internet charges. No hidden magazines or videos. No subscription bills for adult channels, and until Monday night, no late nights coming to bed.

Tim confessed he'd looked at pornography some in college and a few weeks earlier a guy in his office had called him over to see some Internet site. That exposure had awakened his long abandoned fascination. So he'd rented an X-rated video after work on Monday and watched it that night and tonight.

He didn't try to justify his behavior and was deeply filled with remorse and shame. His confession recalled for both of them the apostle Paul's words in Romans 7:24: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"





Those words sum up the lament from thousands of Christian men who seem enslaved by the silky, sexual images of pornography.

## **Sexualized**

I recall my first experience with pornography. I must have been only about five years old. My brother and I were visiting at my grandmother's and some older neighborhood boys had a cartoon booklet. When they flipped the pages rapidly it showed a man's penis becoming erect. I didn't know what that was, but I certainly wasn't going to ask. By the time a junior high buddy showed me his *Playboy*, I knew what the pictures were. I was fascinated with the images—and still am. It's built into our male psyche to be powerfully drawn to sexual images. The fact is, men are wired to enjoy looking at naked women.

But how does the addictive nature come into play? Author and counselor Arch Hart, in his book *Redeeming Male Sexuality*, identifies two powerful brain chemicals that combine to produce the compulsive seeking behavior that's stimulated through pornography. One is the satisfying tension-relief of endorphins. These morphine-like molecules are released in the reward centers of the brain's hypothalamus to produce intense pleasure and relaxation. The second chemical is epinephrine, which creates arousal, alertness, increased energy, excitement, and an aggressive stance ready for risk-taking or conquest. Pornography arouses both these responses, which combine to hold the addictive features of risk-taking, excitement, and the endorphin pleasure explosion.

Couple these powerfully habituating chemicals with the forbidden aspect of lust and it provokes an enticing stimulus-response behavior. It's the typical male response to a "no trespassing" sign. Add in some stressful life factors that cause masculine self-doubt and the stage is set. It becomes an instant fix that reaffirms male potency and gives a tranquillizing, temporary relief of stress—without requiring any other-directed relational energy. That's why a man may masturbate to orgasm while looking at pornographic photos.

Fortunately, not every man becomes addicted. Although the potential's there, most men resist. For many men the exposure to that blatant immorality is distasteful. They recognize it cheapens the actors involved, women in general, and the men who drool over the images. There are also men who see the hypocrisy of professing Christianity while inviting those images into their souls. Some men simply respect their wife's feelings about pornography and resist out of their love. I think my liberation from pornography's appeal includes all these plus my disgust with the idea of giving money to an industry that spans the range from child pornography to "snuff" films. This so-called victimless entertainment leaves devastation and death in its wake.

All these factors make an occasional flight into "soft porn" fantasy an unacceptable choice. Even if both marriage partners find an occasional adult video erotic and exciting, the cost is simply too great.

## **Shamed**

The more control men give pornography over their time, energy, and thought-life, the more devastating is their shame. The downward spiral tends to become reinforcing: The guy feels ashamed, inadequate, and stressed out, and he seeks release through pornography and masturbation, then he feels lousy that he's given in again to the





obsessive-compulsive behavior, and his shame is reinforced. In time he may even desire to be punished, so his guilt and shame become the chosen punishment. Wretched!

Most of the porn-addicted men my wife, Melissa, and I have worked with in our practice are like Adam, who was recently at our retreat center. He'd been fired from his 15-year, successful pastorate when a techie working on the church computer system discovered his frequent clicks on porn sites. Adam and his wife came to repair their relationship and begin his recovery from the addiction.

Adam had deep-seated insecurities that drove him to perform in order to be successful. Now 40-something, he was facing those typical mid-life transition issues of decreasing energy, increasing awareness of his mortality, disillusionment about his abilities, and emotional detachment. He became steadily more depressed and wanted to withdraw. He also needed reassurance of his potency as a male.

His first encounter with Internet pornography was accidental. Adam found the images captivating. Instead of immediately exiting, his curiosity kept him riveted to those images. He even felt himself becoming sexually aroused, something that hadn't been happening much lately. He finally realized what he was doing and escaped the site, but the fascination hooked him and eventually caused him to return. Each time he searched for another exposure the compulsion increased.

Adam knew from the initial experience that he should tell his wife, put safeguards on the Internet, and consider finding someone with whom he could discuss this temptation. But he didn't. Some promise of excitement, adventure, and "innocent" sin echoed in his brain—and rattled around in other body parts. At some point the guilt and shame became the most prominent feature of his life. How could he preach God's Word with this despicable behavior controlling him? How could he counsel others about sexual purity when he'd just been with several women in his fantasies? How could he be intimate with his wife while deceiving her? He saw his ministry effectiveness eroding and was ready for God to punish him or even to take his life. His soul reverberated with Paul's despairing words in Romans 7, "Wretched man that I am!"

In the end he felt enormous relief to be caught. The sham and shame were killing him. He did recover and their marriage was successfully rebuilt, but how much more painless would avoidance have been.

## **Set Free**

Is there any escape from the tentacles of pornographers? It seems that trying to establish political control of the evil is unlikely; the financial power of the sex industry has an addictive power of its own. Nonetheless, there are interventions that hold real promise.

The most effective is establishing healthy male-ness. Giving men a rousing affirmation for their masculinity—without the cultural distortions of sexual promiscuity or male ineptness. That may mean turning off the television, which bombards our living rooms with both of these messages. Even more important is exposure to the noble design of men. Males must be exposed to mature, competent men who model the character qualities of "real men." These include bravery, strength of purpose, honesty, integrity,





kindness, loyalty. A man empowered with these attributes can also begin to exercise manly control of his sexual impulses, no longer relying on the temporary fix of ejaculation to feel good about himself. The expression of his sexuality is more likely to be respectful of himself and of a female. Mature sexuality is relational, not regressively self-focused. Men who feel good about their strength don't have to escape from reality.

There's help for the guy who finds himself drawn into the addictive cycle. This applies to Internet pornography, X-rated videos or movies, "adult" magazines, or chat rooms. There are three major steps:

**1. Stop the behavior.** Recognize the life factors that trigger the first thoughts that invariably lead down a path to the pornography. These may be environmental temptations, stress, loneliness, sexual frustration, or any number of stimuli that are associated with the addictive cycle. Then extinguish these by not reinforcing their power.

**2. Put up barriers to help avoid the temptations.** These can include blocking Internet or television sites, taking alternate travel routes, talking to a spouse or friend, and improving your marital sexual experience.

**3. Create alternative behavioral and thought patterns** that will provide healthy stress relief, adventure, or affirmation—such as family events, reading, or volunteer activities.

That idea brings us finally to the most effective, yet most neglected preventive measure to resist pornography or recover from its control—the life-changing power of the Holy Spirit. We've found that most individuals attracted to pornography have shut off the quiet voice of Jesus calling them to wholeness, giving in instead to the self-destructive fantasies of impersonal narcissistic sex. Praying for strength before giving in is far more effective than pleading for mercy afterwards.

Relying on God also moves a man into vulnerability with his spouse or a best friend who can help encourage him to place necessary boundaries in his daily habits that provide protection from his temptation. Those behavioral changes in thoughts and impulses that initiate the compulsive sequence are a choice. One can choose God-empowered victory or shame.

Remember Paul also said, "Thanks be to God—through Christ Jesus our Lord! ... There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 7:25; 8:1). ❧

*—Louis McBurney, M.D., a marriage therapist and co-founder of Marble Retreat in Marble, Colorado, is the author of [Real Questions, Real Answers About Sex](#) (Zondervan). This article first appeared in the Fall 2002 issue of *MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP*.*

*\*All names have been changed.*





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## THOUGHT PROVOKERS

- 🌀 Dr. McBurney says pornography “becomes an instant fix that reaffirms male potency and gives a tranquillizing, temporary relief of stress—without requiring any other-directed relational energy.” How does this statement affect your view of why a man would be drawn to porn?
- 🌀 Even if someone isn’t addicted to pornography, Dr. McBurney considers it dangerous. What are some of the destructive results of pornography?
- 🌀 How might his three major steps help your marriage be set free from pornography?





## ***Tangled in the Worst of the Web***

What Internet porn did to one pastor, his wife, his ministry, and their life.

*by Christine J. Gardner*

Scott\* was finally alone in his office. After another jam-packed day at the church, he was exhausted but pleased. His hard work was paying off. The youth group was exploding in size, and people said he deserved the credit. Before turning to the stacks of papers and phone messages that demanded his attention, Scott decided he had time for a quick reward. He shut his door and sat down at his computer as it hummed quietly on his desk. I deserve it, he thought. He clutched his mouse, and then—click, click, click—the images of women, posing erotically, smiled back in seeming agreement.

By all appearances, Scott, barely into his 30s, had it all. A popular and energetic youth pastor at the largest church in his denomination, Scott already was in demand as a speaker and writer all across the country. He was married to Caroline, a beautiful and loving wife, and lived in a comfortable home they shared with their baby girl. Yet somehow, full satisfaction eluded him. Scott—like a small but increasing number of pastors today—was living a part of his life in seductive secrecy: He had become a cybersex addict, and his thirst for Internet pornography seemed unquenchable.

### **The road to getting caught**

Scott's earliest childhood memories include sexually explicit images. When he was 6, Scott found a pornographic magazine tucked away in a board game.

After high school, Scott attended a Christian liberal arts college. He and Caroline married in the mid 1980s while still in college, and between a full load of classes and full-time work, they had precious little time to bond. One night on the way home from a college basketball game, Scott and a friend drove by a box apparently discarded in the middle of the road. Curious, they stopped and found it was full of porn magazines. They took it home and, as a joke, told their wives they had bought the magazines. When the joke was played out, they tossed the box into the trash.

But unbeknownst to each other (until years later), they each quietly returned to the trash bin that night to sneak another look. Scott prayed for God's forgiveness and threw the magazines back in the trash; he thought porn was out of his life forever.

After his graduation, Scott's career took off at a large church. But his marriage was in deep trouble. Instead of dealing with their isolation, excessive work, and lack of communication, the couple threw themselves into ministry. "We would work 80, 90 hours a week, and that was our escape from each other," he says.

The couple gradually realized they needed help, but they avoided seeing a professional until the early 1990s, when they agreed to visit a Christian counselor. At their second session, the counselor said their problems stemmed from a poor sex life. He then showed them a sex video. Instead of saving a marriage, the counselor unwittingly reignited a smoldering temptation inside Scott. Within weeks, Scott was using porn





again. "I rationalized," he says. "I made all the excuses: 'God, look at all these things I'm doing for you, working with all of these teenagers. Look, I deserve to have this, because I have a wife who doesn't care.'"

Soon, Scott's porn use had become addictive, controlling much of his time and thoughts. "I had gotten to the place where I stopped asking God to forgive me," Scott says. "I almost felt like I deserved it. I would write a sermon and then shut my door and pull up pornography on the Internet in my office." Porn became the escape from his overly demanding job and troubled marriage. "It was a safe place. I was not going to be rejected. I was not going to be hurt." Porn became Scott's easy answer for intimacy: a false feeling of acceptance without commitment or physical risks.

After years of his chronic porn use amid deep marital problems, Scott's double lifestyle reached a crisis: he got caught. Scott was speaking at a large retreat for Christian youth. He felt a compulsive attraction to a college coed from another church. In private with her for a few moments, he touched her inappropriately. Before the retreat was over, the student told her church group what had happened. "Everything hit the fan," Scott says. "It was really ugly."

Scott went home and told his wife everything, from the retreat incident to his years of porn addiction. Caroline, though fully aware of their marital problems, was completely unaware of his porn addiction. She was devastated.

### **Risk factors**

Pornography use—specifically Internet pornography use—is on the rise, and it is claiming a high price: lost jobs, failed marriages, and destroyed families. Pastors are no less vulnerable to this addiction. The number of pastors becoming entangled is growing.

The temptation may be old, but the technology is new. With an increasing number of computers and Internet access in each home, pornography is just a click away, as convenient as ordering flowers or sending e-mail.

Psychologists say online porn's accessibility, anonymity, and affordability (the three A's of cybersex) all play a role in hooking an individual. Some pastors who would never dream of visiting an adult bookstore or renting explicit videos are downloading images and watching live streaming video from the privacy of their homes or offices. Experts say pastors—who, like many in positions of leadership, are isolated, under pressure to lead exemplary moral lives, and subject to intense on-the-job emotional stress—are at greater risk to become addicted to porn.

Another risk factor for pastors and other leaders: The demands of their work put tremendous strains on marriages. Cybersex can temporarily fill a void in their lives, but it is only a false intimacy. For Scott, porn use seemed to dull a very deep disappointment in his relationship with his wife and with God.

An immature understanding of sexuality or a history of childhood sexual abuse can be other risk factors. Scott was sexually molested twice, once at camp and once by one of his father's friends. Though he told his parents, they ignored the problem. He was left





alone to deal with his confused sense of sexuality. "There was probably a part of me that felt dirty and unclean, that I wasn't worthy of God's love," he says.

### **First, halting steps to recovery**

Scott now realizes that, as important as his confession to Caroline was, it was too much too fast. "I took ten years of marital lies and deceit, a giant backpack full of ugliness, and I pulled it off of my shoulders and slammed it on top of her head," Scott says. He relieved his conscience, he now sees, with little regard for the effect on Caroline. "She was left to deal with the devastation and the ugliness and the reality of what I was telling her."

Caroline blamed herself. "If I would have performed better sexually, or if I would have looked better, or ... I just thought I wasn't perfect enough and that's why he was doing these things," she says.

Many times, the spouse of a cybersex addict does not know where to turn for help. And not only do women blame themselves; sometimes pastors and counselors also impose blame on women. "They get blamed for it: 'If you would be more sexual, submit, have more faith, he would not go outside the marriage,'" says Lynn Wildmon, founder of Esther Ministries ([www.estherministries.org](http://www.estherministries.org)), an outreach to wives of sex addicts.

Wives of cybersex addicts wrongly feel responsible to fix their marriage, Wildmon says. Caroline, in fact, was used to fixing problems. Her childhood was turbulent. Her mother divorced and remarried six times. As she had done with her dysfunctional family, Caroline decided to take control of her crumbling marriage: "I adopted the pull-up-your-bootstraps mentality like I had as a child, and I just thought, *Okay, we need to get a formula here to fix this problem.*"

Caroline says she did not consider leaving her husband. "I was very, very angry with him, but I thought, *Oh, we can't ruin his reputation; we can't ruin his career; I don't want to raise my daughter alone, so I've got to find a way to fix this,*" she says. "So that's what I set out to do."

After a sleepless night caused by Scott's confession, the couple told everything to their church's counselor. Uncertain of what to do, he paged the pastor, and Scott told his story again. The pastor, too, was unsure how to handle the news. So the pastor called in the church's 14 staff members and asked Scott to tell his story a third time.

"They started panicking," Scott recalls. Later that day, Scott's pastor came by his house and told him the church was going to pay for him to receive counseling for sexual addiction. The couple packed up their things, dropped their one-year-old daughter off with friends in another state, then made the long drive to Stone Gate Resources in Colorado. Caroline, who was five months pregnant, miscarried during the journey. Scott says, "I can remember very vividly thinking, *Now not only are you an adulterer and a scum and the most evil, wicked person on the planet, but now you're a murderer.* That's how I felt."





### **Good news is tough news**

"The good news is recovery is possible," says Ralph Earle, founder and president of Psychological Counseling Services in Arizona ([www.pcsearle.com](http://www.pcsearle.com)). "The bad news is it takes work."

In some cases, the wife of a cybersex addict may need to leave the marriage if her husband is unwilling to confront his problem. It's rare for a porn addict to get free from the addiction without professional help.

Scott's recovery began when he acknowledged his addiction, both privately and publicly. Although Scott's church did not allow a public confession, Scott decided to return to his previous churches and confess to staff members that he had been living a sinful lifestyle during his ministry there. Later, a colleague privately confessed to Scott that he had engaged in multiple heterosexual and homosexual one-night encounters for years.

"For the first time in my life, I looked at another person who is absolutely steeped in sin, and there wasn't a judgmental bone in my body," Scott says. "My heart just broke for him." Scott was able to convince his colleague to seek professional help.

That encounter showed Scott how God could use the ugliness and pain in his life to help others. Scott was offered a position as an office manager of a church, a position he was reluctant to take. But the regular office hours allowed him time with his wife and daughter in the evenings, a new commitment both he and Caroline had made.

In this new setting, a new ministry began emerging for Scott. On one occasion, someone at the church needed a file from his computer. When Scott went to retrieve the file, he found pornography saved on the computer. He confronted that person, told the pastor, and the church sent the individual to counseling. One by one, people began to seek Scott's help with their hidden sexual addictions, some driving from as far as three hours away. "They knew who I was," Scott says. "I was a safe person now. I was not sitting on a pedestal somewhere." The church opened a counseling center and helped pay for Scott to pursue a doctorate in counseling.

Scott and Caroline are now using the pain of their experience to help other couples free themselves from the snare of Web porn. In April 2000, Scott joined the staff of a Christian counseling retreat center, assisting with the personal and spiritual restoration of sexual addicts.

### **The work that remains**

Caroline's recovery is a difficult and ongoing process. She still inappropriately blames herself sometimes, and from time to time battles feelings of inadequacy. In intimate moments, she sometimes wonders if Scott is thinking of other women.

After the couple completed counseling, friends wanted to know if their relationship was "fixed," Caroline says. The solution, she says, is not that simple. "In a strange way, we're hoping that we can always stay broken in a sense, so that we don't lose the desperation for God and for each other."





Getting caught and confessing left Scott's spirit humbled and broken. "It was literally like living with a different man. And so I felt like we had begun a new marriage, a new relationship. Everything in our relationship had to change," she says.

But the key to their survival is that Caroline says she was willing to be broken, too. "I think it would have been easy for me to put a wall around my heart and say, 'I'm never going to let anybody hurt me this way again. I can't trust you.' Part of our process of healing, I think, was me saying, 'I'm going to love well, no matter what, even if you continue to hurt me.'" Nevertheless, Caroline says she would consider consequences such as separation if her husband ever fell back into his old habits. "I think a key to this was seeing the changes in him, but also not allowing myself to [be protected] from the pain," she says, "being willing to be open and vulnerable as well."

Part of being vulnerable includes choosing not to be her husband's pornography police officer. "I decided after our counseling that I didn't want to be his watchdog," Caroline says. "I didn't want to check through his bag every night when he came home to see where he had been or what he'd been looking at. I wanted our relationship to be a barometer of how things were going."

Can she ever trust her husband again? Not completely, Caroline says. "I have to put my trust in God, because he is the only one I can trust completely," she says. "And I don't think God asks us in this kind of situation to trust our spouse. I think he asks us to love them no matter what they do." ❧

*\* The names of this pastor and his wife have been changed.*

*—Christine J. Gardner is a doctoral student at Northwestern University and a former assistant news editor of Christianity Today. This article first appeared in the February 23, 2001, issue of Christianity Today.*

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## THOUGHT PROVOKERS

- ❧ What aspects of Scott and Caroline's journey can you relate to?
- ❧ How can you learn from their healing process? What steps toward recovery might you and your husband need to make?
- ❧ In what ways do you blame yourself for your husband's interest in pornography? How can you overcome these false feelings of guilt?
- ❧ Caroline says she thinks God wants her to love her husband no matter what he does. What does that mean to you?





## “I Found Porn on Our Computer!”

How to confront your spouse when you’ve discovered his secret.

by Diane Mandt Langberg

**Q:** *I recently discovered some pornographic material that had been downloaded onto our computer, and I’m shocked to realize my husband may be into online porn. I don’t know how to approach him with my discovery, but I’m devastated and frightened about what this means for our marriage. What should I do?*

**A:** While I’m no computer expert, my understanding is that a pornographic image might be inadvertently stored in the “cache” area of your computer if someone accidentally clicked on a misleading e-mail or website. So pause before you label your husband “guilty.” Where specifically did you find this material, and how often does it appear?

If the answer is frequently and it’s otherwise unexplainable, you’ll have to confront your husband. But first take a look at your heart. Are you harboring any attitudes that might displease God? Whenever you deal with the possibility of sin in another’s life, if you don’t come clean before God and ask him to work in you, you’ll end up reacting to sin in a sinful way—and that’s hardly helpful! The apostle Paul says to approach someone caught in sin with gentleness and humility (Galatians 6:1). Ask God to guide the discussion you have with your husband.

Keep in mind that people want to hide when they feel exposed, so if your husband’s guilty of involvement in Internet porn, he’ll try to hide it through excessive denial, deceit, anger, or accusations. Expect such a response so you’re not thrown off if/when it comes.

When you do talk to your husband, start out saying little. For example, simply mention, “When I was on the computer the other day, I discovered a lot of pornography had been downloaded onto our computer. I’m concerned about that.” Then wait for him to respond. How and what he says will be revealing. He may just say, “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” and walk away. If so, let it go until later. When you speak about it again, let him know how distressed you are that he showed no concern for the issue or for you.

If he admits he’s used pornography, talk through your questions and feelings about it. Tell him about the pain you feel and together discuss ways he can avoid repeating the behavior. If he admits he’s addicted to pornography, he’ll need outside help from someone with expertise in this area. Counseling and a support group are a necessity. However, the core of any addiction is denial and deceit, so he’s likely to resist the idea of treatment. If so, seek help for yourself. You’ll need ongoing support and input on how to respond to your husband. Laurie Hall’s book, *An Affair of the Mind* (Focus on the Family), might help you.

You’re going to need large doses of grace and wisdom in this situation. Try not to become your husband’s policeman; you’re his wife. And don’t join him in pretending nothing’s wrong. Many strong emotions will push on you to police, pretend, control, and





accuse as you work through your pain and anger. But don't let these emotions embitter you; instead, let them send you deeper into the person and work of Christ. By relying on seasoned Christian counsel, prayer, the support of trusted confidantes, and the promises of God's Word to comfort you, you'll be better able to maintain a healthy relationship with your husband. ❧

*—Diane Mandt Langberg, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist in private practice and author of [On the Threshold of Hope: Opening the Door to Healing for Survivors of Sexual Abuse](#) (Tyndale). This article first appeared in the November/December 2001 issue of *TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN*.*

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## THOUGHT PROVOKERS

- ❧ Have you had to confront your husband on this issue? How did you do it? How did he react?
- ❧ What are some ways a wife may react to finding out her husband has used pornography? Which reactions could be more helpful and constructive? How can a woman work through her feelings so she reacts in a godly way?
- ❧ Dr. Langberg writes, "But don't let these emotions embitter you; instead, let them send you deeper into the person and work of Christ." That's tough for anyone to do. What might this look like in your life?





## ***Cybersex Temptation***

Porn is as close as your home computer, and it's got Christians hooked.

*interview by Jim Killam*

Dr. Mark Laaser knows both sides of sexual addiction. For 25 years, beginning as a college student and continuing through his career as a pastor and counselor, he lived a secret life that included pornography, affairs, and encounters with prostitutes. Today, 12 years into recovery and a healed marriage, Laaser heads Faithful and True Ministries, lecturing and conducting workshops around the world. He has worked with hundreds of addicts and their families and has consulted with many church congregations and pastors after their clerics' sexual sins were exposed.

Laaser received his doctorate in religion and psychology from the University of Iowa. He serves on several boards, including the Interfaith Sexual Trauma Institute and the National Council on Sexual Addiction/Compulsivity. His books include *Faithful and True: Healing the Wounds of Sexual Addictions* (Zondervan), *Before the Fall: Preventing Pastoral Sexual Abuse* (Liturgical Press), and *Talking to Your Kids about Sex* (WaterBrook).

He first published *Faithful and True* in 1992, when the Internet was still in its infancy. Since then, he has watched "cybersex"—pictures, videos, chat rooms, clubs, and more—become the number one issue in sexual addiction.

### **You have referred to pornography as a building block to sexual addiction. Obviously the Internet fits very well with that.**

The scary part about the Internet is, first, there are forms of perversion available there that almost defy description. The second and most powerful problem with the Internet is that it's available in the privacy of your home. In the "old days," you had to go to various red-light areas. You had to drive; you had to expose yourself to public humiliation.

### **Would you call Internet sex an appetizer for the more public expressions?**

I think your average person who gets hooked into it will be on a downward spiral. It's going to feed the appetite for sexual expression. If you're left untreated, left unhealed of a pornography addiction, eventually your mind is going to want to express sexuality in some fashion.

### **Does the Internet attract and make sex addicts out of people who otherwise might not have been addicts?**

There might be some people who have kind of drifted along at a very low level that have the vulnerability factors, but then the immediate access of the Internet comes along and hooks a lot of people who might not otherwise have degenerated so rapidly.





### **We tend to think of this as a male problem. Are women at risk, too?**

We're seeing a dramatic increase in the number of women who are hooked into pornography and other more behavioral ways of acting out. Historically we would have said women are addicted to romance novels or women are addicted to chat rooms. That's still somewhat the case, but it's changing. If you look at women 30 to 35, in that age range and under, they're getting more visual. They're getting more aggressive and they're acting out in direct ways, like with masturbation.

Culture is rewiring the female brain. And I literally mean rewiring—neurochemically, neuroanatomically, women are getting rewired to be more visual and aggressive.

### **How does that happen? Just from repeated exposure?**

Your brain does not create new brain cells, but it does have the ability to create new connections. So neurochemically, you literally can rewire the connections in your brain. There's good news and bad news to that. The bad news is you can rewire your brain toward sin, but Romans 12:1-2 ("be transformed by the renewing of your mind") says you can rewire your brain for good things as well.

### **So, someone with a pornography habit will actually physically need it?**

Your brain after a while will adjust to that, and it will want more of that to achieve the same effect. That's why we see sex addicts who deteriorate over time.

### **You wrote in *Faithful and True* that our culture abuses us sexually by bombarding us with unhealthy sexual images. As a recovering addict, how do you deal with that?**

If you're aware of it and you acknowledge it as a bombardment, then you know it's something you've got to deal with. If you are not acknowledging it, just letting it in on a daily basis while being desensitized to what's happening, then all of these things are kind of getting into your mind unconsciously. We have a program that we follow in terms of calling, reaching out, talking to people about what's going on.

### **So a key is not isolating yourself?**

One of our teaching principles is that fellowship equals freedom from lust. We feel that if you're in fellowship in your marriage, in your church, in your community of friends and if you're experiencing fellowship, love, healthy touch, and nurture in those ways, you're not nearly as vulnerable to these stimuli.

So if you're getting bombarded and you're feeling tempted, you need to back up and look at the larger picture. Where am I in my marriage? Where am I in my relationships?

### **The phrase I've heard is that as you feed one side you starve the other.**

Sex in its many forms is a substitute for healthy love and healthy nurturing. If an addict is in the depths of temptation it's generally because he or she is starved for friendship, love, healthy touch, and so on.





### **You just said “sex in its many forms.” Do you mean extramarital sex? Or are you saying sex within a marriage can be a problem too?**

I think one of the huge problems in some marriages is that the sex is not based on spiritual intimacy. It’s based on an escape from intimacy. We’re lonely and really needy, and rather than trying to connect emotionally or spiritually, we try to escape sexually. If I’m using sex to escape how I feel, that leads to what I crassly call *vaginal masturbation*. You may be fantasizing about something else. It’s sex purely for physical gratification.

That kind of sex could even be a form of addiction.

### **What are some warning signs that a couple could be on that road?**

Whether you feel more distanced as a result of sex or you feel more connected. Any sense of sexual dissatisfaction in a marriage needs to be addressed. In a majority of cases there are emotional and spiritual reasons.

### **What would you say to someone who knows he or she has a pornography problem?**

The number one mistake Christians make is that they think they have to deal with this alone—that if they’re getting tempted this way, they can battle it on their own. We need to have an accountability group: healthy relationships with other Christians where we can honestly talk about what we’re dealing with.

With sexual sin, if loneliness is one of the sources of the problem, then to think that you can do it alone sometimes increases the level of that loneliness.

### **Keeping your marriage in mind would help too, right?**

When I see something that tempts me, I need to remind myself of my commitment to a higher form of marriage and sexuality. My vision for the one-flesh union is such that the desire of my heart is to allow myself only to be attracted to my wife and her body, at whatever age.

### **And that goes completely against the tide of our culture, which is obsessed with the physical side of sexuality.**

The paradox is, if you focus on your emotional and spiritual relationship, the physical attraction will increase.

### **When should a person who’s struggling with sexual sin seek outside help?**

If it’s something you’re stuck on. If it’s a minor thing, you may not need to be in some serious recovery program. But I still think you need to confess it, talk about it, get some help, figure out where some of the loneliness and anger are coming from, and deal with it.





### **Would you first confess it to your spouse alone?**

I would involve more people right away. You need some wise counsel about how and when to tell your spouse. You don't just rush in. A lot of guys make the mistake thinking that if they confess it to their spouse the problem will be over. That's not what happens.

### **Never?**

It probably happens occasionally. But, even in those cases, I feel that the people might be kind of white-knuckling what's underneath.

The main thing to try to remember is that all of these sexual issues are symptoms. They're not the problem. They're a symptom of loneliness, feeling disconnected, feeling depressed, feeling angry. There are deeper emotional and spiritual issues that need to be addressed.

So, if you're hooked, if this has become a habit, think of it as a symptom that's telling you there's something in your life that's on disconnect. Where is that coming from? It could be that the source of disconnect is with your spouse. So just telling her that you have a problem with pornography on the Internet is not necessarily going to help that.

### **Where should someone turn? You're a little rough on the church in your book.**

I guess the bottom-line question would be: Is the church a safe place to talk about these kinds of sins? Or are you going to get judgment?

I think all of us in the church need to look at any level of any kind of sin and ask: Is our church the kind of place where we feel safe to talk about our mistakes and still receive grace? Or are we going to church trying to convince ourselves and others that we are something that we're really not?

### **Is there a perverse positive in all of this, that because Internet pornography has become so pervasive it's forcing the church to address sexual issues?**

Sexuality is a tremendous gift of marriage. What this whole thing is doing is forcing Christians to take a look at what God really intends for the sacred union of two people in marriage, and what Paul meant when he talked about a one-flesh union, in light of what the world is teaching about sexuality.

### **How does your view of sex addiction compare with what Scripture says?**

All of the words for lust in the Bible are somewhat synonymous with the words for selfishness. Healthy sexuality is not selfish. It's not designed to gratify biological needs; it's designed to express the fullness of an emotional and spiritual relationship. As such, I think you should be more concerned with affirming your partner than whether you're getting a particular form of sex that day.





**You have said many times that sex is not a man's greatest need. That's contrary to what some other Christian authors are saying today.**

I think men are deceived. If you concede that our human biology is what drives us, then sex is really important. But, if we men are striving to have a heart for God, then I think our hunger for God is our biggest need. As we seek to find Christ in our marriages, then I believe that is our greatest need.

**But for a long time you did pursue illicit sex as if it were your greatest need. Guys hooked on the pursuit of pornography today might feel the same way, even though they know it's sin.**

And that's the question: What is my pursuit? What goals, what vision do I set my heart on?

We're teaching men a higher way. God has given us a biology of desire. There's no question about that. We are going to be stimulated by the sight of a naked female and want to act on that. That's part of who we are. But, we can override our basic human biology with a heart for God, and a heart for a one-flesh union, and a heart for our wives. If we can't do that, then God's playing an awfully dirty trick on us by asking us to be monogamous. ❧

*—Jim Killam teaches journalism at Northern Illinois University. He and his wife, Lauren, have three children. This article first appeared in the Fall 2000 issue of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP.*

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## THOUGHT PROVOKERS

- ❧ Do you think your husband would struggle with pornography were it not so readily available online? Why or why not?
- ❧ Dr. Laaser says that sex addiction becomes a physical need as the brain adjusts to levels of stimulation and then needs more to achieve it. If that's the case, how can the cycle be reversed?
- ❧ As part of the church, how can you respond with grace to others' confessions of sin? How can the church help people heal from addictions?





## ***Warning Signs***

Do you suspect your husband has a problem with porn? Here's what to look for.

*by Jim Killam*

### **Signs you are at risk for sex addiction:**

- ☞ Loneliness. Never having learned to have healthy relationships. Often stems from childhood: having been abandoned of healthy love, touch, and nurture when you were small.
- ☞ Having been abused as a child: physically, sexually, emotionally. "It really sets them up to be frightened, angry, to make a lot of misinterpretations about sexuality," Dr. Marc Laaser says. "So their insatiable pursuit of sex is really an attempt to fill up the void inside for emotional and spiritual connection."
- ☞ Coming from a family in which at least one other addict (not necessarily a sex addict) was present.
- ☞ Coming from a rigidly religious home that taught only negative messages about sex.

### **Warning signs your spouse may have a secret cybersex problem:**

- ☞ Preoccupation with visual, sexual stimuli.
- ☞ Evidence of pornography usage, whether it's on the computer, or with videotapes or magazines.
- ☞ Insisting on his or her own Internet account and e-mail address.
- ☞ Unexplained credit-card bills. Or having a separate credit card that only one spouse uses.
- ☞ Having a post office box where he or she could receive correspondence from people they meet in chat rooms.
- ☞ Staying up late, after everyone's gone to bed, so he or she can get on the computer without interruption.
- ☞ A distance between the two of you emotionally and spiritually. "If your partner never seems interested in sex, never initiates, then that's a problem," Laaser says. "Especially if they're acting out in lots of other ways but have become disinterested in you."





### **What to do if you suspect you are a sex addict:**

- ☞ Interrupt your cycle of sin. "We have guys whom we tell not to take their laptops with them on the road," Laaser says. "We have guys whom we advise, when they get to a hotel room, to literally have the management remove the TV from the room."
- ☞ Don't have your own Internet account and password. Make someone else sign on for you and only use it when someone is around.
- ☞ Get Christian help. "At some point you've got to be hooked into healthy Christian leadership, helping you be accountable, helping you to follow God's design, helping you to understand grace, helping you establish a vision, helping you to work on your marriage," Laaser says. Sources of help include local churches and addiction-counseling groups, or national ministries such as Laaser's Faithful and True Ministries ([www.faithfulandtrueministries.com](http://www.faithfulandtrueministries.com)). ☞

*—Jim Killam teaches journalism at Northern Illinois University. He and his wife, Lauren, have three children. This article first appeared in the Fall 2000 issue of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP.*

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## **THOUGHT PROVOKERS**

- ☞ Which of these signs, if any, applies to your spouse or your situation?
- ☞ How might you use these signs to encourage your spouse to get help?





## ***Healing Wounded Souls***

The way a wife responds to her husband's problem can make or break their recovery.

*by Melissa McBurney*

Recently I received this letter: "My husband and I are Christians, and I've discovered he views Internet porn. We talked about it but he hasn't stopped. I feel horrible, as if I'm partially to blame because I haven't been affectionate with him or because I'm not attractive enough. Why else would he look at these things? Why am I not good enough? I'm trying not to overreact, but this hurts."

Self-concept for women is often a fragile thing. It's as fragile as that other mysterious thing called the male ego. If a woman discovers her husband's into pornography, it's virtually impossible for her to believe his addiction has little to do with her. She feels she's to blame. *If only I'd stuck to my diet and lost that weight*, she laments. *If only I'd colored my hair after all, if only ...*

Interspersed with those thoughts are the ones of anger: *That jerk! I can't believe he'd throw away all we've worked for!*

Sexual sin can be such a wound to a woman's soul that it's easy for her to react immediately with disgust and distrust. But if she could control her indignation long enough, she may see that her first reaction of anger may not always be the wisest. It can make a bad situation worse. Through my years counseling couples, I've had the chance to see several different responses—some destructive and some redemptive.

For instance, Priscilla was casually looking through bills one day, which she did rarely, and saw several calls made to 900 numbers. She didn't know what they were so she dialed one and was shocked by the lewd, seductive woman on the line. Then the truth hit her: Tim had been calling those numbers!

Priscilla reacted from her gut. Without talking to Tim or considering options, she packed a bag and left for her parents' house.

On the other hand, Joan handled her discovery differently. Her husband, Mark, was a teacher at a Christian high school where a female student caught him looking at a porn site on his office computer. Mark lost his job immediately. Joan's world was left in shambles and she wanted to run or break something over Mark's head, but instead she talked to a trusted friend who helped her consider what she really wanted. As hurt as Joan was, she knew she really wanted to be married to Mark. She told Mark she was angry by what had happened, but that she loved him and wanted to help him break free from the bondage he was under.

With her commitment to Mark, they were able to reconcile. It was a slow process, but it happened.

So what should you do if you discover your husband ogling pornography?





**Pray.** And keep praying. Ask God to work in your husband's heart, convicting and healing. While you're powerless to make your husband change, God is all-powerful. You can depend on him to handle your feelings and your husband's behavior.

**Seek outside help.** Go to your pastor or a Christian counselor who can help you understand your husband's actions and how you can respond. Or contact Enough Is Enough, an organization that fights pornography, at [ieica@enough.org](mailto:ieica@enough.org), [www.enough.org](http://www.enough.org).

**Work as a team.** Recognize that you and your husband are on the same side and attack this problem as such. That will reinforce to your husband that your relationship is a safe place.

**Try "tough love."** Draw a boundary for his behavior—one you both agree on. Gently but firmly inform him of the consequences if he steps over the boundary.

These steps sound simple; they aren't—but they work. My years counseling hundreds of women whose husbands have betrayed them with pornography have convinced me that reconciliation can happen. Forgiveness can be exchanged. Trust can be rebuilt. God has the power to obliterate even such addictions as sexual sin. ❧

*—Melissa McBurney, a marriage therapist and co-founder of Marble Retreat in Marble, Colorado, is the author of [Real Questions, Real Answers About Sex](#) (Zondervan). This article first appeared in the Fall 2002 issue of *MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP*.*

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## THOUGHT PROVOKERS

- ❧ What have your responses to your husband's pornography use looked like?
- ❧ How might more thought-through responses affect your husband for the better?
- ❧ How might your relationship change if you put Melissa's suggestions to use?





## ***We Watched It Together! (Part I)***

We gave up porn when we became Christians, but can our sex life—once centered on a shared enjoyment of porn—be rekindled?

by Louis McBurney

**Q:** *For years, my wife and I enjoyed watching pornography together because it enhanced our sexual excitement. But as we've come to know God and have wanted to give him control over every area of our lives, we've rejected pornography. The trouble is we're now having trouble with sex. We miss the stimulation we used to get from pornography. Are we doomed?*

**A:** Quite the opposite. You're putting substance to your Christianity by not allowing the sensuality of our culture to overwhelm your desire for holiness. And rest assured that holiness and sexual excitement aren't mutually exclusive. Committed Christian couples actually report the highest degree of sexual satisfaction.

But I sense that you're wondering if your Christian convictions are going to become a permanent barrier to sexual enjoyment. Here's the good news: While it's true that it's difficult to break the hold of pornography, it's far from impossible.

The visual stimuli of pornography leave powerful and lasting memory traces. The fascination with those images is enhanced by the forbidden aspect and by the endorphin release in the brain when those images are associated with orgasm. The combination of strong visual/auditory stimuli, the high risk-taking quality of "naughty" behavior, and our own sexual reward system create strong patterns. But you can break through those neurological sequences by controlling your mind, substituting new mental images, and relying on the power of the Holy Spirit.

You control your mind by choosing to extinguish rather than reinforce the pornographic memories. When those images come to mind, willfully think about something else. Each time you refuse to replay the "tapes" in your mind, the associations are weakened.

To further the process, reprogram your mind by creating substitute images to extinguish the negative ones. You and your wife can invent all sorts of scenarios, finding stimuli with each other rather than with porn actors. Three-dimensional experiences with your wife are more enticing than imaginary ones, and real-life memories have a more powerful long-range effect. They also protect you from the destructive effects of the pornography (which encourages promiscuity, creates unrealistic demands, and questions a person's desirability or potency).

Most important, you have a powerful ally in fighting evil. The Holy Spirit can give you the desire and the willpower to move toward righteousness. There is nothing God wants more for your sex life than for you to delight fully in each other with no need for the intrusion of unhealthy images. So pray together that God will help you control your thoughts and will replace them with real-life, body, mind, and soul encounters. ❧





—Louis McBurney, M.D., a marriage therapist and co-founder of Marble Retreat in Marble, Colorado, is the author of *Real Questions, Real Answers About Sex* (Zondervan). This article first appeared in the Fall 1996 issue of *MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP*.

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## THOUGHT PROVOKERS

- ☞ What role has pornography ever played in your sex life as a married couple?
- ☞ How has its presence adversely affected your sex life?
- ☞ How can you move toward a more fulfilling sex life without the desire for pornographic stimuli?





## ***We Watched It Together! (Part II)***

Am I prudish because I worry that my husband's no longer thinking about me when we have sex?

by Leslie Parrott, Ed.D.

**Q:** *My husband and I have been married for 10 years and have a great sex life. But last week we watched a pornographic movie together, and now I wonder what my husband's thinking about when we're intimate. He's talking about making porn a regular part of our sex life, but I'm resistant. Am I being a prude?*

**A:** You can't imagine how many times I've heard this question! As a multibillion-dollar industry that rivals Coca Cola's revenues and has more outlets than there are Burger King restaurants, pornography is an insidious, pervasive influence that touches countless couples.

So what's the problem with porn? It seduces people into a fantasy world that eventually replaces reality. The visual and/or verbal stimuli of pornographic material creates an increasing need for more explicit images. In time, these images can become more alluring than marital intimacy.

Are you being a prude? Absolutely not. Biblical ideals aside, in the long run your sex life is far more likely to be fulfilling if you steer clear of pornography. Debra Evans, author of *The Christian Woman's Guide to Sexuality*, says, "Erotica and porn depersonalize sex by ... treating people as sexual objects." With continued porn use, eventually you'll feel used and controlled. In addition, pornography can become addictive; your husband may end up feeling he can't make love to you unless pornography is involved. Not only that, porn use is likely to cause you to doubt your worth and desirability if your body doesn't look like a porn star's. The dangers of porn go on and on.

My advice? Without condemning your husband (since porn is a natural temptation for many men), draw a clear boundary that doesn't allow pornography to contaminate your marriage. ❧

*—Leslie Parrott, Ed.D., is co-founder (with her husband, Les) of the Center for Relationship Development at Seattle Pacific University and the author of several books, including [Love Talk](#) (Zondervan). This article first appeared in the March/April 2005 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.*

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## **THOUGHT PROVOKERS**

- ❧ Do you find yourself trying to compete with XXX models or actresses?
- ❧ How has your husband's enjoyment of pornography affected your body image or sense of beauty or sexiness?





- How can you communicate these feelings to your husband and help him understand the damaging effects of pornography? What boundaries can you draw to protect your marriage?





## ***Additional Resources***

### **Christian Recovery International**

P.O. Box 215, Brea, CA 92822  
714-529-6227  
[www.christianrecovery.com](http://www.christianrecovery.com)

### **Codependents of Sex Addicts (COSA)**

P.O. Box 14537  
Minneapolis, MN 55414  
763-537-6904

### **Esther Ministries**

P.O. Box 2874, Tupelo, MS 38803  
toll free: 877-6ESTHER  
[www.estherministries.org](http://www.estherministries.org)

### **Heart to Heart Counseling Center**

719-278-3708  
[www.sexaddict.com](http://www.sexaddict.com)

### **National Council on Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity (NCSAC)**

1090 Northchase Parkway, Ste. 200  
South Marietta, GA 30067  
770-989-9754  
[www.ncsac.org](http://www.ncsac.org)

### **Overcomers Outreach**

520 N. Brookhurst, Ste. 121  
Anaheim, CA 92801  
714-491-3000  
[www.overcomersoutreach.org](http://www.overcomersoutreach.org)

### **Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA)**

P.O. Box 70949, Houston, TX 77270  
toll free: 800-477-8191  
[www.sexaa.org](http://www.sexaa.org)





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