

The Hidden Epidemic Destroying Marriages and Families

Dear Laurie,

I'm grieving the loss of my young womanhood and the countless nights I went to bed wounded in heart and frustrated sexually. It's hard to look at my face in midlife and wonder how my husband rejected me when I was at my best—I was really pretty.

I went through the stages you did. I was obedient, submitting even over tiny issues. I ministered to his needs and enjoyed it, even when he was oblivious to mine. For years, I've suffered from exhaustion—afraid that if I went to bed before my husband, I'd be neglecting his sexual or emotional needs. I did try saying, "I'm tired," but he felt rejected, and it took days to build him up again.

In the process, I was punished by his lack of involvement in our home and our children's lives. Worse, he'd spend days picking at me until I exploded. Looking back, I realize that I was so hungry for an emotional connection with him that I was willing to get it through anger if that was the only way he would hear me.

Meanwhile, I suffered terrible guilt from the increasing breakdowns I was having due to exhaustion. When I fell apart because I was overly exhausted or confused by lies, I was viewed as "the problem."

Once, when I ran out of a Bible time he was having because I was upset he was demeaning me, my husband shoved me, tore the keys out of my hand and swore at me. I was afraid to tell him how I felt. I thought that would be unsubmitive since a good wife should like everything her husband does and not suggest

any changes.

Afterward, I ran to all his counseling books. Not a single Christian source I checked told me these “minor” abuses not only weren’t minor but were repugnant to God. I had to go to a secular book to find information on abuse.

It seems Christians assume the wounded must be under some sort of judgment or discipline from the Lord. It’s almost a Hindu approach to life—fatalistic, instead of good, clean anger after a wrong done.

I constantly wonder what I could have done differently. The question absolutely hounds me!

I was living within the context of a lie. I wasn’t responsible for that lie. The false data gave me wrong clues as well as wrong ideas about myself, the Lord and my husband. Looking back, the one thing I should have done is pray more for truth.

—Hurting

Are you as moved by that letter as I am? It came from a woman who eschewed the feminist philosophy of self-fulfillment. She came home from the workplace to give herself to her husband and children.

Highly respected by both their church and their community, her family appeared to have it all together. Her husband, a well-known speaker on family issues, seemed to be a godly man.

But the truth was, the husband was hiding a secret life filled with pornography and sexual betrayal. The guilt accompanying his deceit showed up in the form of mind games that he played on his wife.

The Truth About Pornography

Hurting’s letter is only one of many hundreds of letters that poured in after the publication of my book, *An Affair of the*

Mind, which explores the devastating impact pornography has on marriages. I am saddened to discover that so many others have experienced the betrayal that pornography brings to a marriage.

My letter-writers and I are not alone. Studies show that 40 to 50 percent of Christian men are involved in pornography. Wondering if your husband is one of them is scary.

But some of you already know. Some of you have friends who are suffering through this. Some of you are wondering what you should tell your teens about why they should avoid X-rated websites.

Whatever your situation, the truth will set you free to be a healthy wife, supportive friend and loving mother. So let's look at some of the truths about pornography.

1. Pornography is addictive. Dr. Mary Ann Layden, director for the Center for Cognitive Therapy, says that an addiction to pornography is harder to break than a cocaine addiction and that recovery from it is more likely to result in relapse than any other addiction. Why?

When you view pornography, a powerful mix of hormones is released in the brain. Two hundred times more potent than morphine and more addictive than cocaine, endorphins and enkephalins bring on a "rush." The brain is just as driven to want this "rush" as a drug addict's body is driven to want drugs.

2. Pornography causes sexual dysfunction. Many people believe that pornography, especially "soft core" erotica, is simply a depiction of normal, healthy heterosexuality. Nothing could be further from the truth. Pornography contains much false, misleading and scientifically inaccurate information about sexuality, especially female sexual nature and response.

For example, pornography portrays an endless round of thrilling sexual escapades with an endless bevy of breathless, hot-blooded babes and studmuffins. The not-so-subtle message is that these babes and studmuffins are more breathless and hot-blooded if you're not married to them. This is more fantasy than fact.

"Couples not involved [sexually] before their marriage and faithful during marriage are more satisfied with their current sex life and also with their marriage, compared to those who were involved sexually before marriage," says Dr. David Larson of the National Institutes of Health in an unpublished manuscript entitled *Behind Closed Doors*. Dr. Larson and his associates also found that women who feel secure and loved and who trust that their man is around to stay are twice as fulfilled as women who are promiscuous.

There are physiological reasons why this is so. In healthy sexuality, two special parts of our nervous system, the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), work together in harmony to bring about sexual arousal and release. If you give a fearful, guilty or embarrassed meaning to a sexual experience, the SNS will overreact, blocking normal sexual arousal.

Recently, I held a sobbing woman I'll call Jane. Jane stammered out her shame over things she had done in her marriage bed. Her husband stood nearby, hanging his head, saying he had asked her to perform those acts.

He thought they were OK—after all, the women in pornography enjoyed them. But in real life, those sexual practices cause pain. Jane's nervous system overloaded on the shame, fear and pain she was experiencing. As a result, she became sexually dysfunctional.

Pornography can cause sexual dysfunction in other ways. Those who use pornography often develop "sexual anorexia." This

means they are unable or unwilling to enter into a sexual relationship with their spouses.

Sometimes this is because shame about the things they have done in secret make them want to hide from their spouses. Other times it's because they are angry with their spouses for not agreeing to act out a pornographic fantasy. Either way, sex is infrequent, and the innocent spouse wonders why he or she is no longer desirable.

Finally, pornography usage can lead to sexual dissatisfaction. Being compared to some unrealistic standard is a real turnoff. Women who clean bathrooms, make lunches and kiss boo-boos can't compete with women who are pumped up, tucked up and air-brushed.

3. Pornography leads to abuse. The myth that women secretly want to be raped is a big part of pornography. Many of our young people believe this myth. A study of 1,700 junior high teens found that 65 percent of the boys and 57 percent of the girls believe it's OK for a male to force a female to have sex if they have been dating for six months.

Pornography also causes more subtle forms of abuse. In pornography, a woman does whatever a man wants her to do. For example, there's one interactive CD in which it's possible to have over a million virtual sex experiences with a woman—you simply program in what you want her to do.

The normal needs of a live woman anger a man who has been used to being in total control of fantasy women. That may be why the states that have the highest readership of pornography also have the highest rates of domestic violence.

Recently, I heard a talk-show host tell a caller that as long as no body fluids were exchanged, she needn't worry about her husband's exploration of Internet porn. The talk-show host was wrong—pornography kills love.

Has pornography hurt your life or the life of someone you love? Don't despair. There are steps you can take to restore what the enemy has stolen.

And you can take solace in God's word to you: "Your Maker is Your husband—and I'm not just any husband. I'm the God of the whole earth, the Lord of hosts, and your Redeemer. I'm calling to you. I know you feel forsaken. I know you're heartbroken. You were wooed and won in your youth. Now you've been rejected and scorned. Listen to Me. I'll tenderly gather you into My arms, and I will have compassion on you" (Is. 54:5-7, paraphrased).

If You Are a Victim of Pornography, What Can You Do?

1. Cry out to God. Realize that your heavenly Father cares about how you have been affected by your spouse's addiction. Allow Him to share this burden with you.

2. Identify your feelings. In his book *Questions Women Ask in Private*, H. Norman Wright states, "Pornography is especially degrading to women and puts them in a state of being victimized." As a victim of pornography, you may experience a host of emotions, including shock, betrayal, anger and devastation. You will begin to heal when you can name and validate your feelings.

3. Eschew blame. Understand this: You are not to blame for your husband's behavior! Say this over and over until the Holy Spirit convicts you of the truth.

There are many factors that can contribute to your husband's addiction, including personality disorders and psychopathology. He may have become involved in temptation-filled situations or had esteem needs that were never met.

4. Seek support from your pastor, a trusted friend or a counselor. In his *Guide for Sexual Addiction Recovery*, Dr.

Doug Weiss tells the sexual addict, "Your ... spouse has probably suffered in many ways from your addiction, possibly including your inability to be emotionally intimate, financial losses, humiliation and the list goes on." If you have suffered as Weiss describes, you may need help receiving healing in areas where you have been wounded.

5. If you have decided to participate in your husband's recovery, educate yourself. Books such as *Now That I Know, What Should I Do?* by Dr. Weiss answer some of the questions that wives ask. There is also some helpful information for spouses on communication and accountability in Weiss's guidebook, *101 Practical Exercises*. Check in your area for churches with counseling ministries that offer support groups for families of loved ones who are addicted.

6. Forgive your husband. Forgiveness will probably be the most difficult yet most important step in the restoration of your marriage. Forgiveness precedes the rebuilding of trust.

Forgiving your husband does not mean that you accept his sinful behavior. It also does not mean that you deny your feelings or the hurts his addiction has caused. And it does not erase all the consequences of sin. It does, however, mean that you pardon him.

One very effective exercise is to make a list of all the ways your spouse has hurt you and identify the feelings you have experienced in each situation. Reading each offense out loud, choose to forgive your husband for every one.

When you have finished, throw the paper away. If you have been genuine in your intentions to forgive, you will feel a tremendous burden lift from your spirit.

7. Encourage your husband's efforts toward healing. Speak words of life (Prov. 18:21) to him, and praise every act toward wholeness and restoration. Develop a prayer list, and intercede for his healing. Thank God for your increasing

understanding of Him as Healer and Deliverer.

Laurie Hall learned of her husband's addiction to pornography after 18 years of marriage. Since then, she has supported countless women in similar situations. She is the author of *An Affair of the Mind* (Tyndale) and *The Cleavers Don't Live Here Anymore* (Vine Books).