

# Depathologizing Porn

## *Why Can't It Be Just an Acceptable Diversion?*

*by Joe Kort*

In more than 25 years of practice, I've heard hundreds of stories of how pornography use can damage people's sex lives profoundly and ruin their marriages. I've personally had many couples describe the shame and secretiveness of one partner's involvement with porn. Time and again, I've treated people for whom viewing porn has become a compulsion and who've come to prefer it to being with a partner. Yet I've worked with many for whom porn isn't destructive to their relationship, but, in their view, offers a source of excitement and satisfaction they wouldn't otherwise experience.

Of course, these days, it's impossible to grasp the impact of pornography on relationships without considering the role of the Internet. Years ago, finding new and titillating erotica was a time-consuming chore. In the last couple of decades, though, the range of graphic material available online has exponentially accelerated the appeal and use of porn. Trying to explain the effect of the Internet on porn consumption, sex researcher Al Cooper has written that the driving force is the "Triple-A engine of Access, Affordability, and Anonymity." While it may take alcohol 30 years to ruin an alcoholic's health, only a year's worth of heavy cocaine use can lead to a total mental and physical collapse. Now, for some porn users, the Internet has become a kind of virtual cocaine.

Yet, despite the undeniable harm that porn can do, we therapists need to bear in mind a fundamental fact: the overwhelming majority of people exposed to it don't become addicts. Patrick Carnes's research shows that sexual addiction affects three to five percent of adults, suggesting that porn use isn't about to turn us into a country of addicts glued to their computer screens. Further, assuming that porn inevitably leads to addiction can blind us to understanding its nonpathological appeal to so many people—most of them men who are quite normal in every other way. It can make it harder for us to accept that, in many relationships, porn use may satisfy needs that have nothing to do with psychological pathology or sexual dysfunction. In fact, noted sex researcher Helen Fisher argues that the brain-inhibiting effects of antidepressants pose a much graver threat to couples' sexuality than porn. She even advises couples to go on the Internet and look at porn as a kind of hormone booster, arguing

that porn "drives up dopamine levels, which drives up your testosterone."

To be sure, porn use is permeated with a sense of the forbidden that triggers intense emotion, but as therapists, we need to understand it on a case-by-case basis and be careful to separate our own biases from our clients' needs. To begin to see porn in a more normalizing light, it can be helpful to understand the ways in which porn can be incorporated into a relationship without secretiveness or shame.

Many gay male couples I know, both in and out of therapy, consider porn a fact of life—obvious testimony to the reality that one partner's world of sexual desire can extend beyond the other partner's ability, or willingness, to satisfy it and the person's own need to enact it. In these couples, partners discuss each other's porn stashes without a sense of dismay or anger, sometimes even with a bit of amusement. "He's into that, but it's just not my thing," one partner might say. "But if it gets him off when I'm not available or in the mood, that's fine with me." In many gay couples, the use of porn is transparent and nonthreatening, an expression of each other's different sexual tastes, rather than an indictment of the other person.

In my work with gay couples, I typically see more open sharing of sexual interests and dislikes from the beginning of their relationships than I do with most straight couples. In most gay couples, porn isn't usually seen as detracting from the couple's sexual connection, especially if they agree on "house rules" together: the forms of porn that'll be used, whether or not other people are involved via chat rooms and webcams, and the use of public forums, such as sexual bulletin boards and fetish groups. Sometimes I hear that my male clients watch porn together, but often each partner understands that he has some sexual appetites that don't include his partner, and that he can satisfy these in fantasy without undermining the trust level within the relationship.

It's been well established that men and woman differ markedly in their response to erotic material. Generally speaking, the popularity of Internet pornography is overwhelming testimony to the importance of visual stimulation to men and the restless search for sexual novelty that so many men find exciting. Whether through innate wiring or social conditioning, women appear to be more relational in their consumption of erotically stimulating material. Even the erotic entertainment aimed at a female audience, a growing component within the porn industry, relies far more on plot, storyline, and character than the typical display of raw sexuality and primitive dominance featured in porn for men. Nevertheless, despite their entirely different emphasis, the erotic novels and sexually explicit romances favored by women are also a means of erotic-fantasy satisfaction, and express the desire to imagine a partner

who's more exciting than the person with whom they're actually sharing their bed. Having such fantasies doesn't have to mean that, over time, a woman will betray her husband with someone else, or that their relationship is somehow doomed. I believe that the same holds true for most men and their use of porn.

Accordingly, open porn use introduces a relational question that most couples never face: can both partners acknowledge an erotic sexual-fantasy world that doesn't include the other person without undermining their sexual connection and violating the boundaries of their relationship? Most couples never confront this question, but the porn explosion of recent years has produced increasing numbers of couples who, for whatever reason, can't avoid dealing with it, and they're coming into our offices seeking help.

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### Wayne and Lori

Wayne came to see me after his wife, Lori, found links on his computer to websites showing female dominatrixes ordering men around, spanking, binding, and gagging them, and forcing them into sexual acts. Also, Wayne had collected pictures of foot fetishism—women forcing their feet into a man's face and mouth or making men give them foot massages and paint their toenails. Appalled and furious, Lori accused him of being a sex addict and a deviant, and demanded he go immediately to counseling.

In sorting through cases involving the discovery of a partner's porn use, therapists should take certain considerations into account. First, it's important to establish whether there's any coercion to involve an unwilling partner in watching porn and/or participating in sexual practices inspired by the porn use. If there is coercion, that must be confronted directly. Another point to remember is that, however lurid the porn viewed may be, there's a big difference between erotic fantasy and lived reality. In fact, often there's an inverse relationship between the intensity of the porn being viewed and the mundane details of the porn user's life. Certainly issues of possible addiction should always be explored, as should whether the use of porn is damaging the sexual and emotional connection between partners. Clients should be made aware of the consequences of trying to hide the use of porn and the pernicious effects of trying to lead a "secret" life within a marriage or committed relationship, and it's helpful to

explore with them the possibilities of discussing their porn use with their partners and their reasons for not revealing it. In addition, there must always be an exploration of whether responsible precautions and boundaries are being maintained, so that children or others in a household aren't exposed to materials that may be psychologically harmful to them. Once these issues have been carefully assessed, it's my belief that the job of therapists isn't to impose their own values about porn on clients, but to help couples determine what its use by one partner means for both partners.

Wayne assured me he'd never actually acted out his fantasies with women—or men, for that matter. In fact, he'd never *wanted* to act them out. He reported enjoying going to sites where he could see video streams in which dominant women punish subservient men and where he could participate in Internet groups where these fantasies are shared for erotic reasons. For him, that "did the job" of providing sexual pleasure and release.

"I'd never want to make this happen in real life," he told me. "It's just a fantasy, that's all. I don't know where it comes from, but I enjoy it."

Wayne didn't prefer these fantasies to having sex with his wife. He reported his relationship with her was more than satisfactory, sexually and otherwise. But when Lori discovered his online pornography use, they both had to confront the challenge this revelation posed to their relationship.

Wayne was CEO of a large company—a stressful position, which involved the management of numerous employees. A devoted husband and a highly responsible man, he enjoyed being needed and admired. One of four siblings, he'd been brought up in a family that had been erratically managed by a self-absorbed, negligent mother who didn't keep careful track of her children. Early in life, he'd begun to eroticize women who behaved in the opposite way. In his fantasies, women took charge while he could enjoy being submissive and taking orders. Early on, he developed an arousal template in which he could experience women telling him what to do.

Wayne wasn't bothered by his fantasies—for him, porn use and his attraction to aggressive women was just part of his identity. When I asked if he fantasized about his domination and humiliation fantasies while having sex with his wife, he said, though he occasionally did, he mostly was able to be present with her.

Lori and Wayne had an active sex life, though she seemed to be the lower-libido partner. In the beginning of their relationship, Wayne had told Lori he liked to be spanked and wanted to be submissive; however, in practice, this proved not to arouse him or her, so their sex became more conventional, though they did incorporate a variety of sexual positions. He said he enjoyed sex with Lori, and that they each found the other attractive.

In our first few sessions, I asked Wayne about his fantasies, about his early-childhood arousal template, and where he thought the fascination with domination originated. I wondered with him whether his porn use was helping him reconcile a lack of appropriate attachment with his mother as a child and playing out difficult themes with possible erotic undertones from childhood. After getting a full history, developing an initial picture of his marital relationship, and assessing his use of porn with a sexual-addiction inventory, I concluded that he didn't fit the profile of a sex addict. His use of porn wasn't compulsive, he didn't prefer it over being sexual with Lori, and it didn't decrease his sexual drive or desire for her.

Wayne had previously sought therapy over a job loss that was due to company politics. At that time, his therapist helped him explore his relationship with his mother, and Wayne did extensive grief work around his unmet attachment needs and the neglect by his mother. I asked whether his sexual fantasies of wanting to be dominated by women changed during or after this therapy and he said no. In my practice and research, I've found that no amount of early childhood work can actually change a person's arousal template, although it's possible to reduce any compulsivity or acting out of the fantasy. However, as mentioned, Wayne exhibited neither compulsivity nor the need to act out his fantasy.

Porn use can exist comfortably within a relationship that both partners feel is otherwise adequate and fulfilling. But when the worlds of porn and relationship suddenly collide, as it had with Wayne and Lori, the experience is profoundly disorienting. The therapist's task then is to help the couple discover how to absorb this new information, define limits with each other, see whether a sense of trust can be restored, and, if possible, find a way they can grow together as the result of the experience.

After my initial assessment with Wayne, I was ready to see him with Lori and to help them begin the process of determining how they could live with the fact that his world of fantasy was now out in the open. Lori was adamant that his porn use had to stop. For her, any kind of porn was simply abhorrent, and his fantasies, whether acted out or not, were unacceptable. Feeling shocked and betrayed, she felt she didn't know her husband anymore. The knowledge of what he viewed and fantasized about eclipsed everything else in the relationship for her. She had no interest in *participating* in any such sexual fantasies.

My goal in this type of couples session is to see what it might take for the partners to listen to each other without being overwhelmed with reactivity. I wanted Wayne to hear Lori's upset and dismay at his behavior and the way she'd discovered it. I also wanted to see whether she could find a way to understand his porn use without taking it so personally. Having spent several sessions with Wayne, I didn't believe that his long-established fetishes and fantasies would shift easily, though Lori hoped that he'd "see the light" and stop his porn use. Instead, I wondered whether this couple could find a way to negotiate their different needs, once an atmosphere of safety was established. Could Wayne be less defensive about his "right" to use porn and instead help Lori understand that his needs were long-standing? Could Lori see his behavior as an expression of troubling early-life experiences and not as a threat to her or to his desire for her?

I knew we had to focus on Lori's feelings of betrayal before anything else. So I coached Lori to talk first about the concerns that underlay her agitation. These were that Wayne preferred the porn over her and that eventually he'd be driven to find a woman to act out his fantasies. "I don't want him cheating on me," she said breaking into tears. I asked her to explore what she meant by cheating. "Has Wayne ever given you any indication of being dissatisfied with you or of wanting another women?" I asked. She acknowledged that he hadn't, but now felt so betrayed by the secrecy of his porn use that she didn't know what to expect from him anymore.

Once I sensed that Lori could begin to hear about what his porn use meant to Wayne, I began to explore with him his fantasies about women dominating him, which had begun in his late teenage years. As Lori began to see his fantasies in the light of his early bond with his mother, her attitude about Wayne's longing for domination softened. We talked about some of the early attempts they'd made to play out some of these fantasies in their sex life. "I did try to engage in some of the fantasies early in the relationship, and I'd have been willing to try more, but it wasn't a turn-on for me and you felt so humiliated" she told Wayne. "I can try again," Lori added, "though it will just be something I'd do for you. It's just not erotic for me." The awkwardness of these enactment experiences is common among porn users and their partners.

What became clear as we went on was that Lori wasn't as judgmental as Wayne had thought she'd be. The shame he felt was his own shame engendered by the revelation of his fantasies, as well as older feelings related to experiences of telling his mother something about his vulnerabilities and having her minimize what he'd said, leaving him feeling dismissed and judged.

"I wouldn't want to play out these fantasies with you Lori," Wayne wound up telling her. "I don't want you to just go through the motions."

As we talked about Wayne's sexual fantasies and their connection to unmet needs in his childhood, the conversation between him and his wife moved into a different gear. "Whenever I try to take care of him, he gives me a hard time, resisting and telling me he can take care of himself," said Lori. "Maybe if I try to be even more active in meeting his needs—both in and out of the bedroom—than maybe he won't need or want to look at the porn." However, Wayne was unwilling to give up looking at porn completely, and Lori was adamant that his porn use wasn't something that she could tolerate.

"You have a problem here that only the two of you can address," I said. "Is Wayne's porn use enough for both of you to call it quits and end the marriage? Or is there a middle ground that can be achieved?"

I then focused on Lori's latent attitude about porn. She acknowledged that she'd always thought of porn as something only single men needed until they found the right partner. She considered porn inherently abusive and misogynistic. But she was challenged when it was pointed out to her that Wayne's porn featured empowered women dominating men—in fact, men were in the "abused" position.

If couples are to face the impact of the disclosure of a partner's porn use, its content must be taken out of the realm of the secret and the forbidden. I asked Wayne and Lori if they'd be willing to watch some of his porn together. This would be a chance for Lori to try to see what her husband's experience was actually about, instead of remaining attached to what she'd always thought, read, or heard about pornography. Wayne was agreeable to this, saying he'd find it odd but strangely erotic. Lori tentatively agreed.

In the next session, Lori recounted that she'd watched the porn alone at first, but had felt uncomfortable, so she'd stopped watching it until Wayne had joined her. They looked at one movie together, fast-forwarding it so that she could get a good idea of what he fantasized about. Wayne was nervous about being shamed and judged, but reported ultimately feeling liberated by being able to let Lori in on his secret fantasy world.

Surprisingly to Lori, she found that she wasn't as bothered by the porn as she thought she'd be. I encouraged them to continue being sexual with each other in the way they'd always been, but to stay alert to any signs of sexual distance between them. After some weeks, Lori reported that she felt comfortable with their lovemaking and that she didn't feel that Wayne was in any way distant or sexually unavailable to her.

After some experimenting with trying to incorporate Wayne's porn use in their sex life by watching more movies together, Lori began to feel more uncomfortable and worried that Wayne would want to turn the fantasy into a reality. He tried to assure her that this wouldn't be the case, and said he was disturbed that Lori didn't trust him on this subject. I reminded him that he'd kept his porn use secret for years, and that the way she'd learned about it was a betrayal of trust. Given that, I said, her feelings made sense.

Slowly the dialogue between them around the porn use softened for both of them. Over a three-month period, they came to appreciate each other's viewpoints. Lori stated that she didn't want to engage in the type of sexual fantasies that turned Wayne on, but that she could now understand where they came from.

My work with Lori and Wayne involved helping both spouses understand the "impersonal" element in sexuality represented by fantasy life and porn use in a way that rendered it safe and unthreatening—not as a reflection on their marriage, their sex life, or their partner. They realized that while his fantasy world had an impact on their marriage, it needn't overwhelm the rest of their relationship and invalidate their feelings for each other. Discussing the use of porn and each other's sexual fantasies allowed them to develop a new kind of ease and empathy for each other, based on a shared and explicit understanding of the private sexual fantasies that wouldn't have been revealed except for the revelation of Wayne's porn use.

Wayne's frankness about his sexual secrets and desires ultimately opened Lori up to admitting that she had fantasies about having another guy join her in bed with Wayne. Interestingly, Wayne's response was, "Yeah, that's cool, but it's never going to happen!" He was somewhat surprised to find himself in the same boat as Lori—while he could hear about her fantasy, it was clear that he never wanted to do it. They both laughed when Lori said she probably wouldn't want to do it either, but that she'd thought about it from time to time.

Together, Wayne and Lori made rules around his porn use: he'd no longer be secretive about it or try to cover up what he'd been looking at. Lori wasn't interested in having sex more often than once a week, and Wayne remained okay with that, as long as he had a way of experiencing sexual release that was no longer a shameful secret.

The argument that porn takes away from a relationship and encourages selfishness and emotional distance doesn't do justice to the trust and understanding that Lori and Wayne developed with each other. They negotiated a way of acknowledging their different needs without having to pathologize each other or coerce each other into pretending they were different than they were. Every couple faces similar challenges, as they try to honor their bond with each other while navigating the unpredictable waves and currents of their individual sexuality.

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