

# Pornography: How It Works and How to Reverse Its Effects

David Huffstutler, Ph. D.

February 9, 2016

## Introduction

Pornography is defined as “the depiction of erotic behavior (as in pictures or writing) intended to cause sexual excitement,”<sup>1</sup> and it is obvious that pornography is an epidemic in our society. It is imperative that we as Christians understand this epidemic and equip ourselves to live righteously in its midst.

It should be clarified at the outset that the activity of researching this topic leaves one overwhelmed by the myriad of resources that have been written in reporting on and responding to this epidemic. Moreover, when one’s habit of study is not in the field of medical science, there is a certain hesitation and humility that comes from leaning so much on the words of others. It is not my intention to misunderstand or misrepresent the sources cited below. Nonetheless, what follows below is one man’s meager attempt at examining how pornography works and how to biblically reverse its effects for his own sake and the sake of those who listen.

A 2006 study indicated that the US spends an annual \$13 billion on pornography, and \$3 billion of that total is for pornography through the internet.<sup>2</sup> Pornography has become so mainstream in our world today that free porn has led to a 50% decline in porn revenue worldwide since 2007.<sup>3</sup> In other words, porn is so common that it is abundant and free. Why even pay for it? Just look at how this epidemic affects society today:<sup>4</sup>

- \$3,075.64 is spent on pornography *every second*.
- 28,258 internet users view pornography *every second*.
- 372 internet users type adult search terms into search engines *every second*.
- A new pornographic video is created *every 39 minutes* in the United States.
- There are 4.2 million pornographic websites, which is 12% of *all* websites.

The average age of seeing porn for the first time is 11 years old.<sup>5</sup> One study suggests 1 out of 5 teenage men view pornography “every day or almost every day.”<sup>6</sup> *The Washington Post* reported, “According to a report commissioned by Congress, some 70 million individuals visit

---

<sup>1</sup> *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*. 11th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2003), s.v., “pornography.”

<sup>2</sup> Covenant Eyes, “Pornography Statistics: Annual Report 2014.” Online: [www.covenanteyes.com/pornstats/](http://www.covenanteyes.com/pornstats/). Accessed 14 Jan 2015.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> All statistics in this list come from “Internet Pornography Statistics.” Online: <http://internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/internet-pornography-statistics.html>. Accessed 15 Jan 2015. These statistics stem from a study conducted in 2006.

<sup>5</sup> “Internet Pornography Statistics.”

<sup>6</sup> Covenant Eyes, “Pornography Statistics: 250+ facts, quotes, and statistics about pornography use (2013 Edition),” p. 15. Available online: [http://blog.clinicalcareconsultants.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/porn\\_stats\\_2013\\_covenant\\_eyes.pdf](http://blog.clinicalcareconsultants.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/porn_stats_2013_covenant_eyes.pdf). This study consisted of 813 students from six schools in the US.

pornographic Web sites each week; about 11 million of them are younger than 18.”<sup>7</sup> Proven Men Ministries hired the Barna Group to conduct survey of a representative 1,000 adult men in the US in 2014. Reportedly, “Approximately two-thirds (64%) of U.S. men view pornography at least monthly,” and sadly, “The number of Christian men viewing pornography virtually mirrors the national average.”<sup>8</sup>

Temptation lurks in every corner. Are you part of those statistics? If so, do you realize what porn does or has done to you? How do you reverse its effects?

## **How Pornography Works: A Physiological Explanation**

### **Porn Gives Instant Pleasure**

Men receive sexual pleasure by the mere sight of explicit pornography. The pleasure received from this experience is similar to taking a drug. This similarity is described in this way:

“Once we got a peek into the brain . . . our understanding of how addictions work changed. It turns out, cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs have more in common than you might think. Sure, on the outside, some are poured into a glass while others are lit on fire and smoked. But once they’re in the body, they all do the same thing to the brain: flood it with a chemical called dopamine. That’s what makes them addictive. And porn does the exact same thing.”<sup>9</sup>

As mentioned, pornography pleasure through the release of dopamine, “a chemical that makes you feel good.”<sup>10</sup> One article describes dopamine and similar chemicals released by one’s body in this way: “They help us feel pleasure and to bond with other people, and they motivate us to come back to important activities that make us happy.”<sup>11</sup> The means whereby dopamine will “motivate us to come back” to the activity that produced its release is by its relation to the protein iFosB. One article explains,

“When a person is aroused by porn, their brain releases a chemical called dopamine that makes them feel pleasure. As the dopamine goes through their brain, it leaves behind a

---

<sup>7</sup> The Washington Post, “Protecting Kids Online.” 1 Jul 2006. Online: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A19307-2004Jun30.html>. Accessed 16 Jan 2015. The author of the present paper could not find a copy of this study for himself, and the online article did not give this source a detailed citation.

<sup>8</sup> Proven Men Ministries, “Pornography Use and Addiction.” Online: <http://www.provenmen.org/2014pornsurvey/pornography-use-and-addiction/>. Accessed 15 Jan 2015. For a helpful report on multiple surveys on this topic throughout the world, see Mike Genung, “Current Porn Statistics.” Online: <http://www.roadtoGrace.net/current-porn-statistics/>. Accessed 15 Jan 2015. The statistic given above differs somewhat from a report by Luke Gilkerson, “Get the Latest Pornography Statistics.” 19 Feb 2013. Online: <http://www.covenanteyes.com/2013/02/19/pornography-statistics/>. Allegedly, “Regular church attenders are 26% *less* likely to look at porn than non-attenders, but those self-identified as “fundamentalists” are 91% *more* likely to look at porn.”

<sup>9</sup> Fight the New Drug, “Porn is Addictive.” August 8, 2014. Online: [fightthenewdrug.org/porn-is-addictive/#sthash.X4KlqVYZ.dpbs](http://fightthenewdrug.org/porn-is-addictive/#sthash.X4KlqVYZ.dpbs). Accessed 14 Jan 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Fight the New Drug, “Porn Changes the Brain.” August 8, 2014. Online: [fightthenewdrug.org/porn-changes-the-brain/#sthash.wZ9K17FU.dpbs](http://fightthenewdrug.org/porn-changes-the-brain/#sthash.wZ9K17FU.dpbs). Accessed 14 Jan 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Fight the New Drug, “Porn is Like a Drug.” August 8, 2014. Online: [fightthenewdrug.org/porn-is-like-a-drug/#sthash.MaGHW4LD.dpbs](http://fightthenewdrug.org/porn-is-like-a-drug/#sthash.MaGHW4LD.dpbs). Accessed 14 Jan 2015.

pathway created by a protein called iFosB (pronounced delta fos b) that connects feeling aroused to looking at porn. Basically dopamine is saying ‘this feels good; let’s remember how to get back here,’ and iFosB goes to work building a brain pathway to make it easier for the person to do that again. When this happens with healthy behaviors it is a good thing, but when it happens with unhealthy ones it can lead to trouble.”<sup>12</sup>

Putting these thoughts together, the instant and overwhelming pleasure of pornography motivates the user’s behavior to repeat this experience and to do so in addictive manner.<sup>13</sup>

### **Porn Is Never Enough and Leaves You Wanting More**

How does this addiction take place? Despite the instant pleasure that pornography provides, this pleasure wanes over time. The pornographic experience must be enhanced in order to achieve the same level of pleasure again.<sup>14</sup> Here is a description of this addictive process:

“Just like other addictive substances, porn floods the brain with dopamine. But since the brain gets overwhelmed by the constant overload of chemicals that comes with consistent porn use, it fights back by taking away some of its dopamine receptors—which are like tiny ears on the end of a neuron that hear dopamine’s message.

“With fewer receptors, even if the brain is putting off the same levels of dopamine in response to porn, the user can’t feel dopamine’s effect as much. As a result, the porn they were looking at doesn’t seem as arousing or exciting, and many porn users go hunting for more porn or more hardcore porn to get the effect the old porn used to offer.

“As a frequent porn user’s brain acclimates to the new levels of dopamine flooding through it, regular activities that would normally set off a burst of dopamine and make the person feel happy aren’t strong enough to register much anymore, leaving the user feeling down or uneasy whenever they go for a while without looking at porn. That’s one reason why pornography can be so addictive.”<sup>15</sup>

As the user becomes addicted to pornography, this “addiction damages the part of the brain that helps you think things through to make good choices—the brain’s limit setting system.”<sup>16</sup> The cumulative effect is that, as the user feeds his addiction to porn, he is less and less able to choose to break his addiction.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, he seeks out more and more sensational pornography as his addiction continues.

---

<sup>12</sup> Fight the New Drug, “Porn Addiction Escalates.” August 8, 2014. Online: <http://fightthenewdrug.org/porn-addiction-escalates/#sthash.9Oy50nDL.dpbs>. Accessed 14 Jan 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Fight the New Drug, “Porn is Like a Drug.”

<sup>14</sup> Albert Mohler, “Hijacking the Brain – How Pornography Works.” February 1, 2010. Online: <http://www.albertmohler.com/2010/02/01/hijacking-the-brain-how-pornography-works/>. Accessed 26 Jan 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Fight the New Drug, “Porn Changes the Brain.”

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. For empirical research on this conclusion, see Macrina Cooper-White, “Watching Porn Linked To Less Gray Matter In The Brain” (2 Jun 2014). Online: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/02/porn-less-gray-matter-brain\\_n\\_5418607.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/02/porn-less-gray-matter-brain_n_5418607.html). Accessed 14 Jan 2015.

In our advanced technological setting, one has the ability to feed this addiction all the more. As one author describes it, “Thanks to the Internet, porn now mixes the most powerful natural dopamine release the body can produce with a cocktail of other elements—endless novelty, shock, and surprise—all of which increase the dopamine surge.”<sup>18</sup> Princeton University professor Dr. Jeffrey Satinover describes this situation accordingly:

“With advent of the computer, the delivery system for this addictive stimulus has become nearly resistance-free. It is as though we have devised a form of heroin 100 times more powerful than before, usable in the privacy of one’s own home and injected directly to the brain through the eyes. It’s now available in unlimited supply via a self-replicating distribution network, glorified as art and protected by the Constitution.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Porn and Its Behavioral Effects**

A porn user’s behavior is affected by his seeking more porn, and porn of such a nature that allows him to feel the same pleasure as in his previous pornographic experiences. As the addiction increases, other activities in life decrease in their significance to the user and fall by the wayside in order to feed the addiction to porn because the use of porn is more fulfilling. This addiction can often lead to the use of personal funds for more sensational porn.<sup>20</sup> Eventually, even the most pleasurable of pornographic experiences will begin to wane, and the user’s addictive behavior may lead to acting out upon what he has seen. Of the many examples that we could give, Dr. Satinover gives two:

“Since the 50s, as pornography became mainstreamed and pushed the envelope of normal sexual conduct, law enforcement reported that sex crimes mimicking comparable acts were being inflicted on women and children.”<sup>21</sup>

“Testimony from victims and police commonly finds pornography to be an on-site-sex abuse manual.”<sup>22</sup>

In general, one could say that the rapid production of more and more pornography over the past years is a behavioral illustration of the fact that *no porn is ever enough*. For the individual, computer usage increases (desktop, mobile, etc.), family relationships disintegrate (especially with one’s spouse), the act of sex loses its original pleasure, infidelity increases, etc.<sup>23</sup> People involved in romantic relationships with the user feel “hurt, betrayed, rejected, abandoned, lonely, isolated, humiliated, jealous, and angry.”<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Fight the New Drug, “Porn is Like a Drug.”

<sup>19</sup> Jeffrey Satinover, “Hearing on the Brain Science Behind Pornography Addiction and Effects of Addiction on Families and Communities.” Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, Subcommittee on Science, Technology, and Space, November 18, 2004. Online: [http://www.ccv.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Judith\\_Reisman\\_Senate\\_Testimony-2004.11.18.pdf](http://www.ccv.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Judith_Reisman_Senate_Testimony-2004.11.18.pdf). Accessed 14 Jan 2015. Satinover is quoted in brief in the previously referenced article as well.

<sup>20</sup> Fight the New Drug, “Porn Addiction Escalates.”

<sup>21</sup> Satinover, “Hearing on the Brain Science Behind Pornography Addiction and Effects of Addiction on Families and Communities.”

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Covenant Eyes, “Pornography Statistics,” pp. 9–10.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

## **A Biblical Understanding of Enjoying Pornography**

Seeing the physiological description of how porn works and giving an all-too-brief survey of its effects can leave anyone discouraged and wonder if a remedy for this epidemic even exists. Indeed, there is such a remedy, but let us not forget to look first at the survey above through the lens of Scripture.

Biblically, lusting after another person is sin in and of itself (Matt 5:28). Both the production of pornography and the enjoyment of such are also acts of sin. Sexual pleasure is to be enjoyed with one's spouse alone (Gen 2:24; Heb 13:4), not through producing pornography for the enjoyment of others or being the one to enjoy it.<sup>25</sup>

For the user of pornography, it should be added that lust often leads to acting upon such lust. As one is tempted as lured and enticed by his own desires and these desires are provoked by porn, one may just act upon such desires, leading to spiritual death (James 1:14–15). Remember that for David, looking was not enough, especially when it is relatively easy to act upon these desires (2 Sam 11:2–5). And for the one who acts upon such desires, there will be consequences for his sin that will never go away (cf. 2 Sam 12:7–15; Prov 6:33).

## **How to Reverse the Effects of Pornography: A Biblical Perspective**

As helpful as it is to understand the physiological process of how pornography works, God gave us His Word to correct and instruct us on any matter, let alone the topic of sexual sin (cf. 2 Tim 3:16–17), and beyond this, Scripture has a great deal to say about the topic of sexual sin. This is not to say that it would not be useful to some degree to do physiological studies that would yield suggestions for battling porn. It is to say, however, that God's Word already explicitly addresses the matter of how to handle sexual sin, so why would we run elsewhere first for answers?

What follows below is a brief look at the greater biblical means of reversing the effects of porn. It would certainly help to give a detailed examining of many texts on the topic of sexual sin, but for the sake of brevity, these texts must be assumed within the broader framework of what follows below.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> I would add that pornography within the confines of marriage is unwise at best, if the question must even be asked. It allows one spouse to engage in sexual pleasure *without* the other spouse, even though the absent spouse is “present” in the form of pornography. Also, watching videos of one another engaging in sexual relations or doing so while actually engaging in sexual relations with one another would seem to distract one another from the pleasure God intended to be derived from solely enjoying one another. Moreover, what if someone were to inadvertently stumble on such pornography? When does one choose to dispose of such pornography? Will the children or others have to identify and dispose of this pornography when their parents pass away (cf. Gen 9:22)? What if they, like Ham, have the perverse desire to look on the nakedness of their parents? Yet still, what if an older couple watches videos of themselves when they were young? Is that really seeing themselves for who they are in the present? The proliferation of technology creates many interesting questions for sexual ethics, but perhaps it is best to let “one flesh” mean as much today with respect to technology as it did to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

<sup>26</sup> For further study, however, see Tim Challies, *Sexual Detox: A Guide for Guys Who Are Sick of Porn* (Adelphi, MD: Cruciform, 2010); Erwin Lutzer, *Winning the Inner War: How to Say No to a Stubborn Habit* (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2002); and Edward T. Welch, *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave : Finding Hope in the Power of the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001).

The work of God in salvation begins a definitive work in us whereby we progress in our sanctification and thus desire all sin, porn included, less and less over time. We must avail ourselves to God's many means of grace so that we increase in our affection for Him and thereby diminish our desire for porn. What follows are a few points to explain these thoughts more fully.

### **Repent of sin and Believe in the Gospel**

Seeking and deriving pleasure from pornography is sin. As with any sin, one must understand Jesus Christ as fully God and man who lived a perfect life and sinlessly died for the sin of all mankind (Rom 5:8–10; 2 Cor 5:20–21), including sin that involves pornography. All those who repent of their sin and place their faith in Christ find forgiveness and cleansing in Him (1 John 1:8–9).

### **Die to sin and live to God in Christ Jesus.**

The work of salvation includes having died to our former way of life and being no longer dominated by the power of sin (Rom 6:5–6). The reign of sin in our lives has been definitively breached and broken. At the point of salvation and thereafter, we progressively put away what remains of sin and live unto righteousness by the power of the Spirit (Rom 6:6; 8:13; Gal 5:16–26).<sup>27</sup> We will certainly do so because God continues His work in us until Christ's return (Phil 1:6). As we grow in our affection for God, our desire for pornography will diminish.

### **Put the Pornography Away**

“Sexual immorality, impurity, passion”—it is these things that we must “put to death” immediately (Col 3:5). To actively sin through pornography while claiming to have fellowship with God is to walk in darkness, lie, and not practice the truth (1 John 1:6). Along with our salvation, we must get rid of your porn. Throw out your magazines and videos, clear your internet favorites, and get rid of all your pornography, whatever form it may be.

### **Lead Yourself Not into Temptation**

Not only must we get rid of our porn, but we must also put up checks and balances that keep us from engaging in this sin again. Just as we are to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” so also we must “make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Rom 13:14). It is not sin or legalism to do what it takes to keep yourself from sinning again. Get a filter for the internet on every device, have an accountability partner, and do whatever it takes to keep yourself away from porn.

### **Equip Yourself with God's Word**

We have all we need for “life and godliness, *through the knowledge* of him who called us to his own glory and excellence” (2 Pet 1:3). This knowledge of God is found in His Word and comes to us through personal study and preaching. It is through Scripture that we may be “equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16–17). Memorizing and meditating upon Scriptures immediately applicable to pornography are particularly helpful activities that will equip you to do battle against your sin. As David said, “I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you” (Ps 119:11).

---

<sup>27</sup> For a theology of definitive and progressive sanctification, see Anthony A. Hoekema, “The Reformed Perspective,” 59–90, in *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987); John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955), 141–50.

### **Change Yourself through the Church**

The ministry of the saints to one another grows us toward a “mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13; cf. 4:11–16). The church and its individual members spur one another to love and good works (Heb 10:24–25) and provide an accountability to one another that brings about admonition and discipline when necessary (Matt 18:15–18; Rom 15:14). Our interaction with one another pushes us away from sins like engaging in porn, and the saints and the assembly admonish us to stop such sin if present.

### **Intentionally Renew Your Mind**

In whatever you do with the time that would have been given to pornography, “do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col 3:17), and “whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). Since you have previously given yourself to sensuality through pornography to some degree, you should likely be all the more mindful to do things that intentionally renew your mind unto righteousness and holiness in order to diminish the effects of your previous habit (cf. Eph 4:17–24). Such renewal could be through listening to sermons, reading Christian literature, or meditating directly on Scripture.

### **Conclusion**

Perhaps we could tread lightly and suggest that salvation and progressive sanctification undo the physiological effects of pornography over time. The satisfaction one knows from salvation and its fruit and whatever concurrent dopamine release there may be along the way may just leave pathways created by iFosB that help to motivate righteous habits in time. Meditation upon one’s redemption and its practical outworking may give a joy whereby the brain says, “This feels good; let’s remember how to get back there.” Perhaps the former pornographer finds himself eventually thirsting not for porn but for God because his joy in Him is so much more fulfilling than what he once received from porn. Could this not be so?

Whatever the exact physiological description of the joy of our salvation may be, as we have seen, we can actively choose by God’s power to abstain from sexual sin. We find our joy in Christ, and though we struggle to put away what remains of our sexual sin, whether involving pornography or something else, we do so with the hope that all our spiritually destructive cravings will one day be changed and we will no longer want porn again. Our “Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ . . . will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body” (Phil 3:20–21), and “we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). May we strive to be now what we shall be then, like our Savior Jesus Christ, with no addiction to porn, and living for the glory of God.