



kort's korner

The Men in the Mirror: Understanding Gay Men and Their Porn

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IN 1978, WHEN I WAS 15 YEARS OLD, there were no gay role models. I remember going to a local bookstore and seeing pornographic magazines on the very top shelf. Most were for straight men. There was also *Playgirl*,

and surrounding it were some other magazines with men on their covers—*Honcho*, *Playguy* and *Numbers*. At the time, I thought they were for women. I wanted to see images of naked men, so I grabbed a *Playgirl*, put it inside another magazine, and went to another part of the store to read it.

It was exciting, everything that I had expected. I wanted more! So I went back to the section and, while no one was looking, reached for *Honcho* magazine, thinking it would be more of the same—for woman, like *Playgirl*. I was shocked and pleasantly surprised to see pictures and read stories about men with other men. I felt a surge of adrenaline, and recalled all the times my male friends talked about *Playboy* and *Penthouse* and showed me their fathers' porn. This must be what they felt when the viewed

those photos! I didn't enjoy those images at all, and went to the back of those magazines to see images of couples in the ads in the back—so I could view the men. I especially enjoyed other ads in the back, on how men could increase penis size.

These magazines were designed for guys like me, attracted to other guys! I got lost in reading about a man who was sexually focused on another man's body and genitals. That was me! My heart was pounding like I was having a panic attack, worried that I would be caught. My genitals felt like they were on fire. I camouflaged the *Honcho* inside another bigger, thicker magazine, bought the outer magazine, got on my bike and rode home, feeling exhilarated.

I'd never stolen anything in my whole life, and wasn't proud of that. But I was happy to have man-to-

man sex to read about. In my bedroom, I spent the next few weeks masturbating to the images and seeing a whole world of homosexuality open up.

I was shocked and titillated. This was right to me. This was what I had dreamed about, fantasized about and wanted: men kissing other men, holding other men and, of course fucking and sucking them. I longed to date the other boys in my classes, but knew that was forbidden.

After I finished that magazine—and it no longer held the same excitement—I went back to that same bookstore. I couldn't let myself get caught, for two major reasons: I was underage, and it was gay pornography. What would my parents say? If the kids in school found out, I'd be humiliated and my secret would be out.

Back then, I had literally no images of gay men. Nothing! I was with a male therapist who encouraged me to date girls and saw my adolescence as a second chance at "healing and repairing my broken sexuality." I told him about stealing the magazines. He saw that as a result of my homosexual impulses and framed it as a negative expression. Even so, I kept stealing these magazines.

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Quite a collection accumulated in the attic over my bedroom, where I hid them. I'd take them in my backpack and pitch them in a garbage dumpster far away, only to accumulate more.

Once my therapist showed up at that bookstore during one of my "rituals" of taking these magazines. Embarrassed and humiliated, I said hello and I left on my bike—only to return, hours later. I was not going to be spotted.

After I turned sixteen, I drove my car to a bookstore far from where I lived to purchase those same gay magazines. Not allowed, I was told. I was underage. I then drove to a porno store. I walked in, not realizing I had to pay. Here were even more magazines on man-to-man sex. I could have spent hours in, there but the man behind the plate glass window spotted me and knocked furiously, shouting at me to leave. "You're underage and shouldn't be in here."

Curiously, he still sold me the gay porn magazine. I left, even more excited than ever that places like this existed. I added this magazine to my collection and learned more about gay sex and gay men.

Since I couldn't buy these magazines openly, I kept my ritual of stealing them from the local bookstore. One day, I caught another 16-year-old boy doing exactly what I had been doing. Someone like me? He put *Playguy* inside another magazine and viewed it, looking around to make sure no one saw him. He

didn't know I'd spotted him. I went into another aisle to watch and sure enough, he went to buy the magazine. He was successful and walked out. I followed him. He went into his car and drove away.

I followed him home. I couldn't wait to finally talk to another boy just like me. He had to be like me, looking at gay magazines and stolen one, just as I had. When he drove into his driveway, I was right behind him and I got out of my car and approached him.

I was unprepared for his reaction! He thought I had worked at the bookstore—was going to bust him for stealing—and denied having stolen the magazine. I told him I did it too and saw him do it. He told me to go away.

I did, and cried all the way home. Here was my chance to meet another flesh and blood gay male, but it failed. So I returned to stealing pornography until I left home for college and met other gay freshmen.

Pornography can be a source of recreational pleasure use and a rite of passage into gay manhood, but also a source of pain that interferes with one's life. Sam, 55 years old, was referred to me by another therapist who knew I specialize in gay issues and sexual addiction. Heterosexually married, with two grown children, he wanted to stop his compulsive use of pornography. He didn't identify himself as gay. He believed he must have been sexually abused as a child (but

had no memory of anything close to that overtly or covertly), causing him to act out his sexual compulsive behavior. For years he had been using and abusing gay porn. Now, since the invention of the Internet, he was spending hours going to gay sites for images of men with other men. Seeing naked men alone wasn't satisfying. He needed to see images of men engaged with other men sexually, in any way.

Sam talked about how gay life was negative, and while he wanted to fall in love with a man, he didn't think that would ever happen for him. He was intrigued that I was gay and had self-actuated so well, but felt that he couldn't do the same. He said that if his wife and his children discovered his homosexuality, he would be "out on his ear." He didn't want to lose the life he spent so long to build, nor his relationships with his children. He was convinced that if he lived a life of being gay, he would be fired or forced into early retirement.

After his wife went to bed, he would spend nights on the Internet in various gay porn sites, masturbating for hours and postponing his ejaculation. He reported that often he would not have an orgasm from the images he saw and sometimes he would not even masturbate as he viewed the sites. Eventually I convinced him to go to the Mankind New Warrior Weekend, a workshop for gay, straight and bi-attractional men. This weekend was about initi-

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ation into manhood, which targeted his issue of feeling less than a man because of his homosexual urges.

He went, met some other gay men, and fell in love with one. During his time with this man, he stopped going to gay porn sites on Internet. He left his wife, came out of the closet, self-identified as gay and partnered with this particular man. Although he would still look at gay porn occasionally, the sexual compulsion was gone

We gay men have few rituals, if any, to initiate us into manhood. As a young Jewish man, my bar mitzvah served as a gateway. At least it was something. For many boys, sports serves as an initiation—which, unfortunately, a gay boy often doesn't like or isn't good at. Even if he is, he often feel there's something "different" about himself from the other teammates and not really "one of the guys." He may not feel acceptance or a sense of belonging.

As gay men, our initiation into manhood is usually on a sexual level—more often than not, in pornography. I'm not condoning or condemning pornography, but it can be an affirmative, acceptable way to explore one's gay manhood, especially for gay teens or closeted gay men with nowhere else to turn.

Homosexual pornography is so readily and immediately available that it makes sense that a gay teen or a closeted man's first exposure to gayness is through the doorway of sexuality. When I was a gay teen,

I was looking for intimacy with another gay boy, but couldn't find it. When I stole gay porn for all those years, I see that as a way of "stealing" my sexuality, metaphorically. I was unable to express my natural sexual/romantic orientation and when I did, it was met with negativity. My therapist wasn't in favor of my being gay, even though I told him I knew I was. I couldn't date boys or talk about my crushes on them, and saw no role models of what being gay was about. Even when I chased that other cute boy who stole the magazine, he was too scared to be interested. The whole time I followed him, I thought about this possibly being my first love.

I understand now that I had to sneak and "take what I could get" to discover my own homosexuality. If I'd had MTV's *Real World* show or *Will and Grace* with gay characters, I might not have been so desperate as to be out of integrity and steal magazines to grab images of my homosexuality. So for me, gay intimacy and gay sex became equated—as I believe it did for my client Sam, and for most other gay men.

Providing therapy to gay clients, I never minimize the lack of non-sexual ritual and initiation we have had to endure. Our society lacks of images of men, particularly gay men, touching and expressing affection. Gay porn reconciles this lack, if only through sexuality. The heterosexually married gay man, like Sam, who lacks the courage to go to a gay bar or support group finds porn

the easiest, safest way to explore his homosexuality. The closeted man, who fears being hated and marginalized if he comes out publicly, can find some comfort, knowing that no one will judge him in a bookstore, X-rated movie theater, or privacy of his own home.

Having pornography as one's initiation into gay manhood can feed into a man's feeling that being gay is forbidden and underground. Going to a "dirty" bookstore and sneaking around can make someone feel shameful, but also add to the excitement. During sexual excitement, an internal chemical in our bodies is activated called phenylethylamine, (PEA for short) that parallels amphetamines. Research finds that it is also released when two people first fall in love, most strongly in the presence of the romantic partner. It's also responsible for the sexually excitement men get in the presence of a paraphilia. During the release of this molecular structure in our bodies, we feel excitement, ecstasy, and euphoria. The higher the fear, risk and danger involved, the stronger the "hit" of PEA. It makes sense that this would increase the sexiness of porn and potentially hook gay men.

A recent client told me he was sexually acting out online, on porn sites and gay sex chatrooms. A guy he was instant-messaging sent him his pic, while my client sent him his. They discovered they knew each other from a gay social group

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they both belonged to. My client said he felt “exposed.” This reduced the fear, risk and danger of talking to someone he didn’t know. Suddenly the secrecy and forbiddance were gone—and he lost his interest for sexual acting out for the rest of the night.

Not every therapist agrees with the concept of sexual addiction. My own working definition of addiction is any activity that interferes in your life in some way, but which you continue, despite the negative consequences.

Patrick Carnes, Ph.D., has written extensively on the subject. In fact, he coined the term in the subtitle of his landmark book, *Out of the Shadows: Understanding Sexual Addiction*, 1 which helped a great many men identify behaviors that were causing them distress. Carnes’s book didn’t address gay men in particular, but his more recent *Don’t Call It Love: Recovery from Sexual Addiction*, includes examples of gay men and their sexual behaviors. Eli Coleman, Ph.D., affiliated with the Program in Human Sexuality at the University of Minnesota Medical School, has written extensively on sexually compulsive behavior. He believes that what he calls sexual compulsivity is “driven by anxiety reduction mechanisms, rather than by sexual desire.”

John Money, Ph.D., refers to “love-maps” which, in your childhood, were created by your caretakers and the society and culture you were raised in. Healthy lovemaps evolve

within a community or society that encourages affectionate caregiving and recognizes sex as natural, with no taboo or stigmatization. Money sees sexually compulsive behavior as the result of a lovemap “vandalized” through physical, emotional and sexual abuse, where children have suffered post-traumatic stress and injured their self-esteem, personal boundaries, and sense of trust.

I’ve found these three pioneering models to be effective in helping sexually compulsive gay men. The best approach may be different for different clients, though some benefit from a mixture of all three. For one, the addiction model may offer a behavioral and cognitive path to recovery. For another, whose behavior is an anxiety-reducing form of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), medication can help. Finally, viewing the behavior as a vandalized lovemap suggests inquiry into childhood and early abuse: “Who were your caretakers? How did you develop your concepts of love and intimacy?”

Most importantly from my point of view is that sexual addiction is any sexual behavior that’s continued despite negative consequences.

John, 35 years old, came to see me knowing that I specialize in sexual addiction. He asked whether his “excessive” sexual behavior was interfering with his relationship. He masturbated “twice or three times” a day. But to achieve orgasm, he needed porn. This was his paraphilia. Since adolescence, he’d masturbated to images of muscle-

bound men with huge penises. He’d purchase muscle magazines, watch Mr. Universe contests, and remain aroused throughout the show.

But why did those images arouse him, when images of nude men having sex did not?

John imagined that all these men were straight or bisexual. If he even imagined they were gay, that didn’t arouse him. Over the years, he’d had sex with various men, but never enjoyed them as much as porno movies and magazines. He spent hours outside of health clubs and gyms where men worked out, masturbating in his car with porn and muscle magazines. He spent hours at bookstores, looking for magazines featuring muscular men.

Every minute, he was on the Internet, seeking images of body builders to store on his computer, then masturbate to these images. He even surfed the Net at work and in parking lots, even though he worried about getting caught—and that this habit prevented him from finding having a good, solid relationship.

Enjoying images of body builders is a normal turn-on. But in John’s case, it had become compulsive. Why? When we explored his childhood, he recalled his mother criticizing his alcoholic father for “not being much of a man,” because he couldn’t hold jobs and bills went unpaid. In arguments with his critical and emasculating wife—who treated John the same way—he never fought back. John recalled

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her laughing about how “poorly endowed” his father was. This never left his mind. At the school locker room, he was teased constantly for being smaller than the other boys. John knew he was within normal limits but, comparatively, was smaller than his classmates.

Also John’s father was not around very much. He worked many hours and when he was not working he would be out drinking. John felt that his father just did not want to be home with his mother. Through therapy he discovered his feelings of loss that his father was not around more for him leaving him with this castrating emasculating mother.

This all matched up with how his father allowed his wife to treat him, never protecting him from her verbal abuse. In John’s mind, body builders were “real men.” How more masculine could they become?

He tried to stop using pornography. He didn’t succeed. We agreed that he might be a sexual addict.

Most men don’t need to examine their past history, when their sexual behavior isn’t interfering with their lives. John, struggling with sexual compulsion, was forced to examine his sexual fantasies in order to decode his acting-out. He began to recognize that his compulsive interest in bodybuilders was his attempt to get closer to a stronger father figure, since his own had been weak and impotent. This helped us both understand why his bodybuilding men had to be straight or bisexual—being that his father was

a heterosexual man in relationship with a woman.

During his therapy, John complained that I wasn’t giving him enough time. If he wanted more time with me, he’d make attempts to call me and not want to pay. He’d get upset when I charged him for longer sessions, or not lower my fee if he came more than once a week. He also said I should work out more and that I was out of shape for a gay man. I listened for the themes and the negative transference here and pointed out how John was projecting his father’s “lack of time” for him onto me. At first these interpretations angered him. He thought I was defending myself and minimizing his needs—more of the negative transference.

Through the therapy, I allowed for the negative transference toward me as a therapeutic tool. To help him more, I ultimately placed him in a gay men’s group therapy in addition to his individual therapy. I also recommended he attend Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA). Current research shows that the best intervention for sexual addiction is individual, group and 12-step meetings. Relational healing is what is needed for this intimacy disorder. At one SAA meeting there was a gay body builder and John began to “fall in love” with him. This went against John’s template of being interested only in straight or bisexual bodybuilders. Here was an opportunity to heal some of his compulsion and challenge his belief that he couldn’t be attracted to gay men.

Unfortunately, John’s distraction by this particular group member kept him from engaging with the other group members or using the meetings effectively. But this mirrored what he did in life. His preoccupation with pornographic images prevented him from developing healthy relationships. This was pointed out to him at the meetings, and he was challenged to either use the meetings the way they are intended, or be asked to leave the group. John was forced to make a decision. Would he let himself do the work he needed to and not let a “bodybuilder” distract him?

Through both the feelings he had toward this group member and me, he began to recognize that in fact they were transference of his feelings toward his father. While at first this felt shameful, he ultimately realized it was his shame of being neglected by a father who wasn’t there for him.

I encouraged him to go to his father and make attempts at connecting with him. I told him it didn’t matter what his father did with these repair attempts, because John was healing himself by going to his original source of pain and dealing with his feelings. We roleplayed various ways, with group members playing the role of John’s “as if” father. With the group’s help and support, he was willing to do this.

Ultimately, his father wasn’t able—or interested—to talk about John’s feelings and validate them.

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At first, this was devastating. John came back to individual and group therapy, crying and angry about his father's responses. But in group, he was less and less preoccupied with the bodybuilder and stopped asking for more time with me. His compulsion to act out sexually subsided. He went for longer and longer periods without using porn. Ultimately he met another man and began dating. While his interest in porn was still there, it no longer ruled his life.

Some men actually have aversions to gay sex and gay porn. They are either asexual or, as Patrick Carnes calls it, sexually anorexic. They show little to no interest in sex, and if the subject is addressed, it is repulsive to them. At times they have sexual binges but afterward, they are disgusted. Tony was a 38-year-old gay man who came to see me, struggling with being gay. He was in a five-year sexless relationship with another man, and bothered by the lack of sex and intimacy with his partner. He was sexual with himself occasionally and used pornography while masturbating, but afterward would feel ashamed and disgusted with himself.

He came from a strong religious Catholic family who never accepted his being gay. His sister forbade him from seeing his nephews as long as he was in a "homosexual relationship." In therapy, it became apparent that his avoiding his sexuality was an attempt not to feel his being gay. He had difficulty self-identifying

as gay. He was able to see that being sexual with himself or his partner would go against his family's messages. I placed Tony in my gay men's group to help him with his internal homophobic feelings.

In dealing with his sexual anorexia, I asked that he bring in some of his porn that he had at home. My thoughts were to begin a pathway of him bringing what and who he was from underground. At first, Tony was vehemently against this. It took approximately one year of exploring and talking about this before he was willing to do it. He worried that I was trying to "get off" on his stash of porn, or that the group would do the same. I checked out if the group would support him and witness his sexuality. It was important that no one make fun of him or judge him harshly rather to witness and establish a "rite of passage" into what he enjoyed sexually. Everyone agreed, and we created a "sacred space" around it to ritualize it. Shaking, sweating, riddled with anxiety, Tony brought in his porn magazines and showed us what turned him on the most. This was his work for a while, as he came in and showed us the images he enjoyed.

He hadn't told his partner that he even had porn. I recommended that he do so. This took another six months. With Tony, I believe we were dealing with an intimacy disorder. He couldn't be "witnessed" as gay in his family. The closer he was to his partner, the more obvious his gay orientation would be, separat-

ing him from his family even more. Tony was really less afraid of being gay than of what his family thought of him.

I encouraged Tony to stand up to his family about who he was as a gay man. He admitted he wasn't up for any of that! This would involve a high level of separation anxiety. Thus his sexuality remained stunted, and his relationship to his partner asexual.

At times, prescribing gay pornography to a client has been counterproductive. Josh, 35 years old, had been partnered for 5 years—and was addicted to Internet chat rooms where he would contact and ultimately meet other gay men. His boss threatened to fire him after catching him in a chat room online at work. A dedicated employee, he still found himself unable to stop putting his job at risk; and his partner also pressured him to get help. With me, Josh was glad to have identified his problem as sexual addiction.

But after some time in group therapy, individual therapy and Sex Addicts Anonymous, he found himself unable to get aroused or stay erect with his partner. He couldn't talk about his sexual fantasies with the group his partner or me. He also had a stash of pornography that involved bondage. I encouraged him to talk about his fantasies and interests with his partner, show him his pornography, to look at it together, and bring it into their

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sex play. These suggestions angered him. He felt I was going against the SAA program and viewed pornography as one of his boundaries.

I told him I don't think porn has to be a boundary for everyone. I honored that that was how he saw it, but challenged his thinking. Could it be helpful in being sexual again with his partner? I was trying to normalize it for him. Instead, it alienated him.

I like Sex Addicts Anonymous's philosophy that what's a sexual boundary for one person may not be for another. But Josh didn't, and felt that anything sexual outside the context of his relationship was counterproductive and shameful to him. Even after I stopped suggesting he bring his pornography into the bedroom with his partner, Josh became increasingly angry with me. Ultimately, he found another therapist and transferred out of group and individual with me.

One of the gay male community's best features is our free expression of sexuality. X-rated videos and DVDs are seen as a normal (if not mandatory!) part of a gay man's library. This isn't just a gay issue, but a "guy" issue—whether gay, bi-attractual or heterosexual, men are men. If straight guys were more honest, they would talk openly about the porn they enjoy and share their favorite sexual fantasies.

Many gay men feel a healthy entitlement to their sexuality—as do men in general, in our society. It is part of our conditioning. As males,

we're granted much more permission to be sexual than women are. But that our sexuality can be an obstacle and get in our way if we have a sense of entitlement at the expense of our partners. But before it can be identified as a problem, something to heal, one has to ask: Is it interfering in my life?

Marty and Sam came to me about Marty's use of pornography. Sam believed that Marty was a sex addict and in denial. He felt Marty was comparing him to the images he looked at, even though Marty never made verbal comparisons.

Marty insisted he didn't have a sexual addiction and wouldn't stop buying and viewing his porn. He felt the problem was that Sam was a prude. Throughout his childhood, Sam's father had many extramarital affairs, and Sam found his pornography around the house. Marty, on the other hand, came from a very religious household that never talked at all about sex and sexuality.

Just because someone views pornography, he doesn't instantly have a problem. But I do believe that if one partner is bothered by the other's viewing porn, then there's a problem in the relationship, and I tell the couple so. In Sam and Marty's case, since Sam had a problem with Marty's porn use, they both had a problem.

What a couple wants to do around sexuality (or anything else, for that matter) isn't for me to judge. I have opinions, will share them with my clients, but in the end, I promote

couples—as I did with Marty and Sam—to talk openly and honestly to one another about what they both want in their relationship.

To problems like this, a cookie-cutter approach isn't appropriate for all couples. I take into account both partners, their backgrounds, and try to get both to see how that's contributing to the problem. Sam might have been over-reacting to Marty's porn due to his own father's sexual behavior. Marty might have taken a stand against Sam's because when he grew up, sexuality wasn't addressed or allowed. Through Sam, he may have been rebelling against his family. In therapy with them, I told them both my thoughts.

I also did a thorough evaluation of Marty's sexual past. Was he acting out past sexual abuse? Was this really sexual addiction? Some feminists hold that objectifying others isn't healthy, but I think using porn recreationally can be a healthy outlet. It's safe, fun, and adds sexual excitement. Men are visual. The stimulation of viewing sexual images can prevent cheating outside the relationship.

Some partners, like Sam, see the looking at porn as a form of cheating, in itself. But again, this is a case-by-case assessment, as for some couples, pornography can be used as an emotional and psychological exit from the relationship.

For Sam and Marty, I didn't think this was the case. There was no indication that Marty was abusing porn or letting it take away from

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their relationship. Even Sam agreed that Marty was available, present and receptive to his sexual advances and activities.

With Sam, I explored the growth opportunity to allow Marty the ability to look at porn and to trust that this wouldn't send him off to cheat, like Sam's father. This was a chance for him to soothe himself, without needing Marty to calm him with compliance. I also helped Sam see the advantage of having a partner be honest and open about his using porn, and how many other couples sneak and hide this behavior, like his father. Again, I invited Sam and Marty to view the porn together. Both were uncomfortable with that idea, Sam more than Marty, and so decided against it.

By the end of treatment, Sam was getting used to Marty's pornographic use, and assuring himself that Marty was not his father. If the use became out of control, he'd address it then. Marty was willing to cut down his use—even though the frequency and amount were low to start with.

Some or more of this is controversial, I know. But as therapists, we're still pioneers in how to deal and what to do with sexuality. Pornography is exploding on the Internet these days, and isn't going away. People with intimacy disorders are inclined to go online and get a distorted view of what sexuality is. To me, the key to me is exploring with the client what it means to him. It's also about asking him to pro-

vide every detail of what he's looking at and for me, as therapist, to listen with a nonsexual ear. When a client talks about what kind of porn he looks at, I'm listening not so much to the data as I'm thinking about what it represents for him.

I strongly believe that sexual behavior and fantasy are an extension of our inner core—windows into another facet of who we are. Whatever gives you the greatest pleasure sexually is information about you. It's telling a story—not necessarily on a conscious level.

Regardless of your fantasies and what type of porn you enjoy, it's helpful to translate those fantasies into reality, albeit in nonsexual ways. You'll find parts of yourself that you've been seeking.

If a client enjoys fantasies about straight men, I suggest that he explore his relationships with important and influential straight men in his life, starting with his father. The answers could encourage him to find ways to make friends with straight men and accomplish some personal healing. This was the case with my client John viewing images of "straight" bodybuilders.

If a client enjoys being disciplined and spanked, then exploring how he was (or was not) disciplined as a child—and how he's disciplined in his life today—helps determine if he's trying to reconcile something he didn't get enough of (or too much of).

Another client said he enjoyed watching porn films of group-sex

orgies, where "the men are insatiable and can never get enough." We explored his experiences with gay men—and other people, for that matter—and his feelings of inclusion or exclusion. This particular client never felt he belonged. After I encouraged he look at his sexual fantasy as a way of resolving that issue, he was motivated to find groups where he could feel comfortable, contribute, and receive from others.

The other side to this issue is being like Sam, the partner of someone who enjoys porn. His reaction (particularly his over-reaction) to the sexual expression was a window for him to examine his past and his inner self. Sam was able to use the opportunity with Marty's porn use as a way to heal old wounds with his father.

Pornography isn't bad or wrong, but even those whose sexual behavior is within normal limits can examine the underpinnings of his fantasy and see, as through a sexual window, who he is. For the sexual addict, decoding his fantasies can often reduce, if not eliminate, compulsive behavior as well as be a window into who he is. For others, it can be a way of self-actualizing to more of who they are. It's a narrative about the client that can be used as a means for change and growth.