

## **Reflection Paper**

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This is my personal story of my struggle with porn addiction. I grew up in a catholic conservative home with an angry father who was emotionally absent and a mother who was physically, emotionally, and verbally abused. Because of the domestic violence at home, I did not want to be at home and so I started gravitating towards friends/gangs who introduced me to porn magazines and then porn videos. It started with experimenting, then to occasional watching, then escalated to abuse, and ultimately to dependency. I got hooked on porn. In those days we did not have an internet connection or a computer/laptop at home, but we would gather frequently at our friend's house to watch porn the whole night. The National Council on Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity defines a sexual addict as one who “engages in persistent and escalating patterns of sexual behaviors acted out despite increasingly negative consequences to self and others” (Knauer, 2002). Quoting Koob & Volkow (2010), Erickson (2011) states that the disorder of drug addiction has 3 elements of “impulsivity, obsessive thinking, and compulsivity” that leads to three stages of an addiction cycle namely (a) initial use/binge/intoxication, (b) withdrawal/negative affect, and (c) preoccupation/anticipation (craving). I had gone from initial use to binge to intoxication. Magazines and books no longer satisfied my craving. I had developed tolerance akin to a drug addict, wherein I now needed “higher and higher doses of the drug to produce the initial effect” (Erickson, 2007).

I started craving hard-core porn and more. I would view and read anything that had to do with sex. When it was not porn videos, I would view and read sexually explicit magazines and books.

Hilton and Watts (2011) stated that the reason for this compulsivity was that *all addictions* (whether it is substance use or alcohol-related, or porn addictions) other than bringing about chemical changes in the brain also create cerebral dysfunction. This cerebral dysfunction called "hypofrontality syndromes" is an area associated with compulsivity. Addicts, therefore,

are unable to make strategic decisions and end up making impulsive decisions (Hilton & Watts, 2011).

The physical impact of my porn addiction was that it led to excessive and compulsive masturbation. Consistent use of pornography and compulsive masturbation are some of the sexual addictions listed by the National Council on Sexual Addictions (Knauer, 2002, p. 235). Mentally, I was constantly disturbed by lustful thoughts and a craving to watch porn and indulge in masturbation. As per Katehakis (2015) Instead of cultivating intimate relationships, porn addicts choose masturbation to self-medicate. This leads to the person becoming isolated, and ultimately ending up spending all their time and money on porn to further fuel their compulsive behavior (para. 4). My addiction also impacted the way I related with women. I was constantly looking for physical relationships and became an abuser myself on many occasions. Forcing myself upon women became an obsession and habit. Women for me became a commodity/property to be used and abused.

Moreover, Knauer (2002), states that survivors will employ any number of behaviors to numb themselves to the pain resulting from their sexual abuse, anger being one of them (p. 266). I found myself becoming a very angry person. I would have so much rage in me to the point that I constantly wanted to harm and kill people. I started responding with anger to anyone around me. Another effect of watching porn was that I would often go into a depressive mood where I felt shame, guilt, and hatred for myself. To anesthetize me from these feelings of shame, guilt, I would get back to watching porn and masturbating. The reason for guilt, shame, and hatred for myself was that I was not able to have the willpower to have self-control. I later became aware that the untimely and artificial release of chemicals in the brain "causes the portion of the brain responsible for decision-making and willpower to shrink" (Gilkerson, 2021), thereby reducing

the strength to make decisions. Furthermore, I found it difficult and challenging to focus on anything for a long time. I could not read or concentrate on anything for a long time and very rarely remembered what I memorized, and therefore began failing my academic classes. Gilkerson (2021), quoting a study, stated that pornography addiction may impair short-term and long-term memory in juveniles and adults.

Viewing pornography excessively brings with it higher incidences of depressive and anxiety symptoms (George, 2019, para.1). The pornography addict who views porn not only alters his normal emotional state but is also more likely to feel more depressed and emotionally down (Gilkerson, 2021, para. 3). While the intense feelings of guilt and shame kept me awake at night, which denied me a peaceful and restful sleep, the mornings brought depression and anxiety-like symptoms. I dreaded waking up in the morning. Most of the time, I wanted to stay in bed with curtains drawn, never wanting to see the light, knowing that my day will be dominated by feelings of anxiety, hopelessness, and helplessness. Also, because my mind was filled with images that I did not want to remember, and because of the guilt and shame plaguing me, I would exhibit compulsive obsessive behaviors. I had to keep myself busy to keep my mind off the thoughts and images that were clouding my mind.

It is said that repeated exposure to porn leads to the rewiring of the brain such that the chemical pathways of the brain designed for sexual pleasure now seek porn instead of real sex. That leads to the kind of craving experienced by a drug addict (Gilkerson, 2021). My addiction negatively affected my capability to have sexual intimacy with my wife. For many months I would not be able to have intimate moments and I would not like to be touched. I am not sure whether this is the result of my porn addiction, or if it is the psychological impact of sexual

abuse I endured as a child; I am very sensitive to touch. Even before coming to the Lord, I knew that I was committing a grave sin, and I wouldn't dare go to church. My porn addiction fueled my shame and guilt to the point that I stopped going to church, stopped reading the Bible, and praying. I was afraid to go in the presence of God-feeling condemned. Because I could not talk to anyone about my addiction, I was not able to grasp the depth of what my porn addiction was doing to me or how it was hurting me mentally, physically, emotionally, relationally (especially with women), socially, psychologically, and spiritually.

The Lord in his mercy and grace however had different plans for me. I got a job far away from home. Soon thereafter, I accepted the Lord Jesus Christ in that very place where I moved to because of my job. It was because of the Christian testimony of my friend that I came to know about the Lord Jesus and His gift of Salvation. At the time I was craving for peace and a sense of purpose. I am not sure whether my lack of peace and purpose had anything to do with my porn addiction. However, I felt that the Lord had changed me and therefore there was no motivation for me to indulge in my addiction anymore. It felt like an instant miracle. I felt I was immediately healed or so I thought. However, what continued was the craving for porn and I would often have lust-filled thoughts. The constant reading and meditating on the word of God helped a lot in clearing my lustful thoughts.

I was porn-free for almost 8 years. I came to the USA because of my job transfer. There was more freedom in terms of the accessibility of the internet. This became a snare for me as my cravings increased and after some months in the USA, I relapsed again. Washton & Zweben (2002) defines relapse as a return of the addict to his/her former pattern of Substance use. It is reverting to a “previous stage from the present one that the client was in” (Washton & Zweben, 2002). As per Washton & Zweben (2002) relapse occurs because an addict fails to understand

that repeated exposure to certain people, situations, and events have the power to cause a trigger that will make the addict return to their former dependence on the substances. My relapse occurred after counseling someone who had a porn addiction. What they would share with me about their favorite sites created a desire and inquisitiveness in me to come home and start viewing those sites. I was not aware of the fact that there was something called a “trigger” in addictions.

However, I realized that I needed to see a counselor before my addiction spiraled into dependence and abuse. Relapse is common and offers an opportunity for new and deeper learning about addiction and recovery (Washton & Zweben, 2002). Meeting the counselor helped me realize that there were a lot of other factors in my past and other underlying triggers that fueled my porn addiction. These unresolved issues also were responsible for my relapse into porn addiction.

In my first counseling sessions, I was asked to recount my life’s childhood history. The counselor directly asked me if I was ever sexually abused. It was the first time that I had heard someone ask me directly about sexual abuse. Sexual addiction can result from childhood sexual abuse (Knauer, 2002, p. 233). As per Knauer (2002), because of much pain in their life due to sexual abuse, survivors cannot recount their ordeal to anyone openly (p.7). This was my case. Until that time I had not shared with anyone about the sexual abuse I had endured in my childhood. It was the first time that I opened my childhood sexual abuse history to anyone. It was as if I had forgotten about this trauma that was inflicted on me. I had not shared this with anyone for many years until now. Whether it was because of shame, guilt, or disgust for myself and others, I had nevertheless suppressed it within myself.

I was only 7 years old when my sexual abuse began. It was a nightmarish experience being raped and sexually abused by my male relatives and older cousins from the age of 7 onwards till the age of 12. I did not know what they were doing to me except that they told me that it was love. Because my dad was an angry man and was physically abusive, I naturally stayed away from him but gravitated towards others who showed me, love. For ver 5 years I was sexually abused by 4 men regularly. At the same time, they also introduced me to porn material. The counselor helped me understand that the real reason then for my porn addiction were these deep underlying issues that I had not dealt with. As per Knauer (2002),

Nothing is more sacred than our bodies. To be sexually abused sends the survivor message that one's body is not one's own, that sexual services are all that is of value in the victim, and that the victim's feelings do not matter at all to the perpetrator. No wonder survivors need to resort to compulsive behaviors and addictions to numb their emotional pain." (p. 8)

She further states that different sexual abuse victims' resort to different behaviors to relieve the pain of the abuse (Knauer, 2002, p.8). As per the counselor, I unconsciously chose porn to numb my pain. For me, porn was an anesthetic. Moreover, research has confirmed that strong emotions such as grief and anger, "can alter brain function" (Erickson, 2007). The sexual abuse itself had created a lot of other emotional and psychological issues in me that were making me use porn as an anesthetic.

However, I also realized that just knowing what triggered my porn addiction was not enough to help me to get over my addiction. As Washton & Zweben (2002) states, that it is dangerous to think that once the underlying causes of the addiction are adequately resolved, the person's alcohol or drug problem will automatically disappear. To deal with my addiction, the

counselor asked me to put filters on my phone and computer, and also asked me to install accountability software on my phone and computer. When it comes to porn, there is no other way but to starve the brain of the images to bring control back to the addict. I started to have withdrawal symptoms just like in substance or alcohol abuse. As per Erickson (2007), Withdrawal is a normalization process that happens when an addict stop using the drug wherein the body attempts to normalize itself and mechanisms kick in to restore the normal state. The process pushes bodily systems to become more active and in so doing causes a state of hyperexcitability until normal function is restored (Erickson, 2007, p. 42).

I started having headaches, mood swings, lack of focus, anger, anxiety, and depression. The withdrawal symptoms felt paralyzing to me. However slowly I began to see that I had more strength when it came to willpower and self-control. Though the craving continued, with the access to porn sites completely cut off, slowly my brain began to heal. The craving became less and less. The counselor impressed upon me that I needed to know the triggers that tempted me to view porn. I had to know and learn what those triggers were so that I can stay away from people, places, and situations. Furthermore, I had to know what emotional triggers drew me to porn. I realized that my triggers were anger, loneliness, boredom, lack of intimacy, and tiredness. I learned that these triggers would tempt me to turn to porn to get “high”. Becoming high was the result of the untimely and artificial release of chemicals like dopamine, norepinephrine, oxytocin, vasopressin, endorphins, and serotonin. These natural opiates create a “high” that brings about a sense of calm and relaxation while viewing porn (Gilkerson, 2021). I also needed to learn that feelings of shame, guilt, fear, lack of sexual intimacy with my wife, and isolation can also become a breeding ground for a craving to occur and therefore a relapse. By God's grace, I have overcome and have been experiencing victory over my addiction. While the craving

persists, as long I am aware of my triggers, and I take steps to avoid those triggers I believe I am safe.

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