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aspects. In a healthy marriage, couples demonstrate radical love to one another in a variety of ways—apart from sex.

Learning the love language of the person you're dating is important. What conveys love to you may not convey love to the person you're dating. Talk together. Look over the list and dialogue about what makes each of you feel loved. Having other ways to convey love helps diminish the need to express love physically, which helps you keep the sexual boundaries you've set but still allows for continuing growth in your relationship.

8 What's so bad about porn?

As I sat in the coffee shop with Thomas, conversation came easily. He was a former football player, highly social and loved to talk on a wide variety of subjects. Our lives had crossed paths in a campus fellowship and church, so we sat drinking coffee and getting caught up. Our conversation turned to his hope of one day being married and raising a family. As a devoted Christian, he was careful in his interpersonal relationships with women.

Thomas said something that caught me off-guard. He shared that he was using pornography as a way to avoid sexual involvement with women he knew. He said, "I don't want to mess up some girl's life. At least with pornography, I'm not messing up anyone's life." Thomas planned to stop using porn when he got married.

To him, using pornography was less harmful than real sex and was a back door route to holiness. While it's true that a person can avoid sexually transmitted diseases and avoid unplanned pregnancies by using pornography, it's far from harmless. Thomas is one of many sin-

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gle men who think marriage and a legitimate sex partner will be the end of his desire for pornography. Probably it won't. Many married men who dearly love their wives struggle with pornography.

My husband and I were meeting with a young couple, Ricardo and Cyndi, whose marriage was nearly shipwrecked due to Ricardo's ongoing use of pornography. Prior to their marriage, Ricardo had shared his attachment to pornography with Cyndi. They both were leaders in their campus fellowship and were optimistic that marriage would take away Ricardo's attraction to pornography. They reasoned that if he had a real sex partner and was fulfilled with her, his habit of using pornography would disappear.

As the four of us sat in my husband's office, I pensively stared at Ricardo's exceptionally beautiful wife. I was totally at a loss. I finally said to the husband, "I'm sorry to be stupid, but I just don't get it. You have this unbelievably beautiful wife, and yet you choose pornography? How could anything electronic be better than this amazing, beautiful, real-life woman?"

His answer was direct and honest. "You see, she's complicated. Sometimes she has a bad day at work and isn't in the mood for sex. Sometimes she has her period and is unavailable. When we do come together, I have to think about what she likes and wants, how to please her. She's complicated. But when I turn to pornography, it's all about me. Any time, any day, I can instantly find satisfaction. In my sexual fantasy world, I'm super attractive. Women want me; women are always available to me and place no demands on me." His incredible honesty gave me a window into his struggle. I realized in that moment how his single years using pornography had shaped him sexually.

The Cure for Selfishness

God intends sex to draw us out of our selfish *me* world and help us

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connect with another person. As we become one flesh with another person, we take on their concerns, passions, problems, dreams and ambitions. *Me* becomes *we*. Probably the greatest danger in using pornography is that it short-circuits the unity of a sexual experience and makes it a totally selfish act.

Pornography makes real people and real relationships disappointing by developing the expectations that they will be as beautiful or handsome as the airbrushed movie stars and require no sacrifice. Relationships with real people are often complicated, messy and draining. We have to lay aside our own agendas to seek the good of another human being.

Another problem with using pornography is that it develops an appetite for a dark form of sexuality. Men derive a false sense of power from watching women be humiliated and degraded. God's beautiful gift is twisted through violence, degrading acts and sexual abuse of children. This sets up users for an unhealthy duality in sex: pure and loving sex between a husband and wife contrasted with dark, dirty sexual fantasies that will never be fulfilled in marriage.

An increasing number of women also use pornography. An article in *Today's Christian Woman* reported that "one out of every six women, including Christians, struggles with an addiction to pornography."[11] One woman interviewed said, "I thought this would be an answer to my loneliness, but it only made it worse. I was so ashamed of what I was doing I isolated myself."

Many people use pornography to medicate unwanted feelings. Pornography can alter a person's mood by creating excitement for people who are bored, relaxation for people who are stressed, and the illusion of intimacy for people who are lonely.

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What Lies Beneath the Surface

If you're using pornography, look beneath the surface and ask, "What negative emotion am I trying to medicate with pornography?" God desires to enter into those painful places in our souls and bring his companionship and his healing power.

When we use pornography, we often justify it with a sense of entitlement.

- I've worked so hard today, I deserve this little treat.
- My partner doesn't have as big of a need for sex as I do. This helps us balance out.
- I've tried to find a real relationship but nothing works out. I deserve to have my sexual needs met.

Telling ourselves these things makes using pornography seem legitimate. What big or little lies do you tell yourself to justify acting out with pornography?

Take stock of your fantasies. When you have sexual fantasies, is there a recurring theme? What's going on? Who shows up? What's the scene of your sexual fantasies? Sexual fantasies are a way to heal the wounded places in the soul. They bring missing pieces like love and affirmation. Ricardo told us that he had recurring fantasies about attractive women wanting him, seeking him out and finding him irresistible. He said in high school that he wasn't popular and had trouble getting a date for the dance. The popular girls ignored him. He longed so deeply to be chosen, to be wanted. All that was corrected in his sexual fantasies.

Some people believe that an addiction to pornography is the hardest addiction to break. There must be a radical renouncement of the fantasy world that porn users construct within. It takes courage to

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live in real life with a real person, but the rewards are worth it. Ricardo confessed that part of him wanted to give up his addiction to pornography but part of him didn't. He was conflicted. Ricardo was hoping for magical deliverance from his addiction, but the truth is his healing started when he was willing to completely renounce his addiction to pornography and face the truth that he was using pornography to self-medicate his unwanted emotions. It was hard work. Ricardo also began pursuing better ways of self-care—working out, eating healthy food, and getting adequate sleep. He realized he didn't have deep, meaningful relationships with men. It was hard for him to think of even one guy he could call a good friend, so he set a goal to develop a network of men he could be authentic with and enjoy socializing with.

The single best way to break free from pornography is to pursue meaningful friendships with men *and* women. Often loneliness and isolation cause people to turn to pornography. Being meaningfully involved in a Christian community, serving alongside like-minded people and entering into the joys and sorrows of life with other people makes us alive on the inside. Joining a recovery group or finding an accountability partner is crucial. We all need people who will walk with us on the path of discipleship. Becoming holy is a corporate journey.[12]

Pornography is ultimately unfulfilling and a poor substitute for delight and joy in God's good creation. Cultivating positive habits like joining a sports team or a Bible study can help us redirect our sexual energies in more constructive ways. Think of replacing the pleasure of pornography with a higher pleasure.