

## What about Porn?

It's hard to talk about sex these days without the topic of porn eventually getting brought up—along with potentially very strong opinions. Given the easy access to porn on all of our devices, most couples have had to talk about whether porn has a place in their sex life, both while together and solo, and if so, what kind of place. Since porn isn't going away, couples need to be able to talk about it in a way that leads to an agreement that both can live with, especially when there are big differences in how the two partners feel about porn.

In order to have that productive discussion, it helps to start by eliminating some popular misconceptions about porn use so that you and your partner can better address the points you disagree on—accurate information tends to lead to better decisions. Contrary to some very vocal proponents, porn is not addictive in the same way that alcohol is and does not inevitably lead to greater and more problematic use. For these reasons and others, porn addiction was not accepted in the newest version of the official diagnostic manual. Although there are some who wind up spending more time or money on it than they intend, the vast majority of porn users don't run into trouble with it. Excessive porn use is usually the result of using porn as a way to manage anxiety, depression, loneliness, relationship stress, or other uncomfortable feelings. Therefore, those root causes should be addressed and/or alternative coping skills developed. This may or may not involve a temporary abstinence from porn use.

For most people, the problems associated with porn use are the arguments that it causes with their romantic partner. But it should be noted that higher porn use often follows problems in the couple's sex life, rather than causes those problems initially. However, disagreements about porn use can then maintain avoidance of partnered activities if porn becomes the path of least resistance. The obvious way that this happens is that one partner uses up their sexual energy on solo activities, but it can also become a situation where the other partner blames all of their sexual troubles on the porn use without looking at what else is going on in their sex life and relationship. Porn use doesn't exist in a vacuum, so if you feel that it is problematic, then you need to look at how it is fitting into what else is going on—what is the porn use affecting, but also what is affecting the porn use?

### Talk It Out

Part of the problem with the controversy around porn use is that when people talk about porn, several other issues get blended together, which makes for a messy and probably unproductive conversation. Many discussions about porn also contain strong feelings about broader topics, such as:

- Is masturbation acceptable, particularly if you have a romantic partner?
- Is it acceptable to have sexual thoughts and desires that don't fit "mainstream" sexuality?
- Is it acceptable to have sexual thoughts and desires for someone other than your romantic partner?
- Is it acceptable to have sexual thoughts and desires that you don't share fully with your romantic partner?

All of these are big questions that usually have multi-layered and nuanced answers that influence feelings about the more specific topic of porn. Therefore, you may want to get a deeper understanding of how you each feel by starting with these broader questions. There are no right or wrong answers, so much as it is important to figure out what works for each of you individually and to look for points of agreement, as well as to explore what beliefs underlie the points that you disagree on. We learn a lot about sexuality without really stepping back and examining where those ideas came from and whether they still work for us. You may benefit from ongoing discussions that will involve lots of reflection, questioning, and sharing, before the topic of porn even gets brought up.

### Come to Agreement

Open discussion prevents secrecy and unhappy discoveries—which is problematic regardless of what is being hidden. If you and your partner disagree about porn, then it will probably help to talk with curiosity and honesty about the appeal or lack thereof. If your partner is interested in porn, then ask them:

- What is it about masturbation that you enjoy—both with and without porn? Are they different?
- Can you describe or show me the porn that you enjoy?
- What is it about that porn that turns you on, compared to porn that doesn't?
- Are there themes, activities, or feelings from that porn that we could talk about incorporating into our shared sex life?
- Would you feel comfortable and/or enjoy including me in your porn use sometimes?

If your partner does not enjoy porn or feels uncomfortable with your porn use, then try to understand their position by asking them:

- How do you feel about masturbation and is it different with or without porn?
- How do you feel about having sexual thoughts and desires about someone other than each other?
- How do you feel about porn in general—and why?
- How do you feel about me specifically watching porn—and why do you think I enjoy it?
- How do you feel about the specific kinds of porn that I watch—and are there some kinds of porn that would be more acceptable than others?
- What else do you want to ask me?

All this discussion of sexuality in general and porn in particular builds intimacy and understanding. Your turn-ons may still be different, but you may be able to better appreciate what turns your partner on and why. It can be interesting and even exciting to learn about each other's sexual fantasies and desires. Good reactions (by both partners) to honest disclosure reduce the guilt and shame that foster secrecy, uncomfortable avoidance, and/or unhappy discoveries.

So talking about porn becomes part of a much larger discussion about turn-ons, fantasies, desires, sexuality, and intimacy. This greater understanding of each other makes it easier to negotiate an agreement about porn use that you can both feel good about and will therefore be sustainable. And if you do a good job with these bigger discussions, you will probably find that your sex life improves, regardless of what you decide about porn.

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