

Recommendations for Church Leaders in Helping the Spouse of the Individual Struggling with Sexual Addiction

If an individual confesses that they have an issue with pornography, habitual sexually acting out, or other sexual issues, and they are married, it must be understood that the spouse is dealing with *significant trauma comparable to that of a combat veteran*. The following list of ideas may be beneficial to you as you prayerfully consider how to help the spouse.

1. Get Interested

Individuals who struggle with addictions often become the focus leaving those whose hearts have been shattered feeling even more alone and unnoticed. You are encouraged to meet regularly with the spouse and show interest in the spouse's welfare. Don't make the meeting about how to help the one who struggles. It is **NOT** the spouse's responsibility to fix the addict. Help the spouse feel that he or she is not alone and that his or her needs are just as important as the one who struggles with addictive behaviors.

2. Get Specific

Often the spouses are embarrassed to discuss this issue with anyone. They are concerned that others will either think that they are crazy for staying in a difficult marriage or that they aren't a good enough spouse. They may also fear what others will think about their spouse. They don't want anyone to judge their spouse negatively. You may be the very first person with whom they have ever shared how it feels to be married to an addict. Asking them these questions and then listening carefully demonstrates that you care about the person and will provide you with added information you will need so as to be best guided by the spirit on how to help the individual.

Some of the questions that you are encouraged to ask include:

- How long have you known about your spouse's issues?
- How did you find out?
- How do you react when you find out?
- With whom have you shared your situation?
- How does your spouse's behavior affect how you feel about yourself?
- How does your spouse's behavior affect how you feel about your marriage?
- How are you doing with all of this?

3. Get Quiet

The spouses of addicts rarely feel like they are heard or valued. Spending some time with them is very important in helping them deal with their own woundedness. Providing simple prompting statements that will lead to the individual to share more with you will help them uncover the parts of them that they need to work on. You ask a question and then LISTEN.

Some promptings may include:

- How do you feel about _____?
- Can you tell me about a time when you felt connected to your Heavenly Father?
- What parts of your life do you want to experience the most change?
- When have you noticed yourself more at peace?
- What kinds of relationships have been the most meaningful to you in your life?
- What kinds of relationships have been the most difficult for you in your life?
- How has this situation impacted your life? How has this impacted those you love?

4. Get Smart

Depending on the length of time they have been with the addict, chances are incredibly high that the spouse has developed some co-dependent beliefs and behaviors. Co-Dependency is an unhealthy way of trying to show love to another by throwing oneself under the bus while urgently trying to care for the needs of others.

Co-Dependency is not easily overcome. Often times it comes with a deep belief system of not feeling worthy. Often, the spouse will want to take upon themselves responsibility for why the addict does what he or she does. For example, the spouse may believe:

- If only I were skinnier or more attractive, then my spouse won't act out.
- If only I had sex with my spouse more often, then my spouse won't act out.
- If only I were nicer, then my spouse won't act out.
- If only I baked 4 dozen cookies for the PTA, made dinner for a sick sister in the ward, organized the youth dance, read my scriptures, made sure my children are immaculate, have no dirty dishes in the sink, and I have invited 10 people to church – then I will feel loved.

These stem from a belief that they can control or reduce their spouse's behavior. This is a message that comes from Satan. Since the pre-existence, he has tried to convey a message that we should not have freedom and that he can force us to behave a certain way. Unfortunately, he has not stopped proclaiming that message. He has convinced the spouse that they are responsible for their loved one's behavior.

Some of the most unhelpful (and actually very hurtful) things that you can say include:

- You need to have sex with your spouse more often.
- You need to be willing to experiment sexually with your spouse more often.
- Let's figure out how we can help your spouse stop the addictive behaviors.
- What do you think you can do to better support your spouse?
- You are just going to have to forgive your spouse.

More helpful responses include:

- I want you to know that this is not your fault.
- Your spouse has an addiction which is challenging for both of you. However, you cannot be responsible for your spouse's behavior. What is more helpful is for you to examine and deal with your own feelings first.
- You are a Daughter/Son of our Heavenly Father and He loves you. You are valuable and worthy, just as you are, without having to do one thing to make Him love you even more.
- Eventually you will have to explore forgiveness, but you are in control of when you will choose to do so.

It is also recommended that you learn some basic information about how addiction affects the spouse in general. An excellent resource is www.combatingpornography.org.

5. Get Help

You may find yourself struggling with how to help a spouse. The disease of addiction not only impacts the person with the behavior, but it spreads toxic pain into the lives of those most closely connected to the person. If you find that the individual is struggling with following, it is recommended that you consider referring them for individual or group counseling with a qualified, experienced therapist:

- Resentment
- Anger
- Isolation
- Fear
- Flashbacks—reliving the trauma over and over, including physical symptoms like a racing heart or sweating
- Bad dreams
- Frightening thoughts.
- Feel emotionally numb
- Feel strong guilt, depression, or worry – often with thoughts that turned inward (i.e. if only I was a better wife, he wouldn't do this)
- Losing interest in activities that were enjoyable in the past
- Being easily startled
- Feeling tense or “on edge”
- Having difficulty sleeping

6. Get Mindful

Because the spouses are experiencing PTSD symptoms, it is important to understand that how issues are dealt with (or not dealt with) as it relates to the addict may be a devastating trigger for the spouse. Be mindful that the spouse will have many triggers such as going away for girl's camp, scout camp, being called to callings, being released from callings, etc. The range of triggers is immense. It is not your job to manage the triggers, but to be

mindful of them. If church disciplinary counsels are required for the addict, please be mindful that the meeting can be just as traumatizing to the spouse. Prayerfully consider the spouse's feelings and emotional state during these challenging times as you schedule the meetings.

7. Encourage them to seek out a Support System

Most spouses of individuals who struggle with addiction have walled themselves into isolation and secrecy. They have difficulty reaching out and connecting with others. The fear rejection if anyone "finds out". They are concerned about being rejected, ridiculed, or seen as weak. They are also concerned about what others will think about their marriage and their partner.

It is not recommended that the individual stand up in a public group and share their struggles, nor is it recommended that they publically share explicit details of their struggles. However, helping the struggling individual find someone who is trustworthy, loving, and ultimately non-judgmental with whom they can share part of their story can be incredibly healing and makes their burden easier to bear. A safe place for this to happen is through the LDS Addiction Recovery Group or a 12 step recovery meeting.

8. Give Them Resources

Because the individual may not have a solid understanding of what is happening to them and their spouse, it will be helpful to lead them to some resources that will help increase their understanding. Invite them to read about addiction and how spouses are impacted. You are encouraged to develop a list of resources to share with the individual.

9. Encourage them to Pray

We are children of our Heavenly Father and as such are wired to be connected to him. Often that connection is lost or at least severely damaged through the addictive behaviors of their spouse. As you work with these individuals you can ask them:

- How often do you pray on your knees?
- How often do you pray out loud?
- How specific are your prayers?
- What gets in the way of praying?
- What would you like your relationship to be like with your Heavenly Father? How do your prayers convey that to him?
- How effective are your prayers?

You may even want to help the individual list some of the changes that he or she would like to experience in their life and then encourage them to take these desires with them on their knees.

In addition to praying, individuals should also be encouraged to connect with Heavenly Father in other ways. These include studying their scriptures, listening to uplifting music, enjoying Heavenly Father's creations, writing in their journals, etc.

In therapy, we call these "dailies" or the things that they need to do every day to stay connected with God. It isn't considered a cure for their struggles, but more often than not, those individuals who start slacking on their dailies also start slipping more quickly into harmful behaviors.

10. Give Them a Priesthood Blessing

Most of the time, these individuals do not feel worthy of love or belonging. They often feel that God is angry with them and has rejected them. They often feel that they will never be able to overcome these struggles. They often feel hopeless, alone, and scared. Providing a blessing of healing and love can help the individual find hope that change is possible. It can enlighten their darkened mind and touch their soul. Do not discount the power of a priesthood blessing.