

Pornography in relationships has been an issue for a long time. Even today, professional recommendations to couples on how to manage the use of pornography still vary widely. We attended one workshop in a couples' conference that recommended therapists merely accept porn use, especially by men, as natural and harmless. While this may be an extreme view, many clinicians have suggested that if a couple uses pornography as a stimulus for intimacy, or if they both agree to read or view pornographic materials together, then porn use is fine. In fact, many professionals thought it might increase relationship connection and intimacy. In the Bringing Baby Home Workshops, we initially took this view, too, since our research had demonstrated that, after a baby arrives, relationship intimacy decreases and measures were needed to strengthen intimate sexual connection.

Recently however, research on the effects of pornography use, especially one person frequently viewing pornographic images online, shows that pornography can hurt a couple's relationship. The effect may be true, in part, because pornography can be a "super-normal stimulus" (Barrett, D., 2010., *Super Normal Stimuli*. New York: W.W. Norton.) Nikko Tinbergen, a Nobel Prize winning ethologist, described a "super-normal stimulus" as a stimulus that evokes a much larger response than one that has evolutionary significance. One effect of a supernormal stimulus is that interest wanes in normal stimuli. Tinbergen studied male stickleback fish who would naturally attack a rival male that entered their territory during mating season. He created an oval object with a very red belly, more intensely red than the natural fish. The fish fiercely attacked the mock up and subsequently lost interest in attacking its real male rival. Now the "super-normal" stimulus evoked a reaction, but not the normal stimulus.

Pornography may be just such a super-normal stimulus. With pornography use, much more of a normal stimulus may eventually be needed to achieve the response a super-normal stimulus evokes. In contrast, ordinary levels of the stimulus are no longer interesting. This may be how normal sex becomes much less interesting for porn users. The data supports this conclusion. In fact, use of pornography by one partner leads the couple to have far less sex and ultimately, reduces relationship satisfaction.

There are many other factors about porn use that can threaten a relationship's intimacy. First, intimacy for couples is a source of connection and communication *between* two people. But when one person becomes accustomed to masturbating to porn, they are actually turning away from intimate interaction. Second, when watching pornography the user is in total control of the sexual experience, in contrast to normal sex in which people are sharing control with the partner. Thus a porn user may form the unrealistic expectation that sex will be under only one person's control. Third, the porn user may expect that their partner will always be immediately ready for intercourse. (See Nagoski, E. on "the discordant effect," in her 2015 book, *Come as you are*. New York: Simon & Schuster.) This is unrealistic as well. Research has revealed that genital engorgement leads to a desire for sex only 10% of the time in women and 59% of the time in men. Fifth, some porn users

rationalize that pornography is ok if it does not involve partnered sexual acts and instead relies only on masturbation. While this may accomplish orgasm the relationship goal of intimate connection is still confounded and ultimately lost.

Worse still, many porn sites include violence toward women, the antithesis of intimate connection. And porn use can become an actual addiction with the same brain mechanism activated as in other behavioral addictions, like gambling (see Wilson, G. (2015). *Your brain on porn*. New York: Commonwealth Publishers). Pornography can also lead to a decrease in relationship trust and a higher likelihood of affairs outside the relationship. Many porn sites now offer an escalation of sexual activity beyond simply viewing porn that includes actually having sex with other individuals. Finally, the support of porn use is reinforcing an industry that abuses the actors employed to create the pornography. (See Chris Hedges (2010). *The Empire of Illusion*. New York: Nation Books).

In summary, we are led to unconditionally conclude that for many reasons, pornography poses a serious threat to couple intimacy and relationship harmony.