

Recovering from the Trap of Pornography

Elder Dallin H. Oaks Ensign, October 2015

All of us must learn to respond appropriately to media with sexual content.



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A decade ago I spoke in general conference on the subject of [pornography](#). I added my voice to the voice of other leaders who have warned against the devastating spiritual effects of pornography. I warned that too many men and boys were being wounded by what I called the “promotional literature of illicit sexual relations.”¹ Pornography use of any kind is evil—it is destructive of spiritual sensitivity, it weakens ability to exercise priesthood power, and it harms precious relationships.

Now, over 10 years later, I am grateful that many, hearing and heeding prophetic warnings, have avoided and remained clean and unspotted from the stains of pornography. I am also grateful that many have heeded prophetic invitations to turn from pornography, mend broken hearts and relationships, and move forward on the path of discipleship. But I am more concerned than ever that others among us continue to fall prey to pornography, especially our young men and even an increasing number of young women.

A primary reason for the growing problem of pornography is that in today’s world, words and images with sexual content and influences are everywhere: they can be found in movies, TV programs, social media, text messages, phone apps, advertisements, books, music, and everyday conversations. As a result, it is inevitable that all of us are being exposed to sexualized messages on a regular basis.

I. Levels of Involvement

To help us deal with this growing evil, I wish to identify several different levels of involvement with pornography and to suggest ways we should respond to each of them.

In earlier times and circumstances, our counsel about pornography focused principally on helping individuals to avoid initial exposure or to recover from addiction. While those efforts are still important, past experience and current circumstances have shown the need for counsel

addressed to levels of pornography use between the polar extremes of avoidance and addiction. It is helpful to focus on four different levels of involvement with pornography: (1) inadvertent exposure, (2) occasional use, (3) intensive use, and (4) compulsive use (addiction).

1. **Inadvertent Exposure.** I believe that everyone has been inadvertently exposed to pornography. There is no sin in this when we turn away and don't pursue it. It is like a mistake, which calls for correction rather than repentance.²
2. **Occasional Use.** This use of pornography may be occasional or even frequent, but it is always intentional, and that is its evil.

Pornography stirs and magnifies powerful sexual feelings. The Creator gave us these feelings for His wise purposes, but He also gave commandments that limited their expression to a man and a woman who are married. Pornography debases appropriate sexual expression and encourages the expression of sexual feelings outside the boundaries of marriage. Those who use pornography are trifling with forces so powerful that they can create life or destroy it. Don't go there!

The danger with any intentional use of pornography, no matter how casual or infrequent, is that it always invites more frequent exposure, which will inevitably increase preoccupation with sexual feelings and behavior. Scientists have discovered that sexual images produce chemicals in the brain that reward sexual feelings, which then encourage more attention to sexual behavior.³ Immoral sexual behavior of any kind or degree produces feelings of shame, which, over time, can be entrenched within an individual.

3. **Intensive Use.** Repeated intentional use of pornography can make its use a habit, "a behavior pattern regularly followed until it has become almost involuntary."⁴ With habitual use, individuals experience a need for more stimulus to have the same reaction in order to be satisfied.
4. **Compulsive Use (Addiction).** A person's behavior is addictive when it forms a "dependency" (a medical term applied to the use of drugs, alcohol, compulsive gambling, etc.) amounting to an "irresistible compulsion" that "takes priority over almost everything else in life."⁵

II. The Significance of Understanding These Levels

Once we recognize these different levels, we also recognize that not everyone who uses pornography willfully is addicted to it. In fact, most young men and young women who struggle with pornography are not addicted. That is a very important distinction to make—not just for the parents, spouses, and leaders who desire to help but also for those who struggle with this problem. Here is why.

First, the deeper the level of involvement one engages in—from inadvertent exposure, to occasional or repeated intentional use, to intensive use, to compulsive (addictive) use—the more difficult it is to recover. If behavior is incorrectly classified as an addiction, the user may think he or she has lost agency and the capacity to overcome the problem. This can weaken resolve to recover and repent. On the other hand, having a clearer understanding of the depth of a

problem—that it may not be as ingrained or extreme as feared—can give hope and an increased capacity to exercise agency to discontinue and repent.

Second, as with any sinful behavior, willful use of pornography drives away the [Holy Ghost](#). Some who have experienced this will feel prompted to repent. Others, however, may feel embarrassed and seek to hide their guilt through deceit. They may also begin to feel shame, which can lead to self-loathing. If this happens, users may begin to believe one of Satan’s greatest lies: that what they have done or continue to do makes them a bad person, unworthy of the Savior’s grace and incapable of repentance. That is simply not true. We are never too far out of reach from the Savior and His Atonement.

Finally, it is important not to label even intensive or habitual use of pornography as an addiction because that does not accurately describe the circumstances or the full nature of the required repentance and recovery. Having a better understanding of where a person is in the process will also allow a better understanding of what action is necessary to recover.

III. Escaping Pornography



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Now let us consider how individuals can escape and recover from the trap of pornography. This will be helpful not only to those struggling to overcome the use of pornography but also to the parents, spouses, and leaders who help them. Individuals will be more successful in both avoiding and recovering from pornography as they discuss these subjects with parents, spouses, and leaders.⁶

Regardless of the level of involvement in intentionally viewing pornography, the road to recovery, purity, and repentance follows and requires the same basic principles: humility, discipleship, commitment to a personal plan for change, accountability and support, and enduring in faith.

A. Humility

To truly conquer pornography and its associated behaviors, individuals must develop humility (see [Ether 12:27](#)). Turning to the Lord in humility leads one to accept certain truths, which, when fully understood, provide strength and eliminate shame. Some of these truths include:

- Each of us is a beloved child of a loving Heavenly Father.
- Our Savior, [Jesus Christ](#), loves and knows each of us personally.
- Our Savior's Atonement applies to all of God's children.
- Through the grace of Jesus Christ, all can be forgiven and receive the power to change.
- Each of us has the priceless gift of agency, which allows us to draw on the power and strength of the Atonement.
- Individuals who struggle with pornography can draw hope from the fact that others have succeeded in this battle.
- Pornography is evil, but engaging in it does not make the person evil.
- Any individual can escape the trap of pornography and fully recover, but this is possible only through drawing on the power of the Atonement.
- True repentance from pornography requires more than simply ceasing to use it. Such repentance requires a change of heart through the Atonement of Christ.

Accepting these truths prepares one spiritually to act upon them, which opens the door to receiving the Lord's help to make the needed changes to repent and recover.

B. Discipleship

Acting upon these truths also requires individuals to recommit to living as a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ and to doing those things that purify and strengthen them to withstand future temptations. This means commitment to personal religious behaviors: daily meaningful prayer and scripture study, attendance at Church meetings, service, fasting, and (when approved by the bishop) partaking of the [sacrament](#) and worshipping in the temple.

C. Commitment to a Personal Plan

Humble disciples of Jesus Christ will gain the sensitivity to recognize the deep feelings, social situations, and physical surroundings that trigger the temptation to use pornography. Having analyzed those triggers, they will develop a personal escape plan to help them:

- Recognize triggers and cravings as they occur.
- Establish specific actions to help them withdraw from the temptation.
- Redirect thoughts and energy toward the Lord.
- Outline daily specific actions to fortify their personal commitment to live righteously.

When developing a personal plan, individuals should utilize the excellent resources provided by the Church. For example, the Church website overcomingpornography.org has content for individuals as well as the [family](#) members and priesthood leaders who support them. In addition, the Church's Addiction Recovery Program is available to all members who struggle with any addictive behavior, and will also help their family members.

D. Accountability and Support



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Humble followers of Jesus Christ who acknowledge that they need the Savior will also seek the help of their bishop, who was called by the Lord as their priesthood leader and who holds the necessary keys to enable them to repent. With the consent of the individuals involved and if the bishop feels so inspired, the bishop may also call someone else to work with and help them. No matter the circumstances, this counsel from President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) applies:

“Plead with the Lord out of the depths of your soul that He will remove from you the addiction which enslaves you. And may you have the courage to seek the loving guidance of your bishop and, if necessary, the counsel of caring professionals.”⁷

Depending on the depth of the problem, individuals may require the support of a trusted, experienced person or a professional counselor to whom they can turn at any hour to be strengthened in moments of weakness and who can hold them personally accountable to their plan.

E. Enduring in Faith

Persons who have repented and have been blessed to overcome the desire to use pornography must still be vigilant, because the adversary will still seek to exploit their human weakness. Inadvertent exposure may still occur despite all efforts to avoid it. Throughout their lives, individuals must learn to control their God-given sexual feelings and maintain their efforts to be clean.

IV. Compassion for All

Now a word regarding how we treat those who have been ensnared by pornography. All of us need the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Those struggling with pornography need our compassion and love as they follow needed principles and steps of recovery. Please do not condemn them. They are not evil or without hope. They are sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father. Through proper and complete repentance, they may become clean, pure, and worthy of every covenant and temple blessing promised by God.

When the time for marriage comes, I encourage young women and young men to be careful to select a partner to be their companion through eternity who is clean and pure before the Lord and worthy to enter the temple. Individuals who fully repent from pornography are worthy of these blessings.

V. Conclusion

Throughout our lives, all of us will encounter material with sexual content. With the guidance of our loving Savior, including the assurance from the sacramental covenants that we may always have his Spirit to be with us (see [D&C 20:77](#)), we can always respond appropriately. I testify that this is what we should do to enjoy the blessings of Him whom we worship. As we do, we will more fully receive the peace of the Savior and we will remain on the path to our eternal destiny of exaltation.