

Drawing Together When Pornography Threatens to Tear Apart Your Marriage

By Mark Chamberlain, PhD, and Rebecca Jorgensen, PhD

Ben saw that Kristy's eyes were red the moment he arrived home from work. He asked what was wrong. Her response was terse: "We'll talk after the kids are in bed." Later, as she tried to choke back fresh tears, Kristy handed Ben a stack of papers, a list of hundreds of websites he'd visited and topics he'd searched for—evidence that Ben had a serious pornography problem. "I've been faithful to you our entire marriage and thought only about sex with you. I've always assumed that the same was true for you, that you loved me the same way!" she said.

Ben felt like his heart was going to break. How could he have done this to his wife? Then he felt panicky. What if this ruined their relationship? He just had to convince her that her fears about what this all meant were not justified. He tried to reassure her that he loved her genuinely and deeply. He explained that he was frequently tempted to view pornography, but not because he wanted sex with other women, not because he desired the women in the pictures more than he desired her. Facing this crisis, Ben knew that he absolutely had to do what he'd been trying to do for years: finally give up pornography. He vowed to Kristy that he would never view it again.

Throughout the next month, Kristy felt like the ache in her heart wouldn't go away. Even worse, she felt alone with her hurt and feared that Ben didn't really care about her. She tried to convey to Ben how devastating his pornography habit was to her, how doubtful she had become about her attractiveness to him, how unsure she'd become of herself and of their relationship, and the way this had all turned her once-secure world upside-down. Her fear also led her to watch Ben's every move and question his activities. Ben, in turn, tried to reassure her that he was still the same man she'd fallen in love with, that all of the good things she "thought" she'd experienced throughout the years were real. He felt constantly horrible for his behavior and wondered, "What's the matter with me?" When Kristy asked him questions, the awful shame of what he'd done stirred inside. He wanted to get her away from his bad memories so she wouldn't feel the way about him that he felt about himself. He really didn't know how to talk to her; the feelings were so raw he just froze inside.

Ben and Kristy both continued in earnest to try in their own way to make things better, but it seemed things only got worse. By the time they came in for counseling, what had begun as a serious crisis was now threatening to destroy their entire relationship. They had separated, and Kristy was considering filing for divorce. Ben felt like he was walking on eggshells and could no longer do anything right in Kristy's eyes. Kristy felt like Ben didn't understand her pain—and worse, didn't want to.

Kristy and Ben are like so many couples who come to see us. The men are sincerely trying to overcome their pornography habits. Even more desperately, they want to save their marriages. In an attempt to get things back on track, a husband typically:

- Tries to calm his wife's fears by explaining to her his true feelings.
- Focuses their conversations on other topics that are less painful to her.
- Hopes she'll be reassured by all of his efforts to repent and do better.

Wives are just as intent on salvaging their relationships. In an effort to do just that, quite often a wife will:

- Express her heartache and fears, in hopes that he'll understand how devastating this problem has been to her.
- Initiate discussions about the problem, its evolution, and the aspects and events that she still doesn't understand.
- Seek reassurance that he loves her and finds her attractive.

Unfortunately, one partner's attempts to make things better may be at odds with the other's sense of where things need to go. As a result, husbands and wives can end up putting all their effort into cross-purposes. For instance, let's say she's hoping they'll get to the point where they can talk openly about the problem, while he really wants to get to the point where they've moved past it. To him, her efforts seem counterproductive, and vice-versa. As she becomes more adamant about the need to talk, he tries to avoid the topic more. Rather than feeling understood, she feels dismissed. She concludes that he doesn't take the problem seriously enough. She wonders if his sinful behavior has deadened his conscience and impaired his capacity to empathize with her pain. He fears that she's becoming obsessed about the problem, he's fighting this by himself because it's "his problem," and he wonders if he'll ever be able to redeem himself in her eyes.

Although couples in this situation might start out frustrated and upset, over time they can learn to work together to resolve even thorny problems like a husband's pornography habit. They can begin to see that their spouse is just trying to do for the relationship what they think it needs most, escalating their efforts when they feel stymied. As couples come to understand each other more fully, they can ease away from familiar, unproductive automatic responses. Each becomes more able to recognize what the other genuinely wants and needs—and more able to provide it. Here are some of the shifts we've seen that seem to help couples work more productively together:

The husband comes to understand that it's a good thing his wife keeps coming to him with her hurt. It's a great sign that instinctively she regards him as the one who can help her feel better about it. As we're fond of saying, "If your wife comes to you, it's because she intuitively trusts that you and only you can help her heal—not a family member, friend, or another man. It's you she wants to share with and feel validation from."

He comes to see that it's more important to be with her in pain than to try to make it go away. Being together in the pain is what helps it heal.

Both husband and wife come to understand that the worst part for her may not be the pain of what he's done, but the feeling that she's facing her pain alone because he's not connecting deeply with her when she tries to convey it.

She realizes that he may have been avoiding the topic precisely because it hurts him so badly to see her hurt. It is difficult for him to face her pain head on.

She comes to understand that he feels like he doesn't measure up, he may feel unworthy to comfort her, and he fears her rejection. He may have been hoping that if he gave her space, honored her in other ways, and focused on the good things they shared, she might stop focusing on this heart-wrenching topic and feel better about the relationship. This may be his way of trying to help heal her pain.

He learns to trust that honesty, including emotional honesty, throughout recovery is more important even than avoiding pornography—not to minimize how crucial that is. The more honest and open he becomes, the more included she feels. As she feels more included, his pornography problem is no longer a part of his life she is left out of. They become a team fighting together against the habit, rather than letting the pornography come between them.

He comes to treat her as a resource in his recovery. She can help him understand the emotions and needs that previously have built up and were released in pornography use.

She discovers that although sex becomes the focus when he's tempted, most of his everyday needs are emotional in nature. Thus she begins to feel less threatened, and rather than viewing him as an enemy or "pervert" she can't relate to, she sees him as an ally.

In counseling Ben learned to relax and take a few deep breaths when temptation hit instead of bracing against it or trying to fight it. He learned to use the temptation as a flag that he was stressed and needed to talk to someone or do something to reduce his stress. Solving the problem of how to manage his stress became something to focus on besides sexual thoughts and urges. At the same time he started counseling, Ben began attending the Sexaholics Anonymous meetings that were held once a week at a church near his office. He started to admit that he had been powerless to resolve his addiction on his own. At first it felt foreign to him to "surrender" and rely on God's help; he had always seen this problem as one he had to conquer on his own or push through. Over time, he experienced a growing sense of strength and peace when he turned to God. He felt that Heavenly Father accepted him even in the midst of his struggle, and Ben went to Him more in times of need.

In the 12-step group meetings, Ben heard other attendees talk about the importance of "rigorous honesty." He remembered how distraught Kristy had been when she talked about feeling he had violated her trust. He knew that his secrecy had been a big part of not only her trust, but his problem. Ben resolved to be completely honest with Kristy about his struggles and feelings from then on.

Now that the problem was out in the open and he and Kristy were working together on it, Ben experienced fewer cravings than he had before. As time wore on, however, the old urges to view pornography started to hit him again. On tough days, he'd let Kristy know about it. Although she appreciated his openness, she was concerned that he was struggling.

During one counseling session, it was apparent there was unresolved tension between them. "I told her I was struggling," Ben said. "She asked for more information. I wasn't sure whether or not I should tell her. I knew it might hurt her if I told the truth." In an effort to be rigorously honest, he told her that while driving around in his van for work that afternoon, he had stopped at a traffic light. A black convertible pulled up next to him with an attractive woman at the wheel. "I hate to admit it, but I started to fantasize about her. I told Kristy about it. She was upset. Then she wanted to know more about the fantasy, but it was just a brief lapse, a wandering of my mind. It wasn't that detailed. But Kristy assumed I wouldn't tell her more because she was upset. She thought I was holding back. I tried to think back and see if any other thoughts had come into my mind. But then my mind was on that topic again, thinking sexual thoughts about a strange woman. I told Kristy that I didn't think it was good for us to dwell on it."

"He told me it wasn't a good idea for him to dwell it," Kristy said. "Of course it isn't. That's exactly why I'm so frustrated with him. Why does he keep doing it?"

Many things can trigger unwanted sexual thoughts in someone who has a history of sexually acting out. Stress, feeling isolated, visual cues, and even boredom are common triggers. Sexual thoughts are like a lightning rod. They can draw all of our energy and attention. They are a powerful symptom of an inner struggle. However, when we dwell on the symptom we can miss the cause and more importantly, the cure. Being honest about having sexual thoughts is one part of honesty, but it's not the biggest part, nor the most important. President Spencer W. Kimball taught: "Jesus saw sin as wrong but also was able to see sin as springing from deep and unmet needs on the part of the sinner." He then counseled that if we hope to change our own habits or help someone else change theirs, we must "look deeply enough . . . to see the basic causes for . . . failures and shortcomings" (*Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball [1982], 481–82).

We encourage clients like Ben to pay attention inwardly, to be on the lookout for other feelings and needs that might be in play when sexual urges hit. If he feels lonely because he's out driving on his own all day, it might be a relief to think about sex instead. However, those sexual thoughts are obscuring something much more important. He needs to be honest with himself, rigorously honest, by acknowledging the loneliness. The sexual thoughts are closer to the surface. It's easier—and may seem manlier—to feel sexually interested or aroused. It's more difficult to admit more vulnerable feelings and softer inner experiences. He needs to start by being honest with himself about what he's feeling before he can be deeply honest with his wife.

The next time Ben told Kristy he had been tempted that day, she saw the usual bait, but she didn't take it. Instead of asking about the content of his tempting thoughts, she was more interested in what, in particular, had happened that day to make him vulnerable. "What had your day been like up to that point?" she asked.

"Kind of a drag, I guess," Ben responded.

"What was going on inside for you?" Kristy asked. Ben pondered her question and thought back. He couldn't put his finger on anything. Still, that brief discussion helped him to feel hopeful and cared about and to be on the lookout the next time temptation hit. He was in a more curious frame of mind a few days later when illicit thoughts kept popping into his mind. "Sex is the most attention-grabbing feeling, but what else is going on for me?" he wondered. "I'm driving around replacing copier toner cartridges, and it's boring. I know that's part of it. It's hard to see people driving around in nice cars. I go into offices with all of these sharp professionals. Am I envious? Seems like they have important things to do and places to be. Do I feel less important than them? Sometimes I wish I'd stayed in school and earned my degree. I don't feel like I'm living up to my potential." Ben's forehead was getting warm and there was a lump in his throat. "I worry that other people look down on me. I guess that's why it's nice when women find me attractive. It makes me feel like I still have it, like I'm worth paying attention to, that I'm admired and important, like I have something to offer."

Ben knew immediately that it would be much tougher to be honest with Kristy about these feelings. After the kids were down that night, he talked to her about what he had felt that afternoon. As he did, the feelings came back. Sitting on the side of the bed, he looked down at the floor as he shared his self-doubts. "Part of it is that you were with your old boyfriend for three and a half years before we got together. His business is thriving now." Ben's throat almost wouldn't let the next words out: "Do you ever regret marrying me, with all the financial struggles we've had?"

Kristy looked Ben in the eye. "The financial struggles have been the easiest part," she said. They both

laughed. It felt good to both of them to laugh together, with how painful things had been. “None of our struggles have ever made me sorry I chose you. I watch you in the backyard kicking the ball with Trevor. I see you wrestling with Isaac. Little Crystal just can’t help herself from jumping into the melee. I’d never trade you in and take a chance on my kids having a different father.” Kristy thought for a few moments. “Even the hard stuff we’ve done together. We’re spending our Saturday afternoons fixing the flood damage in the basement because we can’t afford to hire it out, listening to the oldies station and CDs no one else would like but us. The funny thing is, that time together is precious to me. It’s just the two of us working. I wouldn’t have it any other way. I cherish all my memories of times like that with you.” Ben felt as if she was looking straight into his soul now. “I love you, Ben. I love that you’re willing to work so hard doing stuff you don’t really like to support our family. I don’t want any other man. I want you, which is why it hurts when I’m afraid that you don’t desire me. When I worry about your attractions to other women or sense you’re hiding something, I feel so unsure, and I want so badly to know I can trust you and feel secure in your love.”

“Look what I’ve done to you,” Ben said. Looking into his eyes, Kristy knew that he had really heard her, was genuinely seeing how much she had been hurting. “I don’t want to minimize my sexual problems,” Ben said, “because I know they’ve fueled your insecurity. But I do want you to know that my struggles are my struggles; they have nothing to do with your attractiveness or desirability. Everything I’ve done so far in my recovery, and everything I’ll do in the future, I’m doing because I want to be—I want to become—the kind of man you can count on, that you can put all your trust in. That is who I want to be. I know these are just words, but I’m going to keep doing whatever I need to do for the rest of my life to show you that I mean what I’m saying.”

These types of heart-to-heart discussions continued to happen with Ben and Kristy. They not only helped their relationship recover but they helped Ben overcome his old pattern. It takes a while for most couples to learn to communicate about their deeper feelings and ask for their needs to be met the way Kristy and Ben did. Each partner’s history and insecurities create an entire minefield of other less-helpful reactions that can be set off along the way. As couples keep trying, however, the understanding they develop can change everything. Each is more likely to see the other’s deepest, once-obscured needs and become more able to help meet them. As understanding and communication deepen, distress lessens and tensions diffuse. A wife finds it easier to relate to and identify with a husband when he talks about the quieter, more genuine aspects of what’s going on inside him. This is the same man whose sexual struggles may have only weeks ago so put her off that she wondered, “What kind of man did I marry?”

Recently, a new client expressed his determination to conquer his pornography habit without involving others. He was reluctant to reach out to anyone he knew for support because he was afraid he’d be rejected if he opened up. He might see people he knew if he attended a support group. His wife might not be able to handle knowing about his problem. “I’ll do it on my own, with God’s help. With God, nothing is impossible, right?” We talked of Ben and Kristy and the healing that is possible when couples draw together instead of remaining like islands, apart. It’s true that with God, nothing is impossible, but it’s also important that we remember how God works. President Spencer W. Kimball taught: “God does notice us, and he watches over us. But it is usually through another person that He meets our needs” (“Small Acts of Service,” *Ensign*, December 1974, 5).

Pornography can ignite a powerful crisis in a marriage, a crisis that can tear couples apart. Or, if both partners are willing, the struggle can be used as an opportunity to draw together, becoming stronger and more united.