

Men Caught in the Web of Internet Pornography and Sex Addiction

By Randy Flood

Stan, a family law attorney, is married with children. An elder in his church, he has strong convictions about what is moral, how to be a good father, and the importance of marital fidelity. Yet he defies such convictions by staying late at the office to surf the Internet for pornography. And he risks his marriage, family, and job by going to illicit massage parlors during the day. He leads a duplicitous life, rather than a life of integrity as his religion and professional ethics encourage. Why? Because Stan is addicted to sex.

Stan's is only one story. Sex addiction is a real and growing problem in our society—one that causes considerable pain and destruction in the lives of those who can't end the cycle of addiction.

An estimated 16 million Americans are addicted to sex, the majority being men. Many will never get to the point of infidelity, use of prostitutes, or engaging in criminal sexual conduct. At the same time, the evidence shows that a percentage of individuals have already escalated to such behavior. *Internet Filter Review* estimates there are 40 million regular adult users (male and female) of Internet porn, so the odds are pretty good that more individuals will become addicted. Even a small percentage will result in a significant increase in numbers.

Sexual imagery and the pursuit of sexual experiences are intoxicating. By means of video technology and the Internet, pornography has become a multi-billion dollar industry. According to *Internet Filter Review*, revenues in 2006 of the sex and porn industry worldwide were \$97 billion greater than the revenues of Microsoft, the NBA, NFL, and Major League Baseball combined. *The Price of Pleasure*, a recent documentary film, states that currently there are 420 million pages of pornography online, and each year 13,000 pornographic videos are released and 900

million porn videos are viewed. One can only imagine that these numbers are mounting, not diminishing.

Although an individual isn't consuming a mood-altering substance as with alcoholism, sex produces changes in brain chemistry that offer the addict a euphoric, mood-altering experience. Sex addiction is labeled a "process addiction," similar to gambling, in that the user of sex becomes addicted to the behaviors and rituals that create a mood-altering experience. And, as with other addictions, the user eventually begins to experience impaired control resulting in a progression of behavior whereby he or she uses sex more often and in increasing doses. In sex addiction, the dose is increased by going from Internet-only pornography to engaging in extramarital affairs or pursuing more intense or outrageous pornographic imagery. The process begins to take on a life of its own. Weekend use can become daily use; at-home use can progress to use at work.

You'd be hard pressed to find someone who says he or she chose to become addicted. Addiction doesn't work that way. As with substance addictions, process addictions involve a hijacking of the brain where neurochemical changes result in a compromised ability to make rational decisions based on outcomes or consequences. Despite mounting negative consequences such as lost time and money, sexually transmitted diseases,

failed marriage, and loss of job, the sex addict will continue to struggle without effective and specialized treatment and relapse-prevention strategies.

Many men begin using pornography as a distraction from loneliness, a sense of isolation, or feelings of inadequacy. Some may have begun using pornography as impressionable and curious boys. The sight of naked women created a rush, and this level of excitement may have precipitated a pattern of pursuit and use.

In the era when pornographic images were produced on paper, the pursuit of such imagery was more difficult than it is now, when one can simply click away on a computer or smart phone. The Internet created a seismic shift in the cultivation of a sex addiction. Why take the risk of being seen and spending too much money in pursuit of a lap dance when your laptop can provide anonymous and titillating video sex for free? You can sexually Skype, engage in flirtatious chatting, trade pornographic pictures and videos, arrange hookups—the list goes on and on. The variety at your local adult book store pales in comparison to the World Wide Web.

This easy and imposing access can begin a pattern of use similar to when someone begins using or abusing alcohol or drugs. Participating in the behavior can provide relief from stress or anxiety or provide

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intense euphoria. Although many users are married or involved in a significant relationship, this doesn't guarantee intimacy skills or protection from addiction. Through Internet pornography, they can pursue euphoria and false intimacy, which can distract and give temporary pleasure but fails to provide the satisfaction and closeness of an actual relationship.

There are men who may simply be curious about Internet pornography and are involved in what they would describe as a satisfying, intimate relationship with a partner. These men can also develop a pattern of use that involves many hours a week and takes them away from their partners and work responsibilities. This pattern of use and the deception involved in hiding it becomes a toxin to the user and his relationships. As this pattern progresses, addiction looms and intimacy erodes.

Unfortunately, admitting one has an addiction is often viewed as an excuse or a cop-out from responsibility. Additionally, a social stigma is often attached to people who admit to addiction problems.

At the Men's Resource Center of West Michigan, we view sex addiction as a reality to be accepted and treated. We believe that education and treatment are key to stopping the cycle of addiction. Men who struggle with this addiction and problems with pornography don't get better by denying the problem. They get better by becoming accountable, admitting to the problematic use or addiction, and doing something about it.

The insidious presence of a sex addiction in one's life without treatment will eventually destroy everything in its path. Relationships fail, work suffers, and individuals begin drowning in shame and guilt. The journey to recovery requires commitment, strength, and honesty. We have witnessed men from all walks of life crack their denial, understand their problems, and open their hearts and minds to a more loving and intimate life. Although the hardest and biggest step is the first step, a person can move from isolation, shame, and chaos into a therapeutic community offering hope, joy, and restoration.

Effective recovery also includes good relapse prevention strategies. Unfortunately, because of the stigma of sex addiction, ad-

dicts are reluctant to talk with their employer or colleagues. Unlike the alcoholic in recovery who openly passes on the after-work happy hour with supportive colleagues, sex addicts struggle in silence and isolation. They are afraid to install or ask for an Internet filter. They are reluctant to ask for time off from work for 12-step meetings and counseling. For sex addicts, the workplace is analogous to an alcoholic working at a law firm with open wet bars in each office. The community in which they are trying to recover is unnecessarily compromised.

Internet pornography is menacing and imposing. Sex addiction is real and recovery is possible. Education, support, and accountability regarding Internet pornography and sex addiction are needed in every workplace to ensure that our friends, coworkers, and family members are not caught up in the perils of addiction because we choose to stigmatize them.

Actor David Duchovny voluntarily entered a facility for the treatment of sex addic-

tion in September 2008, as did Tiger Woods last year. Our hope is that their actions inspire others to step forward and face their own sex addiction problems—not just for their well-being, but for the welfare of marriages, families, clients, and colleagues. The more we acknowledge and talk about sex addiction as an issue that can be effectively treated and prevented, the more safe and healthy work environments we will create. ■

Randy Flood is a psychologist and the founder and director of the Men's Resource Center of West Michigan with locations in Grand Rapids and Holland. The center provides specialized counseling for men with a variety of issues. Its "Transformations Toward Healthy Sexuality" program provides evaluation and counseling for sexually addicted men or those struggling with problematic use of Internet pornography. Mr. Flood is the co-author of Stop Hurting the Woman You Love, published by Hazelden in 2006.