

An Open Letter on Porn

By Drs. John & Julie Gottman

Pornography in relationships has been an issue for a long time. Even today, professional recommendations on how to manage the use of pornography still vary widely. We attended one workshop in a couples therapy conference that recommended to merely accept porn use, especially by men, as natural and harmless. While this may be an extreme view, many clinicians have suggested that if a couple uses pornography as a stimulus for intimacy, or if they both agree to read or view pornographic materials together, then porn use is fine. In fact, many professionals have thought it might *increase* relationship connection and intimacy. In the Bringing Baby Home new parents workshop, we initially took this view since our research had demonstrated that, after a baby arrives, relationship intimacy decreases and measures were needed to strengthen intimate sexual connection.

Recently, however, research on the effects of pornography use, especially one person frequently viewing pornographic images online, shows that pornography can hurt a couple's relationship. The effect may be true, in part, because pornography can be a "supernormal stimulus". Nikko Tinbergen, a Nobel Prize winning ethologist, described a supernormal stimulus as a stimulus that evokes a much larger response than one that has evolutionary significance. One effect of a supernormal stimulus is that interest wanes in normal stimuli. Tinbergen studied male stickleback fish who would naturally attack a rival male that entered their territory during mating season. He created an oval object with a very red belly, more intensely red than the natural fish. The fish fiercely attacked the mock up and subsequently lost interest in attacking its real male rival. Now the supernormal stimulus evoked a reaction, but not the normal stimulus.

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.

There are many other factors about porn use that can threaten a relationship's intimacy. First, intimacy 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.

Second, 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.

Third, the porn user may expect that their partner will always be immediately ready for intercourse. This is unrealistic as well. Research has revealed that genital engorgement leads to a desire for sex only 10% of the time in women and 59% of the time in men.

Fourth, some porn users rationalize that pornography is ok if it does not involve partnered sexual acts and instead relies only on masturbation. While this may accomplish orgasm the relationship goal of intimate connection is still confounded and ultimately lost.

Worse still, many porn sites include violence toward women, the antithesis of intimate connection. Porn use can become an actual addiction with the same brain mechanism activated in other behavioral addictions, like gambling. Pornography can also lead to a decrease in relationship trust and a higher likelihood of affairs outside the relationship. Many porn sites now offer an escalation of sexual activity beyond simply viewing porn that includes actually having sex with other individuals.

Finally, the support of porn use is reinforcing an industry that abuses the actors employed to create the pornography. We applaud major media outlets like *Time Magazine* that have joined the anti-pornography movement. Their April cover story titled *Porn and the Threat to Virility* dives into how modern men who grew up watching porn as children and teenagers have started a

movement against it, hoping to shed light on the sexual material's power to harm Americans.

In summary, we are led to unconditionally conclude that for many reasons, pornography poses a serious threat to couple intimacy and relationship harmony. This moment calls for public discussion, and we want our readers around the world to understand what is at stake.

Update – Open Letter on Porn

When couples use porn in a way to stimulate each other, such as in masturbation and fantasy, porn can be beneficial to a relationship. Researchers from Brigham Young University completed a study of 813 university students and found that 87% of men and 31% of women use porn, and that 67% of men and 49% of women find pornography use to be acceptable.

Using porn can lead couples to discuss their sexual preferences, and research does show that talking about sex improves a couple's sex life and leads to more orgasms for women. This is good. But this use of porn is rare, at least in the research we did in our Love Lab and clinical practice.

The issue with porn is that it acts as a supernormal stimulus, which can lead to a lack of desire for sex with one's partner, a normal sex stimulus. Supernormal stimuli are everywhere around us, including in advertisements of the idealized and photoshopped female body as well as in junk food laden with unhealthy fats and sugars. In fact, some young men who, as adolescents, engaged in heavy porn use and subsequent masturbation reported being unable to engage sexually with a partner later in life. Some of them suffered from "porn-induced erectile dysfunction" or some other factor that inhibited them from having sex, even with partners that they found to be very attractive. This indicates that, at least anecdotally, the supernormal stimulus of porn use had conditioned those young men to respond sexually only to pornography and not to the normal sex stimulus of a sexual partner.

In an article published in Esquire, one young man revealed that "porn use did not just cause the end of his relationship, but ruined his enjoyment of sex altogether." However, some of those young men have since sworn off

their porn habit in order to enjoy sex and become healthier sexual partners, and some have formed “porn recovery” support groups online that provide an open forum to discuss the issue of porn addiction and its consequences.

Regarding the influence of porn on men’s sexual attitudes and desires, there is no empirical evidence that shows a link between violence toward women and porn use, yet a 2010 meta-analysis of several studies found an “overall significant positive association between pornography use and attitudes supporting violence against women.” In the aforementioned Esquire article, one young man reported that as his consumption of porn increased through his adolescence, he started to view more “extreme” porn and admitted that he “liked watching women be degraded.” Subsequently, he argued that “my mind completely separated emotion, empathy, intimacy, love, affection, and all other virtues from sex. And my expectations made my partners feel objectified, used, and ‘not enough’”.

As such, we can argue that the frequent consumption of porn, especially coupled with masturbation (at least by men), can reduce the quality and quantity of sex in a committed relationship. While porn use can be a way for couples to openly discuss sex and improve their sex lives, which is a positive outcome, the negative consequences of excessive porn use, such as becoming conditioned to require porn to become sexually aroused or achieve orgasm, are readily apparent.

This article can be found online at:

<https://www.gottman.com/blog/an-open-letter-on-porn/>