

UNDERSTANDING HABITUAL PORNOGRAPHY USE

God implanted within us an attraction to the human body which serves as a catalyst to form, create and maintain families. Satan is very aware of this innate, God-given attraction and uses the desires of the flesh to capture us through the improper satisfaction of those implanted desires. We live in a world that has become saturated with perverted sexual images and messages, everyone has been exposed to this in one or more forms, without looking for it. How we learn to deal with it becomes very important in our development toward godliness.

An important lifting and leveling function of the brain is to create and release a “feel good” hormone called dopamine. Every time we experience something enjoyable, like feeling the Spirit, exercising, listening to good music, meditating, enjoying a sunset, eating a favorite food/desert, shopping, having sex, etc., a little bit of dopamine is released in our brain. This natural release of dopamine is important in maintaining a healthy balance in our feelings.

However, there are things that we can participate in that unnaturally release very high levels of dopamine and thereby are very addictive. Notable examples are drugs, pornography and the fast-changing images when using the screen. According to some studies, viewing pornography can release up to 400 times the level of the natural dopamine release. This instant “feel good” release, far and away exceeds anything else the person has experienced and can create a strong desire to experience it again. After pornography has been viewed and the dopamine high has faded, the result is a feeling of shame and a desire to hide what they have seen and done. When a person is feeling down, lonely, hungry, stressed, rejected, anxious, fearful, bored, tired, etc., the brain sends the signal that dopamine is needed to “lift” the mood. The brain remembers what brought the fastest, easiest and greatest release of dopamine and sends the signal, resulting in a craving, to view pornography again. The challenge to stop viewing pornography is exponentially increased because people now carry in their pocket the means to view it again, with ease and anonymity, when the brain calls for a dopamine release. The challenge of overcoming pornography use is further increased by the fact that, over time, the dopamine release from viewing pornography is inhibited resulting in the “need” to view more explicit pornography to try and achieve the same dopamine high. Many have been trapped in this cycle, most of them innocently (the goal of the pornography industry is to trap a child in its use before they are 8 years old), before they knew what was happening. They have struggled, prayed, fasted and wept in an effort to overcome but have found themselves unable to conquer.

A pornography habit is an addiction to the excessive production of dopamine in the brain, not a sign of moral weakness. Over time, the continued use of pornography results in the person not learning the skills of how to deal, in a healthy manner, with the stresses of life (hunger, exhaustion, anxiety, rejection, loneliness, stress, etc.) because pornography was the tool that became habitually used. Therefore, overcoming habitual pornography use is not a matter of just stopping its use (in fact telling a person to “just stop” is more harmful than helpful), but in understanding the brain science of what is happening inside them, and in learning healthy habits to deal with life so that pornography use no longer is the “solution.” Habitual pornography users don’t know or recognize this process has happened, and themselves do not understand the “why” of their continued use. They come to hate it—loath it—and themselves. With every desire of their hearts and minds they desire to be rid of it but don’t know how to effectuate an escape.

Almost all individuals struggling with habitual pornography use will find themselves unable to overcome this alone—outside help is needed. Satan knows that this struggle cannot be overcome in isolation. Consequently, he uses shame to isolate—he attacks them as a person; whispering that they are depraved, morally corrupt, weak and that if anyone knew of this, they would immediately be ostracized and despised. His method works. Most habitual pornography users do not seek help and consequently carry this feeling of shame throughout their lives, sometimes leading to suicide.

It is natural to think that if a person connects to the enabling power of the atonement of Jesus Christ (grace) through the Spirit every day, by meaningful scripture study, prayer and regular participation in ordinances, that it will be enough for them to conquer their habitual use of pornography. Though these tools are critically important and cannot be ignored, unfortunately, it most often is not sufficient. It is like telling a person with a broken leg that if they just had more faith, gained via the means just expressed, that they would be healed. But a doctor is needed to help set the bone, immobilize the break and require sufficient time for healing to occur. It is similar with habitual pornography use—the brain has been broken and requires additional help to experience the healing that is promised through Christ's atonement. Without this combination, the struggling person ends up feeling more and more shame and a loss of hope that mastery is actually possible for them.

Sometimes when a person struggling with habitual pornography use seeks help, a well-intentioned parent or priesthood leader speaks in a way that heightens shame or uses punishment, thinking this will help the person gain mastery more quickly. This is rarely an effective means to bring about progress and usually just reinforces, within the struggling individual, the feeling that they truly are no good and are beyond hope.

Even as a person begins to gain mastery in overcoming habitual pornography use, the brain does not forget how it got the biggest dopamine release. Consequently, the recovering person must always be vigilant, striving daily to pay the price that connects them to the love and power of God, and can never put down the guards established in gaining control or else a setback will occur. When a setback occurs, Satan uses the occasion to attack the person (shame) and try to strip from them hope and desire to keep trying. Setbacks need to be used by the struggling person (and those that counsel with him/her) as a time to learn from the slip-up and recalibrate or reinforce the plan of action to continue to progress. This Herculean battle, in learning the daily, hourly and even minute by minute discipline of discipleship, over time, results in marvelous spiritual growth and strength and a deepening relationship with God.

Some additional, helpful information:

- Marriage does not resolve habitual pornography use. It is not a sex addiction but a dopamine drug addiction and marital sex does not result in the same dopamine high as pornography use.
- The computer/phone screen is addictive by itself but when combined with pornography it becomes a spiritually deadly weapon. Changing how the computer/phone is used and

even getting rid of the internet connection on the phone is often needed to enable a person to start the recovery process.

- Desires, appetites and passions of the flesh are God given, but we must learn to control them, making them our servants, not our masters. They must be refined and sanctified through the grace of God. To pray for God to remove these God-given drives is a prayer that will not be answered. But He will help us learn to master them, so they become our servants.
- It is important to help the struggling individual understand the difference between guilt and shame. Guilt is used by God to prick our minds and hearts to convey the message that what we just thought, did or said was not right and needs to be corrected. It is always accompanied by hope and encouragement. Shame, on the other hand, is the tool of Satan, and is an attack on the person, not the action, conveying the feeling that we are no good, bad, that God cannot love us now, and that we can never overcome or change. It strips hope and courage from us. We must learn to discern between the two and push shame from our thoughts and feelings or we lose the Spirit, because a role of the Spirit is to confirm truth, and since those thoughts are not based on truth, continuing to think them separates us from the Spirit, and therefore we lose hope and righteous desires.
- As parents it is important to teach our children, at age-appropriate ways and times, in a positive way about healthy sexuality. They need to learn that sex is a power shared with us by God to bind husband and wives together and begin the creation of an eternal family, that it is a healthy part of a good marriage.
- Share with the ones you counsel with the methods you use to stop, as President Packer called it, “the bird that flew overhead from building a nest in your hair” (meaning unsought for sexual images that you send on their way without entertaining them in your mind...or heart). (See also Bradley D. Foster, “It’s Never Too Early and It’s Never Too Late,” October General Conference 2015.)
- Any habitual use of pornography or substance freezes emotional development at around the age the habitual use set in. As a result, the person has not developed the mature methods of dealing with the triggers and stressors of life in a healthy manner. Healthy ways of dealing with the stresses of life need to be learned and applied for long lasting recovery to occur.
- Sometimes there is a need for a counselor to help the person learn healthy responses to the triggers/stressors of life rather than going to pornography.
- Sometimes there is a need for medical help for a person with habitual pornography use who is also dealing with anxiety or depression. The medication does not “fix” the problem but helps to stabilize them enough that they are more able to deal with the habitual use, without which they may never be able to overcome.
- It takes a great deal of effort to bring under control habitual pornography use, a constant flow of divine aide and the exercise of discipline is required to keep a person from falling back into it. If the daily price is not paid to connect to God’s love and power, and the person fails to listen to and respond to the first warning whisperings of the Spirit, the seeds have been sown for a soon-to-occur setback, unless corrective action is taken.
- Habitual pornography use effects all ages and genders.
- We cannot be afraid to talk about this--to bring it out of the closet, to normalize discussion of it—to remove the stigma associated with pornography viewers so that help can be sought without the feeling that they are subhuman. This will help give people

courage to seek help and to know this is something we are all exposed to and, because of the world we live in, effects all of us to some degree or another.

- Males are most effected by the visual medium and females use to be predominantly affected by the emotional draw achieved through romance novels, movies, etc. However, the porn industry has focused on hooking females on the visual medium and they have been successful in entrapping a higher percentage of females into this medium.
- The brains production and release of dopamine is the body's normal way of lifting the feeling in our lives to help us feel better. The main reason missionaries are told to exercise each morning is so there can be a dopamine release to lift the spirit so they can deal with the challenges and rejection they will face during the day.
- Safeguards for using Technology, a missionary handbook, is a very good source for tools to learn to control the use of media, which should be implemented by all members and used throughout our lives.
- Suicide is not uncommon as a means used by some to escape the web of pornography use that they have unsuccessfully tried to conquer.
- Satan has tried to make sex the god of this world via advertising, music, social media, movies, TV sitcoms, books, magazines, fashion, immodesty, porn cites, jokes, computer games, etc. He has been very successful.
- To tell a person to just "stop it" is very damaging and shows ignorance of the nature of pornography use.
- 1) Connecting to God through meaningful daily habits, 2) being a careful steward of thoughts, 3) seeking the companionship of the Spirit, 4) learning to listen to His first impressions, and 5) being honest enough with self to not rationalize or justify away the guidance given is essential in gaining mastery. It takes years of practice to develop the necessary disciplines but results in wonderful spiritual growth and power.

The Process of Obtaining Enabling Grace Summarized

We start by recognizing our absolute need for help and in humility getting down on our knees, pleading for help to change (repent), to overcome and become more like Them. He meets us at whatever level of progression or degradation we are at and by His Spirit infuses us with greater desire and determination to do better. His enabling grace is there to assist us all along the way. We don't have to reach a point of being "good enough" to receive it, indeed it is His grace that enables us to be good, "for good cometh of none save it be of me" (Ether 4:12). He then prompts our minds with thoughts of what we need to do differently. **Exercising faith in Him means we must be committed enough to act. As we record those impressions and plead for His help to act upon those instructions His enabling power increases in our lives. Our desires and determination to do better increase.** Little by little our capacity to be different expands because His power in us is growing. We maintain and increase these desires by being involved daily in meaningful scripture study and prayer for increased power to resist temptation and by our actively seeking to overcome weakness and develop more of the godly qualities. As we properly, and with increasing understanding, worship in the temple, we learn how to gain greater power through Their enabling grace, because that is the central message of temple ordinances. The change of heart and mind, called spiritual rebirth, continues to occur to greater and greater degrees until our fallen natures become increasingly purified and sanctified—made more holy—resulting in our desires, thoughts, words and actions reflecting a more Christlike nature because,

indeed, by Their power in us, we are becoming, in a small way, like Them. Not by our own power but by Theirs. This is what it means to endure to the end.

Many times, we will plead for God to “wave a magic wand” so to speak and “make” us holy, in an instant. However, strength of character is developed in the daily battle of our use of agency, choosing to plead for help daily, seeking for guidance of what we need to do differently, choosing to follow those promptings while pleading for help to do so. This interaction of our use of agency and His divine help etches within us an increasingly godly nature. Humility, a deepening recognition of our complete dependence upon Them for all good that comes forth from us (Ether 4:12), matures.

Elder Christofferson said, “repentance means striving to change. It would mock the Savior’s suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross for us to expect that He should transform us into angelic beings with no real effort on our part. Rather, we seek His grace to complement and reward our most diligent efforts (see 2 Nephi 25:23). Perhaps as much as praying for mercy, we should pray for time and opportunity to work and strive and overcome. Surely the Lord smiles upon one who desires to come to judgment worthily, who resolutely labors day by day to replace weakness with strength. Real repentance, real change may require repeated attempts, but there is something refining and holy in such striving. Divine forgiveness and healing flow quite naturally to such a soul, for indeed ‘virtue loveth virtue; light cleaveth unto light; [and] mercy hath compassion on mercy and claimeth her own’ (D&C 88:40)” (Ensign, Nov. 2011, 39).

“So grace is not a booster engine that kicks in once our fuel supply is exhausted. Rather, it is our constant energy source. It is not the light at the end of the tunnel but the light that moves us through the tunnel. Grace is not achieved somewhere down the road. It is received right here and right now. It is not a finishing touch; it is the Finisher’s touch (Brad Wilcox, “His Grace is Sufficient,” BYU Devotional, 12 July 2011).

“It all takes time. Said the Prophet Joseph: ‘The nearer man approaches perfection, the clearer are his views, and the greater his enjoyments, till he has overcome the evils of his life and lost every desire for sin; and like the ancients, arrives at that point of faith where he is wrapped in the power and glory of his Maker and is caught up to dwell with Him. But we consider that this is a station to which no man ever arrived in a moment’ (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, 51).

“Thus the work of eternity is not done in a moment, but, rather, in ‘process of time.’ Time works for us when our desires do likewise!

“May God help us so to train our desires. . .” (Elder Neal A Maxwell, CR Oct. 1996, 26-29).