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HOW PORN AFFECTS THE BRAIN LIKE A DRUG

It may be surprising, but porn affects the brain in ways very similar to harmful substances, like tobacco. Studies have shown that porn stimulates the same areas of the brain as addictive drugs, making the brain release the same chemicals. And just like drugs, porn triggers pathways in the brain that cause craving, leading users back for more and more extreme “hits” to get high.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- To your brain, porn has the same effects as drugs.
- Porn hijacks the reward pathway in the brain.
- Just like drugs, you build up a tolerance so you need more porn for the same effects.
- Withdrawal symptoms can occur when you try and walk away.

On the surface, tobacco and porn don't seem to have much in common. One is kept behind the counter at the gas station or supermarket because of its well-known harmful effects; the other is available virtually anywhere. One can quickly become an expensive habit while the other comes free with an internet connection. And let's be honest, Hugh Hefner doesn't exactly conjure images of a secretive tobacco executive.

So where's the similarity? Inside the brain.

In case you're not a neurosurgeon, here's a crash course in how the brain works. Deep inside the brain, there's something called a “reward center.” [1] You've got one. Your dog's got one. For mammals, it comes standard. The reward center's job is to release “pleasure” chemicals into your brain whenever you do something healthy, like eating tasty food, doing a hard workout, or enjoying a kiss. [2] The “high” you get from that chemical rush makes you want to repeat that behavior again and again. [3] Thanks to your reward center, your brain is hardwired to motivate you to do things that will improve your health and chances of survival. [4] It's a great system... normally.

The problem is, the brain can be tricked.

When addictive substances are used, they give the brain a “false signal.” [5] Since the brain can't tell the difference between the drugs and a real, healthy reward, it goes ahead and activates the reward center. [6] An important chemical called dopamine is released, which makes the brain start developing a craving for the fake reward. [7] As long as there's a lot of dopamine floating around in the brain, the cravings will keep getting stronger, and the consumer will feel super-motivation to keep

pursuing more of the drug. [8] Essentially, addictive drugs hijack the brain, turning it around and forcing it in a direction it was never meant to go. Instead of encouraging the consumer toward healthy behaviors, drugs lead the consumer into things that aren't healthy at all, and can even be dangerous. [9]

Want to guess what else does that? Porn.

Researchers have found that internet porn and addictive substances like tobacco have very similar effects on the brain, [10] and they are significantly different from how the brain reacts to healthy, natural pleasures like food or sex. [11] Think about it. When you're munching a snack or enjoying a romantic encounter, eventually your cravings will drop and you'll feel satisfied. Why? Because your brain has a built-in “off” switch for natural pleasures. “Dopamine cells stop firing after repeated consumption of a ‘natural reward’ (e.g. food or sex),” explains Nora Volkow, Director of The National Institute of Drug Abuse. [12] But addictive drugs go right on increasing dopamine levels without giving the brain a break. [13] The more hits drug users take, the more dopamine floods their brain, and the stronger their urges are to keep using. That's why drug addicts find it so hard to stop once they take the first hit. “[O]ne hit may turn into many hits, or even a lost weekend.” [14]

What else has the power to keep pumping dopamine endlessly into the brain? You guessed it: porn.

Scientists have long known that sexual interest and performance can be increased simply by introducing something new—

like a different sexual position, a toy, or a change of partner. [15] That's because the brain responds to new sexual stimuli by pumping out more and more dopamine, flooding the brain just like a drug would. [16] And "new" is exactly what internet porn sites provide: an endless stream of fresh erotic images delivered at high speed, in vivid color, 24/7. Before consumers even start to get bored, they can always give themselves another dopamine boost just by clicking on something different, something more stimulating and hardcore than before. [17]

In fact, porn consumption follows a very predictable pattern that's eerily similar to drug use. Over time, excessive levels of "pleasure" chemicals cause the porn consumer's brain to develop tolerance, just like the brain of a drug user. [19] In the same way that a junkie eventually requires more and more of a drug to get a buzz or even feel normal, regular porn consumers will end up turning to porn more often or seeking out more extreme versions—or both—to feel excited again. [20] And once the porn habit is established, quitting can even lead to withdrawal symptoms similar to drugs. [21]

But there's good news too. Even those with serious porn habits can break away and reclaim their lives. Thousands have done it, [22] and if you're looking for resources for yourself or a loved one, click here to learn more.

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HOW PORN CAN BECOME ADDICTIVE

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- We now know that when it comes to addiction, it's not necessarily what gets inside the body or how it got there, but rather what reactions it triggers in the brain.
- Consuming porn triggers dopamine release, tricking the brain into thinking it's a healthy activity.
- As porn consumers become desensitized from repeated overloads of dopamine, they often find they can't feel normal without a dopamine high.

A lot of people are convinced that there's no such thing as an addiction to porn. But science disproved the old belief that in order to have an addiction to something it has to involve a substance that is physically put into the body; like with cigarettes, alcohol, or drugs. Excessive consumption of internet porn bears all of the signs, and dangers, of a true addiction.

Is pornography addiction even a thing? There's an ongoing debate right now in the media, and even in academic circles, over whether compulsive porn consumption is truly an addiction. Part of the problem is simply that people don't agree on exactly what the word "addiction" means. [1] But Dr. Nora Volkow, director of the United States' National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), is convinced that porn addiction is real. She even suggested changing NIDA's name in order to recognize "addictions such as pornography, gambling, and food." [2]

In fact, research shows that of all of the forms of online entertainment—like gambling, gaming, surfing, and social networking—porn has the strongest tendency to be addictive. [3]

Doctors and scientists used to believe that in order to have an addiction to something it has to involve a substance that is physically put into the body; like with cigarettes, alcohol, or drugs. [4] But once scientists started to look inside the brain, it changed our understanding of how addictions work. [5] What's important, we now know, is not necessarily what gets inside the body or how it got there, but rather what reactions it triggers in the brain. Cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs bring foreign chemicals into the body in a myriad of ways: sniffed, injected, drunk from a glass, or lit on fire and smoked. Porn and other behavioral addictions, like gambling, on the other hand, bring no new chemicals or substances into the body that weren't already there. But, these behaviors initiate strikingly similar processes inside the brain like substance addictions, and that's what makes them potentially addictive. They hijack the brain's reward pathways. [6] (See How Porn Affects the Brain Like a Drug.) That's what every addictive substance and habit do. [7]

Porn may enter through a different "how" and be a different "what," but it ultimately does the very same things. [8]

See, your brain comes equipped with something called a "reward center." [9] Its job is to motivate you to do things that protect and promote your survival—things like eating to stay alive or having sex to produce babies. [10] The way it rewards you for doing those things is by flooding your brain with dopamine and a cocktail of other "pleasure" chemicals each time you do. [11]

But your brain doesn't always reward you for the right things. For example, it produces higher levels of dopamine when you have chocolate cake than it does for whole-wheat bread. [12] Why? Because 3,000 years ago, high-calorie foods were really hard to come by, so when our ancestors found them, they needed to eat a whole bunch while they had the chance. [13] These days, a bag of Oreos is only as far as the nearest supermarket. If we gorged on them every chance we got, we'd have heart disease and a lot of other health problems.

Porn is basically sexual junk food. When a person is looking at porn, their brain is fooled into pumping out dopamine just as if they really were seeing a potential mate. [14] Sure, filling your brain with feel-good chemicals might sound like a great idea at first, but just like with junk food, it's more dangerous than it seems.

When porn enters the brain, it triggers the reward center to start pumping out dopamine, which sets off a cascade of chemicals including a protein called DeltaFosB. [15] DeltaFosB's regular job is to build new

nerve pathways to mentally connect what someone is doing (i.e. consuming porn) to the pleasure he or she feels. [16] Those strong new memories outcompete other connections in the brain, making it easier and easier to return to porn. [17] (See How Porn Changes The Brain.)

But DeltaFosB has another job, and this is why its nickname is “the molecular switch for addiction.” [18] If enough DeltaFosB builds up, it flips a genetic switch, causing lasting changes in the brain that leave the user more vulnerable to addiction. [19] For teens, this risk is especially high because a teen’s reward center in the brain responds two to four times more powerfully than an adult’s brain, releases higher levels of dopamine and produces more DeltaFosB. [20]

Overloaded with dopamine, the brain will try to defend itself by releasing another chemical called CREB [21] (It’s called CREB because no one wants to have to say its real name: cyclic adenosine monophosphate response element binding protein!) CREB is like the brakes on a runaway reward center; it slows the pleasure response. [22] With CREB onboard, porn that once excited a person stops having the same effect. [23] Scientists believe that CREB is partly why consumers have to keep increasing their porn intake to get aroused. [24] That numbed-out state is called “tolerance,” and it’s part of any kind of addiction. [25]

As porn consumers become desensitized from repeated overloads of dopamine, they often find they can’t feel normal without a dopamine high. [26] Even other things that used to make them happy, like going out with friends or playing a favorite game, stop providing enjoyment because of the dulling effects of CREB. [27] They experience strong cravings and often find themselves giving more of their time and attention to porn, sometimes to the detriment of relationships, school, or work. [28] Some report feeling anxious or down until they can get back to their porn. [29] As they delve deeper into the habit, their porn of choice often turns increasingly hardcore. [30] And many who try to break their porn habits report finding it really difficult to stop. [31]

If this sounds like the classic symptoms of addiction, well...the head of the

United States’ National Institute on Drug Abuse agrees.

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HOW PORN CHANGES THE BRAIN

Repeated consumption of porn causes the brain to literally rewire itself. It triggers the brain to pump out chemicals and form new nerve pathways, leading to profound and lasting changes in the brain.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Consuming porn lays down new neuronal pathways in the brain.
- The more porn consumed, the stronger the nerve connections become, and the more difficult it can be stop.
- A consumer can rebuild those pathways by avoiding pornography and seeking healthy alternatives.

Believe it or not, studies show that those who consume pornography more frequently have brains that are less connected, less active, and even smaller in some areas. [1]

To be fair, the studies only show that there's a correlation between porn consumption and smaller, less active brains, but they raise the question: Can porn literally change your brain?

Scientists used to believe that once you finished childhood, your brain lost the ability to grow. [2] They thought that nothing except illness or injury could physically alter an adult brain. Now we know that the brain goes on changing throughout life, [3] constantly rewiring itself and laying down new nerve connections, and that this is particularly true in our youth. [4]

See, the brain is made up of about 100 billion special nerves called neurons, [5] that carry electrical signals back and forth between parts of the brain and out to the rest of the body. Imagine you're learning to play an E chord on the guitar: your brain sends a signal to your hand telling it what to do. As that signal zips along from neuron to neuron, those activated nerve cells start to form connections because "neurons that fire together, wire together." Those newly-connected neurons form what's called a "neuronal pathway." [6]

Think of a neuronal pathway like a trail in the woods. Every time someone uses the trail, it gets a little wider and more permanent. Similarly, every time a message travels down a neuronal pathway, the pathway gets stronger. [7] With enough repetitions, your neuronal pathway will get so strong you'll be strumming that E chord without even thinking about it. That process of building better, faster neuronal pathways is how we learn any new skill, whether it's memorizing math formulas or driving a car. Practice makes perfect.

But there's a catch. Your brain is a very hungry organ. It may only weigh 2% of your body weight, but it eats up 20% of your energy and oxygen, [8] so resources are scarce up there in your head. There's some pretty fierce competition between brain pathways, and those that don't get used enough will likely be replaced. [9] Use it or lose it, as they say. Only the strong survive.

That's where porn comes in.

Porn happens to be fantastic at forming new, long-lasting pathways in the brain. In fact, porn is such a ferocious competitor that hardly any other activity can compete with it, including actual sex with a real partner. [10] That's right, porn can actually overpower the brain's natural ability to have real sex! Why? As Dr. Norman Doidge, a researcher at Columbia University, explains, porn creates the perfect conditions and triggers the release of the right chemicals to make lasting changes in the brain. [11]

CONDITIONS

The ideal conditions for forming strong neuronal pathways are when you're in what scientists call "flow." Flow is "a deeply satisfying state of focused attention." [12] When you're in flow, you get so deep into what you're doing that nothing else seems to matter. [13] You've probably experienced it before, playing a game or having a conversation with friends or reading a great book. You were so focused on what you were doing that you lost track of time, and everything around you disappeared. You wanted it to keep going forever. That's flow.

When you're in flow, it's like you have superhuman abilities. Athletes call it being "in the zone," when you seem to do ev-

everything right. Your focus is intense. Your memory is phenomenal. Years later, you'll still recall exact words of the conversation or details of what you read.

Now imagine someone sitting in front of the computer at 3:00 in the morning, looking at porn. That person is so absorbed in his or her porn trance that nothing else can compete for the consumer's attention, not even sleep. This person is in the ideal condition for forming neuronal pathways, and that's what they are doing. Clicking from page to page in search of the perfect image, not realizing that every image seen is reinforcing the pathways the consumer is forging in his or her brain. By now, those images are burned so deeply into their mind that they will remember them for a long time to come, maybe the entirety of their life.

CHEMICALS

Like other addictive substances and behaviors, porn activates the part of the brain called the reward center, [14] triggering the release of a cocktail of chemicals that give you a temporary buzz. [15] (See How Porn Affects The Brain Like a Drug.) One of the chemicals in that cocktail is a protein called DeltaFosB. [16]

Remember when we said that building neuronal pathways is like making a trail in the woods? Well, DeltaFosB is like a troop of mountaineers out there with picks and shovels, working like beavers to groom the trail. With DeltaFosB floating around, the brain is primed to make strong mental connections between the porn being consumed by individuals and the pleasure they feel while consuming. [17] Basically, the DeltaFosB is saying, "This feels good. Let's be sure to remember it so we can do it again."

DeltaFosB is important for learning any kind of new skills, but it can also lead to addictive/compulsive behaviors, [18] especially in adolescents. [19] DeltaFosB is referred to as "the molecular switch for addiction," [20] because if it builds up enough in the brain, it switches on genes that create long-term cravings, driving the user back for more. [21] And once it has been released, DeltaFosB sticks around in the brain for weeks or months, which is why porn consumers may feel strong crav-

ings for porn long after they've stopped the habit. [22]

The good news is, neuroplasticity works both ways. If porn pathways aren't reinforced, they'll eventually disappear, so the same brain mechanisms that lay down pathways for porn can replace them with something else. [23] If the time has come for you or someone you love to begin that healing process, learn more about how to get help.

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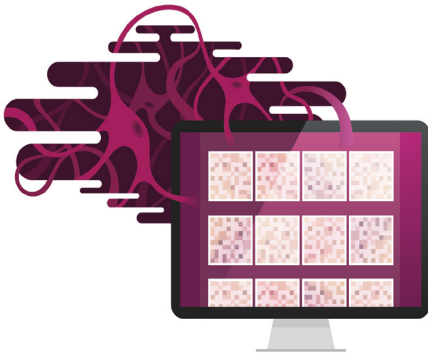
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HOW PORN AFFECTS SEXUAL TASTES

Many porn consumers find themselves getting aroused by things that used to disgust them or things that they might have previously considered to be inappropriate or unethical. As individuals consume more extreme and dangerous sex acts, they gradually begin to feel that those behaviors are more common and acceptable than they really are.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Casual porn consumption has the power to change ideas and attitudes.
- In many cases, porn consumers find their tastes so changed that they can no longer respond sexually to their actual partners, though they can still respond to porn.
- Porn consumers are more likely to express attitudes supporting violence against women.

As you'd probably guess, rats don't like the smell of death. But a researcher named Jim Faust wondered whether that instinct could be changed, so he sprayed female rats with a liquid that smelled like a dead, rotting rat. When he put them in cages with virgin male rats, a strange thing happened. The drive to mate was so powerful that it overcame the instinct to avoid the smell, and the rats hit it off. Actually, that's not so strange. The strange part was what happened next.

Once the male rats had learned to associate sex with the smell of death, Faust put them in cages with different objects to play with. The male rats actually preferred to play with the object that smelled like death, as if it were soaked in something they loved! [1]

We know what you're thinking: "Now I know what I should have done for my science fair project!" No, seriously, that's pretty gross, right? You're probably wondering how rats could possibly be trained to go against such a powerful natural instinct. Well, here's how:

Rats, humans, and all mammals have something in their brain called a "reward center." [2] Part of the reward center's job is to promote healthy living by rewarding you when you do something that either keeps you alive (e.g., eating) or creates a new life (e.g., sex), or enriches your life (e.g. building satisfying relationships). [3] The way it rewards you is by pumping a cocktail of "pleasure chemicals" through your brain. [4] (See How Porn Changes The Brain.)

Those chemicals do more than make you feel great. While you're enjoying that good feeling, your brain is also building new nerve pathways to connect the pleasure you're feeling to the activity you're doing. [5] It's the brain's

way of making sure that whatever you're doing, you'll come back to it again. The association between the activity and the "reward" happens automatically, even if you don't intend it, because "neurons that fire together, wire together." [6] (See How Porn Affects The Brain Like A Drug.)

The reward center is usually a pretty great thing, even if it didn't work out so well for those poor rats. Normally our brain attracts us to healthy behaviors and encourages us to form life-supporting habits. [7] But when those reward chemicals get connected to something harmful, it has the opposite effect.

The same process that rewired those rats' preferences—connecting the pleasure they felt during sex to the stench of death—is triggered in human brains by porn. Porn consumers may think they're just being entertained, but their brains are busy at work building connections between their feelings of arousal and whatever's happening on their screen. [8] And since consumers of porn typically become accustomed to the porn they've already seen and have to constantly move on to more extreme forms of pornography to get aroused, [9] the kind of porn consumed usually changes over time. [10] (See Why Consuming Porn Is An Escalating Behavior.)

In a survey of 1,500 young adult men, 56% said their tastes in porn had become "increasingly extreme or deviant." [11] Just like the rats, many porn consumers eventually find themselves getting aroused by things that used to disgust them or things that they might have previously considered to be inappropriate or unethical. [12] In many cases, porn consumers find their tastes so changed that they can no longer

respond sexually to their actual partners, though they can still respond to porn. [13]

Once consumers start viewing extreme and dangerous sex acts, things that they thought were disgusting or degrading can start to seem normal, acceptable, and more common than they really are. [14] One study found that people exposed to significant amounts of porn thought things like sex with animals and violent sex were twice as common as what those not exposed to porn thought. [15] And when people believe a behavior is normal, they're more likely to try it. [16]

Research has also found that watching pornography affects attitudes and beliefs toward sex, women, and relationships. [17] Porn consumers are more likely to express attitudes supporting violence against women, [18] and studies have shown a strong correlation between men's porn consumption and their likelihood to victimize women. [19] In fact, a 2015 peer-reviewed research study that analyzed 22 different studies from 7 different countries concluded that there is "little doubt that, on the average, individuals who consume pornography more frequently are more likely to hold attitudes [supporting] sexual aggression and engage in actual acts of sexual aggression." [20] (See How Consuming Porn Can Lead to Violence.)

Obviously, not everyone who looks at porn is going to turn into a rapist, but the reality is that even casual pornography consumption has the power to change ideas and attitudes. [21] When that happens, changes to behavior aren't far behind. But spreading the truth about the harmful effects of porn helps limit its influence. Porn can corrupt our deepest, most basic instincts, but deep down at that same instinctive level, we know and want what's healthy. We crave happiness and love. And every individual decision to focus on real love and real relationships moves us back toward the robust, natural lives we're wired to pursue.

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WHY CONSUMING PORN IS AN ESCALATING BEHAVIOR

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Many consumers start on free porn, but it doesn't end there.
- Researchers have discovered that the reward center is actually two different brain systems, a "Liking" system and a "Wanting" system, that work in different—sometimes opposite—ways.
- As some consumers develop tolerance, the porn that used to excite them starts to seem boring and they often need more extreme versions of pornography and more often to get the same effects.

Frequent porn consumption tends to escalate. Because of porn's addictive nature, porn consumers usually need an ever-increasing dosage over time in order to feel the same level of enjoyment, and they often have to seek out more extreme and hard-core forms of porn. Porn consumers can reach a point where they enjoy porn less and less, but want it more and more.

Have you ever wondered how pornographers who charge for their material stay in business when there's so much porn available for free? As Wendy Seltzer—an attorney and fellow at Yale Law School—explained, the answer is actually pretty simple: once porn consumers get hooked, they'll want more and more. "Seeing [free porn] just whets their appetite for more," Seltzer said. "Once they get through what's available for free, they'll move into the paid services." [1]

How can pornographers be so sure? The answer is right there inside the brain.

Like any potentially addictive substance, porn triggers the release of dopamine into a part of the brain called the reward center (a.k.a. reward pathway or system). [2] Basically, the reward center's job is to make you feel good whenever you do something healthy, like eating a great meal, having sex, or getting a good workout. [3] The "high" you get makes you want to repeat the behavior again and again. [4] (See How Porn Affects The Brain Like A Drug.) Your brain is hardwired to motivate you to do things that will improve your health and chance of survival. [5] Simple.

Well...not quite so simple. Researchers have recently discovered that the reward center is actually two different brain systems, a "Liking" system and a "Wanting" system, that work in different—sometimes opposite—ways. [6] Understanding how they work helps explain why porn can be habit-forming and why consuming porn is often an escalating behavior.

LIKING

The "Liking" system is a tiny portion of the reward center. [7] It provides the enjoyable

feelings you get when you win a game, share a kiss, or experience any natural, healthy reward. [8] Unfortunately, it also lights up for counterfeit rewards like cigarettes, drugs, or porn, which is why addictive substances feel enjoyable at first. [9]

When something activates your reward center and you feel that intense high from the "Liking" system, your brain starts producing a chemical called CREB. [10] CREB acts kind of like a set of brakes on the reward system. [11] Normally it makes the pleasure fade and leaves you feeling satiated and ready to get on with your life. (See How Porn Can Become Addictive.)

But if the "Liking" system gets stimulated too much over time (as often happens with drugs or porn), CREB levels build up until your whole pleasure response goes numb. [12] Some researchers believe that an excess of CREB is the reason addicts experience tolerance, which means that they feel less enjoyment from the stimulant and need to use more of it to reach a high. [13] In fact, too much CREB floating around in your brain can dull the enjoyment of anything, which may be why addicts often feel bored, detached, and depressed. [14]

WANTING

The "Wanting" system is a much larger area in the reward center, and it causes the brain to rewire itself in response to intense pleasure. [15] With the help of a protein called DeltaFosB, the "Wanting" system builds new brain connections so you can remember the experience and repeat it later. [16] (See How Porn Changes The Brain.)

It's called the "Wanting" system because those new nerve connections make you crave the pleasurable experience. [17] The more often the experience is repeated, the stronger those nerve connections become, and the stronger the cravings grow. [18] DeltaFosB is sometimes called "the molecular switch for addiction" because it reinforces cravings and, if it builds up enough in the brain, it can switch on genes that leave the consumer more vulnerable to addiction. [19]

DeltaFosB doesn't just make you remember the pleasurable experience itself; it also forms connections to details associated with the experience. These associations (called "cues") are found with all kind of addictions. [20] For a smoker, a cue may be the smell of cigarette smoke. An alcoholic may develop pathways triggered by the sight of a bottle or the voice of a drinking buddy. Cues can be anything the brain associates with the experience. For a porn consumer, it may be the memory of a porn scene or a place or time of day he or she can be alone with the internet. For an addict, the whole world starts to seem like a collection of cues and triggers leading them back to their addiction. [21] Gradually, the porn pathways become sensitized, meaning they are easily triggered by the cues that are all around. [22]

Wait! Didn't we say that CREB dulls the nerves, making them less sensitive? Now we're saying that DeltaFosB makes them more sensitive. Well, which is it?

Actually, both. Remember, we're talking about two different brain systems. With repeated exposure to porn, the "Wanting" system grows more sensitive to the cues that cause cravings. At the same time, the "Liking" system grows less sensitive to pleasure. That's the awful irony of any addiction: the user wants it more and more, even while he or she likes it less and less. [23]

Porn is an escalating behavior because as some consumers develop tolerance, the porn that used to excite them starts to seem boring. [24] Predictably, they often try to compensate by spending more time with porn and/or seeking out more hardcore material in an effort to regain the excitement they used to feel. [25] Many porn consumers find themes of aggression, violence, and increasingly "edgy"

acts creeping into their porn habits and fantasies. [26] But no matter how shocking their tastes become, you can bet there will be pornographers waiting to sell it to them.

If you are, or know someone who is, being pulled into more and more porn, it's not too late! It's possible to quit porn and replace it with healthy habits. The brain can start to heal, and consumers can regain the ability to fully feel and enjoy their lives again. Thousands already have. [27] Click here to learn how to get help.

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WHY PORN IS FULL OF LIES

In porn, everything—from the way people look, to the way they have sex—is a fantasy. Porn consumers often become so obsessed chasing the fantasy that they miss out on actual love and relationships.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Porn causes consumers to miss out on the best parts of real relationships.
- Porn is just a production.
- Porn is not a safe or healthy way to learn about sex.

Back in the 1950s, two researchers named Tinbergen and Magnus played a trick on butterflies. [1] After figuring out which marks on female butterfly wings were most eye-catching to males, the researchers created their own cardboard butterfly models. They exaggerated the patterns on the wings to make them brighter and flashier than would ever be found in nature. Essentially, they created the world's first butterfly supermodels.

And the male butterflies fell for it. They went straight for the cardboard mock-ups and tried to mate with them. Ignoring the real female butterflies that were right there in plain sight, the males gave all their attention to the exaggerated pictures. [2] Sound familiar?

Like the duped butterflies, porn consumers can get so obsessed chasing flashy fantasies that they miss out on real life and real relationships. Call it the first great lie of porn:

PORN LIE #1

You can have it both ways; you can enjoy the immediate gratification of thousands of virtual sex partners and the long-term satisfaction of a real relationship.

The truth is, porn often takes a heavy toll on real-life relationships. [3] When they discover that their loved-one is using porn, many partners feel shocked, rejected, abandoned, humiliated, and betrayed. [4] (See *How Porn Hurts A Consumer's Partner*.) The idea that “porn is a personal decision that affects no one else” is simply wrong.

But even if your partner has no problem with porn, it can still damage your relationship. Studies have clearly shown that porn erodes a person's ability to love and feel loved with a real partner. [5] When men are exposed to porn, they rate themselves as less in love with their actual partners, [6] and less satisfied with their relationships and sex lives. [7] They become more critical and dissatisfied with

their partner's appearance, sexual performance, sexual curiosity, and displays of affection. [8] Ironically, porn is directly related to problems with attraction, arousal, and sexual performance, [9] as well as lower sex drive, erectile dysfunction, and difficulty reaching orgasm. [10] (See *How Porn Damages Consumers' Sex Lives*.)

One recent study examined men who used internet porn compulsively and found that, in 11 out of 19 subjects, porn consumption had lowered their sex drive and/or ability to maintain erections in physical relationships with real women. [11] Oddly enough, those men were still able to respond sexually to porn. [12] Like Tinbergen's butterflies, porn can leave people preferring internet porn over an actual partner. [13] Chances are, your partner is not okay with that.

PORN LIE #2

Porn is just watching people have sex—what could be more natural and normal than that?

Actually, sex is natural and normal. Porn is something entirely different.

Make no mistake, porn is a product. Pornographers have a lot to gain by driving traffic to their sites, so they dress up their product to grab your attention. That “dressing up” is exactly what makes porn so unnatural.

Professional porn performers have a whole team of people to make every detail look perfect, from directing and filming to lighting and makeup, maybe even a plastic surgeon or two to thank. With some careful editing, a typical 45-minute porn flick that took three days to shoot can appear to have happened all at once, without a break. Film the right bodies from the right angles at the right moments, edit out all the mistakes, Photoshop away any imperfections, add a catchy soundtrack, and you

have something most definitely NOT like “natural” sex with “normal” people. You end up with something more “cardboard” than “butterfly.”

PORN LIE #3

Porn is just an innocent distraction and a harmless pastime.

Leading relationship experts, Doctors John and Julie Gottman have expressed serious concern about the effects of pornography on couple relationships. They explain, “Pornography may be just such a supernormal stimulus. With pornography use, much more of a normal stimulus may eventually be needed to achieve the response a supernormal stimulus evokes. In contrast, ordinary levels of the stimulus are no longer interesting. This may be how normal sex becomes much less interesting for porn users. The data supports this conclusion. In fact, use of pornography by one partner leads the couple to have far less sex and ultimately reduces relationship satisfaction.”

Once a person is aware of the damage they are doing to themselves, (See How Porn Changes the Brain) their loved ones (See How Porn Hurts A Consumer's Partner,) and society (See How Porn Fuels Sex Trafficking), using porn can hardly be called harmless or innocent.

PORN LIE #4

Porn is a safe way to learn about sex.

This lie is especially troubling because many young porn consumers really do rely on the warped fantasy of porn to form their ideas and expectations about sex. [14] That's scary for a lot of reasons. Young people who consume porn often expect their partners to act out what they've seen, even if it's painful, degrading, or dangerous. [15] They tend to believe that what they see in porn is normal and acceptable, even as their tastes in porn grow more extreme over time. [16] (See How Porn Affects Sexual Tastes.) And as people adopt the unrealistic standards of porn, they end up feeling bad about themselves [17] and dissatisfied with their partners. [18]

Learning about sex from porn also means absorbing a lot of dangerous ideas about sexuality and women. [19] (See How Porn Warps Ideas About Sex.) Amateur porn, which claims to be more natural and real, actually teaches the same attitudes and reproduces the same false stereotypes as professionally produced porn—sometimes worse! [20]

Ultimately, porn doesn't deliver the satisfaction and healthy enjoyment it promises. [21] It leads to damaged relationships, disappointment, and isolation. [22] (See Why Porn Leaves Consumers Lonely.) Tinbergen's butterflies were simply reacting to instinct when they were fooled by the “supermodel decoys,” but humans are not victims of their evolution. You can choose to recognize porn for the deception it is. You can reject porn's lies and choose real life, real relationships, and real love.

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Porn can make real relationships more difficult and less satisfying.
- In addition to harming romantic relationships, porn can harm any and all relationships in a consumer's life.
- Porn can negatively impact self-esteem.

HOW PORN KILLS LOVE

Sure, porn is fake, but what's wrong with a little harmless fantasy? The problem is, porn isn't harmless at all. Studies show that viewing porn makes consumers more critical of their partner and less satisfied with their romantic relationship and sex life. Not only does porn impact romantic relationships, but porn influences the ways individuals view themselves, as well their friends, family members, and others around them. And as if that wasn't bad enough, porn also changes the ways that individuals view the hobbies and passions they used to love!

Porn looks like a newer, slicker version of love. Love 2.0. It's like love, but easy, fast, and cheap.

In porn, finding a "partner" is effortless. He or she is always ready, willing, and longing for your attention. This partner has nothing else to do with their time but wait for the consumer, breathless and perpetually aroused. He or she is young, attractive, sexually adventurous, and anxious to please. This partner will never get bored or annoyed, never have an "off" day or need a listening ear. In fact, all he or she will ever want is wild, ecstatic orgasms that look real! And if this porn-partner ever fails to keep the consumer entertained, they can simply be exchanged with the click of a computer mouse. [1]

Sure, it's all fake, but advocates of porn say, "So what? What's wrong with a little harmless fantasy?" The problem is, it's not harmless. The problem is that internet pornography has a number of unique properties, such as limitless novelty, on-demand accessibility, and easy escalation to more extreme material, that can condition someone's sexual arousal to aspects of pornography consumption that do not readily transition to real-life partners. As this happens, real life sex may not register as meeting expectations, and arousal declines.

Maybe that is why counselor's offices and divorce courts are filling up with couples who have found that, in reality, porn is killing love in their romantic relationships.

An increasing number of couples in therapy report that pornography is causing difficulties in their relationships. [2] Research shows that pornography consumption is linked to less stability in relationships, [3] increased risk of infidelity, [4] and greater likelihood of

divorce. [5] While this applies to men and women, studies have found that men who are exposed to porn find their partner less sexually attractive and rate themselves as less in love with their partner. [6] A recent study tracked couples over a six year period, from 2006 to 2012, to see what factors influenced the quality of their marriage and their satisfaction with their sex lives. The researchers found that of all the factors considered, porn use was the second strongest indicator that a marriage would suffer. [7] Not only that but the marriages that were harmed the most were those of individuals who viewed porn heavily, once a day or more. [8]

But it's not just married couples who are harmed by porn. Unmarried couples in romantic relationships who view pornography together experience twice the rate of infidelity as couples where partners watch it individually and alone, and three times more than couples who don't watch porn at all. [9] A recent study of romantically involved people (most of whom were not married) found that those who used porn frequently were most likely to have lower satisfaction and intimacy in their relationship. [10]

Why do porn consumers struggle so much in real life relationships? The science is pretty clear.

Research shows that porn users report less love and trust in their relationships, are more prone to separation and divorce, and often see marriage as a "constraint." [11] Overall, they are less committed to their partners, [12] less satisfied in their relationships, [13] and more cynical about love and relationships in general. [14] They

also have poorer communication with their partners and are more likely to agree that, in their own relationships, “little arguments escalate into ugly fights with accusations, criticisms, name-calling, and bringing up past hurts.” [15]

And, as if that’s not enough, porn also ruins a couple’s sex life. [16] (See How Porn Damages Your Sex Life.)

But is this just a “chicken and egg” scenario? Is porn really damaging relationships, or are people turning to porn because they’re in relationships that are already suffering?

Probably both, according to Dr. Ana Bridges, a psychologist at the University of Arkansas. [17] When a couple hits a rough patch, one partner may use porn for distraction or relief, and their partner may be hurt by their porn use because it makes them feel unattractive and insecure, like he or she is being compared to porn performers and the fantasy of porn. [18] The hurt partner may pull away emotionally, which might make the porn-consuming partner feel more distant, so he or she deals with their stress by turning to more porn, and round and round they go. (See How Porn Hurts A Consumer’s Partner.)

No wonder many partners of porn users end up depressed, anxious, and feeling like they can never measure up to the impossible standard of porn. [19] (See How Porn Can Hurt Your Partner.) The truth is, they have good reason to worry. In porn, mistakes are edited out and flaws are Photoshopped away. Porn actors have a whole team there to make them look fantastic, and once their best performance is captured on film, it never ages. Who wants to compete with that? [20]

Regardless of how a consumer’s romantic relationship is being impacted by porn, as human beings, we interact with different people daily, in a number of ways. One of the dangers of porn is that it can distort the way a consumer sees people, causing him or her to see friends, family members, coworkers, or strangers on the street only as a sum of body parts, discarding their humanity. [21] Essentially, porn tells consumers that people are objects with the sole purpose of providing sexual satisfaction, and that’s unhealthy for relationships, romantic or otherwise. [22]

Not long ago, Princeton psychologists performed a study showing a group of men pictures of men and women, some barely clothed and some not. The psychologists monitored their medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC), which is involved in recognizing human faces and distinguishing one person from another. For the most part, the mPFC was activated with each picture. However, when the subjects of the study were shown the pictures of scantily clothed people, it was not activated. [23] Basically, the automatic reaction in their brains suggested that they didn’t perceive the sexualized people as fully human. Just as a body, a sum of parts.

Obviously, porn is not the best representation of how real men and women look or how real sex and intimacy work in a real-life relationship. And yet, whether they realize it or not, porn consumers are affected by the portrayals they see in porn even after the browser window is closed. [24]

While it may not always be “romantic love,” porn can kill love in friendships, relationships with family members, and others in porn consumer’s lives. And it doesn’t stop there, porn also has the potential to kill the love consumers have for themselves. Ultimately, this often leaves porn consumers feeling lonely. [25]

There is a healthy amount of love every individual has for themselves that promotes good self-esteem, confidence, and overall a positive quality of life. Since porn depicts men and women as being nothing more than sex objects, porn consumers can start to subconsciously think of themselves that way, as nothing more than sex objects. [26] Because it can be hard to reach out to friends and family to explain how they are feeling and how they are struggling with porn, many people turn to the easiest source of immediate “comfort” available: more porn. This can lead to a vicious cycle of isolation and self-loathing. [27]

As a porn consumer finds himself or herself further down this cycle, an isolating porn habit can lead consumers to skip out on interacting with friends, trying new hobbies or participating in old ones, and ultimately connecting with the people in their lives. [28] This is all because consumers’ brains have become so reliant on porn that it can start to make them think they

will be happier watching porn than participating in those real-life experiences. [29]

Breaking free of this cycle, reaching out for help, finding support, and establishing healthy forms of intimacy in one’s life can eliminate the poor self-esteem caused by porn. Many people who have broken free of a porn habit have reported greater happiness, better self-esteem, improved mental health, and happier relationships.

“I can see beauty in so many different forms now... real forms. I’m back at composing music, studying, my grades have boosted, have way more energy... I take more care of myself, exercise... When I meet a girl now, sex is not my goal. There’s no goal. The present is the only goal, so a cool conversation, or maybe just a flirty smile can make my day.”

23 YEAR OLD MALE
AFTER 2 MONTHS OF QUITTING
PORN CONSUMPTION [30]

Who wouldn’t want that? Who wouldn’t want a healthy amount of love and respect for himself or herself that is free from porn’s isolating and harmful effects? Who wouldn’t want a healthy view of potential romantic partners and relationships in general? Real love requires real commitment to real people, including yourself. Choosing real love over porn gives people greater freedom and control to decide what they really want to do with their time and energy. Instead of someone sitting in front of a computer for hours, consuming a product that can isolate and damage their relationships, they can focus on reality. Keeping porn out of your life gives you the freedom and time to try that new sport you have been interested in, take that class that sounds really interesting, travel to a new place with family members, invest in friendships, or find the one you want to spend time loving and growing old with—the real way. Real life, and real life-giving experiences have so much more to offer than porn ever will.

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WHY PORN LEAVES CONSUMERS LONELY

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Porn lessens consumer's ability to connect in real relationships.
- People are often secretive about their porn use, separating them further from others.
- Porn can contribute to or increase other psychological problems in consumers.

Porn promises immediate satisfaction, endless excitement, and easy intimacy, but in the end, it robs the consumer of all three. The more pornography an individual consumes, the more he or she tends to withdraw emotionally from real people and rely on porn. Eventually, it becomes more difficult to be aroused by a real person or to form a real relationship, and the resulting isolation and loneliness fuel the need for more porn.

Author and political activist Naomi Wolf has traveled all over the United States talking with college students about relationships. “When I ask about loneliness, a deep, sad silence descends on audiences of young men and young women alike,” she says. “They know they are lonely together ... and that [porn] is a big part of that loneliness. What they don’t know is how to get out.” [1]

But what does porn have to do with loneliness?

“The more one uses pornography, the more lonely one becomes,” says Dr. Gary Brooks, a psychologist who has worked with porn addicts for the last 30 years. [2] “Anytime [a person] spends much time with the usual pornography usage cycle, it can’t help but be a depressing, demeaning, self-loathing kind of experience.” [3] The worse people feel about themselves, the more they seek comfort wherever they can get it. Normally, they would be able to rely on the people closest to them to help them through their hard times—a partner, friend, or family member. But most porn consumers aren’t exactly excited to tell anyone about their porn habits, least of all their partner. So they turn to the easiest source of “comfort” available: more porn.

“When one partner uses porn at a high frequency,” explains researcher Dr. Ana Bridges, “there can be a tendency to withdraw emotionally from the relationship.” [4] That’s partly because porn consumption causes the brain to rewire itself to connect sexual arousal with porn’s fantasies, [5] (see *How Porn Changes The Brain*) making it more difficult for the consumer to become aroused by a real person in a real relationship. [6] (See *How Porn Damages Consumers’ Sex Lives.*)

According to Bridges, as a porn consumer withdraws from his or her relationships, they experience “increased secrecy, less intimacy and also more depression.” [7] Studies have found that when people engage in an ongoing pattern of “self-concealment,”—which is when they do things they’re not proud of and keep them a secret—it not only hurts their relationships and leaves them feeling lonely, but also makes them more vulnerable to serious psychological issues. [8] For both male and female porn consumers, their habit is often accompanied by problems with anxiety, body-image issues, poor self-image, relationship problems, insecurity, and depression. [9]

That may be one reason why porn consumers struggle so much in their closest relationships. Studies have consistently shown that porn consumers tend to feel less love and trust in their marriages. [10] They also experience more negative communication with their partners, feel less dedicated to their relationship, have a harder time making adjustments to their partner, enjoy less sexual satisfaction, and commit more infidelity. [11] Meanwhile, spouses of porn consumers report decreased intimacy in their marriages and a feeling of being less understood by their porn-consuming partners. [12] Relationship experts, Doctors John and Julie Gottman explain, “there are many factors about porn use that can threaten a relationship’s intimacy [which] for couples is a source of connection and communication between two people. But when one person becomes accustomed to masturbating to porn, they are actually turning away from intimate interaction.”

A second reason porn consumers struggle with relationships is because of the nature of porn itself. Porn portrays both men and women as little more than bodies with a single purpose, to give and receive sexual pleasure. [13] Whether porn consumers like it or not, those perceptions often start creeping into how they see themselves and other people in real life. [14] The harder it becomes for users to see themselves and others as anything more than sexual objects, the harder it is to develop and nurture real relationships. [15]

“There’s a certain way of experiencing sexual arousal that is the opposite of closeness,” Brooks says. “At best, it can be managed somewhat by some people, but most of the time it creates a barrier that poisons relationships.” [16] The Gottmans go on to explain, “when watching pornography the user is in total control of the sexual experience, in contrast to normal sex in which people are sharing control with the partner. Thus a porn user may form the unrealistic expectation that sex will be under only one person’s control... the relationship goal of intimate connection is confounded and ultimately lost.”

Porn promises immediate satisfaction, endless excitement, and easy intimacy, but in the end, it robs a consumer of all three.

The kind of intimacy porn offers is nothing more than sexual titillation. Real intimacy offers so much more. Real intimacy is a world of satisfaction and excitement that doesn’t disappear when the screen goes off. It’s the breathtaking risk of being vulnerable with another human being. It’s inviting them not just into your bedroom, but into your heart and life. Real intimacy is about what we give, not just what we get. It’s other-centered, not self-centered. Intimacy is understanding someone at a level porn never attempts, and having the life-altering experience of having them listen—really listen—to you in return. It’s seeing yourself through other eyes, and caring about others as much as you care about yourself. It’s the astonishing, baffling, wonderful experience that artists and philosophers have been trying to describe ever since our lonely human tribe began.

It’s the opposite of loneliness. It’s love.

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HOW PORN HURTS A CONSUMER'S PARTNER

Partners of porn consumers often report feeling angry, confused, and betrayed when they find out that the other half of their committed relationship has been watching porn. Consumers may have no idea how they are hurting their own relationships and the people they love.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Commonly, when individuals find out about their partner's porn consumption, they feel a range of negative emotions including rejection, humiliation, abandonment, isolation, loneliness, jealousy, anger, and shame.
- Even if partners are open and honest about their consumption—it can still do real harm.
- Porn reshapes expectations about sex and attraction by presenting an unrealistic picture.

No one ever woke up and said, “Today, I want to get out there and ruin my current and future relationships. I’m going to cut myself off emotionally, undermine trust, and leave my partner feeling confused, rejected, angry, and betrayed.”

No one says that, but a pile of research shows that’s exactly what can happen as a result of consuming porn.

It’s probably no surprise that women tend to view porn and its effects very differently from men. [1] While women and men can both struggle with pornography consumption, studies have shown that many women—even if they believe that pornography consumption is okay for other people—see no acceptable role for porn within their own committed relationship. [2] And no wonder! The evidence that porn can harm relationships and partners is overwhelming. [3]

Two of the most respected pornography researchers, Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillman at the University of Alabama, studied the effects of porn and media for more than 30 years. They found that consuming pornography makes many individuals less satisfied with their own partners’ physical appearance, sexual performance, sexual curiosity, and affection. [4] They also found that, over time, many porn users grow more callous toward females in general, less likely to value monogamy and marriage, and more likely to develop distorted perceptions of sexuality. [5] Other researchers have confirmed those results and added that porn consumers tend to be significantly less intimate with their partners, [6] less committed in their relationships, [7] less satisfied with their romantic and sex lives, [8] and more likely to cheat on their partners. [9]

That doesn’t bode well for any relationship where one partner is consuming porn, especially since most of us want and expect our

intimate relationships to be built on trust, respect, commitment, honesty, and love.

It is very common, when partners find out that their other half has been consuming porn, for them to feel a whole range of negative emotions including rejection, humiliation, abandonment, isolation, loneliness, jealousy, anger, and shame. [10]. Even if they don’t believe that porn is the same as cheating, they often feel a deep sense of loss, betrayal, and mistrust. [11] The secrecy, shame, isolation, and lies that are often introduced into a relationship by compulsive porn consumption can snowball into all kinds of problems. [12]

But even if porn isn’t kept a secret—even if partners are open and honest about their consumption—it can still do real harm. We mentioned earlier that porn consumption can lead to less satisfaction and less interest in one’s partner. [13] Why does that happen? Part of the answer is that porn rewires the brain, so that consumers of porn become less responsive sexually to their partner, even though they can still respond to porn. [14]

At the same time, porn reshapes expectations about sex and attraction by presenting an unrealistic picture. In porn, men and women always look their best. They are forever young, surgically enhanced, airbrushed, and Photoshopped to perfection. [15] So it’s not hard to see why, according to a national poll, six out of seven women believe that porn has changed men’s expectations of how women should look. [16]

As writer Naomi Wolf points out, “Today real naked women are just bad porn.” [17]

But it’s not only physical looks of both men and women that get distorted in porn. Women are also generally portrayed

as anxious for sex anywhere, at any time, with anyone, and they are delighted to go as long and aggressively as one man or multiple men want. They always climax, usually loudly and ecstatically, and then are immediately ready for more. They never get tired or sore. They never need a break. In fact, they never seem to need anything at all except endless sex. They are depicted as happy with whatever a man wants to do, even if it's dangerous, painful, or humiliating. [18]

If you think those unrealistic depictions don't work their way into consumers' beliefs, expectations and actions think again. [19] In a recent survey of 16 to 18-year-old Americans, nearly every participant reported learning how to have sex by watching porn, [20] and many of the young women said they were pressured to play out the "scripts" their male partners had learned from porn. [21] They felt badgered into having sex in uncomfortable positions, faking sexual responses, and consenting to unpleasant or painful acts.

Of course, the pain caused by porn can go far beyond a bad experience in the bedroom. Individuals who learn of their partner's porn habit often internalize their shame and confusion, asking themselves why they aren't "enough." They may feel undesirable, unattractive, and worthless. [23] Many partners of porn consumers even start showing physical symptoms of anxiety, depression, and even Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. [24] And while it's true for both men and women, studies have shown that because of the shame they feel and their worry about being blamed for their partner's problem, the majority of women who learn of a partner's porn use isolate themselves at least somewhat from their normal sources of social support, just when they need that support the most. [25]

If you want to do a huge favor for the Love of Your Life, decide now that you won't bring the potentially devastating effects of porn into your relationship. Or, if you're already caught in porn's web, make the decision to get help. Click here to find out how you can give them the gift they really want: You. All of you. Heart and Mind.

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HOW PORN DAMAGES CONSUMERS' SEX LIVES

According to research and personal accounts, instead of increasing sexual enjoyment, porn often leads to less satisfying sex in the long run and, for many porn consumers, no sex at all.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- *Commonly, when individuals find out about their partner's porn consumption, they feel a range of negative emotions including rejection, humiliation, abandonment, isolation, loneliness, jealousy, anger, and shame.*
- *Even if partners are open and honest about their consumption—it can still do real harm.*
- *Porn reshapes expectations about sex and attraction by presenting an unrealistic picture.*

Porn promises a virtual world filled with sex—more sex and better sex. What it doesn't mention, however, is that the further a porn consumer goes into that fantasy world, the more likely their reality is to become just the opposite. [1] Porn often leads to less sex and less satisfying sex. [2] And for many consumers, porn eventually means no sex at all. [3]

How? Well, it starts in the brain.

You see, your brain is full of nerve pathways that make up what scientists call your “brain map.” [4] It's kind of like a hiking map in your head, with billions of tiny overlapping trails. These pathways connect different parts of your brain together, helping you make sense of your experiences and control your life.

When you have a sexual experience that feels good, your brain starts creating new pathways to connect what you're doing to the pleasure you're feeling. [5] Essentially, your brain is redrawing the sexual part of your map so you'll be able to come back later and repeat the experience. [6] (See *How Porn Affects The Brain Like a Drug*). The same thing happens the first time someone consumes porn. The porn consumer's brain starts building new pathways in response to this very powerful new experience. [7] It's saying, “This feels great! Let's do this again.”

But here's the catch: brain maps operate on a “use it or lose it” principle. [8] Just like a hiking trail will start to grow over if it's not getting walked on, brain pathways that don't get traffic become weaker and can even be completely replaced by stronger pathways that get more use.

As you might expect, consuming porn is a very powerful experience that leaves a strong and lasting impression in the brain. (See *How Porn Changes The Brain*.) Every time someone consumes porn—especially if they

heighten the experience by masturbating—the part of the brain map that connects arousal to porn is being strengthened.

[9] Meanwhile, the pathways connecting arousal to things like seeing, touching, or cuddling with a partner aren't getting used. Pretty soon, natural turn-ons aren't enough, and many porn consumers find they can't get aroused by anything but porn. [10]

How bad is the problem? Put it this way: doctors are seeing an epidemic of young men who, because of their porn use, can't get it up with a real, live partner. [11]

Thirty years ago, when a man developed erectile dysfunction (ED), it was almost always because he was getting older, usually past 40. As his body aged it became more difficult to maintain an erection. [12] Chronic ED in anyone under 35 was nearly unheard of. [13] But those were the days before internet porn. These days, online message boards are flooded with complaints from porn users in their teens and 20s complaining that they can't maintain an erection. [14] They want to know what's wrong with their body, but the problem isn't in the penis—it's in the brain. [15]

Study after study has shown that porn is directly related to problems with arousal, attraction, and sexual performance. [16]. Porn leads to less sex and to less sexual satisfaction within a relationship. [17] Researchers have shown a strong connection between porn use and low sex drive, erectile dysfunction, and trouble reaching orgasm. [18] Many frequent porn users reach a point where they have an easier time getting aroused by internet porn than by having actual sex with a real partner. [19] One recent study even concluded that porn use was likely the reason for low sexual desire among a random sample of high school seniors. [20] Who has ever heard of

that? Low sexual desire among high school seniors!

This trend of sexual problems is especially serious for teens and young adults. Their brains are particularly vulnerable to being rewired by porn, [21] and they are in a period where they are forming crucial attitudes, preferences, and expectations for their future. [22]

Young people imitate what they see in porn, and when teens learn about sexuality from porn, they are in danger of adopting the misleading, harmful biases embedded there. [23] Many teens never have the chance to learn what a healthy relationship is like before porn starts teaching them its version—which is typically filled with domination, infidelity, abuse, and violence. [24] Since most people aren't too excited about entering a relationship with someone who has attitudes like that, teens who get their sex ed from porn often find that they struggle to connect with real romantic partners. [25]

Fortunately, the brain is a resilient organ. The sexual dysfunction caused by porn can be reversed, [26] and a brain map can be rewired to work well again once porn is out of the picture. [27]

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PORN'S HARM IS CHANGING FAST

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Pornography has changed with technology.
- Porn has become more intense, violent, degrading, and humiliating over time.
- People are being exposed to porn at younger and younger ages.

Skeptics of pornography's danger point out that porn has been around a long time. After all, the ancient Greeks painted sexual images on their pottery. But comparing paintings on Greek vases to today's endless stream of live-action, hardcore videos is like comparing apples to... um... kumquats. Technology is changing not only the content of porn, but how, when, and at what age it's being consumed.

The year was 1953, and Hugh Hefner had just published the first copy of Playboy.

Sex had just started to become a more prominent part of American's cultural conversation, partly because of Dr. Alfred Kinsey who, five years earlier, had published a controversial but extremely popular book on sexuality. [1] He was heralded as one of the first scientists and writers to talk so openly about sexuality, and his books went flying off the shelves. [2]

Hefner saw a chance to make money from the changing cultural views about sex. But to maximize sales of his new magazine he had to change porn's image from something your friend's creepy relative might read to something sophisticated and mainstream. So Hefner put his pornographic photos next to essays and articles written by respected authors. In Playboy, porn started to look like nothing more than harmless pleasure engaged in by respectable and successful individuals.

Flash forward to the 1980s, when VCRs suddenly made it possible for people to watch movies at home. [3] For porn consumers, that meant that instead of having to go to seedy movie theaters on the wrong side of town, they just went to the back room at their local movie rental place. Sure, they still had to go out to find it, but porn was a lot more accessible.

And then the internet changed everything. [4][5]

Once porn hit the Web in the 1990s, suddenly there was nothing but a few keystrokes between anyone with an internet connection and the most graphic material available. [4] The online porn industry exploded.

Between 1998 and 2007, the number of pornographic websites grew by 1,800%. [6] By 2004, porn sites were getting three times more visitors than Google, Yahoo!, and MSN Search put together. [7] It was "big business" in a way the world had never seen before. Thirty percent of all internet data was related to porn, [8] and worldwide porn revenues (including internet, sex shops, videos rented in hotel rooms, etc.) grew to exceed the incomes of Microsoft, Google, Amazon, eBay, Yahoo!, Apple, Netflix, and Earthlink combined! [9]

As internet porn grew more popular; it also turned darker, more graphic, and more extreme. (See Why Consuming Porn Is An Escalating Behavior.) With so much porn available, pornographers tried to compete for attention by constantly pushing the boundaries. [10] "Thirty years ago 'hardcore' pornography usually meant the explicit depiction of sexual intercourse," writes Dr. Norman Doidge, a neuroscientist and author of *The Brain That Changes Itself*. "Now hardcore has evolved and is increasingly dominated by the sadomasochistic themes ... all involving scripts fusing sex with hatred and humiliation." [11] In our post-Playboy world, porn now features degradation, abuse, and humiliation of people in a way never before seen in the mass media. [12] "[S]oftcore is now what hardcore was a few decades ago," Doidge explains. "The comparatively tame softcore pictures of yesteryear ... now show up on mainstream media all day long, in the pornification of everything, including television, rock videos, soap operas, advertisements, and so on." [13]

As the popularity of internet porn grew

like wildfire, so did its influence. Network television shows, pay-per-view channel series, and movies began to up the ante with more and more graphic content as they scrambled to keep the attention of audiences accustomed to internet porn. [14] Between 1998 and 2005, the number of sex scenes on American TV shows nearly doubled, [15] and it wasn't just happening on adult programs. In a study conducted in 2004 and 2005, 70% of the 20 TV shows most often watched by teens included sexual content, and nearly half showed sexual behavior. [16] And for the first time, porn was becoming a routine part of teen life and a major way adolescents learned about sex. [17]

By now, porn's effects have soaked into every aspect of our lives. [18] Popular video games now feature full nudity. [19] Snowboards marketed to teens are plastered with images of porn performers. [20] Even children's toys have become more sexualized. [21]

Technology has changed not only the content of the porn, but also how, when, and at what age they consume it. Young men and women are all presented with the issue of today's porn, and studies show that by the time they turn 14 years old, two out of three boys in the U.S. have viewed porn in the last year, [22] and many are watching it on devices they have with them 24 hours a day.

And for all of these changes to the nature and reach of today's pornography, we haven't even mentioned the most disturbing development of all: human trafficking. The modern-day slave trade (and there is one) is fueled by pornography. Over two-thirds of all calls to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center involve sex trafficking—an estimated 21 million victims worldwide [23]—with 49 percent of all trafficking victims and 70 percent of underage trafficking victims reporting that pornography was made of them while they were enslaved. [24]

This is not a Third World problem. Sex trafficking, and its dissemination through online pornographic sites, extends beyond prostitution and child trafficking rings to the many “revenge porn” sites, to the coercion, drugging, and/or physical abuse of porn performers, wannabe models, and runaways right here in the United States.

Human trafficking includes any “commercial sex act induced by force, fraud, or coercion.” [25] (See *How Porn Fuels Sex Trafficking*.)

In fact, exposure to porn has been found, along with poverty, drug abuse, and homelessness, to be one of the most consistent risk factors associated with human trafficking. [26] And after victims are ensnared, porn is often used to desensitize them to the acts in which they will be forced to engage. Quite literally, porn feeds human trafficking and human trafficking feeds porn. [27]

The argument that porn is nothing new—that it's been around forever and never caused any great harm—seems pretty silly when you think about how different today's porn is from anything that existed before. Porn is incomparably more accessible, more widespread, and more extreme than anything that existed even a generation ago. Those centerfold magazines that were passed around among youth in previous generations were nothing compared to what youth have access to today, [28] and the consequences of looking today go far beyond young people hoping their parents don't find out.

The good news is that in response to the unprecedented spread of pornography there are an unprecedented number of resources and people who want to help, whether by spreading facts about pornography or helping those who feel caught in its undertow. Today's pornography is a new phenomenon, unlike anything humankind has ever seen, but the things that can push porn back are as old as humanity itself: wisdom, vigilance, and a commitment to real love.

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HOW PORN FUELS SEX TRAFFICKING

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Sex trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery.
- The TVPA defines sex trafficking as a situation in which “a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age.”
- Porn directly informs what goes on in trafficking.
- Porn is a risk factor for sex trafficking.

In a worldview of slavery, society generally agrees that it is inhumane and degrading, and most people are astonished that there have been times in history where slavery was accepted as normal and acceptable. Somehow, still, many people are accepting of a form of modern-day slavery: human sex trafficking. And while many people claim to be opposed to human sex trafficking, what many don't know is that the demand for human sex trafficking is fueled by pornography and the porn industry.

Though no one knows its true origins, The Willie Lynch Letter declares itself over three-hundred years old. [1] According to the story, Virginia colonists in 1712, unable to control their slaves, reached out to a slave owner named Willie Lynch for help. “Your invitation reached me on my modest plantation in the West Indies,” he responds, “where I have experimented with some of the newest, and still the oldest, methods for control of slaves.” The letter is essentially a slavery instruction manual—how to “break” slaves, how to organize, brainwash, and set them against one another to make them easier to subject.

Despite questions about its authenticity, [2] the letter has found its way into everything from Hollywood scripts to political speeches, and from college reading lists to Hip-Hop albums. It's as if the letter takes all of the objectification, dehumanization, and inhumanity in the worldview of slavery and encapsulates them in just a few short pages. “We will use the same basic principle that we use in breaking a horse,” the letter explains. “What we do with horses is that we break them from one form of life to another; that is, we reduce them from their natural state in nature.”

Whether or not the letter is real, it seems noteworthy that when Corey Davis, a New York pimp, was arrested by federal investigators in December of 2006, a copy of The Willie Lynch Letter was sitting in his Mercedes. Other titles on Mr. Davis' reading list included The 48 Laws of Power and Whoever Said Whoring Wasn't Easy?

The books weren't the only things seized. Investigators also took his \$91,000 watch, the

Timberland boots he used to stomp girls when they didn't obey (pimps call it “tim-ming”), and of course, the tee shirt Davis was wearing when he was arrested. It said, “The Beatings Will Continue.” [3]

Why would a modern New York pimp be reading a 300-year-old set of instructions for how to break a slave? Considering the degree of intimidation, coercion, brainwashing, and violence that that accompanies sex trafficking today, it makes a lot of sense.

HOW BAD IS THE PROBLEM OF MODERN-DAY SEX TRAFFICKING?

Sex trafficking activists occasionally have to defend their use of the word “slavery.” [4] Some people don't believe the sex trafficking problems we have today rise to a level that would merit such an emotionally charged word. Others feel the word somehow romanticizes the problem. In fact, believe it or not, arguing about the word “slave” is just one small part of the larger debate about sex trafficking, especially in the United States. Some people question whether the problem is really as bad, or as big, or as widespread, as the reports make it sound. [5] Others question the motives of the abolitionists and human rights activists on the front lines of the fight. [6]

Here at Fight the New Drug, we know sex trafficking is a huge global problem and that this modern form of slavery is inherently, inseparably linked to the problem of pornography. Because this is an underground issue numbers are harder to come by, but if anything, the numbers re-

flecting what is actually happening around the globe are bigger than what has been reported. And isn't even just one person being trafficked, one too many?

Our goal is to give you the facts, so consider this your one-stop read to learn all the basics about sex trafficking and its relationship to porn. Then you'll and have the information you need to draw conclusions and join the conversation about how porn fuels sex trafficking.

WHAT IS SEX TRAFFICKING?

The legal definitions get technical, but sex trafficking is a type of human trafficking, and human trafficking is exactly what it sounds like: trafficking in humans. If "trafficking" means buying and selling things, or moving things so they can be used for profit, then "human trafficking" means buying or selling humans, or moving humans so they can be used for profit. It's the purest form of objectification—the literal commoditization of a person.

Whether you knew it or not, chances are very good that, at some point in your life, you have eaten fruit that was picked by a slave, worn a shirt that was made by a slave, used a device that was partially produced by a slave, or stood in a building that was built by a slave. Estimates of the number of slaves worldwide are between 21 and 32 million. [7] The vast majority of them come from vulnerable populations like immigrants, refugees, the impoverished, and children. They may be forcibly taken or lured away with promises of good jobs, only to find themselves powerless, in a foreign place, with nowhere to turn. Often they owe money to the people—the traffickers—who brought them. Traffickers will hold the debt over their heads, confiscate their immigration papers, threaten them with legal action or deportation, threaten them or their families with violence, and even inflict violence if the victims do not place themselves in servitude. The traffickers are often the only ones around who speak the victims' language, and the victims find themselves in a foreign land, cut off from home or help. Working in these circumstances, they earn an estimated \$150 billion every year for their abusers in all kinds of industries and settings, from factories and farms to hotels and brothels—even in the United States. [8]

Of those millions of global human trafficking victims, a little less than a quarter—about 22 percent—are trafficked for sex acts. (Those 22 percent earn a whopping 66 percent of the global trafficking profits! [9]) That's what sex trafficking is: the roughly 22 percent of human trafficking wherein the victims are exploited for sexual purposes.

Now, before we go any further, we know what you're thinking. This is the part where most people start visualizing the Hollywood version of sex trafficking: young boys and girls kidnapped or tricked in some Third World or Eastern European country, kept in chains and forced to perform in black market pornography, or to work as prostitutes in some massage parlor, seedy motel, or other makeshift brothel—or boys and girls from the same backgrounds, smuggled into the United States and abused in similar ways.

And yes, those stories do exist. They're not just real; they're closer to home than you imagine. Just read the way one police raid of a quiet little house in a middle-class New Jersey suburb was described in the New York Times:

On a tip, the Plainfield police raided the house in February 2002, expecting to find illegal aliens working an underground brothel. What the police found were four girls between the ages of 14 and 17. They were all Mexican nationals without documentation. But they weren't prostitutes; they were sex slaves. The distinction is important: these girls weren't working for profit or a paycheck. They were captives to the traffickers and keepers who controlled their every move. ... The police found a squalid, land-based equivalent of a 19th-century slave ship, with rancid, doorless bathrooms; bare, putrid mattresses; and a stash of penicillin, "morning after" pills and misoprostol, an antiulcer medication that can induce abortion. The girls were pale, exhausted and malnourished. [10]

Those are the types of situations most people envision when they hear the phrase, "human sex trafficking." And you can see why filmmakers would gravitate to that version. It's viscerally disturbing. Most people would be shocked just to learn that a scene like that was possible right in the heart of a modern American suburb.

But here's the thing: if that "Hollywood" version is all you know about sex trafficking, then you're only seeing one part of a much more complex picture. Many Hollywood depictions, and even many of the examples of sex trafficking in this article, represent situations where women and girls were victims, but it's important to note that men and boys are also victims of human sex trafficking and part of this bigger, more complex picture. And to understand that picture, you have to understand the TVPA.

WHAT IS THE TVPA AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

In the year 2000, in response to reports of international human trafficking, one of the broadest bipartisan coalitions in history came together to pass the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, or TVPA. [11] The landmark legislation identified "severe forms" of human trafficking, imposed harsh criminal penalties for offenders, and provided support systems for the victims. [12]

The TVPA defines sex trafficking as a situation in which "a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age." [13] It was designed in response to international sex trafficking like the New Jersey example we just described, but it had an interesting result. It ended up shining a light on every form of sex trafficking in the United States. Here's how one article described the effect:

One positive blowback of the T.V.P.A. was that it brought attention to domestic sex trafficking—pimping—which follows the same models and patterns as its international counterparts. "The logic was: if you get weepy-eyed about a young girl in Cambodia, why not feel the same way about the girl trafficked from Iowa?" [14]

Remember Corey Davis? The pimp with the slavery manual in his Mercedes? His victims weren't smuggled from other countries. They weren't held in servitude by complicated immigration situations or kept constantly imprisoned by armed guards. They were Americans. At various times in their ordeals, they were physically free to come and go. Davis kept them in servitude through a combination of fraud,

physical violence, and psychological intimidation to the point that they felt they had no choice but to obey. [15] Another pimp who was prosecuted under the TVPA had victims ranging from a twelve-year-old runaway to a university coed on a track scholarship. [16] By identifying the practices that constitute human trafficking, the TVPA brought attention to all instances of trafficking, regardless of where the victims were from.

But there's more. Look again at the TVPA's definition of sex trafficking: "a commercial sex act induced by force, fraud, or coercion." That last word, coercion, is important. It means that a commercial sex act can be sex trafficking, even if no one was physically assaulted, even if no one was tricked or defrauded. All it takes is coercion. The moment a victim is coerced or intimidated into a commercial sex act against his or her will, sex trafficking has occurred.

Once again, this aspect of the TVPA cast new light on all the little forms of pimping and exploitation that might otherwise fly under the radar. An individual bullies their spouse into prostituting themselves. Trafficking. A boyfriend or girlfriend pressures their partner into stripping on a live webcam show and then threatens to show the partner's family and friends if they don't do it again. Trafficking. A porn performer shows up on set to discover that the scene is much more degrading than they'd been told, and their agent gets them to go through with it by threatening to cancel their other bookings. Again: trafficking.

And this is where the connections to pornography begin.

HOW IS SEX TRAFFICKING CONNECTED TO PORNOGRAPHY?

"I was in California and I had a blowjob scene. [...] I go there and he's like, 'Oh yeah, it's a forced blowjob,' And I'm like, 'What?'" Just one guy, one little camera on a tripod. [...] I was scared. I was terrified. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know if I could tell him no. Or the fact that we already recorded 15 minutes of it, if I could just f—ing leave. Then what? That's when I understood that's how rape victims feel. Like, they feel bad about themselves." [17]

There are all kinds of connections, big and small, between pornography and sex trafficking. There are incidental connections, like the fact that exposure to pornography has been shown to make viewers less compassionate toward victims of sexual violence and exploitation. [18] (See *How Consuming Porn Can Lead To Violence*.) There are "supply-and-demand" connections: the simple fact that pornography—especially when viewing habits and fantasies involve violence or other fetishes—increases the demand for sex trafficking, as more and more viewers want to act out what they see. There is the "training manual" connection: the well-documented fact that porn directly informs what goes on in trafficking. Traffickers and sex buyers get ideas from porn, and then make their victims watch as a way of showing them what they'll be expected to do, so that the violent fantasy concocted by some porn director and his or her actors becomes the reality for some trafficking victim. [19] And then there is the risk factor connection: the fact that, along with poverty and substance abuse, a child growing up in a home where pornography is regularly consumed is far more likely to be trafficked at some point in his or her life. [20]

But what's the biggest, most surprising connection between pornography and trafficking? It's this: they're often the same thing. We can spend hours and hours pointing out these cause-and-effect, symbiotic relationships between trafficking and porn. Those connections are real, and that's an important conversation to have. But let's not allow that to entrench the idea that porn and sex trafficking are always separate. Far more often than people realize, they're not.

HOW ARE SEX TRAFFICKING AND PORN THE SAME THING?

To begin with, nearly half of sex trafficking victims report that pornography was made of them while they were in bondage. [21] The victim is not going to turn to the camera and announce they are being trafficked, and these images and videos make their way onto mainstream porn sites, where they are indistinguishable. In fact, even if the victim does register their distress, it's still impossible to know, because rape and abuse-themed porn have now become mainstream. One female survivor, whose captor slept on top of her at night so she

wouldn't escape, watched her through a hole when she went to the bathroom, and listened to her phone calls with a gun pointed at her head, was forced to appear in a video that made the Sinclair Intimacy Institute's list of "sex positive productions"! [22] "Every time someone watches that film," she said, "they are watching me being raped." (See *The Porn Industry's Dark Secrets*.)

Two more examples: The July 2007 issue of *Taboo*, a publication owned by Hustler, featured a multi-page feature of a young woman being held prisoner and severely sexually abused by her captors. They took photos and videos of her and sold them as porn. [23] In another case, a Miami jury convicted two men of luring women to Florida to audition for modeling jobs, drugging them, filming them being raped, and selling the footage as porn online and to stores across the U.S. This went on for five years. [24] How many of those videos, in five years, were viewed by individuals who would never dream of contributing to human trafficking, who assumed they were watching the work of consenting performers?

But "consent" is a slippery word in the world of porn. And of all the ways pornography and sex trafficking overlap, the darkest, most surprising secret of all might be this: even in the production of mainstream porn, sex trafficking is a regular occurrence. Remember, it doesn't require kidnapping or threats of violence. All it requires is coercion:

"I was threatened that if I did not do the scene I was going to get sued for lots of money."

"[I] told them to stop but they wouldn't stop until I started to cry and ruined the scene."

"He told me that I had to do it and if I can't, he would charge me and I would lose any other bookings I had because I would make his agency look bad." [25]

None of those quotes is from someone who was chained in a room. None of them are from victims who were beaten into submission or held at gunpoint in some dingy brothel. Each of those actors drove home at the end of the shoot and collected a paycheck. But does it sound like consent?

Or does it sound like coercion? (See The Porn Industry's Dark Secrets.)

This aspect of the porn world is so common, you don't even have to go to anti-pornography websites, or talk to ex-porn performers, to hear about it. Current porn performers tell the same stories. It speaks volumes about the culture and expectations of the porn industry that often, when you hear these same complaints from people still inside the business, they frame them in terms of an "unprofessional" agent, director, or actor. As a legal matter, under the TVPA, these aren't just people being bad at their jobs; these are potential sex trafficking crimes, punishable by up to twenty years in prison. In fact, according to the United Nations definition of human trafficking, it doesn't even matter whether the victim said no: "the consent of the trafficked person becomes irrelevant whenever any of the 'means' of trafficking [coercion, fraud, threat of force, etc.] are used." [26]

CONCLUSION

Is sex trafficking modern-day slavery?

We've seen that the term "sex trafficking," as a legal matter, can apply to all kinds of situations, from the dungeon-like conditions of a black market brothel to the simple coercion and intimidation that can take place on the set of a modern porn shoot. With such a broad range of offenses, it's understandable if it seems heavy-handed stamping the word "slavery" across the whole thing. Even in the ugliest examples, the abusers don't "own" their victims. Governments don't sanction the behavior. One could reasonably ask: Why even make the comparison?

But then again, why does a modern-day pimp have a slavery manual sitting on the back seat of his car?

Survivor's advocate, Minh Dang, makes an interesting point. Sometimes we have a tendency to define human trafficking only in the legal terms of what the perpetrator does, instead of what the victim experiences: "If we compare slavery and human trafficking, we need to be clear about whether we are talking about slavery as an institution, slavery as an economic activity, or slavery as the condition of the person being enslaved."

She continues, "Not everything is slavery, and that's okay. [...] This doesn't mean that the activities just outside of slavery aren't as horrendous." [27]

So what is slavery and what is merely horrendous? How long does a person have to exploit the body of another human being before it qualifies as slavery? A decade? A year? An hour? How awful do the victims' experiences have to be?

In the old days of the unimaginable Atlantic Slave Trade, slave traders used to scatter trinkets and bright red scraps of fabric along the beaches of West Africa and right up the ramps of their ships. Their victims walked up the ramps and into slavery, lured by luxuries and shiny charms beyond anything they had ever seen. [28]

What are the lures today?

"Come to Florida to start your modeling career!"

"Come to America for a better life!"

"I'll make you a star!"

Sex trafficking is the experience of being lured away from safety and into a situation where a person can be dominated and exploited by another human being. The victimization may last years, it may last minutes, but that common thread remains the same.

Long before the American Civil War, millions of Americans had come to the realization that slavery was evil. They condemned it. They preached sermons about it. They published abolitionist books, pamphlets, and tracts. They rescued slaves. They went to Congress. So why did the problem persist for decades?

Because all while they were condemning, preaching, and publishing about the evils of slavery, they were also wearing the cotton shirts it produced.

Modern sex trafficking shares a variety of symbiotic connections to pornography. Often they're one and the same. You can hate a thing. You can be outraged by it. But if you continue to sustain and engage with the industry that helps give it life, what is your outrage worth? Make it count, be a voice against modern-day slavery. Be a voice against sexual exploitation and stop

the demand for sex trafficking through pornography.

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HOW CONSUMING PORN CAN LEAD TO VIOLENCE

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Most mainstream porn contains violent sexual behavior against women.
- Consuming violent porn can change attitudes and leads individuals to think violent sex is normal and acceptable.
- Studies show that after consuming porn, even non-violent, consumers are more likely to use verbal coercion, drugs, and alcohol to coerce individuals into sex.

It's no secret that much of porn is violent, but many people don't understand the extent to which porn's underlying messages influence behavior. Porn is full of people, particularly women, being disrespected, coerced, and physically and verbally abused, and that's shaping how society thinks and acts.

A few years ago, a team of researchers looked at 50 of the most popular porn films—the ones purchased and rented most often. [1] Of the 304 scenes the movies contained, 88% contained physical violence and 49% contained verbal aggression. On average, only one scene in 10 didn't contain any aggression, and the typical scene averaged 12 physical or verbal attacks. One particularly disturbing scene managed to fit in 128!

The amount of violence shown in porn is astonishing but equally disturbing is the reaction of the victims. In the study, 95% of the victims (almost all of them women) either were neutral to the abuse or appeared to respond with pleasure. [2]

In other words, in porn, people are getting beaten up and they're smiling about it.

Of course, not all porn features physical violence, but even non-violent porn has been shown to have effects on consumers. The vast majority of porn—violent or not—portrays men as powerful and in charge; while women are submissive and obedient. [3] Watching scene after scene of dehumanizing submission makes it start to seem normal. [4] It sets the stage for lopsided power dynamics in couple relationships and the gradual acceptance of verbal and physical aggression against women. [5] Research has confirmed that those who consume porn (even if it's nonviolent) are more likely to support statements that promote abuse and sexual aggression toward women and girls. [6]

But porn doesn't just change attitudes; it can also shape actions. Study after study has shown that consumers of violent and nonviolent porn are more likely to use verbal coercion, drugs, and alcohol to coerce individuals into sex. [7] And multiple studies have found

that exposure to both violent and nonviolent porn increases aggressive behavior, including both having violent fantasies and actually committing violent assaults. [8]

In 2016, a team of leading researchers compiled all the research they could find on the subject. [9] After examining twenty-two studies they concluded that the research left, "little doubt that, on the average, individuals who consume pornography more frequently are more likely to hold attitudes conducive [favorable] to sexual aggression and engage in actual acts of sexual aggression."

If you're wondering how sitting in a chair consuming porn can actually change what a person thinks and does, the answer goes back to how porn affects the brain (See *How Porn Changes The Brain*). Our brains have what scientists call "mirror neurons"—brain cells that fire not only when we do things ourselves, but also when we watch other people do things. [10] This is why movies can make us cry or feel angry or scared. Essentially, mirror neurons let us share the emotion of other people's experiences as we watch. So when a person is looking at porn, he or she naturally starts to respond to the emotions of the actors seen on the screen. As the consumer becomes aroused, his or her brain gets to work wiring together those feelings of arousal to what is seen happening on the screen, almost as if he or she was actually having the experience. [11] So if a person feels aroused watching a man or woman get kicked around and called names, that individual's brain learns to associate that kind of violence with sexual arousal. [12]

To make matters worse, when porn shows victims of violence who seem to accept or

enjoy being hurt, the viewer is fed the message that people like to be treated that way, giving porn consumers a sense that it's okay to act aggressively themselves. [13]

Consumers might tell themselves that they aren't personally affected by porn, that they won't be fooled into believing its underlying messages, but studies suggest otherwise. There is clear evidence that porn makes many consumers more likely to support violence against women, to believe that women secretly enjoy being raped, [14] and to actually be sexually aggressive in real life. [15] The aggression may take many forms including verbally harassing or pressuring someone for sex, emotionally manipulating them, threatening to end the relationship unless they grant favors, deceiving them or lying to them about sex, or even physically assaulting them. [16]

And remember that porn use frequently escalates over time, so even if consumers don't start out watching violent porn, that may change. (See *Why Consuming Porn Is An Escalating Behavior*.) The longer they consume, the more likely they'll find themselves seeking out increasingly shocking, hardcore content. [17]

Not surprisingly, the more violent the porn they consume, the more likely they will be to support violence and act out violently. [18] In fact, one study found that those with higher exposure to violent porn were six times more likely to have raped someone than those who had low past exposure. [19]

Of course, not every porn consumer is going to turn into a rapist. But that doesn't change the fact that pornography is hitting us with a tidal wave of dehumanizing violence. It makes no sense for our society to accept the messages of porn, while at the same time calling for full gender equality and an end of sexual assault. A large portion of the porn consumed by millions of people every day is reinforcing the message that humiliation and violence are normal parts of what sex is supposed to be. [20] It's wiring the minds and expectations of the upcoming generation, making it harder for many young people to prepare for loving, nurturing relationships [21] and leaving both women and men feeling like they can't express the pain it's causing them. [22] (See *Why Porn Leaves Consumers Lonely*.)

Saying no to porn is helping to build a less violent world; one that's more loving, connected, humane, sexy, and safe.

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THE PORN INDUSTRY'S DARK SECRETS

Would you support a business if you knew that they abused some (but not all) of their female employees? Pornographers don't want you to think about it, but even if some of the humiliation, degradation, and sexual violence you see in porn is consensual, some is not.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Consumers have no way of knowing whether or not individuals in pornography gave their consent.
- Many victims of human sex trafficking are used in the production of pornography.

I got the €%\$ kicked out of me Most of the girls start crying because they're hurting so bad I couldn't breathe. I was being hit and choked. I was really upset and they didn't stop. They kept filming. [I asked them to turn the camera off] and they kept going.*

REGAN STARR
FORMER PORN ACTOR [1]

In the spring of 2004, during the American occupation of Iraq, the world was shocked to learn that US soldiers were abusing prisoners in Abu Ghraib. Hundreds of leaked photos showed Iraqi prisoners being made to crawl on the floor wearing leashes, wear panties on their heads, masturbate for the camera, touch other men's naked bodies, and even more degrading behaviors that we are not comfortable mentioning here. What horrified the public was not only the human rights violations themselves, but the fact that the soldiers recorded the abuse with obvious glee. In many of the photos, soldiers grinned and flashed a "thumbs up" to the camera as they stood over their victims. After an investigation, several soldiers were dishonorably discharged from the military and others served time in prison for what they had done at Abu Ghraib. [2]

That same year, pornographers video-recorded and photographed thousands of women enduring nearly identical treatment and worse. Those images were published on the internet and viewed by millions of porn consumers. There was no public outcry.

Comparing porn to what happened in Abu Ghraib will ruffle some people's feathers. A knee-jerk reaction is to say, "Those are totally different! In porn, women give their consent!"

But do they? Do we know for sure that anyone in any porn content gave their consent? Defenders of pornography make this argument all the time, that no matter how a woman is treated in porn, it's okay because

she gave her consent. [3] But what if she didn't? What if she really didn't want to be painfully dominated, humiliated, and sexually used for the world to see? The truth is, there's often much more going on than what you see on the screen. That is, perhaps, the porn industry's biggest, darkest secret: it's not all consensual.

There is a tendency to believe that "human trafficking" refers to a Third World problem: forced prostitution or child pornography rings in some far-off, developing country. The truth is, sex trafficking is officially defined as a "modern-day form of slavery in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act is under the age of 18 years." [4] That means any instance in which the individual on screen was forced, tricked, or pressured. By that definition, human trafficking is everywhere. [5] (See [How Porn Fuels Sex Trafficking](#).)

The examples are chilling. In 2011, two Miami men were found guilty of spending five years luring women into a human trafficking trap. [6] They would advertise modeling roles, then when women came to try out, they would drug them, kidnap them, rape them, videotape the violence, and sell it to porn stores and businesses across the country.

That same year a couple in Missouri was charged with forcing a mentally handicapped girl to produce porn for them by beating, whipping, suffocating, electrocution, drowning, mutilating, and choking her until she agreed. One of the photos they forced her to make ended up on the front cover of a porn publication owned by Hustler Magazine Group. [7]

So sure, you could say the handicapped

girl “agreed” to participate. You could argue that the women voluntarily responded to an ad. But do you really think those victims gave their consent? We all know that’s not real consent, that’s coercion.

In porn, the question of consent can be tricky (and the growing phenomenon of amateur porn makes it even trickier). For example, if one of the participants doesn’t know there’s a camera running, then the porn is not consensual, even if the sex is. Right? What if a person consented to be filmed, but not to have the film shown to anyone else? What if someone manipulated their partner into being filmed in the first place, like making him or her worry that they’d blackmail them if they didn’t cooperate? Or what if a person agreed to have sex, but in the middle, their partner suddenly started doing something that the person who initially gave consent didn’t expect? Did he or she still give consent?

The point is, when you consume porn, there’s no way to know what kind of “consent” the actors have given. You can’t assume, just because someone appears in a porn video, that they knew beforehand exactly what would happen or that they had a real choice or the ability to stop what was being done.

“I’ve never received a beating like that before in my life,” said Alexandra Read after being whipped and caned for 35 minutes. “I have permanent scars up and down the backs of my thighs. It was all things that I had consented to, but I didn’t know quite the brutality of what was about to happen to me until I was in it.” [8]

Did you catch what Alexandra said there? “It was all things that I had consented to.” That’s the problem with treating consent like it’s “all-or-nothing.” She consented to do X. She didn’t consent to do X, Y, and Z.

We’re not claiming that all porn is non-consensual. We’re just pointing out that some of it is and some of it isn’t, and when you watch it there’s no way to know which is which.

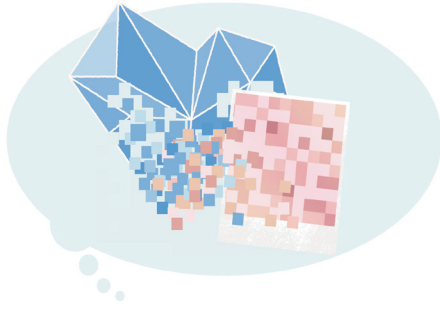
So, would you buy from a company if you knew that some, but not all, of their products were made with child labor? Would you support a store that abused some, but not all, of their employees?

How can it be ethical to say that “porn is okay because participants give their consent,” when we know for a fact that some—probably much more than you think—do not?

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HOW PORN WARPS IDEAS ABOUT SEX

Whether they want to or not, the majority of teens are getting some of their sex education from porn. Researchers have repeatedly found that people who have seen a significant amount of porn are more likely to start having sex sooner and with more partners; and to engage in riskier kinds of sex, putting them at greater risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Porn has become a fictional version of sexual education for most young people.
- Sexual preferences of porn viewers have become heavily influenced by pornography.
- The porn industry becomes increasingly more extreme in a competitive market.
- Porn edits out the consequences of unhealthy sex practices.

Imagine what would happen if your school's health class was taught by a cigarette salesman. Chances are, you wouldn't hear much about lung cancer or how much shorter the typical smoker's lifespan is. He might even try to tell you that smoking could boost your sprint time. Sounds ridiculous, right? But that's the kind of education millions of teens are getting about sex every day.

While porn is often called "adult material," many of its viewers are well under the legal age. [1] In fact, the majority of teens are getting at least some of their sex ed from porn, whether they mean to or not. [2] And just like cigarette commercials show healthy people puffing away instead of the cancer-causing reality, porn is offering a completely warped idea of what partners, sex, and relationships are really like. [3]

Studies show that people who consume porn are far more likely to believe that things like group sex or dangerous sex acts are more common than their non-porn-consuming peers. [4] Why? Because that's what they've seen in porn. In one study of popular porn videos, the average number of sexual partners in a scene was three, although the number ranged as high as 19. Today's mainstream porn sites include whole categories of unprotected sex with strangers, brutal gang rape, and other dangerous and violent sex acts.

And porn keeps getting worse.

"A competitive market means that pornographers are trying to outdo each other to come up with the most extreme images," explains Dr. John Wood, a therapist who works with youth addicted to pornography. "This contest to push the boundaries means that straight intercourse is considered too boring. Images

of brutal anal sex and women being humiliated and degraded by two or more men at any one time are the new norms." [5]

Researchers are finding that porn's influence can and does find its way into teenager's sexual behaviors. [6] For example, people who have consumed a significant amount of porn are more likely to start having sex sooner and with more partners, to engage in riskier kinds of sex that put them at greater risk of getting sexually transmitted infections, and to have actually contracted an STI. [7]

Sociologist Dr. Michael Kimmel has found that men's sexual fantasies have become heavily influenced by porn, [8] which gets awfully tricky when their partners don't want to act out the degrading or dangerous acts porn shows. [9] As a result, individuals who consume pornography have been shown to be more likely to go to prostitutes, [10] often looking for a chance to live out what they've seen in porn. [11] In one survey of former prostitutes, 80% said that customers had shown them images of porn to illustrate what they wanted to do. [12]

But just as harmful as the things porn shows is what it doesn't show. Pornography doesn't give an accurate picture of what healthy sex is like; they cut out things like talking, cuddling, bonding touch, and other ways partners are responsive to each other's needs and preferences. [13] They also cut out the consequences of the kinds of sex portrayed in porn. [14] No one ever contracts sexually transmitted infections in porn. There are no unplanned pregnancies, no cervical cancer, no intestinal parasites, and no skin tearing or bruises.

In porn, no matter how rough a person treats their partner, nearly everything looks like it feels good. [15] In fact, in the study of popular porn videos, in nine scenes out of 10, a woman was being hit, beaten, yelled at, or otherwise harmed, and the result was almost always the same: the victim either responded with pleasure or had no response at all. [16]

Not only does porn offer a warped version of sex education, it also delivers that education in a way perfectly tailored to how our brains learn. [17] (See *How Porn Changes the Brain*.) Images are especially powerful teachers since they can pack in a whole lot of information that the viewer can understand very quickly. And while words are often interpreted as mere opinions, our brains are more likely to accept images as facts. After all, it's a lot more difficult to argue with something you're seeing happen in front of you. [18]

And what messages are young people learning so effectively from porn? A recent study of adolescent porn use concluded that the major messages presented by porn are male domination, hypermasculinity, and making male sexual pleasure the top priority. [19]

What kind of education is that?

"It's sad," says Dr. Gary Brooks, a psychology professor who studies the effects of porn. "Boys who are initiated in [to] sex through these images become indoctrinated in a way that can potentially stay with them for the rest of their lives." [20] And think about it, what messages does that send to young women and girls who are consuming this content as well?

That's what porn is: indoctrination, the process of teaching a person or group to accept a set of beliefs uncritically. It isn't just entertainment. It isn't just titillating. It teaches a detrimental message from a specific worldview. We can limit the advancement of porn's ideals by spreading the truth, especially to young people. And for those who feel caught up in porn's web, it's never too late to stop and even turn back its harmful effects. [Click here to find out how.](#)

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