

Caught in Cyberspace?

In the work place and the home, the net is increasingly the window through which we reach the world. We are being trained to go online to gain information, entertainment, essential services and to purchase goods. But like all things, the web has its limitations and dangers. It offers a hot bed for sexual addiction. Access to pornography, spontaneous sexual liaison, or merely arousing sexual chatter has never been easier to attain, or so instant to access and hide, nor so prolific variations from which to choose.

John's marriage was basically OK. He was doing well in business, and was respected in his church. On the Internet, however, he accidentally downloaded a pornographic image. Something about it grabbed him. After a lingering glance he deleted it. In the following days the image haunted him to look for another. Something within him yearned for more. At first, he stole looks during breaks, but soon he was driven to download pornography at work, then at home, while his family slept. Work performance decreased. Irritability with his family increased.

Jolene, 35 and single, felt unable to connect with friends at a deep level. Church fellowship didn't relieve her loneliness. For months she had spent downtime chatting on the Net. Clicking with a man who declared himself single, she moved their conversation to a private chat-room. A month of daily chatting resulted in telephone contact. Her heart filled with dreams of romance. Travelling 1000 km to rendezvous, she convinced herself that she could keep the encounter platonic. Her deeper yearning however yielded to sex. Feeling compromised, she looked to him for commitment. Distancing himself, he confessed that he was married with children.

21-year-old Manuel had dated a few times, but felt awkward. Something in him preferred men, so he comforted his heterosexual awkwardness by masturbating to male pornography on the Net. His hidden shame and insecurity in relating with others at church gave him a sense that he didn't belong.

Internet Addiction Disorder

Though the names have been changed, these stories are true, and, unfortunately common. In each case Internet use became escape, then developed into an unmanageable search for intimacy. In their quest for connection with others they were snared by a recently identified addiction: Internet Addiction Disorder. (IAD)[1] It is not diagnosed by the quantity of time spent online, but rather by the way net usage detracts from the quality of the user's life. IAD develops where productivity and enjoyment are supplanted by bondage to the computer. It results in "decreased occupational, academic, social, work related, family related, financial, psychological, or physiological functioning." [2] While activities like gambling, playing games, fascination for information etc can become online addictions, the pursuit of intimacy online often becomes a particularly sinister addiction.

Online Sexual Pursuit has Various Consequences

If youngsters discover and download it, or seek it out with peer encouragement, online pornography has damaging effects in their foundational sexual development. For adults it might bring excitement, but it also serves to undermine true intimacy, and in the end, social mores.

Seeking Intimacy Online

The two major channels for "online intimacy" are pornography and chat rooms.

Pornographic sites receive more hits per day than any other services provided on the Internet. Playboy averages well over 5 million hits per day on its web page, while Penthouse takes over 3 million.[3] Pornography is a one way visual connection. Chat rooms ensure anonymity as users interact by typing messages in computer jargon. Cyber sex in its various forms of video cam, erotic suggestion in a private chat room, or the provision of other services, is, in the end, isolated masturbation.

Intimacy on line is a misnomer. None of these "services" bears any resemblance to true intimacy, which has to do with the love and trust involved in two people knowing and committing to one another, in mutual vulnerability and transparency. True intimacy is a special human reflection of God's love. When God made Adam, He said, "It's not good for man to be alone.[4] So He gave Eve as Adam's equal partner. Their perfect relationship lasted only briefly. When they chose to eat the forbidden fruit, a wedge was driven between them. Each was rendered alone, distanced from the other. Their perfect intimacy remained only an echo for which the soul could yearn, in its separation from God and others. The human condition is a quest from basic aloneness for intimacy.

Can the personal computer bring personal connection?

In turning to the p.c. for personal connection, its very gadgetry is isolating. Drawing us into itself, it ushers us out to a cyber world, which seems to have no limits. While it can arouse feelings of excitement, anticipation, and hope, it provides only an illusion of personal connection.

Three Options of Cybersex

1. The Chat Room - In the chat room, we can't know with whom we are communicating. It offers uninhibited anonymous ability to say things you wouldn't otherwise say and in video chat rooms to do things you wouldn't normally do.

Users often masquerade, pose and act out fantasies. The medium enables users to present only certain aspects of themselves or to present a completely false persona, using anonymous net-names.

They can parade as the other gender, and/or as someone decades younger or older than they actually are. Such interaction provides mystery, suspense and a powerful, unreal sense of reality: Virtual reality is no reality at all. Human reality is discerned through the 5 senses. Where flattery or intrigue can cause the imagination to run wild, the "feel good" response does not derive from wholesome communication with another, meted through the stimulation and discernment of the five senses, but from adrenalin. Sense stimulation is limited to the touch of a keyboard, the sound of tapping, the sight of a screen and the fragrance of the plastic and parts from which the pc is made. Genuine personal interaction, a vital reality check, is absent altogether. Painful disappointment follows most relationships which develop from the chat room, when the fantasy bubble is burst. Harassment may even occur after contact details are disclosed to lonely pretenders. The worst form of this is to communicate with others via video-cam, engaging in lewd acts together, which normally would not even be contemplated, and which strip human dignity and modesty.

2. Pornographic sites - These offer quick access to view and/or download adult photos, moving video clips, with links to phone numbers for sex talk.

They reveal "perfect" airbrushed models, or actors paid to perform contrived sexual antics, in stories that are excessive fantasy. Illusory escape fosters an addictive cycle of anticipation, ritual, orgasm, then guilt. They are designed to

snag raw sexual curiosity and to pander to frustrations, sexual urges and our desire for something bigger and better, beyond ourselves, by leading users into contrived fantasies and the illusion of connecting to sexual and/or physical perfection. Ironically most users express the resulting orgasm in secretive, isolated self comfort.

3. Interactive Online games - Interactive Online games offer a third form of cyber sex. Anonymous players gain status by using sex, dominance, power and violence to crush others. These games can go on serially for months until one player emerges the victor. They use a combination of addictions to completely obsess the players. Sex is identified with dominance and power, eroding the users' sensitivity for intimacy in their sexual relationships.

IAD develops through adrenalin-fed excitement. The momentum of repetition reinforces the adrenalin rush. Endorphins released in the brain create a panacea. Biochemistry changes and the soul, created for intimacy, is caught up in addiction, ALONE. Masturbation to such images, chat room encounters or fantasies of dominance only serves to reinforce addictive, SOLITARY sexuality.

The dangers of the Net

The net lacks boundaries which are found in real life interaction. It accelerates candidness and encourages a lack of inhibition. It can start off with harmless flirting, progress rapidly to sexual chat and then end up in masturbation. Others proceed to meeting, fraught with danger or disillusionment. Relationships cannot be divided effectively between real life and online fantasy. One survey shows that 31% of cyber relationships among heavy net users become sexual ones. 14% of cyber relationships among moderate users become sexual.

Though IAD is isolating, the damage it causes is not. Meaningful relationships with family, friends and colleagues, are undermined. Shame, secrecy, illusion and the deadening of true feeling, causes the addict to disengage. They escape the challenges of the give and take of lasting relationship. The marriage bed, if sought at all, is defiled with the need for adrenalin and the living out of fantasy. Rather than achieving intimacy through the Net, it is dissipated.

How cyber sex is impacting our society and changing our values

It subtly affects the way that we view others:

Continual exposure to soft core pornography distorts the way in which we view others: women, men or children, depending on the focus of pornographic viewing. These are gradually and subtly transferred from people of their particular obsession, to the way they view all others in general. In the addict's eyes, the dignity of humanity is lost because they come to view others as mere objects for their own sexual gratification, in these ways:

Voyeurism: others' bodies become all pervading in the mind of the addict, at the expense of their qualities of character, personality and gifting.

Objectifying: the addict becomes obsessed with others' particular body parts. People are valued according to the rating of their parts by size, shape and characteristic. This is usually done by fantasizing them naked.

Trophyism: seeking to conquer others, making them property or "notch marks in the belt". This can become a culture within various social groups, and leads to rape, gang rape etc

People are assessed by the potential they hold to fulfil the addict's fantasies, often inspired by pornographic video. Common conversation may be spiced by the mental question: "Will you play my game?" Innocent responses are misinterpreted by the addict to be sexually responsive, even seductive. Most relationships are viewed through the addict's blurred, self centred, sexual imagination.

It Undermines Our Capacity For Healthy Relationships:

- With Wives

The end of such obsession is an inability to relate to others in an emotionally intimate way. The addict has too much to hide to be truly known to others, especially spouses and those closest to him. He is too distorted and driven in his view of them to be able, or to want to know them in a whole manner. For him, "love" is denigrated to an assessment of physical beauty and sexual performance. One addict's wife commented, "How can I compete with 100's of anon others who are now in our bed, in his head? Our bed is crowded with countless faceless strangers where once we were intimate." [5] Most addicts end up feeling let down when the reality of their encounters never matches the fantasy. True intimacy is lost when they try to draw their wives into impossible fulfilment of their fantasy. Because the illicit aspect, the fear of being caught, is missing, adrenalin is not released to the same degree, and the whole encounter becomes a disappointment. Further, intimacy is elusive because the addict's desire to really know his wife, and meet her needs, has been long lost. Deep within she painfully knows this.

- With Children

Children are very sensitive. Sons, who instinctively model themselves on Dad, finding downloaded images, can get a sense that this is what masculinity is all about. Daughters can perceive that they are looked upon more for the value of their body than for who they are. Children have the ability to walk in on you at least expected times.

How exposure to pornography makes children victims

Porn distorts normal personality development. It misguides a child in the development of his/her sexuality, sense of self, and appreciation of their body, which leaves them confused and damaged.

It confronts children prematurely causing them to deal with sexual sensations that they are emotionally immature to cope with. They can be left confused and overstimulated. Children generally develop sexual capacity between 10 & 12. During crucial periods in the child's psycho sexual development the brain is programmed for sexual orientation. Exposure to healthy sexual norms and attitudes in these formative years enables the child to develop healthy sexual orientation and practise. Exposure to pornography during this time, may imprint sexual confusion, obsession, images or fear in the child's psyche.

"Dr Victor Cline's research shows that memories experienced at times of emotional arousal (which includes premature sexual arousal) are imprinted on the brain by epinephrine, an adrenal gland hormone, which is difficult to erase. A young boy's early stimulus by pornographic photos can cause him to be conditioned to be aroused by them. Once this "pairing" is rewarded a number of times, it is likely to become permanent, making it difficult for the individual to experience sexual satisfaction apart from pornographic material or the challenge, guilt or adrenalin associated with them." [i]

Research has shown that

- males who are exposed to a great deal of erotica before the age of 14 are more

sexually active and engage in more varied sexual behaviours as adults than is true for males not so exposed.

- Exposure to porn can prompt children to act out sexually against younger, smaller and more vulnerable children
- 66% of teen males and 40% of females want to try out sexual behaviours they have witnessed in pornography, and 31% of males, 18% of females actually did within days of viewing.
- Adolescent exposure to porn is related to greater involvement in deviant sexual practice.

"Research does suggest that depictions of sexual behaviour may be emotionally disturbing to young people who encounter them. One survey found that 53 per cent of children aged 11-17 had seen or experienced something on the internet they thought was offensive or disgusting. The respondents said that they felt "sick", "yuck", "disgusted", "repulsed" and "upset"." [ii]

The Australia Institute released a report in March 2003 titled "Youth and Pornography in Australia: Evidence on the Extent of Exposure and Likely Effects." It suggested that among 16 to 17-year-olds, 84 % of boys and 60 % of girls have had exposure to net porn, 38 % of boys but only 2 % of girls say they have deliberately sought out sex sites and just under a quarter of boys and 7% of girls "accidentally" encounter sex sites every week. 73% of boys and 11% of girls have watched X-rated videos. Around 4-5% of boys identify as frequent (weekly) users of pornography.

- It Is Changing Social Values And Standards:

Pornography influences its viewers to believe that sex bears no responsibility. It fuels the increasing belief in the sexual handshake. Have sex first. Talk later, if then. It's influence is camouflaging the dignity, sacredness and personal impact of sex.

- Rape is trivialised as a criminal offence or not considered one at all. Eg Recently first grade players from both AFL and A.R.L. Football codes, in defending group sex, have been reported as saying that "gang bangs" (pack rape) are endemic within the code.
- Non-monogamous relationships are viewed as normal, natural and necessary.
- Marriage is purported not to be able to fully meet sexual need and desire.

How many women are driven towards eating disorders because of their obsession to match up to the perfect "10" laid out by the voyeuristic body image culture of our society?

- It Helps Foster Sexual Addiction:

90% of male and 77% of female sex addicts reported porn as significant to the development of their addiction. This addiction undermines the self, relationships and the community. As it progresses, the sexual addict

- Is unable to sustain other relationships, activities and responsibilities in a healthy manner.
- Finds life becoming increasingly unmanageable, and loses time, money, productivity, job, integrity, face.
- Experiences a dulling of his spirit and soul, becoming increasingly focussed on sex, breaking his own moral boundaries.

- Is duped by the substitute, the fake, in the search for intimate relationship and transcendence.

The connection to sexual violence

There is a proven connection between pornography and sexual violence. Studies have shown how

- Pornography is used as a stimulant in the preparation to commit sexual violence.
- Habitual use of porn can result in the need for greater stimulation, which can drive the user to attempt to work out his fantasy on others. Often not having the social skills to develop relationships, he needs to force response.

"The Australia Institute report expressed particular concern over violent pornography, suggesting that it may be a risk factor for young men's perpetration of sexual assault and may cultivate greater tolerance of this behaviour by others. Given that young women are three to four times more likely to be subject to sexual and physical violence than older women and young men aged 15-25 are responsible for more sexual assaults than older males, this is a legitimate concern." [iii]

One study of convicted child molesters showed that 77% of those who molested boys and 87% of those who molested girls, admitted to habitual use of pornography. They also use porn images to show their victims what to do, lower their inhibitions and demonstrate that what they want them to do is "OK."

Steps to Healing

There is a way to freedom and healing from IAD and the broken relationships and sexuality it causes. It's a soul matter and, thankfully, Jesus restores our souls, even souls surrendered to and ravaged by sexual and/or internet addiction. He alone can fill our deepest yearnings and empower us to give wholesome expression to our deepest passions. Healing is a process and takes both the addict's desire and commitment to change, as well as Jesus' powerful grace to transform.

Some Hard Decisions Are Required

To receive His grace, some hard decisions are required. Initially it's to forsake denial, realise that the compulsion is beyond control, and to seek help with a safe person. This may be a pastor, counsellor or mature friend, who will not judge but have wisdom to help find support for the healing process.

Next is to confess to the confidant the character weakness behind the problem, and the specific sins that it has caused. James 5:16 states that when we confess our sins to one another the way is opened for healing. The IAD sufferer seeks the healing of the soul. It is vital that they take responsibility for their actions, without blame shifting or justification. Though it takes humility, it is quite empowering, as the soul is cleansed, the guilt lifted and the secret shared. Depending on the length of time of the IAD and the demeaning practices to which it has led, the recovery process may take years.[6] Profound addiction will require counselling. Whatever, during the recovery time, and beyond, ongoing accountability is indispensable. In the early stages a return to the behaviour is usually experienced in some form. Open confession and accountability breaks the secrecy and reinforces new neurone connections in the brain to enable a different response to addictive triggers. Joining a group focussed on working through the issues of sexual addiction provides accountability, insight from experience, and prayerful support.

Radical change in accessing, and using the computer is necessary. It is necessary to forsake sole control of the computer by giving another person permission to regularly check its internet history. More radical still is to allow the other person

to set the computer's password so that only they can unlock it, facilitating supervised use. Move the computer to a central place where traffic flows regularly.

The computer itself can be used to help. Filtered Internet service providers remove much of the stress of what may be down loaded. Purchasing Net Nanny or other filters is another option. Many keep calendar schedules on their computer. Such a program logs online time, activity and subject, establishing a base line to track the recovery process. It also enables a program to be set to flash a message at regular intervals, prompting the user to briefly stop and evaluate their current activity. None of these are fool proof and require integrity with accountability. If it remains a problem get rid of the computer altogether.

(Cut off your hand or eye, which causes you to sin. Matt 18:8,9)

Finally the recovering addict should become intentional in breaking down barriers to intimacy, taking initiative in relationships to connect at soul level.

John, Jolene, Manuel and I, by God's grace, have moved through this process, remain accountable and are delighting in restoring relationships and rebuilding our lives. It takes courage, which is given as the soul discovers its true passion.

IMPORTANT NOTE:

Recovery Groups for people who want to overcome sexual addiction are conducted by Living Waters Ministries in Sydney, Canberra, Brisbane, and Perth. [Contact us](#) for further info.

[1] I Goldberg. Internet Addiction research@cmhcsyc.com July 5, 1996

[2] Is the Internet Addictive, or Are Addicts Using the Internet? S.A. King, Centre for Online Addiction, 1996 www.concentric.net/~Astorm/iad.html, www.netaddiction.com

[3] US World News Report: Business Perspective of the Pornographic Industry, 1996.

[4] Genesis 2:18

[5] NY Times May 16, 2000

[6] Patrick Carnes Don't Call It Love, Recovery From Sexual Addiction, Bantam Books New York,1991, Ch 6 provides an analysis and timetable of the stages of recovery,,

[i] Victor B Cline Pornography's Effects on Adults and Children New York Morality in Media 1990 p11

[ii] Michael Carr-Gregg Youth in Grip of Online Onanism The Australian, 29th December, 2003

[iii] Carr-Gregg