

Cybersex addiction.

In 2011, the American Society of Addiction Medicine described an **addiction** as '**a primary chronic disease of brain reward, motivation, memory and related circuitry**'.

A person addicted to pornography is affected in these ways by internet pornography. Initially, men are attracted by **visual** cues and women by **psychological** cues.

Brain changes

The brain is a malleable organ. It changes the strength and connections between brain cells in response to our experiences. It forms pathways and connections that correlate with our experiences, including what we watch, listen to and learn.

The effects on brain chemicals

Initially, internet pornography stimulates **the pleasure circuitry** of the brain. This causes the release of the brain chemical **dopamine** to higher levels than those tolerated normally by the brain. Dopamine stirs feelings of excitement, pleasure and arousal. It also 'learns' which experiences stimulate its release by the brain's pleasure circuitry.

Internet pornography leads to the stimulation of so much dopamine that, for self protection, the pleasure receptors of the brain become less responsive. What gave pleasure in the past no longer does so to the same extent. New and more exciting pornographic images are sought. People addicted to pornography become numbed to life's normal pleasures.

Pornography also causes the release of another drug – **norepinephrine**. **This drug makes images hard to forget** – including pornographic images. It makes it hard also to stay away from internet pornography.

Finally, internet pornography stimulates the release of **serotonin**. This drug normally **helps us feel happy, calm, satisfied and relieved of stress**.

The effects on the limbic system of the brain

The limbic system moves us automatically to seek what we need to survive, and away from pain. We automatically seek a drink when thirsty, and avoid what might burn us.

This system automatically seeks pleasure to overcome pain. It moves us to return to sources of pleasure. However, **the limbic system has no awareness of possible consequences to actions and is not rational. It inclines us to be impulsive.**

When attached to internet pornography, the limbic system stirs a person to 'hunt' for pleasure through pornography in times of 'pain' – such as the trials of life. Its urgings are unrelated to possible consequences of addiction, such as failing to fulfil one's relationship, work responsibilities or financial commitments.

The effects on the prefrontal cortex

This part of the brain affects reasoning, logic, values, goals, self discipline, self restraint and will power. Research shows that, over time, internet pornography addiction causes the prefrontal cortex of the brain to shrink between 10 and 20 per cent.

The damaged brain

From these examples of brain changes in the person addicted to internet pornography, we can see that this addiction increasingly leads to:

- the desire for more exciting images as the felt need for higher levels of dopamine grows
- increased cravings
- reduced impulse control as the prefrontal cortex shrinks.

The good news is that these effects can be reversed by a person giving up viewing internet pornography. The brain's health and normal functioning can be restored over time.

Stages of addiction

Internet pornography addiction commonly develops in stages. These are

- early exposure, when pornography 'gets a foot in the door'
- addiction, when the person starts to keep coming back to view pornography
- escalation, when the pornography watched becomes more graphic
- desensitisation, when previously viewed pornography no longer excites and the addicted person seeks the same thrill but cannot find it
- acting out sexually, when the addicted person seeks the thrill in the real world.

How does pornography addiction affect people's lives?

There are many answers to this question. A few examples are offered.

Internet pornography addiction commonly starts with people seeking relief from feelings of stress, loneliness, depression and anxiety. They seek fantasy as an escape from difficult life problems. Pornography is always an escape behaviour.

Young people who prefer internet relationships can be particularly vulnerable to this danger for personality reasons. Their difficulty may be shyness, low self esteem, lack of self confidence, or psychological hurts or hurts stemming from past experiences.

Internet pornography addicts tend to neglect relationships, work, school or other important responsibilities. More and more time is taken up on the internet. Responsibilities are not fulfilled; hence the concern of agencies such as the Rural Financial Counselling Service.

What are some personal consequences?

There are many possible personal consequences of pornography addiction.

One of the more serious is a sense of self-loathing. This leads to secrecy and the fear of the embarrassment of discovery.

Self loathing causes declining self esteem. In turn, this can lead to an increasing felt need to escape through the fantasy world of more pornography.

Second, the brain changes related to internet pornography lead to seeing others increasingly as 'sex objects'. In marriages, the hard earned relationship intimacy grounded in affection, love, acceptance and emotional commitment declines. The capacity for other relationships can also decline – increasing loneliness and, once again, the temptation to seek further escape by internet pornography.

Third, as the capacity to relate with others declines, family and other relationships suffer. All who love the addict, in turn, become victims of internet pornography.

See website www.covenanteyes.com