

A Man's Brain on Porn: A Neuroscientist's View

✖ Have

you ever wondered why pornography seems to hypnotize the male brain, or why it can override all logic, sometimes to the point of ruining a guy's life? William Struthers has the answers. A neuroscientist and professor at Wheaton College, Struthers has researched what goes on in the mind of a man when he looks at pornography. His findings are enlightening. Our conversation with him hit on a variety of topics, such as why porn seems to be worse for Christians than non-Christians and how single men can find hope. Don't miss this interview from New Man E-magazine.

New Man: What goes on in a man's brain when he's looking at pornography?

Struthers: I

think even before you answer that question you have to know a little bit about how a man's brain is built. Obviously it starts developing in the womb. The critical part in making a masculine brain is testosterone. It causes the brain to develop along a certain pathway. That's what makes little boys different from little girls. You'll notice that a baby boy likes to look at things, but a baby girl likes

to look at faces more.

The next big chemical changes take place during puberty, when the brain becomes cued in to sexual maturity. Every brain has certain parts that are more masculine or feminine. What you find during this time is that the masculine parts of the brain are really triggered by visual stimuli. This goes back even to the example of babies—the boys are more interested in looking at things. This visual preference shows up very clearly with pornography.

In tests, when men are placed in brain scanning devices and look at stills of naked women or video of couples engaged in intercourse, the visual parts of a man's brain light up more than a woman's. The example I use in the book is that, to a man, pornography is like a high definition television. For whatever reason, it tends to draw in men reflexively and maintain hold over them. Just like when you're looking at TVs in Best Buy, the HDTV is going to grab your attention more than the standard definition. To a woman's brain, it's all standard definition. So pornography lends itself to a man's brain.

Another critical thing for a man's brain when looking at pornography is that

many men will use pornography to masturbate. Once again, when you look at what goes on in the brain around an orgasm, it is the parts of the brain that are involved in reinforcement. They are the same parts that activate when a person eats or drinks or takes addictive drugs.

So when you start pairing the visual image of pornography, which men see incredibly well and are almost hypnotized by, and if you combine that with the reinforcement of masturbating or acting out sexually, you're laying down a powerful neurological habit where the orgasm reinforces the response to pornography.

Within our larger Christian worldview, the purpose of the brain reinforcing the response to an orgasm is to bind a man to his wife. This response ties you to whatever is sanctioned with it. In the context of marriage between a husband and a wife, this binding is a good thing. If, however, this sexual response is bound to something else, like a pornographic image, you are bound to it and you develop an attachment to it. This is a neurological process as much as a spiritual one.

New Man: Does this process only happen when looking at extreme pornographic images—such as naked pictures or video—or does it apply to

**anything we
are sexually drawn to?**

Struthers: A

lot of that is culturally defined. All men are drawn to look for nudity and the female form, but how much depends on the culture you grow up in. If you are in a conservative culture where the female form is taboo, a little female skin may get you sexually aroused. If you are in a culture where there is a lot of sexual imagery, you may need even more than a naked body in order to elicit a sexual response. To continue the metaphor, if you've been watching HDTV for a while, you want a bigger screen. You've gotten used to it.

In our culture, which is hypersexual, many men will need to escalate their pornography usage. Some men will develop fetishes and go to specific Web sites or look at particular types of women. They are training their brains to only respond to that one thing. Other men will view multiple Web sites with multiple different models and types of pornography, training themselves to only be aroused by lots of women doing lots of different things. Then, when they go to their one wife whose appearance doesn't change and generally keeps to the same sexual script, it

doesn't arouse the man anymore.

New Man: That's fascinating. Why does it seem sometimes like Christian men can have a greater struggle with pornography than non-Christians?

Struthers: If you don't see sexually acting out as a spiritual matter, then you don't have the same issues as a Christian, who sees it as sin or a moral failing. Christians will have emotions like guilt and shame related to their pornographic use, and that can make it worse. They feel a self-loathing because of their issue, and they try to soothe that loathing by acting out sexually. That momentary orgasm response of relief and pleasure gets rid of the shame for a moment. It's a cycle that gets worse over time, even more so for men of faith.

Another important thing to understand is that viewing pornography and sexually acting out is not just done because it causes pleasure. It can be done as a way of relieving stress, dealing with depression, or done just out of a compulsion. Some men see it as a reward. They've been good all week and they deserve it.

Some men are narcissists. Actually, that's a personality type that attracts a lot of pastors. We

have to be careful when dealing with pastors in recovery because sometimes they'll talk too openly about it so that they can be admired, but they will draw others unnecessarily into the issue.

The point is that you wouldn't treat a heroin addict the same way you would someone who is depressed or someone who has a compulsive disorder. So when we rightly understand the particular reason why men are viewing pornography, we have a better chance of helping them. Rather than just saying, "It's an addiction," we have to find the reason why men are acting out and develop behavioral patterns to deal with the issue.

New Man: Is there hope for men who are stuck in this habit to rewire their brains?

Struthers: Just as you are creating neurological habits out of your sexual immorality, so too can you also create neurological habits out of sexual purity. The same rules that govern how you got to this point can also be used to get you out.

Imagine that you were addicted to purity and compassion. You would feel the same lack of freedom to control yourself, but you wouldn't be able to stop yourself from doing good things. That process of being neurologically unable to

fall prey
to temptation is called sanctification. As I make small
decisions, they
have long-lasting neurological consequences for me. That can
be good or
bad.

The other important part is having a right
understanding of what our sexuality is for. It is not
primarily about
reproducing. If that were the case, every man should get
married, no
man should have sex with his wife after menopause, and there
would be
no place for single men and women.

Also, you hear all
kinds of crazy things about men being wired to spread our seed
[or our]
being biologically promiscuous and women being more selective.
That's
just rubbish. When you look at the statistics, women are just
as
promiscuous as men. It's just that men tend to over-report
their
experiences and women tend to under-report them.

The
other thing is, it's not just about pleasure. If that were the
case,
men should just sit around masturbating all day. Neither
reproducing
nor pleasure is the primary purpose for sexuality.

The
primary nature of our sexuality is tied to the fact that we
are made in
the relational nature of the image of God and that sex is

about knowing
and being known. It is about speaking goodness into someone
else and
having them speak goodness to you. That takes place in a
unique way in
the context of marriage between a man and a woman, and it
models God's
exclusive love for His people or Jesus' exclusive love for His
church.

But
we also need to move away from understanding sexuality as
solely
between mates. Sexuality affects every relationship we have. I
can be a
father figure to many young men on my college campus, but I'm
a father
to my son in a different way. I'm a son to my parents, but I
can be a
spiritual son to older men and women. I can be a spiritual
brother to
women who aren't my wife, but I have a unique relationship
with my wife
that is exclusive. All these relationships are affected by our
sexuality. It's about intimacy that is being made into a
relational
image of God.

**New Man: Single guys have a unique situation. Any advice for
them?**

Struthers: In
our culture, and this is exacerbated in the church, single men
feel
trapped because they don't have an outlet for their sexuality.
This is
because they only see their sexuality as genital. When they
can see

their sexuality in a relational context, like I was talking about a minute ago, then they can be freed up of feeling the weight of having a sexual outlet. They need to understand that sexuality isn't just about pleasure and that they can channel that energy into their relationships and service. Combine that with the fact that the sexual drive will die down with age, and there's hope for them.

That's also important for the rest of the church. When we understand they can be ministers for good in a way that a married man can't be, then we give them greater esteem and a higher place in the church. Just because married is the norm, it doesn't mean it is the ideal. The church doesn't value chastity as a lifelong decision anymore, it only sees it as a holding pattern until marriage. That's not biblical. The church desperately needs the service that single men can give. Without it, the church cannot become what it is supposed to be.

To learn more about William Struthers' book, or to place an order, [click here](#).