

The Brain Science of Porn Addiction: How You Got Here

BY THE RECLAIM TEAM - #R008



Engaging in unwanted sexual outlets (porn, masturbation, live sex chat, escorts, paid sex) or even streams of short-term, meaningless relationships can create a great deal of shame, despair and self-loathing. Most struggling individuals don't understand that specific brain processes that have developed their behaviors through specific stages over time.

If you are struggling with pornography, sex addiction, masturbation, or other unhealthy sexual behaviors, these insights can help you better understand how you got here.

Stage 1: Curiosity

As we grow up, it's very natural to be curious about our bodies, the bodies of others, and human sexuality in general. In many cases, experiences with pornography, masturbation, casual sex, and other sexual outlets start out motivated by simple curiosity. We can be exposed to these things by accident, through our own efforts, or through friends and family members. In any case, it's usually a natural curiosity that lures us in.

Stage 2: Excitement and Pleasure

After the initial discovery, many individuals start using sexual outlets "recreationally." That is, they find them exciting and arousing. Pornography viewing, masturbation, and various other sexual outlets trigger the brain into releasing powerful neurochemicals like dopamine, norepinephrine, and endorphins, producing a "rush" or a "high." Sexual outlets are a very convenient and powerful way for the brain to feel pleasure and cope with boredom or mental burnout. In fact, these activities are initially thought of as fun, exciting, and an easy and cheap way to get a thrill.

Stage 3: Self-medication

Sexual outlets and behaviors release the same kinds of neurochemicals commonly experienced with illicit street drugs, alcohol, and prescription drugs. What starts out as recreational use can quickly lead to an escalating "drug of choice" for self-medication and escape. Over time, the brain learns that the quickest, easiest, and most potent solution for feeling anger, stress, boredom, loneliness, etc. is a sexual outlet. Individuals in this stage usually need to go through a detox period and create some boundaries so the brain can get a break from the neurochemicals and start responding to normal, healthy, pleasure experiences.

Stage 4: Dependency

When pleasure is easily and instantly accessible, can be produced on demand, and is experienced repetitively—for example, when internet porn viewing is coupled with masturbation—it can become

addictive very rapidly. Sexual outlets and behaviors become a central focus for individuals in this stage. Thoughts become dominated by sexual images, urges, and fantasies. Increasing amounts of time, effort, and energy are expended on anticipating and preparing for sexual outlets, engaging in them, or fighting the urge. The brain begins to interpret sexual outlets as a "need" just like food or sleep. Over time, dependence on the chemical release develops as the brain is convinced that it needs the chemical rush induced by the sexual outlets to function in life. Individuals who are in this stage may have tried to stop, but can't. Just as those who struggle with drugs and alcohol, they have developed a chemical dependency.

Stage 5: Replacement For True Intimacy

In this stage, pornography, masturbation, cybersex chat rooms, paid sex, and "one night stand" meaningless relationships completely take the place of real human connection, intimacy, and relationships. These sexual outlets offer a "fantasized relationship;" a semblance of being in love and having a fulfilling relationship that fills the void of loneliness. In this fantasy world, people imagine a relationship with the object of their lust:

- They project emotional connections: "She wants only me." "He adores me—I'm desired, craved, loved."
- They believe the experience is exclusive and private: "It's just me and her."
- The experience is seen as exciting, pleasurable, taboo, and privileged: "No one else understands me this way." "She knows just what I like."

The great tragedy of using these types of behaviors as a substitute for real intimacy is that these activities shut the person off from true emotional intimacy or real human interaction, making them feel even more isolated, disconnected and lonely, which increases their longing, pain, and shame. This then drives them to seek out more of their behaviors, creating a deepening downward-spiraling isolation and loneliness cycle.

Stage 6: Trapped In the Avoidance Cycle

Eventually the myriad negative consequences from unwanted sexual behaviors leads the individual to a resolution to quit. What happens when he tries to force the sexual thoughts and urges out of his mind? Those urges drill their way in with even more power, until they become "intrusive thoughts." Often, he fights for as long as he can, and then finally worn out by the battle, he gives in.

As he views the images, powerful neurochemicals flood the brain, and there is a very temporary but highly satisfying relief from the battle. "Finally, I don't have to fight these sexual thoughts and urges anymore!" he thinks. However, once the chemicals dissipate from his brain, logic and reasoning return, and then guilt, regret, and shame set in. The individual makes a new vow to fight the urge, and the "Avoidance Cycle" starts all over again. After repeated failures to cease the behavior, the individual starts to feel "out of control," weak, discouraged, and hopeless. He begins to fear the sexual thoughts, images, or stimuli that he might encounter in everyday life.

There is Another Way

Regardless of your particular kind of unwanted sexual behavior, understand that there is a logical, reasonable, scientific explanation behind how you got caught up in these behaviors. You are NOT a freak, loser, or lost cause. You are a good and valuable human being who has simply developed a dependency on an extremely powerful "brain-chemical-releasing activity" for escape, self-medication, and pleasure. This is not unlike anyone who chooses alcohol, drugs, or food as a method of coping. The good news is, just as with any other unwanted behavior or addiction, there is a logical way out. You can avoid or you can free yourself from the *Avoidance Cycle*. The RECLAIM Online Recovery Program has been created to put you solidly on the recovery path where you can quickly begin moving forward.

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