

What's a Woman to Do?

How Pornography Affects Women and What They Can Do

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It's not uncommon for well-intentioned observers to inquire about the fuss being made over pornography. Many of them assume that pornography consumption is a victimless pastime. Their line of thinking generally supports the notion that a man who views pornography in isolation is not hurting anyone. They even debate the question of whether or not this same man is hurting himself by viewing pornography.

I would like to challenge these assumptions by sharing how pornography use damages not only the individuals who view it, but especially wives and girlfriends of these same men. I will also include suggestions for how women affected by their partner's pornography use can cope as they begin the journey toward wholeness.

In all of my years of counseling individuals and couples, I have never seen any other behavior produce a pattern of pain and misery as predictable as that which happens to an individual and his marriage when he views pornography. Let me briefly outline the pattern as I see it.

First, long before his wife discovers his pornography use (either by his own disclosure or by her catching him), he will begin to slowly change into someone who becomes more self-centered, irritable, moody, and impatient. He will spend less focused time with his family, seek out more distractions, begin to mentally and even verbally devalue his marriage, become critical of his wife's body and character, feel more spiritually empty, and experience more internal stress. He will become more dissatisfied with his work, become easily bored with things that used to interest him, and feel restless. He will also become more resentful and blaming when things don't turn out the way he hoped.

This transformation may take years, depending on how often he views pornography. If he only seeks it out every few months, he may be able to fool himself that the aforementioned challenges are situational and will pass with time. For those who view pornography more frequently, each viewing produces more disconnection from the man he could become. The repeated viewings and subsequent self-deception deepen this transformation over time.

This gradual erosion eventually creates confusion and strife in the marriage. Although each case is different, most wives who knew nothing of their husband's secretive pornography consumption have told me they felt like something was "off" in their relationship with their husband. They usually second-guessed themselves, many of them even reflexively blaming themselves entirely for the disconnection in the marriage.

If undisclosed pornography use has the potential to produce this much confusion and pain in a marriage, one can only imagine the level of difficulty imposed on a wife when these secretive behaviors are brought to light.

Shock, denial, anger, rage, depression, self-loathing, isolation, and fear are some of the words that describe what a woman experiences when she learns of her husband's secretive sexual behaviors. Virtually every woman I've worked with has experienced deep shame, embarrassment, and humiliation. Consequently, partners will often suffer privately and become

more disconnected and isolated from their support systems. Even if they initially react in anger, most of the pain becomes “sorrow that the eye can’t see.”

It seems that most men who admit their secretive behaviors feel a sense of relief that they don’t have to keep their behaviors secret anymore. On the other hand, their wives feel the opposite of relief, experiencing profound fear, anxiety, and confusion.

Many scholars have noted that women betrayed by their husband’s pornography use experience symptoms associated with posttraumatic stress disorder, a condition that is equated with feelings of powerlessness, intrusive thoughts and memories, and efforts to avoid the triggers associated with the traumatic stressor. Like war-torn soldiers, these women live in fear that something will remind them of the painful memories associated with the betrayal of pornography. They often become hyper-vigilant by checking computer histories, cell phones, and obsessing over details related to his pornography use.

The stress associated with discovering a husband’s pornography addiction can produce sleepless nights, food issues (both overeating and undereating), traumatic flashbacks, crying spells, and feelings of hopelessness. The physical exhaustion related to these stressors can cause a once perfectly healthy woman to begin under functioning in her various roles.

Dr. Shondell Knowlton, a marriage and family therapist in Farmington, UT, has compared the experience of learning of a husband’s secret pornography use to tipping over a cart of neatly stacked apples. She says that when the metaphorical apple cart gets dumped over, the order and predictability of one’s life gets scattered in all directions. Energy previously used for other things gets re-routed to gathering, cleaning, sorting, and re-stacking the “apples.” This process is fraught with disorder, confusion, and humiliation.

Many women believe they will automatically recover from the trauma of their husband’s pornography use when he stops looking at it. It’s easy to imagine how this would be the case. If the behavior that is causing the pain goes away, then the pain goes away, right? Yes and no.

Yes, the pain will decrease as a husband commits to ending his pornography consumption and begins to live an authentic life free from the damaging effects of this addiction. On the other hand, if women affected by their husband’s pornography use don’t consciously work to undo the effects of his behavior, they could continue to hang onto unresolved fear, resentment, anger, and grief.

Another comparison helps to clarify this point. If a pedestrian is struck by a car, the pedestrian will be moved to safety and risks associated with getting hit will likely be eliminated. However, the fear, physical pain, and emotional insecurity associated with getting struck in the first place will linger unless the pedestrian works to undo the impact of that event.

Women who discover their husband’s pornography use will benefit from doing some emotional first-aid to help stabilize them so they can set themselves up to do the long-term work of healing. I will outline some of the most helpful first steps women can take when they discover their husband’s behavior. I will then briefly explain what is involved in long-term recovery for women affected by their husband’s pornography use.

First-Aid

1. **Physical self-care** is probably the most overlooked aspect of early recovery for women. Trauma is mostly experienced in the body. The body is designed to protect us from danger. If an individual experiences a serious threat to their safety (emotional or physical), their body will become tense, flooded with adrenaline, and have difficulty calming down. To ignore the body is to ignore one of the greatest resources for healing. I have found that women who make physical self-care a priority heal much faster from the impact of their husband's secretive behaviors. Many women find that getting more sleep, eating healthy foods, exercising, meditating, stretching, soaking in warm water, and slowing down to nurture their physical body can help them shift out of survival mode so they can think clearly.

2. **Spiritual grounding** provides feelings of peace, hope, and reassurance in the face of so much uncertainty. Meditation, prayer, seeking comfort and counsel from words of ancient and modern prophets, and counseling with church leaders allows women access to power and strength beyond their own. Like Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail, many women feel forsaken and alone when they've been betrayed by those closest to them. Elder Holland and other church leaders have recently delivered powerful discourses on how to cope in the face of deep suffering. Spiritual healing is essential, even if it takes time. Some women find it hard to attend church and spend time with others when they feel so low and vulnerable. The healing power of the Atonement binds up wounds that are self-inflicted as well as other-inflicted. Also, it can help to spend time where spiritual feelings are easier to access, such as visiting peaceful locations in nature or listening to uplifting music.

3. **Emotional expression** is critical throughout all stages of recovery, but especially in the early stages. Many women find it helpful to write their feelings in a new journal that they have the option of throwing away at a later date. Emotions can be so strong early in this process that some women worry about putting raw feelings in their regular journal. It's important to have the freedom to express feelings in a healthy non-aggressive way. No feeling is inappropriate. Feelings come and go like the waves of sea, so it's important to give them full expression and movement. Holding on to any strong emotion with the hope that it will disappear only keeps it stuck. Talking with others can also help, which is explained in the next item.

4. **Connecting** to others who can help is also difficult to do, but has tremendous benefits as well. It's not recommended that a woman who learns about her husband's behavior broadcast her pain to just anyone who will listen. Instead, it's important to identify a few key individuals who: 1) will keep confidences, 2) can provide a safe place to talk, 3) won't negatively judge her or her husband, and 4) can offer some support and direction. It can be beneficial for the long-term stability of the relationship for a woman to inform her husband that she will be speaking to specific individuals about her struggles. Helpful individuals often include ecclesiastical leaders, therapists, parents or siblings, 12-step support groups, therapy groups, and close friends.

5. **Simplifying** life is certainly a goal for most people, but this is an excellent reason to begin. This is the ideal opportunity to begin saying "no" to extra commitments, evaluating the schedule, and looking for things to cut out. Dealing with the trauma of betrayal is so physically and emotionally exhausting that everything that used to feel easy will suddenly feel impossible. It's important to keep a simple structure in place so there is order and predictability in life. However, a frenzied pace only functions as a distraction and eventually catches up in the form of more hopelessness, feelings of

failure, and powerlessness. Helping others can create a sense of purpose as well. It is better to slow down and prioritize those things that will bring the greatest peace, joy, and comfort.

6. **Education** is critical in the early stages of recovery. There are many good resources available to help women understand the scope of the problem. I maintain a readings list for partners available on my resources page of www.lifestarstgeorge.com. Education can help validate common feelings and clear up misconceptions about addiction and recovery.

Long-term Healing

Healing from the effects of a husband's pornography addiction is best compared to grief, loss, and bereavement. The discovery of a partner's secret sexual behavior can cause a woman's life (as she knew it) to flash before her eyes. Recovering from this loss is a process of understanding the shock and anger, processing the sadness of what was lost, and moving toward acceptance of the new life. The new life may or may not include a husband who is committed to long-term recovery. Regardless of that outcome, it's still critical for women to do the long-term work of healing from the impact of secret pornography use. Future articles will cover what long-term recovery includes and how women can continue their journey toward wholeness in the face of betrayal.



Geoff Steurer is a licensed marriage and family therapist in private practice in St. George, Utah. He has over 10 years of experience working as a marriage and family therapist in a variety of clinical settings. He is the executive director of *LifeSTAR* of St. George, Utah, a nationally renowned three-phase addiction recovery program for couples and individuals affected by pornography and sexual addiction (www.lifestarnetwork.org). He has a list of books, articles, and other resources related to addiction recovery on his *LifeSTAR* of St. George, Utah website: www.lifestarstgeorge.com. Geoff frequently writes and presents on the subjects of marriage and addiction recovery. Many of these articles and presentations are available to download on his website www.lovingmarriage.com.