

The complex nature of overcoming Pornography Addiction

Crystal L Sailo.

Addiction occurs when the pleasure and reward pathways in the brain are hijacked by either exogenous drugs such as cocaine or opioids, or by natural processes such as eating and sexual activity which are essential for survival.

A decade ago Dr. Howard Shaffer at Harvard wrote, “I had great difficulty with my own colleagues when I suggested that a lot of addiction is the result of experience ... repetitive, high-emotion, high-frequency experience. But it’s become clear that neuro-adaptation—changes in neural circuitry that help perpetuate the behavior—occurs even in the absence of drug-taking.

Pornography acts in many ways like a drug and exhibits consequences for the brain. Prolonged engagement often results in increased tolerance which often culminates in addiction for many individuals. Though it is not a physical substance, it elicits the same loss of control fostering a compulsive need to seek out the activity despite its negative consequences and prompts withdrawal when access is restricted.

For example, in activities like running, continued exposure can lead to lifelong change in the brain ([neuroplasticity](#)). This occurs through release of dopamine, a neurotransmitter which serves as a reward mechanism when accomplishing something such as eating for survival or sexual activity to produce future life. This reshapes and alters the brain cells to motivate certain actions. So, when dopamine is released, it reinforces the behavior and makes an individual not only desire it, but require it.

The brain is frequently described as a “Use It or Lose It” system, because the neural connection which is stimulated becomes stronger and inclined towards activation, while the ones that are ignored tend to become weakened. Fortunately, because of the “Use It or Lose It” principle, the same system that stimulates these habits can also be harnessed for healthy ones.

Pornography serves as a powerful emotional coping mechanism. Its usage subdues a lot of negative emotions. When people use pornography especially in an addictive way, they often have a pre-existing sense of self dissatisfaction. This presents a big problem as the continued use of pornography tends to worsen feelings of shame and guilt. Consequently, in an attempt to deal with the same and guilt, there is a tendency to use it again, creating a pattern.

There exists a societal stigma attached to pornography addicts seeking recovery. Compared to the positive and supportive response given when individuals declare their recovery from substances like alcohol or drugs, individuals who disclose their recovery journey tend to face a different and negative reaction.

Engaging in pornography can result in psychological impacts like finding one's partner less attractive. Other consequences include erectile dysfunction, premature ejaculation, as well as the neuroscience and psychological impact. The shame associated with pornography can significantly hold back sexual performance, which leads to difficulties in both achieving and sustaining erections.

There is a term referred to as "online drift". For instance, a person may come across a charming video of a cat. They begin to seek out more endearing cat videos while browsing the internet. This pattern is also seen in pornography addiction, where individuals progressively seek out more intense content to get the same level of satisfaction or gratification.

When does pornography become a problem? Any behavior becomes a problem when it starts to hinder daily functioning and overall well-being for example, binge watching a Netflix show can be considered a problem if it causes one to be late for work or leads to delaying responsibilities. Any behavior regardless of its nature, can become problematic when it negatively impacts one's ability to maintain a balanced life.

The good news is that the effects of pornography and its addiction does not have to be permanent. Typically, when people understand the mechanism and realize its impact on their lives, they can take steps to discontinue the behavior.

How long does it take to break a habit? There is no definitive timeline, the duration required to break a habit is not fixed, it depends on the individual, the frequency of the habit and its purpose in their life.

Rex(pseudonym) sharing his experience during a follow up session said, “Breaking a bad habit doesn’t take as long as fully deciding to break a habit.” He candidly discussed how pornography had negatively impacted him. He acknowledged how he wanted to walk away and distance himself from it, during which he experienced moments when the urge remained. Rex drew similarities between this struggle with an abusive relationship, recognizing the toxicity of the connection. He compared saying that he enjoyed the relationship but realized that it is not what he wanted, therefore he wanted to end it, but the romantic partner kept showing up every now and then. He drew parallels between his experience of ending pornography and ending a harmful romantic relationship, and emphasized the importance of decisiveness.

Even at times when he felt that it was not a problem anymore, it was still a constant wrestle, a wrestle which isn’t as intense as before but it is still present especially on stressful days, because that used to be his outlet. But, he is constantly aware of his decision at that crucial moment, aware that if he engages in pornography again, he would be in the same cynical pattern.

He acknowledged that in the beginning of the journey, he wanted to break the habit, but also did not want to break it as well. However, once he committed to making a change, the process accelerated. However, he acknowledged that even after months of progress, certain stressful life events trigger a resurgence of the pull toward the habit.

Rex also highlighted a friend’s similar experience with sobriety from alcohol. Despite years of abstinence, a major life event rekindled the temptation. This underscores the ongoing vigilance required in maintaining positive changes.

There are multifaceted challenges associated with overcoming pornography including the psychological and emotional aspects of addiction, the intricate process of breaking free from such a habit. It is decisiveness that is important in initiating and sustaining recovery efforts.

Rex's testimony provides valuable insight into the complexities of overcoming pornography addiction. His analogy of treating pornography like an abusive relationship sheds light on the emotional struggle involved. Rex's experience underscores the significance of making a firm decision to break a habit, and the potential for occasional challenges even after a period of progress.

References

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