

Porn Comes of Age

Further evidence that porn addiction acts like drug addiction

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A recent study from University of Cambridge reports that porn may trigger compulsion in the brain of a sex addict much the way drugs and related paraphernalia triggers a drug addict. In a process called “incentive motivation,” a now widely accepted theory of addiction, the drug addict is driven to consume narcotics not for pleasure, but to satisfy an uncontrollable feeling of desire. By correlating sex addiction with drug addiction, researchers have put to bed the long-standing argument that heavy use of porn is merely a sign of a “high sex drive.” Far from it, says Dr. Valerie Voon, the study’s main author. “There is no question [these people] are suffering,” she explains. “They are unable to control their behaviors.” Additionally, a recent German study published in the journal JAMA Psychiatry reported that as greater amounts of porn were consumed, the brain registered lower levels of “reward” in the striatum, causing “desensitization,” or simply put, numbness. More and more pornography was thus needed to return to the original high, echoing the drug addiction comparison made by Voon. Together, these studies mark a significant breakthrough for those who believe sex addiction had lagged behind other disorders in terms of public understanding, treatment options, and research funding.

The Cambridge study found on the whole that those who were sexually compulsive had used porn more often and earlier in their lives, as compared with their non-sexually addicted counterparts. And indeed, one of the most compelling findings was that younger patients were the most vulnerable to pornographic images, which stimulated their ventral striatum, the part of the brain that is responsible for reward-based decision-making. Although more data is needed, this suggests a relationship between high-risk behavior and porn consumption. By contrast, the ventral striatum in a healthy teen continues to grow and strengthen throughout adolescence and young adulthood, helping the individual to resist peer pressure and compulsive activities of all kinds. Ultimately this information can help psychologists and doctors to intervene earlier in the lives of the sexually compulsive, breaking the chains of addiction and bolstering the brain’s innate “immune system.”

Another key discovery made by Dr. Voon’s team was that over half of the study subjects (with an average age of 25) were now more likely to get erections from watching porn than with a flesh and blood partner. This is a profound statement on the severity with which porn undermines human intimacy. It also highlights the need to reduce or eliminate porn consumption during recovery from sexual addiction in order to cleanse the sexual palate and rediscover healthy physiological and psychological sexual impulses. Although the sex addict suffers from an acute obsession that pervades every aspect of life, from work to relationships to self-esteem, of which compulsive use of pornography may only be a single manifestation, it is a clear and obvious place to begin the healing process.