

Against the Current

A column for teens and young adults

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Superdrug!

“Boy, Father, you don’t know how relieved I am!”

“Why?”

“Because you didn’t freak out, or tell me to leave, or call me names.”

“Listen. What you did wasn’t a good thing, but I think you’re pretty courageous to want to deal with it. And besides, statistically speaking, almost 90% of the young men your age are into this. It’s actually a pretty common problem.”

“Really?”

“Really. It’s one of the biggest issues facing your generation. It’s an epidemic, and it hurts people at every level – personally, in our families, relationships, at work, at school, on the job, and demographically.”

“But in school they teach us that it’s natural, even healthy!”

“You’re old enough to know that not everything you learn in school, hear on the news, or read in the paper is necessarily right. Evil always wraps itself up in lies. But it’s evil, nonetheless.”

“So why is it so common, and why is it so tough to deal with?”

“Because it functions like any other addiction. It ‘re-wires’ the pleasure/reward centre in your brain. In addition, it has several other advantages over other substances or activities which are addictive. It’s accessible, affordable, anonymous, and aggressive. You can access it virtually anywhere, it doesn’t cost anything, no one need know you’re doing it (after all, you don’t walk crooked or slur your speech afterwards, like when you’ve been drinking), and

the people selling it don't wait for you to come to them, they're actively looking for you. "

"What do you mean?"

"Haven't you ever been searching for something on the internet, and a racy image pops up?"

"Well, yes".

"This is one of the ways they try to hook us. It's called 'mouse-trapping'. They'll do things like match their site name to the names of sites commonly misspelled by children, send out e-mails with message lines like 'Haven't heard from you lately?', or openly advertise the trashiness of their sites."

"Why do they do this?"

"Money. Internet pornography is a \$100 billion a year business. That's more than the National Football League, Major League Baseball, and the National Basketball Association make - combined! Did you know approximately 60% of all websites visited are sexual in nature? That there are 4.2 million distinct porn sites, with 2,500 new ones every week?"

"That's crazy!"

"It's frightening. Because of the way that pornography interacts with our brain it's been called a 'superdrug'. You've got instant access, unlimited supply, it's effectively free, totally secret, and there's no hangover!"

"Is it really like a drug?"

"Yes. Every addiction, whether it's to drugs, alcohol, sex, food, gambling, whatever, functions in the same way. It actually changes our brain chemistry, and the more addicted we are the more it physically changes our brain."

"How?"

"In a nutshell, the overuse of the dopamine reward system causes addiction. The 'reward circuits' become desensitized, and so higher amounts of the addictive substance or activity are needed in order for the addicted person to

feel normal and functional, let alone get a high. In addition to this, the frontal lobes of our brain, the part which is responsible for reason and logical thinking, actually deteriorate. It's a condition called hypofrontality, and it in effect prevents us from being able to recognize destructive behavior and 'put the brakes on'.

Because sex is the most physically, mentally, emotionally and hormonally focused activity humans engage in, sexual addiction is the most potent of all addictions. As a matter of fact, sexual addictions are by far the fastest growing type of addiction in our society."

"Really?"

"Really. About 60 million people in the USA alone purposefully visit pornographic web-sites. Then there are the 'adult' movies, magazines, and books that are sold. And it's not just adults. Have you checked out the 'young adult literature' section in your local bookstore lately? I'm not exaggerating when I tell you that a lot of the stuff being sold to adolescents in respectable bookstores, not to mention what you can read or see in magazines, TV shows, or movies out there today, have content which would have been regarded as pornography when I was young - and that's not so long ago."

"I don't know, Father . . . is this stuff really that bad?"

"You bet it is. Remember what I said about how it negatively impacts every aspect of a person's life? The use of pornography breaks down a person's ability to have healthy and fulfilling relationships; it interferes with the normal sexual relationship of a husband and wife; it objectifies other human beings; due to the need for greater and greater levels of stimulation it desensitizes us, and often leads to violence, abuse, and perversion. From a theological standpoint it takes something which God gave us as a great gift for sharing and turns it into a destructive means of self-gratification.

Spiritually the effects are just as bad. People who use pornography don't just lose their connection to other people, they lose their connection to God. It breaks up families, marriages, hurts women, harms society, and makes the people who use it feel ashamed. It's no better for the people who make it. Did you know that most porn actors are dead by the age of 50, many by the age of 35, of suicide, drugs, or other unnatural causes? Did you ever consider the fact

that that body you're looking at on the screen is someone's mother, or sister, or daughter? Yeah, this stuff is bad whichever way you look at it."

"Well at least it's only the guys who are into it, eh?"

"Don't be so sure. About 31% of female youth admit to using pornography."

"Really? Girls? How?"

"Males and females react differently. When guys look at the screen they tend to see a collection of body parts. Girls see it more in terms of relationships. Guys get sucked in by looking at pictures. Girls usually get sucked in through chat rooms. Curiosity pulls them in deeper and deeper until they're hooked."

"OK, if I want to kick this habit what can I do? Is it even possible?"

"Of course it's possible. You should start by confessing your sins to a trusted priest and receiving Holy Communion. Sometimes just saying a sin out loud in the presence of another human being is enough to help us overcome it, with God's grace, of course.

But there's more. Though we don't doubt the forgiveness we receive from God, it usually takes additional hard work to get rid of deeply rooted addictions or compulsions. 'Revolving door' confessions, where a person just keeps doing the same things and confessing them over and over again, usually don't help in the case of an addiction. If you're serious about returning to a healthy, normal, mental and emotional state I'd suggest two additional tools.

The first is called 'Covenant Eyes'. It's a program you can install on your computer, which monitors all your internet activity, and at the end of every week sends a log of all web-sites visited to someone you trust, like a teacher, coach, or priest. Web-sites with questionable content are highlighted. You can check it out at www.covenanteyes.com. If you don't have anyone else you would feel comfortable being held accountable by I'd be OK with doing this for you.

The other thing I'd suggest is Sexaholics Anonymous."

"But Father, I'm not some kind of pervert!"

“I didn’t say you were. But a person with a pattern of watching internet pornography even four times a year – once every three months – might be considered an addict. SA is what is called a ‘twelve-step program’, and programs like Alcoholics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, or SA are a proven means of beating addiction. You can probably find a phone number for SA in the Yellow Pages, and the web-site address is www.sa.org. If you’re not sure about this just get the SA book and begin to work the steps yourself. If you need help, I’m here.”

“You know, Father, most of the guys I know are looking at pornography, and some have told me they want to break the habit. If I tell my friends what you told me they’ll probably just say ‘what does a priest know?’ and not listen. What can I say to them?”

“Tell them not to listen to the priest. Tell them to read up on this issue themselves. They can start with an article entitled ‘Slave Master: How Pornography Drugs & Changes Your Brain’ by Dr. Donald Hilton, which they can read on-line at www.salvomag.com/new/articles/salvo13/13hilton.php. If they want to delve deeply into this issue they can read the book The Drug of the New Millenium: The Brain Science behind Internet Pornography by Mark Kastleman. There’s lots of stuff out there on this subject – if you want to learn about it.”

“You know, Father, I came in here scared and ashamed, but I’m actually leaving here with some hope.”

“Good, you should be hopeful. If we try to overcome our problems or challenges with God’s help, and with the help of trusted, wise, and loving friends, we’ve got a good chance of success. I want to tell you that I really respect you. A lot of guys would just go on, pretending that things are OK when they aren’t, and end up making themselves crazy and the people that love them miserable. If you truly want to be free of this compulsion you can be. May God be with you, and help you in your struggle.”

This conversation was fictional. The problem, however, is very real.

