

Breaking Pornography Addiction

By: David Powlison

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Can God change those who are addicted to pornography? Yes, God can and does bring people out of their isolated, imaginary world of sexual addiction into the real world of authentic, loving relationships with God and people. David Powlison explains that change happens as people are lovingly challenged to face their behavior honestly, understand its roots, and turn to God for help. True change from God will bring freedom from pornography addiction by transforming the sexual addict's imagination and behavior.



Have you ever said anything like this?

“I’ve tried to stop so many times, but somehow I’m still end up in front of the computer surfing websites.”

“Cold showers, prayer, avoiding situations—I’ve tried everything. Is there any hope for me?”

“I know I should get help, but I am too ashamed.”

“I thought only men struggled with pornography, but I spend way too much time in my own little fantasy world.”

If you have, it’s likely that you are feeling trapped by an addiction to pornography and sexual fantasies. You feel guilty and ashamed, but you just can’t seem to stop. Maybe you are starting to notice that your relationships with the real people in your life are being affected by your struggle.

There is no magic bullet to free you from your addiction, but when you ask Jesus for help, he will come to you mercifully and firmly. Jesus welcomes all kinds of strugglers into his kingdom, and his Spirit will provide the deep down change you long for.

Change happens when you face your behavior honestly, understand the roots of your behavior, and then go to God to work true change in your life. The true change that comes from God will affect not only your behavior, but your imagination and desire life. Do you believe God can do this? Take a step of faith; read this booklet, and ask God to use it to begin to change you.

WHAT IS PORNOGRAPHY?

The first part of the word pornography, “porné,” means immorality and the second part, “graph” means to write, draw, or portray. Pornography is about picturing, imagining, and fantasizing about immorality.

Pornography has been around for centuries. But the widespread availability of pornography means the problem touches more people than ever before. Soft core pornography is everywhere you look: television, movies, magazines, billboards, and even posters at bus stops. And it’s not just in the media. In our world, both men and

women dress to attract attention and to elicit romantic or erotic feelings in others. We are all bombarded with pornography every day—it's the atmosphere we live in.

And pornography isn't just a male problem. Both sexes have immoral fantasies. Women might be more captured by romantic literature and men by erotic pictures, but the end result is the same—you are committing adultery in your thought life.

FANTASIZING IMMORALITY IS WRONG

Perhaps you have been told that fantasizing immoral images and actions isn't really wrong. It's true that it's a different kind of wrong than having an actual affair, but it is still sin. Jesus made this clear when he said, "anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). It's important for you to acknowledge that what you are doing is wrong, because you won't fight well unless you are able to say, "This is an enemy. When I do this, I sin."

WHAT DOES PROGRESS LOOK LIKE?

What does progress in your struggle with pornography look like? In all typical human struggles (like anger, anxiety, escapism) winning doesn't mean achieving perfection. It means having a new goal and a new direction. Your direction in life determines your final destination. Where are you headed? Are you going in the right direction? Going in the right direction in your struggle with pornography means learning to fight your temptation to *sin*, to handle your *guilt* when you fail, and to understand and avoid the *circumstances* in which you are tempted.

Making progress in these three areas does not mean you will suddenly get teleported from the mire in which you now live to the mountaintop of freedom from all temptation. Change in these areas means taking many small, incremental steps in the right direction. For example:

- *A decrease in the frequency of a sin is a true good.* It's not good that you are still indulging in pornography, but if you are doing it less, you are going in the right direction.
- *A change in the actual nature of the sin is progress.* If you are no longer having an affair or premarital sex, and now you are battling pornographic fantasy, it's good that your struggle has changed from your actions to your imagination.
- *A change in the battleground is progress.* When your battle has moved from purchasing materials or going onto explicit internet sites to battling the old fantasy tapes that are still in your mind, that's movement in the right direction.
- *An increase in honesty and accountability is progress.* You are moving forward when you are willing to be truly candid and accountable to a trusted friend, spouse, or pastor and say, "Here's where I'm struggling." An appropriate openness to others is a very significant step towards change.
- *Not always responding to difficult circumstances by indulging in sin is progress.* If your life gets hard and instead of going straight to your fantasy life, you pray for help and ask others to pray for you, then God is at work.
- *Repenting more quickly is progress.* Learning to go more quickly to the Lord of life, instead of wallowing for days, weeks, and months in the gloom of "I failed again," is a sign that God is at work in your life.

- *Learning to love and consider the interest of real people is progress.* Your immoral fantasies use other people in an imaginary world. Caring for others, even in small ways, means that Jesus is changing you.

UNDERSTAND YOUR DEEPER STRUGGLE

How do you get going in the right direction? You start by understanding your struggle. It's easy for your big, obvious sins (like surfing the internet for pornographic material) to conceal the deeper sins that fuel your struggle with pornography. But unless you recognize and repent of the sin patterns underlying your addiction, you won't be fighting the right battle. I learned this when I counseled Tom,¹ a single, Christian man in his late thirties who had been struggling with pornography and masturbation since he was a teenager. He had tried all the right things: accountability, memorizing the Bible, exercise, cold showers, and being involved in ministry. But he still struggled.

When I asked him to keep a record of when he was tempted, he said to me, "I already know when. It's usually on Friday night. It's my temper tantrum with God." I thought his big struggle was with pornography, but all of a sudden he was talking about anger at God!

Then he said, "I'm tired and lonely on Friday nights. I think about my single friends on dates and my married friends with their wives, and I feel sorry for myself. I get angry at God because I think he owes me a wife, and I don't have one. By 9 o'clock the temptation to sexual sin is overwhelming, and I give in."

Tom's fight with sin focused on just one thing—his struggle with pornography. But underlying that struggle was Tom's anger at God, self-pity, envy, and, a hugely significant issue, his belief that God owed him a wife. Tom's desire for a wife had become what the Bible calls a "lust of the flesh." A lust of the flesh is any desire (even a desire for a good thing like a wife) that dominates our lives, anything we organize our lives around except God. Tom's lust for a wife fueled his sins of self-pity, anger at God, and then pornography.

Tom was also a legalist. He believed that when he tried to be a good Christian God owed him goodies (such as a wife), and when he did something wrong he despaired. Tom's imagination was much more than a sexualized imagination. It was full of envy, grumbling, and believing that what he did would either pry goodies from God or release a whirlwind of punishment. His imagination didn't include the gospel, forgiveness of sins, understanding God's love for him, or understanding the help that's available from the Spirit of God. Underneath all of Tom's sins was unbelief. He was living as if God wasn't with him and wasn't able to help him in his time of need.

As Tom faced these deep sin patterns and confessed them to God, he started to grow and change. His entire Christian life had been about managing one moral failure, but now his Christian life began to sparkle. He was fighting a much broader battle, and God gave him a wider vision to see the real battle and the real grace of God that was available for his whole life, not just one area of temptation.

You can take the same journey that Tom did. Start a journal, and keep track of what's happening in your life when you struggle with pornography. Answer these questions:

- When does it happen? What is going on? What happened that day?
- What were you thinking about? What was the nature of the temptation?
- What did you do about it? Did you act on it?
- If you didn't act on it, how did that happen?

- If you did what did you do after you fell?
- How did you recover? What was the after-effect?

Keeping this journal will help you see what is really going on in your struggle with pornography. As you start to grapple with your deeper sin patterns, you'll see that your problem is much bigger, your need for grace is much deeper, and your goal is much more magnificent than you ever imagined.

YOU GO TO GOD

What do you do when you see the scope of the battle you are fighting? How do you begin taking those small steps in the right direction that will add up to deep down change? *You go to God*. These four words—so simple to say and so hard to do—are at the center of how you fight against sin.

Why is this so hard? Because your natural instinct is to turn to yourself, instead of to Jesus. This is true of all sin, but it's obvious in your struggle with pornography because it's a solitary pursuit. Your pornographic sins are, by definition, only about you: what you want, what you hope for, and what you long for. When you are facing hard or disappointing circumstances—boredom, loneliness, money problems, fighting with a spouse, distance from a friend—it's easy (and instinctive) to turn in on yourself and try to escape your troubles by going to your fantasy life.

After you sin, it's easy (and instinctive) to stay turned in on yourself, but in a different way. Now, because you feel guilty, you chew on yourself, kick yourself, and are dismayed with yourself. But even your guilt is all about you.

Your only hope for deliverance from this never ending cycle of self is going to Jesus. How do you recover from defeats? You recover from defeats by going back to the God who offers mercy and forgiveness to you through the death of his own Son on the cross. Jesus died so you could be forgiven.

How do you face hardship, boredom, hurt, betrayal, and loneliness? By going to the God who is there, who is not surprised by sexual sin, who hears you, who cares about you, who wants to be in relationship with you. He is able to change your instinctive patterns.

Practical Strategies for Change

Imagine that your heart, your true inner self, is a room filled with your thoughts, feelings, experiences, and perceptions. Some are good and full of light, and some are bad and full of evil and darkness. There are two ways to clean out the evil and darkness and bring light and goodness to the whole room. You can eject the evil bodily: Fight the sin! Say no! Call your accountability person. Repent. Remember the Bible. Cry out to God for mercy. That's one-half of the battle.

The other way you fight sin is to flood your heart with light. When the room of your heart is filled with light, the shadows, the darkness, and the evil will be pushed out. You don't just put off your sins; you have to put on something new. Part of winning your battle with sexual sin is learning a new way of living.

TALK TO GOD

This new way of living starts with pouring your heart out to God. Begin by praying through Psalm 25. This psalm provides you with a pattern to follow as you deal with sin, hard circumstances, and guilt. In the first few verses of the psalm David turns to God and talks to him about the difficulties in his life. He says, “Do not let me be put to shame.” And “no one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame” (vv. 2–3). Then he immediately starts asking God to help him deal with his sins. He doesn’t want to end his life in shame and failure, so he prays, “Show me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior” (vv. 4–5). David specifically asks God to remember his own character, “Remember, O Lord, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old...according to your love remember me” (vv. 6–7). He wants God to look at his life through the lens of his compassion, goodness, and forgiveness.

Right in the center of the psalm, there’s this wonderful verse: “For the sake of your name, O Lord, forgive my iniquity, though it is great” (v.11). This is the heart of what it means to go to God—a radical giving of your life into the hands of another. David is putting himself in God’s hands and trusting him for everything he needs. He is pleading with God on the basis of his character to pardon him, change him, teach him, instruct him, grow him, and make him different.

David goes on to pray about his troubles, his afflictions, his loneliness, his stress, his hurts, and his enemies. After he prays about all the problems that bring temptation into his life, he asks God to meet him and “free me from anguish,” (v.17) and again to, “take away all my sins...guard my life and rescue me” (vv.18, 20).

Do you see how praying through this psalm will lead you out of your world of sin, guilt, and the difficult circumstances that are the occasion for your stumbling? Pray this psalm to God and insert your troubles, your sins, and your need for forgiveness into it. As you pray, God will begin to reverse the turning inward that sin, guilt, and hardship bring. And he will draw you to himself—to the one who, for his name’s sake and by his mercy must and will work in you.

LISTEN TO GOD

Don’t stop with pouring your heart out to God, listen to what he says about sexual sin.

Listen to what God says in Proverbs 5:15–23. This passage is about finding sexual fulfillment in marital faithfulness, and the consequences of not doing so. Pay close attention to this verse, “For a man’s ways are in full view of the Lord, and he examines all his paths” (v.21). Your struggle with sexual sin will change when you understand that it is not a private struggle; your whole life is lived in public, before God. Remembering that you are not living in your own little private world, but that you are living in God’s world where he sees everything will make it much more difficult to sin. Use this passage to remind yourself that when you look for sexual fulfillment outside of marriage you will be “ensnared,” and held fast in “the cords of sin,” and that the way forward is living in “full view” of God.

Listen to what God says in Matthew 5:27-30:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your

right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.”

Jesus sets the bar high for our thought life, and then gives a radical prescription for dealing with your lust. You are to tear it out, cut it off, and throw it away. He is telling you how to break your addiction. Your fight must be vigorous and resolute. You must roll up your sleeves, see that your enemy is you, and fight against your desires.

GET A NEW VISION

Because pornography is a sin of the imagination, true change has to reach your thought life. You can't "just say no" to an evil imagination. You have to appeal in a more profound way to your imagination by working to replace the evil, dark, and wicked in your mind with the good, light, and pure.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery, a French writer, said "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood, and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea." This is exactly what God does for you. He wants you to have a vision of something so much better than living within your dark, self-centered imagination. God wants to give you a vision of life as it is meant to be, filled with a real, true, and intimate relationship with him and authentic, loving relationships with others.

Isaiah 61 and 62 will give you that kind of vision. These chapters are full of life and hope. Read them, and notice how Jesus promises to help you. He binds up the brokenhearted. Aren't you brokenhearted by your continuing struggle with sin? He brings freedom to prisoners. Don't you feel imprisoned by your sexual sins? He comforts those who mourn. Don't you mourn when you fall into sin one more time? Fill your mind with the promises in these chapters: Jesus will give you gladness instead of mourning and praise instead of fainting under guilt. He will replace your shame with a new name, a beautiful crown, and a royal diadem: a new imagination.

BUILD REAL RELATIONSHIPS OF LOVE

The prophet Isaiah said, "'Woe to me!' I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips'" (Isaiah 6:5). Then an angel brings a coal of fire that cleanses his lips. This is what God is doing in you as you struggle with sexual sin. You are unclean, and you live in the middle of unclean people. But there's an altar on which the Lamb of God has been sacrificed. From that altar comes a coal of fire, and you are cleansed.

Now you say to God as Isaiah did, "Here am I. Send me" (Isaiah 6:8). There are things to do. There are people to love and treat differently. Building real relationships of love with real people is crucial to the transformation of your imagination. You have spent way too much time in your private fantasy world.

It's time to build same-sex friendships with people who will hold you accountable and care about you. It's time to build healthy brother-sister relationships with the opposite sex as well. Leave your fictional world of pretend relationships and, if you are a man, start viewing women as your sisters, as people to protect instead of prey upon. If you are a woman, start treating men as your brothers. If you're married, begin the hard work of building an honest relationship where sexuality becomes one of the fruits of your unity as a couple.

BUILD ACCOUNTABILITY INTO YOUR LIFE

Becoming accountable to others is crucial to breaking your pornography addiction. But who should you confess to? Start by confessing to God, and then also confess to someone who can help you grow, who will hold you accountable, who can counsel you, pray for you, and encourage you. Who should that person be? Pick a same-sex friend who's trustworthy, who will ask you hard and pointed questions, who loves you and is willing to hang in there with you over the long haul.

If you're married, should you confess to your spouse? The ideal is that your spouse would be your most faithful and helpful accountability partner. But this sin directly affects your spouse, because in your mind you are betraying him or her. So you have to think carefully, with the help of a wise friend, counselor, or pastor, how you can confess to your spouse without hurting him or her more. As in all sharing, you don't need to go into every gory detail, you can share just enough in a generic way that your spouse knows what you are confessing, so he or she can offer you real forgiveness. This will dissipate the cloud that sexual fantasies have put over your marriage, and then the sexual union that happens afterwards can be fresh and in the context of mercy.

Any sharing (in any relationship) should not become a source of temptation. The Bible is full of stories about sexual sin, and they are told in a way that leaves us with no illusions, but is never arousing.

MINISTER GOD'S GRACE TO OTHERS

As God blesses you and changes you, minister to others the grace you have been given. Let God send you to those who are struggling as you have struggled. There's protection from sexual sin in knowing that later this afternoon or tomorrow you're going to be talking to someone else who struggles. You will want to talk to them with a clear conscience and a bright heart. If you can't, it will be your opportunity to go to God again and ask for mercy and help.

The transformation of your life from your isolated, private, imaginary world of romantic and erotic desires will happen as you learn to live in the real world where there is a real God to trust, need, know and love, and where there are real people with whom to reconcile, to love, and to serve. Crying out to God for help, thanking him for help received, praising him for who he is, and being willing to be sent by him to love others is how God will continue the life long work of transforming you and making you useful in his world.