

Autor: Gary Wilson

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A cure for porn addicts who have lost that loving feeling

Young men are finding that addiction to hardcore videos is harming their physical ability to have real sex. Gary Wilson explains how science and online discussion groups are helping them to quit

Gary Wilson

In 2007 something strange happened on the internet. I know, something strange is always happening on the internet. But this wasn't a viral sensation that came and went in a few days. Hundreds and then thousands of people, mostly male, mostly young, started questioning the effects of online pornography.

I first met some of these men when they showed up in a forum on sex, mating and bonding run by my wife, Marnia Robinson. They complained of delayed ejaculation, inability to climax and erectile dysfunction (but not with porn), porn fetish tastes that had morphed beyond recognition and loss of attraction to real partners. Some were convinced they were addicted.

As an anatomy and physiology teacher, I had been keeping up with the biological discoveries about the physiological underpinnings of our appetites and how they can become unbalanced. Addiction is a controversial word. But the neuroscience is remarkably unambiguous.

Researchers will tell you that both behavioural and drug addictions involve the same fundamental brain mechanisms. Whether you take cocaine, gamble or are captivated by internet action, the chronic elevation of your dopamine (the "go get it" neurochemical) risks bringing on a well-established set of core brain changes. Hundreds of neuroscience studies on behavioural addictions - including more than 75 on internet addicts - show all the same addiction-related brain changes seen in substance addicts. (Toxic drugs cause additional effects.) From a neuroscience perspective, something epic occurred in 2006. Galleries of short porn clips appeared featuring the hottest few minutes of an unending supply of videos. Sexual stimulation releases the highest natural levels of dopamine, and these "tube sites" (they stream instantly like YouTube videos) could amplify and prolong arousal with surprising, shocking

and anxiety-producing content, all of which release dopamine. The porn industry had perfected an addiction hazard that was far more potent than Playboy, VHS or dial-up.

A paradoxical effect of too much dopamine is a drop in sensitivity to it, so as a user slips into addiction everyday pleasures pale. He searches even harder for something "hot". Meanwhile his brain tightly wires itself to whatever rewards him with the biggest dopamine blasts. If that's porn, eventually he may not be able to climax without constant novelty.

I shared with the visitors to my wife's forum some of the latest neuroscience findings on neuroplasticity and addiction. Armed with an account of "how the machine works" that drew on the best available neuroscience, the men on the forum realised there was a good chance they could reverse porn-induced brain changes simply by quitting. Why wait for an expert consensus about whether internet porn was potentially harmful or not when they could eliminate it and track results? To everyone's astonishment, grave symptoms generally reversed themselves within months. A trickle of reports became a steady stream. Along the way, the men learnt and shared critical insights about recovery.

Soon, the majority of those seeking solutions for unexplained sexual dysfunctions were younger men. They set up anonymous forums to support one another. Now there are hundreds of thousands of members in such forums worldwide. Yet the phenomenon has, until now, remained beneath the radar. We may pride ourselves on our open, "sex-positive" culture. But men tend to keep quiet about erectile dysfunction caused by porn use.

This year, addiction neuroscientists at Cambridge and Germany's Max Planck Institute began to study internet porn users' brains. Not surprisingly, they found telltale addiction-related changes.

Porn addicts' brains lit up in response to porn-video clips much as cocaine addicts' brains light up for powder. More than half of the Cambridge addicts (average age 25) reported difficulty with erections or arousal with real partners, though not with porn. And the Max Planck study found that porn use correlated with loss of grey matter in the brain's reward system.

The Cambridge researchers also found that the younger the user, the more powerfully his brain responded to porn clips. Adolescents have lower baseline dopamine, which makes day-to-day life seem boring. If you're a parent of teens you'll probably have gathered that already. But their dopamine spikes higher than that of adults in response to thrills. They naturally seek out anything that promises these exhilarating hits. This mechanism drives all young mammals to explore new territories and avoid inbreeding.

Today's smartphone-wielding adolescent need never leave his bed to experience an endless dopamine drip in the form of novelty, sexual stimulation and risk-taking. He thinks he's learning about adult sexuality, but he's actually training for an entirely different sport: screens, isolation, constant novelty, fetish porn and watching other people have sex.

His situation is even more precarious because, by adulthood, his brain will have pruned away billions of nerve connections, based on the principle of use it or lose it. Real sex, when it finally occurs, may feel an alien experience.

The effects are showing up in some ominous statistics. Fifty-four per cent of Canadian males aged 16-21 report sexual problems: low libido (10%), problems with orgasm (24%) and erectile dysfunction (27%).

On the forums I monitor, young men need months longer to recover erectile function than men who did not grow up

with streaming porn. I am not interested in telling people what to do and I don't want to start banning things. But modern pornography poses serious risks to its users. It is past time we understood them. Mindless identification of

porn with sexual liberation is every bit as unhelpful as prudishness. Let's start from what we now know about the effects of porn on the brains of those who use it and work from there.

Gary Wilson is the author of the ebook

Your Brain on Porn: Internet Pornography and the Emerging Science of Addiction

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