

Wired for Intimacy. How pornography hijacks the male brain. By William M. Struthers.



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Introduction

WHAT IS IT ABOUT PORNOGRAPHY that makes it so appealing to so many men? Why does a naked female body or a movie of a woman having sex seem to hijack a man's brain, hypnotizing him and rendering him incapable of making good decisions? Why might a man who is married to a lovely wife risk that relationship for a ten-second video clip of a couple having sex? What is it about being male that makes it so difficult for men to look away?

While pornography ravages and destroys the lives of both men and women, this book and the research within focuses almost exclusively on pornography's impact on men. It is true that women are increasingly becoming consumers of pornography, but there is little doubt that it is primarily men who are hooked on it. And the reasons that women view pornography are very different than the reasons men do. Men seem to be wired in such a way that pornography hijacks the proper functioning of their brains and has a long-lasting effect on their thoughts and lives.

As a biopsychologist and a person of faith, I am in a unique position to engage many of the questions posed above. It is hard to be a Christian in the United States and not be sensitive to the pervasive influence of pornography and the warped views of sexuality that saturate our culture. Pornography and the hypersexuality found in the media are almost impossible to avoid.

As I have looked more carefully at some of my Christian beliefs about sexuality and felt convicted to respond to the pornification of

our culture, I have had an unexpected opportunity to integrate my faith with my academic discipline. As I have studied how the brain develops, how hormones and culture affect it and how addictions and compulsions develop, it has become increasingly apparent to me why many men struggle so much. In this book I share this material, and I hope it can be a part of the healing process that so many long for.

Like many adolescent boys growing up in the 1980s, I had occasional opportunities to view lingerie catalogs in the mail and softcore pornography magazines stashed away by friends and relatives. These were my first exposures to the naked female form, eliciting what I now know to be sexual interest. As I grew older, frontal nudity and erotic sexual scenes in movies became readily viewable on cable television channels such as HBO and Playboy. Home videotapes made access to all types of pornography easier than ever before.

While I can't recall feeling a compelling attraction toward pornography, I won't deny that I found it hypnotizing when I stumbled upon it. But I was struck by the hold that it had over several of my teenage friends and their desire to expose me to it. Perhaps I was just late in my sexual awakening, but as I entered my twenties, my exposure to porn shifted into high gear. Legally an adult and living with other men who were enjoying the freedoms of college life, I was exposed to additional forms of pornography. I became increasingly aware of how many men subscribed to *Playboy* and regularly rented adult videos. I began to notice how many of my friends and acquaintances—men who by all other accounts would have made fine boyfriends and husbands—sacrificed relationships with real women for the allure of an image of a woman on the magazine page or videotape of a couple having sex. I admit that I was not a saint and did not avert my eyes from every temptation. I believe that it is only by the grace of God that I was mostly spared from the seductive draw of the pornographic page and screen.

I can think of many ways I have benefited from computer technologies and the vast knowledge available on the Internet. But I also delete

dozens of e-mails each day that solicit pornographic material, sexual enhancement products or opportunities for sexual encounters. My workplace has an Internet filter, but sexually explicit material is easy to access if you are determined. I put on self-imposed blinders as I wade through tantalizing advertisements with Victoria's Secret models in the margins of my weather forecast. My Internet service provider's homepage is littered with dating services ("Hot Single Girls in Your Neighborhood Looking for Love!") and my sports websites have galleries of scantily clad cheerleaders. If I watch a soccer match on television with my children, I have to be vigilant to change the channel when commercials for Viagra are aired. In a world that has been hypersexualized, it is hard to get through the day without being battered and numbed by the intrusions of pornography.

Many people have asked me if I have ever looked at pornography. I'm not sure if the question is geared to label me a hypocrite or to appeal to an "everybody does it" mentality. When I tell them that I find many things on television or on newsstands pornographic, they frown. Apparently this makes me a prude, which is worse than being a hypocrite. Yes, I have viewed pornography because *it is everywhere*. You cannot get away from it; if you don't view it intentionally, you will unintentionally. The result is that repeated exposure to pornography and the objectification of the female body changes the way our brains see each other. Repeated exposure to any stimulus results in neurological circuit making. That is how we learn. But what does pornography teach and how does it change those who regularly consume it?

My journey in asking this question began several years ago when, as a faculty member at a Christian college, two significant things happened. First, I knew three men in different stages of life and from varied backgrounds who had problems with pornography and engaged in sexually inappropriate behaviors. These men had allowed pornography to warp their idea of sexuality, impacting them and their families negatively. Watching these men deal with the consequences of their problems was exceptionally painful. In one situation, I felt that I had unknowingly contributed to the breakdown of one man's

marriage by encouraging him to discover the wonders of the Internet for quick and easy stock trading. Instead he discovered it as a gateway to free pornography and depravity.

A second factor was an upper-division psychology class I taught called Men and Addictions. In part of this course, I spent a significant amount of time exploring findings about men's struggles with pornography and compulsive sexual behaviors. We evaluated whether or not a person could become addicted to porn and if it should be classified as a clinical problem. This component to the course turned out to be an invitation for hordes of college-aged men to visit me during my office hours. There they confided that they felt trapped by their inability to stop consuming pornography. The weight of the guilt they carried was heartbreaking.

I began the process of seeking out therapeutic options for these men and came across statistics about the adult entertainment industry. I was flabbergasted at the economics and demographics of it all. I met regularly with these young men and referred them to counselors when appropriate. It became apparent that many of them were dealing with significant emotional and spiritual wounds that had resulted from their experience with pornography. This book is a result of the great need for healing that I saw in these men as a result of pornography consumption.

My personal agenda will be clearly evident to anyone who reads this book. It stems from my Christian faith and my desire that each person fully understand how we all are unique and appreciate how much we share in common as human beings created in the image of God. My faith requires that every human life be viewed as sacred and the dignity of every individual be respected and honored. When we better understand the devastating spiritual, psychological, social and biological reality of how pornography violates our unique position in God's creation, we will be better able to minister to those who have been wounded by it.

Because of this perspective, I view pornography as an institutional evil that preys on the disaffected, wounded and desperate members of

society. I believe that even those who wholeheartedly embrace pornography's lie of sexual fulfillment and freedom (whether producers, actors or consumers) are still loved by God. Our calling as Christians is to examine ourselves and walk alongside those who have been damaged by this evil. We are not to demonize others, but to share God's healing, grace and mercy as they discover their identity in Christ. Healing and right thinking about our sexual nature are found in the person of Jesus Christ, Scripture, the power of the Holy Spirit and the ministry of the church.

Many excellent books have been written by Christian authors who explain in plain terms how men can deal with pornography. They use language common in Christian culture and easy for many men to grab hold of: lust of the flesh, sexual sin, diseased soul, sexual idolatry. Much good comes from using this language when wrestling with the reality of pornography. Many of these authors rightly frame pornography as more than just an ethical or legal matter—it is a *spiritual* matter.

Pornography is also a *physical* matter, rooted in the biological intricacies of our sexual design. In my opinion, nowhere is the complexity of our sexual nature seen more than in the wiring of the brain. Our reproductive organs are often given too much attention in the discussion of sexuality. It is the brain, however, where we feel the sexual longing, the arousal, the focus and the ecstasy that comes from sexual intimacy. Using spiritual and psychological language to describe the tenacious grip of sexually destructive patterns is helpful. But calls to pray harder, move the computer to the living room and get plugged into an accountability group only go so far. They come across as hollow to many men whose brains have been altered and rewired by their experiences with pornography. They have trained their brains to respond sexually to the pornography they consume.

We need to move to the next stage of dealing with pornography, cybersex addictions and sexual compulsions. We can find healthy ways to train the male brain to understand and act on its sexual nature. By appreciating our created nature and acknowledging pornog-

raphy's unhealthy impact on our brain (and the rest of our body), we have a better path forward.

I hope that as recent scholarship in the brain sciences reframes and informs our ideas about how we are made, we can develop a better understanding of how fearfully and wonderfully made we are. Pornography taps into many men's wrong thinking about themselves, in places where their brains are most vulnerable to exploitation. But as we appreciate the reality of our sexuality and place it within the biblical narrative, we will see hope for redemption. As we more clearly see our need for redemption and the path of sanctification, we will be better equipped to heal from the wounds of pornography and allow our sexuality to be a necessary part of the process by which we are conformed to the image of Christ.