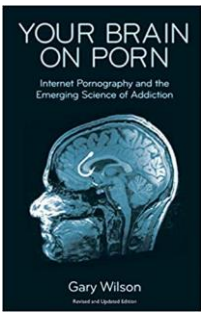


Overcoming the Effects of Porn: Rebooting Your Brain – Dan Hitz



This article contains many insights gained from the book, Your Brain on Porn, by Gary Wilson, Commonwealth Publishing, copyright 2017. Although this book contains an abundance of helpful scientific recovery insights, it does not uphold biblical sexual standards. Many of the personal testimonies and observations contain graphic details. This author felt that the benefits of the appropriate advice in this book outweighed the potential negative aspects. Your Brain on Porn provides a very easy to understand summary of the addictive chemical effects of pornography on the brain, and presents the steps one goes through to “rewire” the brain to engage in healthy sexual behavior.

Through the years, porn has promised many things... excitement... a sexual outlet... an education... You can fill in your own blanks here and here. With the arrival of high speed internet, porn made two new promises. They were huge. Finally, porn could promised anonymity and freedom. No longer did you have to slink into a public store and hope that no one would notice you were buying pornography. Now, with a basic smartphone, you can get all the porn you want. Any variety. In the privacy of your own bedroom or bathroom. And with incognito browsers, no one else will ever know what you are looking at. At least, we hope not.

Unfortunately, many of us didn't read the fine print. Long before we realized the hollowness of porn's promises, we were trapped in an addictive haze. What used to give us a major buzz in the beginning of our addiction just doesn't do it for us anymore. We've had to upgrade to harder porn. Many of us moved on to images that we'd never dreamed we'd look at in a million years. Images that used to greatly disturb us. Now we can't get off without them. Images that even leave us questioning our own sexuality. We found out the hard way that the freedom and excitement porn promised us gave way to addiction, depression, fear, and hopelessness. How many times have you promised yourself that you'd never look at “that” again? Only to find yourself viewing even darker images...

Along with increases in depression, social anxiety, and the loss of interest and energy for everyday tasks; doctors have noticed another alarming effect of pornography. Dozens of otherwise healthy males in their twenties have sought medical help for sexual dysfunction. After growing up and feeding on a steady diet of internet porn, these young men were horrified to discover that they were experiencing erectile dysfunction or premature ejaculation with their human partners. Surprisingly, many women have begun to have their own share of performance problems. What's happening to these healthy men and women that keeps them from having fulfilling experiences with their sexual partners? High speed pornography use is messing up the neurochemical receptors in their brains. They've been conditioned to hard core internet porn, and lost their ability to relate to humans and respond to true, biblical emotional and sexual intimacy.

To understand porn's devastation, let's look at how our brain's reward system is wired. Of course, this is a highly simplified explanation of how the chemical pathways and reward system in our brains works, but you'll get the general idea. **Dopamine is a pleasure chemical that tells your brain that it really, really enjoys something and that you should definitely do it again.** It drives us to eat all four corner slices of a Jet's pizza, or to seek and indulge in other very pleasurable experiences. **Then, when we engage in those behaviors, our brains give us a rewarding dose of opioids which give us a sense of satisfaction.** Another chemical creates an emotional bond to whatever gave us the pleasure in the first place, while another chemical tries to convince us that we've done enough for now. The problem is, we don't tend to listen to the chemical that tells us we've done enough for now and we keep going. Soon we've wired our brains in such a way that the chemical drive to do “it” again is much stronger than the reward we get for actually doing “it”, and even stronger than the chemical that tells us we've had enough of “it” for now.



Over time, we get desensitized to the original “it” and need to find a much stronger “it” to get the same level of rewards that we used to get way back when. That’s a perfect setup for an out of control pornography addiction.

Think of the feeling you might get as you constantly check your latest Facebook post to see the likes piling up. Dopamine gives you that sense of excitement as you open the app to bask in the accolades of your friends. Opioids give you that feeling of awesomeness as you see twenty more likes than you had five minutes ago.

The problem is that the dopamine drive is much stronger than the opioid sense of satisfaction; therefore, we keep responding to the dopamine drive and continue to check



our post for even more likes. After a while the likes stop piling up as fast as they did before. Even if they don’t, the same number of likes just doesn’t give us the same level of opioid enjoyment that we got before. **It takes more and more likes to give us that same excitement that we got in the beginning. We start thinking about how to make our next Facebook post bigger and better than ever to get even more likes and comments. The cycle continues. Dopamine levels drop with familiarity, so we start craving something new. Something just a bit edgier than before... Substitute porn use for Facebook posts and you get the idea.**

Dopamine has a few other neurochemical friends that work along with it. Anxiety and stress increase the effects of dopamine. Jet’s pizza and Facebook posts are mild compared to much of the porn freely available on the Internet. Porn addicts often frequent sites that violate their own conscience and convictions which produces anxiety, shock, and a haunting desire to see more. These emotions in turn release additional chemicals like norepinephrine, epinephrine, and cortisol which give a major boost to the already powerful dopamine. This in turn, drives the porn user to more and more outrageous sites in a continual search for a bigger and bigger chemical release.

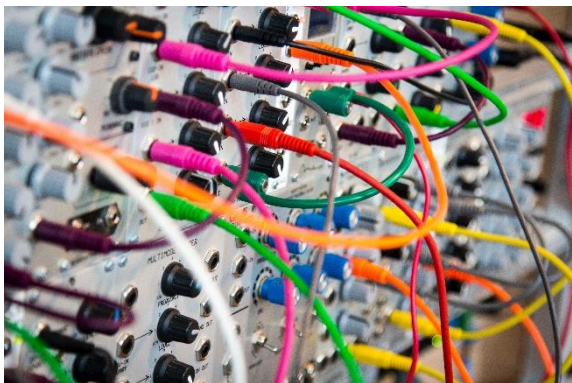
Other things continue to happen in the brain that chemically wire our desire for the intense things that we view during and porn and masturbation sessions. This causes us to be less interested in the normal sexual intimacy that we could have with our spouse, which seems so mild and boring compared to the “thrills” of the internet. Even if we weren’t drawn to a particular fetish in the past, our desire for more and more excitement can make us crave forbidden areas that once made us nauseous. **During times of sexual excitement and orgasm, another chemical called DeltaFosB begins to burn chemical pathways into our brain that work with dopamine to direct our desires in the specific direction of what brings us the most excitement.** Dopamine and DeltaFosB drive the desire to do “it” again. And the desire for “it” can become compulsive.

Our brains do have a weak checks and balance system. Another chemical called CREB dampens our pleasure response in an attempt to tell us we’ve done enough and need to take a break. Unfortunately, the amount of stimulation available in our culture makes it easy for us to override the CREB and keep seeking more and more pleasure. Since our dopamine levels begin to decrease the more we become familiar with something and increase when we see something new and more exciting, our desire for more intensity drives us into deeper and deeper porn use. Another problem is that CREB not only dampens our desire for porn. CREB also dampens our pleasure responses to other activities like socializing, hobbies, and the rewards we feel from successfully accomplishing everyday activities. That helps to explain why porn addicts seem to develop tunnel vision for porn and allow so many other aspects of their lives fall to the wayside.

There are deeper consequences for teenagers who have started to use porn than guys in the previous generations could fathom. Chemicals in the teenage brain are working hard to establish pathways for desire, worldview, and behavior. The effects of the neurotransmitters active in porn

addiction have a much deeper and longer lasting effect as the teen's brain is developing, than they do on an older adult who started viewing pornography in their 30s or 40s. **An overwhelming number of teens are taking their sexual cues from cyberspace instead of from human relationships. That means their brains are being chemically wired to the images and ideas they are learning from pornography.** This makes it all the more critical for teens to stop using pornography and learn healthy relationship patterns.

There is good news for those who are addicted to pornography and for those who are suffering from the negative effects of porn addiction. God created our brains in a way that allows them to recover from addiction and restore healthy desire. It has to do with the characteristic of the



brain called *neuroplasticity*. Neuroplasticity refers to the brain's ability to chemically rewire itself and change the poor wiring caused by addiction. Of course, this process takes a lot of time and concentrated effort, but it can renew our minds and restore healthy sexual functioning.

In the last few years, researches and addicts have discovered the process of “rebooting the brain”. Not as easy as the way we reset our computers or smartphones when they become slow by just restarting them, but it does give us hope. This process has helped

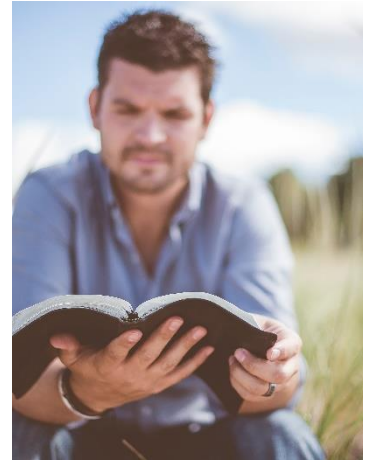
countless men and women who were experiencing sexual dysfunction and the emotional effects of pornography addiction. With perseverance, men and women have overcome their addictions and begin to experience healthy relationships and healthy sexuality. Rebooting our brains is really a simple concept. It means that we abstain from all forms of sexual arousal for a period of time to give our brains time to enact its “use it or lose it system” and rewire the chemical pathways in our brains. **As we replace negative behavior patterns with healthy ones, the old chemical pathways that drive our desire for a given behavior become quieter. They are eventually overwritten by the new behavior patterns that we engage in.** Anyone who has ever tried to eliminate a bad habit and establish a good one will recognize the challenge. The old chemical pathways in our brains are pretty strong and don't like to be ignored. They will scream for attention. Eventually, those screams become quieter and quieter and can be replaced by new cheers that encourage good behavior. In time, the old chemical pathways weaken and healthy new pathways can appear.

Depending on the depth of porn use and the length of the addiction, it can take several weeks to a few months to reboot the brain. **In the beginning, you will likely experience some emotional and physical signs of withdrawal. Your body has been used to getting its sexual release and will let you know that it is not happy that it is not getting its own way.** Think of the little kid in the checkout line who just found out that he isn't getting that candy bar today. He throws a fit. A smart mother will teach the child that he still isn't getting his way even though he is throwing a fit, and that it is healthier to eat good fruit instead of candy. An unwise mother will give in to the child and give him the candy bar just to shut him up. Unfortunately, this just teaches the kid that if he throws a fit long enough he will get his candy bar. The fits get louder with each trip to the grocery store. The wise kid learns the benefits of the good fruit and learns that his tantrums don't serve a useful purpose. The trips to the grocery store get easier over time. You may experience restlessness and aches in some sensitive body parts. Don't give in to your body's temper tantrums. As you teach your body to appreciate good fruit, it will realize the tantrums don't serve a useful purpose and they'll get quieter over time.

You'll likely experience some emotional withdrawal. You're used to the unnatural highs of sexual addiction, and even the best real life relationships will seem boring at first. You may experience depression, anxiety, irritability, restlessness, lethargy, brain fog, sleep disturbance, and a strong desire to return to porn. You may also feel a sense to isolate. This is why it is so important to seek qualified help as you go through recovery. **Reach out to an experienced Christian counselor and the pastoral care department of your church.** Support groups such as Living Waters and

Celebrate Recovery can offer much needed strength. In the past you may have dealt with difficult life experiences by escaping to porn. Experienced caregivers can help you learn to resist the urge to return to porn. They can help you learn to navigate through life's difficulties successfully, without self-medicating. Over time, you should find that your energy levels increase and you will begin to experience more enjoyment in the daily pleasures of life. Many people in recovery are delighted to find that they are enjoying their long lost hobbies and that their social anxiety is gone. Instead of relating to people through the fog of deviant sexual images, they are learning the joys of engaging in healthy friendships and appropriate emotional interaction. Of course, this is a process and it all takes time, but the process is very rewarding.

One more common withdrawal symptom that you will likely experience is called “flat lining”. Remember your body has been used to an unnatural level of arousal from neurotransmitters. After a few weeks, your body's screams for sexual excitement can give way to a complete loss of sexual desire emotionally and physically. **You may even become concerned that your sexual organs feel completely dead and worried that they will never function again. This is a common experience that almost everyone passes through as they reboot their brain. Don't panic.** At the end of your rebooting process, your sexual desire will return. With the support of mature Christians, you can learn to direct your reawakened sexual desires in the right direction. You can learn to embrace your sexuality within biblical parameters and deepen your healthy relationships.



How long to stay in the reboot process varies with the degree of porn use, frequency of masturbation, and the age of each individual. Those who flooded their brains with a high degree of porn use and heavy masturbation at an early age will need more time in the process. Those who began their porn use after experiencing some form of healthy sexuality will need less time. Recommendations vary from 40 days to three months or more. An experienced caregiver or therapist can help you determine how much time is best for you. You should remain in the process for a while after the urges to view porn subside or come at an easily manageable level. If you are married, it is best to talk with your spouse and explain to him or her that you are considering the rebooting process and that you will need to abstain from sexual activities for a period of time. Most spouses are happy to assist their spouse in the reboot process in the anticipation of purifying and deepening the relationship in the long run.

After the process, the Lord calls those who are unmarried to abstain from sexual fantasy and physical sexual expression until marriage. You will experience sexual temptations, but the Lord will provide the grace for sexual purity. Those who are married are also called to sexual purity in their thoughts and actions; however, they do have a sexual outlet with their spouse to engage in appropriate sexual activities once the rebooting process has been completed.

The thought of quitting porn cold turkey may seem like an exercise in futility to you. After all, you've tried to quite many times before and find yourself right back at your computer screen. The question to ask yourself is what can make things different this time? As you prayerfully consider your answer, also prayerfully consider what mature Christians and which counselors and support groups can help you in this journey. **You should also prayerfully count the cost of your addiction, and the benefits of living a life free from the bondage of pornography. As you take notice of all that your pornography addiction has taken from you, and all of the good gifts that the Lord wants to restore to you in exchange, I pray that you will be motivated to take the steps necessary to walk into freedom. It may not seem like it in the beginning of your journey, but living a pure life for Jesus will give you far more peace and strength than you ever thought you could get from porn. Now is the time to change your life.**

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