

Strategies for Addressing Pornography and Internet Sexuality in the Hope Approach

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The advent of the internet has forever changed society, a fact often recognized when considering the unbridled opportunity of worldwide connection. However, the internet often has a dark side that remains unacknowledged, particularly in the area of pornography (Carnes et al., 2001). About 17% of internet users have problems with sex on the internet (Carnes et al.). Over 100,000 websites sell sex in some way, with 200 more added daily, making sex the third largest sector on the internet economically (Carnes et al.). Eight percent of users in one study of cybersexual behavior spend more than 2 hours online daily (Carvalho & Gomes, 2003). This signals a looming and unexpected problem for modern men and women. Opportunities for sexuality online include accessing pornography, having sexual contact online with a fantasy partner, and using software incorporating sexuality (Carnes et al.). Cybersex is particularly alluring due to its constant availability, its isolating tendency, the anonymity the internet provides, its affordability, and the injection of individualized fantasy (Carnes et al.). Some individuals even come to prefer online relationships to real-world ones, particularly those with limited social skills (Carvalho & Gomes).

Problems created by internet sexuality

Carnes and colleagues (2001) outline several factors that indicate problematic usage, including compulsive use (increasing frequency and length of use), continuing to engage in the behavior despite negative consequences, irritability when trying to reduce Internet sex use, using cybersexuality as an escape, searching for increasing intensity or risk in cybersex, lying to others about internet sexual behaviors, committing illegal acts online, and preoccupation with internet sex. Delmonico and Miller (2003) developed the Internet Sex Screening Test, a useful screening tool to determine if use is problematic for the individual. Carnes and colleagues outline a long list of rationalizations used when individuals are in denial about their problem (2001, p.114-115, 127) and review the cycle of sexual addiction. Addicts are likely to experience shame and isolation that makes it more difficult for them to disclose to their partner (Bird, 2006), which further erodes relational trust.

Complicating the cybersexual picture are more generally acknowledged differences in the ways that men and women view sexuality, such that women are more likely to see oral sex and cybersex as infidelity than men (Knox, Zusman, & McNeely, 2008). Cooper and his colleagues (2003) found that there are sex differences in accessing pornographic material on the internet, such that women are more likely to prefer using it to maintain connection with an established sexual partner, whereas men are more likely to access visual erotica, which is more likely to be addictive and destructive. In the United States, males are more likely to engage in online sexual activities (84%) than females (16%; Cooper et al., 2002). For this reason, the language of this section will use the husband as the partner with sexual

addiction. However, it must be acknowledged that there is a growing minority of women who struggle with cybersexual problems (Ferree, 2003, and Leiblum, 2001).

In addition to its effects on the individual, various studies have indicated that cybersexual involvement has great impact on family members as well. Most partners do not see occasional pornography use as negative, but nor do they see it as positive (Bridges, Bergner, & Hesson-McInnis, 2003). Between 30 and 40 percent of partners in one study (Bridges et al.) indicated that pornography had negative consequences for the relationship, including decreased self-esteem and increased feelings of undesirability for the partner of the one using pornography. Many women see cybersex as just as painful as an affair, including those whose spouses have had both virtual and real affairs (Schneider, 2003).

Help for cybersexual issues

For those that are seeking help due to cybersexual issues, Carnes and colleagues (2001) offer several suggestions to the individual. They state that they need to start with first-order changes, such as setting specific external boundaries in order to reduce access to pornography, reduce anonymity associated with online sex, reduce objectification of one's partner and others online, develop accountability with others, and develop healthy habits online. They also suggest second-order changes, deeper levels of change required to solidify change in one's life; particular suggestions include engaging in a 12-step program, seeing a therapist, using a support group, making new connections socially, preventing relapse, and getting others involved in recovery. They outline a series of stages, including the developing stage (when one is developing awareness of the problematic nature of cybersexual behavior), crisis and decision (when one faces a crisis and commits to changing), shock (when one is emotionally numb and disoriented, trying to control the damage of others becoming aware of the problem), grief over the loss of the compulsive behaviors, repair (rebuilding one's life after ending problematic sexual behavior), and growth (improved relationships with others due to reduction in addictive behaviors). Zitzman and Butler (2005) outlined a marital intervention to help couples deal with pornography addiction that included restoring trust, softening (wives learning to separate themselves from their husband's problem), recovery (husbands disclosing their problem and feeling accepted by the partner), and marital enrichment (focusing on solving problems and restoring unity).

It is important for the therapist to be aware that this is not an isolated problem; it affects all members of the household. Schneider (2003) found that partners of those struggling with cybersexual addiction reported hurt, betrayal, devastation, shame, isolation, jealousy, and anger. They reported decreased self-esteem and were more likely to dissolve the relationship; one partner also experienced decreased interest in sexuality with the partner in 68% of cases. Partners saw themselves as undesirable and unable to compete with online images, and according to Bergner and Bridges (2002) were also likely to see themselves as degraded, stupid, or weak. Cybersex also causes them to view their partner as sexually perverted, a liar, a poor husband/father, and selfish. Partners go through phases of denial, shock at the activities, and problem-solving before they begin to recover (Schneider). According to Bergner and Bridges, partners often withdraw and become secretive, the couple's sex life and intimacy deteriorates, and they are "living a lie." Cybersex is particularly destructive because it occurs at home and consumes so much time (Schneider). The children of cybersex addicts are often exposed to inappropriate sexual images, become part of the parents' conflict, do not receive proper parental attention, and frequently go through divorce traced to pornography (Schneider). Manning (2006) reports pornography use often leads to discussions of sexuality prior to the child being ready and increases his or her risky sexual behaviors, such as anal sex or sex outside of relationships. Thus,

cybersex impacts the entire family system. For this reason, it is important to assess and address internet pornography usage within the hope-focused approach. For those incorporating addressing this issue with the HOPE approach, the following recommendations are offered.

Treatment Tips

For the addict:

- Be sure to do a good assessment. The line between accessing pornography occasionally and having a problem is a difficult one. See annotated bibliography for help.

For the partner:

- It is vital that she realize that it is not about her, but is her partner's attempt to make up for some loss or wrong he suffered as a child (Bergner & Bridges, 2002).
- A key goal is to diminish her degradation of the partner (Bergner & Bridges, 2002). This will not help in recovery, but will prolong it.
- A careful analysis of what he will and will not accept from his partner and being able to communicate that to her without coercion or high emotional reactivity, is another key goal (Bergner & Bridges, 2002).

For the therapist:

- Be aware of your own beliefs about pornography, and the beliefs of the client. They may not be the same. Clients may see any pornography as problematic due to religious beliefs, or vice versa. It is important to understand their view of such behaviors.
- Pay attention to issues of pornography/sexual addiction that may arise. Use them as an opportunity to probe for the impact of such behaviors on the relationship.
- Be careful of how much disclosure you invite, as this may traumatize the partner. However, inform the partner that being dishonest is likely to impede later progress in therapy (Bird, 2006).
- Incorporation of individual issues (recovery) and couple relationship (stabilization) facilitates improved functioning (Bird, 2006).

Internet Sexuality: Case Vignette

Horatio and Ismena have come to marriage therapy saying that they need to work on their intimacy. This is the first marriage for both Ismena, but it is Horatio's second marriage. They have one daughter and one son who have recently left home. This vignette is from their first session.

Horatio: I guess I had some unrealistic expectations of what this time in our life would be like. I kind of thought, with the kids gone, that we would get back on track in our relationship.

Ismena: It's not that I'm not interested in time together, just not what *you* want to do during our time together. (*Turning to therapist*) He says that he wants to be closer, but it's like he's hot and cold. When he does want to spend time with me, he wants to spend time watching porn, and I'm not OK with that.

We never needed it before, and when we have sex now I feel gross. So I'm not that interested, and either is he, a lot of the time.

Horatio: That's not true! I want to have sex with you, but you never start anything. I always have to be the one to initiate, and porn's just a way to help. I thought we'd be having more sex, now that we don't have to worry about the kids, but it's less than ever.

Therapist: So, it sounds like you're disappointed.

Horatio: Yeah. I mean, you hear that when the kids leave the nest, you get back to normal with your sex life, and I was looking forward to that...

Ismena: *Normal?* You call this *normal*? We never needed porn before, and I don't see why we do now. It seems like without the porn, you're not interested in me anymore!

Therapist: It seems like pornography is a concern for you, Ismena. Tell me about that.

Ismena: I was brought up not to believe in pornography. I don't like it. We never used it when the kids were around, and I don't see why we need it now. I don't think it's right.

Horatio: I don't think it's right for kids to look at it, which is why I didn't have it in the house when the kids were around. But we're married, and we're adults. It's not like we're doing anything wrong. We're not going out there and cheating or anything. We're just using a little entertainment to set the mood. There's nothing wrong with that, right?

Therapist: What are your beliefs about pornography?

Horatio: Well, I guess when I was growing up they said that it wasn't a good thing to do, but I don't see why. It's not hurting anyone. I like it, and it makes our sex life better.

Ismena: *Better?* I don't think so. We have sex less than we ever had!

Horatio: That's because you aren't interested anymore. I'm a man; I need sex. If you won't do it, I have to get what I can. (*Pointing to therapist*) He's a guy; he understands!

Therapist: I'm not sure that I do. Can you tell me a little more about what's going on?

Horatio: Well, since she won't have sex with me, I sometimes go online. Only at night, after she's asleep. She woke up the other day and came downstairs to see where I was, and she saw some of it. It's no big deal, just something I do to relieve stress. It's not like I'm looking at kiddie porn or something. I don't know what she's upset about.

Ismena: I'm so embarrassed (*starts crying*). You don't even want me anymore. You're always on the computer, looking at pictures. You only want to have sex when you can watch other women. It makes me feel disgusting. Even when we do have sex, you have to see the woman on tv.

Horatio: It's not like I'm cheating on you or something! You make it sound terrible, but I'm just relieving a little tension, since you're not interested in me anymore.

Ismena: *I'm not interested in you? You're* the one that sits on the computer all night. How can we have sex when you never come to bed? And when we do, you want to do...gross things...you never wanted to do them before, and I just don't think they're right. You like the way all those other women look better

than me. There's no way I can compete with them. And you've been doing this for a long time; I just caught you.

Horatio: Well, I have been looking at porn occasionally for the past couple of years. You were so busy with the kids and everything, I just didn't feel like *bothering you*...

Ismena: Occasionally? They wrote you up for it *at work*. I'm really worried about how much time you're spending with porn, instead of with me.

Here, the therapist is seeing some classic signs of struggle with pornography. Horatio is spending less time with his available sexual partner. He is spending increasing amounts of time on pornography, even jeopardizing his livelihood. His partner is feeling unattractive, and he is treating her as an object to fulfill his sexual needs. He is also minimizing his use and blaming his partner for withholding sex. He has brought pornography into the relationship, which is offensive to his wife morally and makes her uncomfortable; it appears that she felt pressured to take part in his fantasies, and his pornography use is interfering with their intimacy.

Annotated Bibliography

Carnes, P., Delmonico, D., Griffin, E., & Moriarty, J. (2001). In the shadows of the net: Breaking free of online sexual behavior. Center City, MN: Hazelden.

This volume is written as a self-help book for those struggling with compulsive internet behaviors. It provides an overview of what kind of sexual experiences are available online, how to determine whether behaviors are problematic, how to understand these behaviors in context, a look at the role of arousal, the consequences of problematic online behavior, and how to make long-lasting changes to escape problematic behavior.

Bird, M. (2006). Sexual addiction and marriage and family therapy: Facilitating individual and relationship healing through couple therapy. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 32(3), 297-311.

This article has an extensive review of research on sexual addiction therapies, with separate sections for its effects on the addict, the partner, and the relationship. It includes an overview of what has been proven to be effective in therapy with addicts, incorporating the modalities of individual therapy, group therapy, and couples therapy. It ends with suggestions for therapeutic interventions as a couple.

Bridges, A. J., Bergner, R. M., & Hesson-McInnis, M. (2003). Romantic partners' use of pornography: Its significance for women. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 29, 1-14.

The authors developed the Pornography Distress Scale (PDS), a 7-point Likert scale with 32 items and high internal reliability, to examine views of partner pornography use. A large minority of participants indicated that their partner's pornography use has had negative effects on the relationship, their self-esteem, or feelings of undesirability. Those that were dating their partner had significantly more positive views of pornography than those that were married.

Bergner, R., & Bridges, A. (2002). The significance of heavy pornography involvement for romantic partners: Research and clinical implications. *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, 28, 193-206.

This article is a research study based on women's posts at websites related to sex addiction. It surveyed them to understand the women's concerns about the relationship after a male partner's pornography use, which was characterized by the women as extreme. It provides insight into the partner's struggle, as well as practical tips on how to deal with this issue in therapy for both the addict and the partner.

Ferree, M. (2003). Women and the web: Cybersex activity and implications. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy, 18*(3), 385-393.

This article addresses women's online sexual activity, in case this is needed.

Zitzman, S. T., & Butler, M. H. (2005). Attachment, addiction, and recovery: Conjoint marital therapy for recovery from a sexual addiction. *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity, 12*, 311-337. The authors examine qualitatively conjoint marital therapy for marital distress and attachment problems that this addictive behavior causes in a sample of those treated conjointly by for sexual addiction by the husband. The results highlighted several major themes for therapy, including restoring trust, softening (learn to separate from the problem), recovery approaches, and marital enrichment. The authors also make specific recommendations for conjoint therapy for this problem.

Additional References

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Schneider, J. P. (2003). The impact of compulsive cybersex behaviors on the family. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy, 18*(3), 329-354.