

## **How Is Pornography Addictive?**

By Mr. Jan Veselak, MA, Licensed Addiction Counselor

Can pornography be addictive? There are many professionals who argue that it cannot be addictive because it is not a substance and therefore cannot be physically addictive and ceasing the behavior therefore would not cause physiological withdrawal symptoms. These people like to see addiction in a very restricted and narrow sense. We have a different view based on the literature, and many years of experience. We believe that all addictive behaviors, be they chemical or process, are driven by physiological processes, primarily in the brain. If we ingest a psychoactive substance like alcohol, we feel a change in mood. We also feel a change in mood when we experience certain places, images, odors, memories and sensations. A beautiful sunset or stirring piece of music will change our mood. Certain experiences will give us an even more powerful mood change. A good-looking person who stimulates our arousal template creates a mood-altering event, possibly along with certain physiological changes! The smell of freshly baked cookies has a similar effect, although with salivation as the physiological change. That is why cookie stores often pump chemicals into the air so that we will desire a cookie. Most people have fond memories of their childhood and cookies and want, on some level, to recreate those fond feelings.

What is happening in our brains to create these very powerful mood-altering feelings? The release of dopamine! Dopamine is a neurotransmitter, a brain chemical which affects the pleasure center of the brain. Dopamine is the reward seeking chemical. It tells us that we like what we are doing, we want more of it and that we should continue this reward producing behavior! Thus begins a cycle of wanting to do more and more of what we are enjoying. This in and of itself is not addiction. Addiction occurs when our brains start to require this particular mood-enhancing behavior in order to fire dopamine and actually have a positive change in mood. The firing of dopamine is now dependent upon this particular behavior and other, previously enjoyable behaviors lose their potency. This situation leads us to take more risks and seek these particular mood-enhancing behaviors above everything else. There is a perfect storm of biochemical, social and psychological factors which lead from enjoying a behavior to it becoming addictive.

Pornography is actually a fairly easy thing to become addicted to. Most people enjoy looking at naked good-looking people! And pornography usually starts out with people looking at good-looking naked people. The power of pornography lies in its ability to seduce us into looking at more and more exciting images. How does it do this? One of the most powerful forces that leads us to do anything is novelty. Novel situations stimulate the brain and releases more dopamine. So, we can start out looking at nudes and after a while get bored. But with all the many sources

of pornography available to use today, there's always something more tempting, more obscure, more tantalizing to look at. Even the grotesque, ugly and perverted can stimulate curiosity. The novelty of these new scenes feed the desire to keep looking until we get bored again. But wait, there is always fresh novelty with the next page or image! This creates a cycle wherein the brain keeps seeking new experiences, and hence, new changes in mood.

Another aspect, which also, happens to gamblers, is the near win. The near win is highly seductive. For instance, in a slot machine one can get two cherries and then a bar. But just above the bar is an icon of cherries. A near win! This experience has been found to be more seductive and reinforcing than wins themselves. Hence, those loose and random slot machines seem to come up with more near wins than what statistically happens with pure randomness. I have had clients tell me of a similar experience with pornography. The picture is almost perfect, but there's something in the photos that isn't quite right for full sexual gratification. But maybe the next picture will! Hence the designers of and the process of pornography, also practice the same reinforcing behaviors that advertisers, gambling establishments and any other enticing enterprises employ. There is always the promise of the next picture being more arousing. But again it never completely satisfies. And so there is always a next picture. Eventually all those pictures become boring and frustrating, leading to the need to push the limit and go further into more daring aspects of pornography.

In pornography, the addiction is based on an attachment to pixels, rather than real people or situations. We seek *images* that stimulate. It does not follow, however, that the person looking at these photos wants to actually engage in the same sexual activities as seen in the photos. They may even be experienced as morally reprehensible, which increases the excitement! So many times people end up looking at photos that are illegal and even get arrested for downloading the sites but would themselves never actually engage in those activities personally. The seduction of the pixels, and images are themselves the addiction. With high-speed Internet the experiences of novelty elevates exponentially and can have many effects physiologically and psychologically which drag viewers deeper and deeper into the abyss of addiction.

If you relate to this process and would like more information or help, please contact Mr. Jan Veselak, LAC, and certified sex addiction counselor at 303-718-6853.