

**Love You, Hate the Porn:**  
**Healing a Relationship Damaged by Virtual Infidelity**

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## BACK MATTER:

It may be cybersex, but it can feel like real infidelity to a spouse. There's nothing virtual about the damage done to a relationship. When one spouse is hooked on porn, the wounds are reopened each time a relapse is discovered. Even when a husband (it's mostly men who struggle) keeps his commitment to stay away from porn, his marriage may continue to suffer. As tough as it is to overcome a porn habit, healing a marriage damaged by porn is even harder. It can get so bad for some couples that they separate and divorce. Others stay together, but the strain of unresolved feelings takes a distinct, if not always acknowledged toll.

For wives, it's not enough for their husbands to simply stop looking at porn. They need healing themselves. Whether they keep bringing it up or suffer silently, emotional wounds can fester, fuel fights about other things, and keep both partners feeling disconnected. Many wonder, "Can our marriage heal? Will we ever feel close again?"

*Love You, Hate the Porn* helps couples draw together again when pornography is threatening to tear them apart. It shows couples how to identify and address vulnerabilities in their relationship so that they can understand each other better, feel closer, help the struggling partner avoid relapse, and make their relationship even stronger than it was before.

## **A Cancer that can Ravage Relationships**

Throughout her life, Sally had never objected to pornography on moral grounds. She'd always figured it was up to everyone to decide for themselves what they did for entertainment. Recently, however, she'd been developing an objection of a different sort. Rather than moral, it was visceral.

It spread from a sick feeling in her stomach up to a choking heaviness in her chest. It had started several months ago when she'd discovered at three in the morning that she was alone in bed. She'd gotten up to look for Lyle and found him downstairs pausing the DVR and rewinding it again and again to watch a sex scene. She'd stood there in shock, that awful feeling coming in waves up her torso, as she realized that her husband was having sex with that stranger on the screen in his mind. She was even more troubled by the fact that he hadn't even heard her behind him. He never noticed her standing there until she said something to him.

Obviously, he had been in another world. But even worse, he seemed different. She had the terrifying feeling that this was not the man she thought she'd married, somehow. Do I even know you? She'd asked him. *Really* know you?

Lyle had insisted that he had no idea how strongly she'd react to what he was viewing, that porn meant nothing to him, and that he would gladly and easily avoid it in the future now that he knew how she felt about it. Lyle hadn't realized how Sally would react, and frankly neither had she. She was embarrassed that it bothered her so much.

Sally knew what kind of guy Lyle was deep down. After all, she'd watched him with his kids. He was patient with her dogs, which could be a real pain. She'd knelt beside him, handing him tools, on the floor of their elderly neighbor's bathroom as he repaired her toilet. She'd chosen him because he was a great guy, she kept reminding herself. She wanted to be able to be less bothered by that incident, to get over it, and move on in their relationship.

Nonetheless, it had taken Sally a couple of months to sleep soundly through the night again. And her chiropractor was still working on the knot he couldn't seem to knead out of the base of her neck. Even worse, she no longer threw on sweats in the evening when they both got home from work. She'd added more sit-ups to her workout routine to try to tighten up her abs. She'd even caught herself checking her makeup in the bathroom mirror at nine o'clock at night. What's gotten into me, she wondered. Rather than enjoying her time with Lyle, she felt like she was performing in an effort to hold his interest. She finally admitted to herself that it now felt like a potential contest between her and every porn actress out there for his attention and affection. She might have beaten back the first wave of attack—he was still here with her—but eventual defeat seemed inevitable. After all, just look at me, she'd think when she'd look at herself in the mirror. She'd felt fine about her body a few months ago, but now all she could see was a bundle of flaws. Most disappointing to Sally was the realization that she was more relaxed and

felt freer to be herself when she and Lyle were in different rooms of the house. There'd been no horseplay or wrestling or lighthearted teasing for months now.

She felt less secure in their relationship. When Lyle went to a college buddy's bachelor party she wondered whether she could trust him. When they were out in public he seemed so focused on the bodies of attractive women. She kept watching him surf through the channels until he found something titillating and saw how entranced he got when a sexy or scantily-clothed girl came onscreen.

Lyle could tell that Sally was different now and he kept asking her if she was okay. When she'd leave their bedroom at night he'd eventually come find her and try to talk with her. At first she hardly knew what to ask him for. She didn't want to be absurd. He'd wanted to feel close to her again and he kept trying to comfort her, but it felt now to him like she had retreated into a shell.

Finally, when Lyle kept asking and asking what was wrong, and if there was anything he could do to help her feel secure again, she acknowledged to him just how deeply she was being affected. "When I think you're lusting after other women, it rocks me to the core. I get scared that I'm going to lose you to someone else. I can't take that. You know how much you matter to me. I can't bear that thought. So I have to get some distance between us. I know it sounds crazy, but I pull away to protect myself. When I get so sick inside, I don't have a choice. It's better to be apart at those times than to try to be close to you when I know what I'd be competing with."

Sally felt bad her insecurities had come between them like this. However, it also felt good that Lyle had persisted in asking her what was wrong, which had convinced her

that he really wanted to hear it. Now, having revealed everything, she stood emotionally naked in front of Lyle.

Lyle sat, pondering everything Sally had said. She could tell by the look on his face that he took her feelings seriously. He didn't seem to think that she was being silly at all. What a tremendous relief.

"Hon," Lyle finally responded, "we obviously have different reactions to erotic entertainment. But we're married. I'm committed to you, and I need to respect your sensibilities more. I am *going* to. After that first incident in the middle of the night I should have gotten it, but I'm a slow learner I guess. Thanks for not giving up on me. I want nothing more than for us to have back the comfort and ease that we used to have with each other. It's been months since we've had a pillow fight or a water fight," Lyle concluded with a smile, "and that can't go on."

Sally had never shared with anyone her feelings the way she just had with Lyle. She'd been telling herself that she was overreacting, so to have Lyle want to know what was going on inside for her and then commit to honor her feelings was more than she would have hoped to ask for. She stood up, walked into the bathroom, filled a Dixie cup with water, and walked back into the bedroom. She sat down on Lyle's lap, straddling him so that their faces were almost touching. She stared into his eyes and relished the return of the closeness they both cherished. As she held the back of his head with one hand to keep his face close to hers, she raised the cup over his head and slowly started to pour.

### **Surveying the Damage**

The harm pornography does to relationships has been quantified and measured. Indiana University researchers Dolf Zillman and Jennings Bryant had research subjects view porn daily for six weeks and then compared their attitude ratings from before and after. These subjects became less satisfied with their real life sexual partner, saw monogamy as less desirable and faithfulness to one's spouse as less important, and were more prone to overestimate the prevalence of less common sexual practices like group sex, bestiality, and sadomasochistic activity. They even came to perceive victims of sex crimes as suffering less and being less severely wronged. Perhaps most troubling in the context of our discussion, after viewing so much pornography these subjects became more cynical in their attitudes about love and more accepting of the idea that superior sexual satisfaction is attainable without having affection for one's partner. They were more prone to see marriage as sexually confining and to view raising children and having a family as an unattractive prospect. Since the time of the initial study in the 1970s, these results have been replicated in similar studies since.

As disturbing as these statistically measurable changes in attitude may be, it's even more chilling to see the effects of pornography in real life. Documentary filmmaker \_\_\_\_\_ followed one couple who volunteered for the husband to go through the same experience as the subjects in Zillmann and Bryant's experiments: six weeks of daily pornography consumption. When we're introduced to the couple early in the film, the rapport they share is obvious by their eye-contact and the way they joked with each other. Fast-forward to the follow-up interview seven weeks later, and things between them appear to have taken a distinct downturn. What surprised me most was that \_\_\_\_\_ didn't think that his attitudes or relationship had been affected by the pornography. The

sincerity is apparent in his eyes as he says so to \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_. As he's talking, the changes in his ratings flash onscreen, and they're the very same differences Zillmann and Bryant identified in the studies described above. Among others, \_\_\_\_\_ trusts \_\_\_\_\_ less. That's right, the partner viewing the pornography has less faith in his wife's commitment and fidelity. Both \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ were less satisfied with each other and their relationship. They had less confidence that they'd continue in the future as a couple. \_\_\_\_\_ felt so bad about this outcome that he sprang for marriage counseling to help this couple try to repair the rift that had developed between them.

The wives of those who view pornography compulsively don't need social scientists or documentary filmmakers to convince them their relationship is being eroded. The complaints of women who perceived their husbands to be heavily involved in pornography were analyzed and two dominant themes emerged: First, they observed that their husbands had a decreased sexual desire for them. Second, when they did have sex, the way they were treated left them feeling more like a sex object than a lover.

### **The Worst Wound**

Pornography can afflict a couple's relationship the way a malignant cancer ravages a body. The most devastating thing pornography does is come between a man and woman at the worst times and in the worst way. Right at those moments when he is struggling and in-need emotionally, pornography offers an alternative—a relationship counterfeit. Pornography becomes something he can go to for soothing and an illusory sense of connection and vitality. And that, perhaps, is pornography's real virulence, its ultimate price: when he's going to *it*, he's not going to *her*.

Just yesterday, a new client said to me, “I don’t go to porn when I’m feeling a sexual desire that hasn’t been satisfied. I go to my wife Ally for that. It’s when we are struggling as a couple. I lose hope of being happy together and having a good relationship. That’s when I take that path. When things are going well between me and Ally, it’s like I’m invincible to the urges.”

Here’s how I explain it to clients: when we’re feeling raw or emotionally vulnerable, it’s as though the lid is off the superglue. We gravitate to things we hope might soothe us. We may turn on the radio and listen to music. If that doesn’t quite “do the trick” and we still feel out of sorts, then we’re still emotionally thirsty and the hunt for a quencher continues. The lid is still off the superglue. Let’s say we then zone out in front of the TV for awhile. We may keep sitting and watching, entranced to some degree, an apparent indicator that we might be getting some kind of satisfaction or relief from the process. However, a couple of hours later when we think about turning it off and turning our attention back to our lives, that unsettled, uneasy feeling is sitting right there waiting for us. You decide not to hit the power button just yet. Before long, your spouse has gone to bed. The house is silent—everyone but you is sleeping. You’re still surfing the channels. You don’t feel relaxed enough to sleep. You’re not yet wound down. There remains some lingering emotional energy—stirred up, pent up. You still need a release. The lid is still off the superglue. Channel after channel after channel after channel, you circle round-and-round again. There are some titillating advertisements. You start to feel different, more focused and alive. Then you run on to a salacious program. You’re attention is riveted. The seduction builds to a sex scene, followed by minimal plot material and then another sex scene. You are in a different world now. The emotional

landscape has morphed and you are completely free of the yucky feeling that was haunting you. You may have other thoughts pestering you, like neon signs along the side of the road, trying to break into your consciousness. Thoughts about how it's the middle of the night and you really should be sleeping so that you can function more effectively the next day. Thoughts about how you were intending to give up this habit of seeking, viewing, and then masturbating to sexual content on TV and the internet. But those thoughts don't stop you now. Once that program's over, you retreat to the bathroom and lock the door. Afterward, you try not to think about anything. Mercifully, your mind remains blank, your inner arousal level finally settling to match the quiet all around you in your home. The once stirred-up emotional waters are now smooth as glass. Sleep comes quickly at that point, delivering you from consciousness.

So what ever happened with the superglue? You likely did not realize it at the time—or even recognize later what happened, but you certainly experienced the results. You were feeling emotionally raw and something helped you restore an inner sense of equilibrium. Having had that experience, you are now more attached to whatever that was. Unfortunately, it was pornography and masturbation. Even more regrettably, it was not your wife. It could have been her. It should have been her. But there is a block in your ability or willingness to go to her when you're in-need emotionally. For many of us, our failure to seek relief within our most important relationship results not only from a lack of ability, but also from an ignorance or lack of awareness. We simply may not recognize those initial stirrings, those uneasy feelings as indicators of our need for emotional connection and relationship soothing. And thus, we become sitting ducks, much more vulnerable to pull of pornography.

## **The Damage Deepens**

Things will be different after a night like the one described above. The fleeting benefits of porn give way to lingering costs. First, there are physical effects. You're sleep deprived and exhausted, of course, but there's even more. Oxytocin is a hormone that calms the nervous system, soothes us emotionally, and helps bond us to our sexual partner. This chemical is most famous for its role in bonding infants to their mothers, since it is released during breastfeeding. However, it is also released in both men and women when we touch, hold, and caress one another. Affectionately known as "the cuddle chemical," oxytocin is released in abundance after sexual climax. However, researchers have measured a relative void of oxytocin in the bloodstream of individuals who engage in sex without a partner—those who masturbated to pornography. To be exact, those who had intercourse with their beloved were shown to have 400% more oxytocin in their bloodstream. The afterglow of sex with a partner contrasts sharply with the oxytocin-depleted emptiness that follows consumption of porn.

Pornography can be like a drug in its effects, and like any other addictive drug, it leaves us worse off than it found us. Physically and emotionally, you will likely end up more in-need after such a night than you were before. You are in withdrawal, experiencing the low that always follows a drug-like high. This is how tolerance develops—the need to take more of a drug in order to experience the same effect. We want to feel better the next day, too, but now we have further to go in order to feel okay since our experience the day before took us down a few notches. Our body has adjusted

to intensity by dampening its response. Our pleasure and contentment chemicals are more depleted than before. Equilibrium will be harder to restore.

Not only are you more in-need emotionally, but the best avenue for successfully meeting those needs—your marriage—is even more blocked than it was yesterday. Even if you've tried to convince yourself that this behavior had nothing to do with your wife or your relationship with her, masturbating to pornography has unavoidably affected your marriage. The next morning, you'll feel sheepish at least, get-me-out-of-her-presence ashamed at worst. You'll be less likely to look her in the eyes. The next time you would benefit from emotional connection and relationship soothing, you'll be less able to reach out to her. You'll feel more like dealing with it on your own. And porn will be right there waiting for you. Not as effective, perhaps, but seemingly safe and certainly less risky emotionally. For too many, unfortunately, this pattern continues on and on and on. In everyday life, distressing emotions are always going to keep getting stirred up, leaving us primed and in-need of something. As much as we may want to kick the porn habit and turn our lives around, continuing the same course is the path of least resistance.

By the time this cycle has gone on in our lives for months or years, our appraisal of ourselves can be pretty low. It may seem impossible to change. “How could I ever go to her when I'm in-need? This huge secret is now a wedge between us, and I can't talk to her about the porn. If she really knew that it's been such a big problem for me, she could never accept and love me. In fact, she might just leave me over it.”

The habit is well-ingrained and the walls on both sides of the canyon are steep. Every time I struggle emotionally, the lid comes off the superglue once again. Every time I go to pornography, I miss out on the emotional soothing that I could be receiving from

my wife. And I become more and more attached—bonded, dependent, reliant, and perhaps even addicted—to the pornography habit I'm trying to give up. And all the time feeling less worthy of my wife's love and less able to go to her about my porn problem or anything else I'm struggling with.

### **The Power of Drawing Together**

Once a pornography problem is revealed, either through voluntary disclosure or a spouse's discovery, the destructive cycle of isolation and addiction can be interrupted. The couple can start to draw together instead of allowing their relationship to continue to be torn apart. She can share with him the distress she has felt over the disconnection that pornography has created or perpetuated. He can learn to recognize when he's feeling bad and in need of support and develop the habit of going to her at such times.

It's not like the couple immediately finds bliss. The skill of seeking soothing within the relationship and the process of developing emotional connection are complex and challenging. They won't bring the kind of instant gratification and relief pornography promises. Nonetheless, when couples stick with it, the process can work for both partners. Everyday distresses and needs aren't as problematic as when they drove disconnection and addiction. In fact, they become opportunities for bonding. When emotional arousal is triggered, the lid still comes off the superglue. However, as couples draw together in such key moments and feel better for having gone to each other, their bond deepens and becomes a more and more profound connection over time. They stick together until they're stuck together in a way that permits nothing to come between them. This is the kind of relationship couples can develop even after a pornography problem

has done its damage. I've seen many couples do it. The rest of the book is about how they've achieved it—and how you can, too!

## **We're Both Working, but it's Not Working**

Before we talk about how you can heal your relationship, it's important to understand why our initial efforts at healing so often fail. I've discovered over the years that problems can fester even when both husband and wife demonstrate a high commitment level and exert a lot of energy trying to work through a pornography problem. Too often, despite how much they both care and invest, their relationship continues to flounder. This usually happens when husband and wife keep getting into a negative cycle in the way they deal with issues related to pornography.

### **A Negative Cycle in Action**

Craig and Cheryl are walking through the mall. Things have been good the last couple of days, and that's a relief to both of them, a much needed break. The tension and conflict had been at such a high level between them. It all started at that moment three weeks ago when Cheryl walked in and caught Craig viewing pornography on his iPhone when he was supposed to be taking care of their three kids. It has been hellish for much of the time since then... but now, for a change, it's almost as though they're like any

other couple walking through the mall. They could almost forget that this problem has done such damage to their relationship and looms over them still like a dark cloud.

Almost.

Craig spots it first: a gigantic photo advertisement of a woman in lingerie up ahead on their right. Cheryl sees it, glances at Craig, who quickly glances back and sees that she sees that he was looking at it. He then sees her eyes narrow and her head cock in a rebuking gesture, and he knows what she's thinking: "Really Craig?! After everything we've been through?!"

Craig's eyes widen, as if pleading, "What did I do? I swear I just noticed it. I wasn't ogling, I just *glanced*. It was just a fraction of a second for crying out loud!"

Cheryl sighs, exasperated.

Craig rolls his eyes, just as exasperated.

Cheryl's stride is now brisk and stiff. She's hurting, but the hurt quickly converts to anger. Craig marches to keep up, feeling like a scolded puppy, ashamed... but quickly moving into resentment over the fact that he can't seem to do anything right in her eyes.

His perversion and deception have left my life in ruins, Cheryl thinks. I was already struggling to feel good about my body, and now I discover he's looking at that crap! How can I stay with a man who would put me through this? What does that say about me as a woman? Am I really going to live in this kind of relationship? Can I really be that much of a doormat? And look at him! He's defensive when I bring it up. He minimizes it instead of being more attentive and reassuring. And yet other people think he's such a compassionate, caring person. All of that's just a façade, and look at the real man that I get: can't even control his lust when he's holding hands with his wife."

“It’s hopeless,” Craig concludes. “No matter what I do to try to make this better, none of it ever gets through to her. She’s convinced that I’m a jerk, convinced that I want other women instead of her, and convinced that I’m unsuitable as husband material. Back when it was a secret, I just knew that if she found out about my pornography struggles that she’d never be able to forgive me for it. Her whole family’s this way: judgmental and self-righteous. I have never been good enough in their eyes, or in hers. If our marriage ends, maybe it will be for the best.”

### **The Legitimate Needs that Fuel Negative Cycles**

Men and women’s most pressing relationship needs are often different, and that can really wreak havoc as they interact about the hot-button issue of pornography. For instance, husbands often have a very pressing need for *acceptance* from their wives. They so deeply want to get along, to feel like there’s peace in the relationship and that things are smooth between them as a couple. He feels loved and confident when he knows that his wife is pleased and content. She, by contrast, typically has an equally pressing need to maintain a sense of *closeness* with her partner. She so deeply wants to know what’s going on inside for him, to talk about how things are going. She wants to make sure their hearts and minds are “on the same page” and that they’re working together on issues and problems.

It may not seem like a big problem, this gap or variance between what each of them yearns for most out of the relationship. However, each partner’s need is, to them, like emotional oxygen. If they’re not getting it, they can become panicky and fixated. They can’t give what the other needs because they’re now scrambling for what they so

desperately need. Feeling so unacceptable in her eyes, he can't draw close to her. So distraught that she may never have the closeness she needs, she literally cannot convey approval and acceptance. Each partner becomes even more panicky and fixated as they cycle escalates. Watch how it can affect their interaction:

A couple of weeks after the problem in the mall, Cheryl wants to talk as they finally collapse into bed one night.

“How did things go for you today?”

“Fine.”

“I mean with temptation.”

“It was fine. I've told you I have no desire for that stuff since it's all come out in the open. Today was the same as yesterday, and the same as the time before that when you asked. It will probably be going fine if you ask tomorrow. I realize that because of my behavior you have every right to ask, but it seems like you're not convinced even if I tell you things are going well.”

“I've been reading about pornography addiction and they say that almost all men relapse several times along the way in their recovery. You're telling me you're unique, and that it's just suddenly over for you?”

“I don't know how many times I have to tell you: it was a relief to get it out in the open. I hated keeping the secret and living a double life. I'm *happy* you know. It makes it easier. It's *easy* now. I'm just trying to tell you the truth. Should I lie and say that I'm struggling just to make you feel better? Even when I was having the problem, sometimes I'd go weeks or even months without giving in. It wasn't ever as big of a problem as you

seem to think it is. I think that all your reading is actually making this a worse problem in your mind.”

“So now I’m exaggerating your problem and making things worse by learning about it. Amazing! I guess I was mistaken to think that you might be grateful for the help. I know, I know, I should just stop bugging you and everything would be fine. Well things aren’t fine! I’ve been devastated! I think about it all the time now, Craig! You think I like thinking about this stuff?! I hate it! And I’m starting to hate you for ruining what I *thought* we had together!”

“Cheryl, if you only knew how common this is. Most men aren’t even trying to stop! It’s not like I’m some pervert. I’m still the same guy you thought I was, I just had this struggle you didn’t know about. It doesn’t make me some terrible person!”

“You’re the same guy I thought I was married to, with only one small difference: you’re a guy who looks at pictures of other women and fantasizes about having sex with them. Oh yeah, and you’re a guy who could keep a habit like this a secret from the woman he’s married to for seven years. That’s all. Just those two little differences.”

“I’m not going to talk to you if you’re going to be sarcastic.” Craig throws back the covers and gets up out of bed.

“Go ahead and leave,” Cheryl shouts through sobs. “That’s what you always do! You won’t even stay here and work through it with me! Once again I have to deal with the tough stuff on my own!”

“You are going to wake up the kids!” Craig retorts through gritted teeth.

“The kids?!” Cheryl shouts after him as he leaves the room. “You’re concerned about the kids?! Well I wish you’d have been thinking more about the kids that night

when you were looking at *porn* on your phone when you were supposed to be tending the kids!! I wish you'd thought more about *the kids* all those years when you were thinking about having sex with women besides their mother!!!”

Cheryl cannot show acceptance toward Craig. Craig cannot draw close to Cheryl. And many of the couples who are being torn apart by pornography are just like Craig and Cheryl in this way.

A smoke detector is constantly monitoring, and yet remains silent when the air is clean. However, once there exists in the air that is being screened the problematic element that it has been designed to identify, the alarm is sounded. The alarm won't be quieted until the problem is addressed, the smoke cleared, and the air is clean once again.

Within every one of us is a psychological system that is designed to maintain the connection in our most important relationships. When things are fine between us and our spouse, we can function as usual. When the connection is threatened, an inner alarm is sounded. It won't be quieted until the problem is addressed, a sense of connection reestablished, and things are clear between us once again.

For most men, the inner detector is monitoring: “Am I acceptable to you? Am I the man you want me to be? Am I the good guy in your eyes? Do I measure up? Am I getting it right? Are you satisfied and content with me?” With this as priority number one, I'm never surprised when I hear men say, “If the wife ain't happy, ain't nobody happy.” There's a strong element of sincerity in their joking.

However, he's now been discovered to have a pornography problem. The inner alarm has sounded: “I messed things up. She disapproves of me. Look at what I did to

her. And the scab gets ripped off again for her when I'm around her and she talks about it to me. I'm the source of her pain. I don't want to bring her down any more than I have already. Her sadness is bringing me down. It's as though we've become enemies over this issue."

Well, what can be done now to address the problem? Can the air ever be cleared of this smoke? Can the connection we had be reestablished? Is there anything that can be done to help things be good between us again? This is the person who matters most to him in the entire world. He has to try: "I'll give her time and space to calm down. I will stay away in hopes that things will cool off. As terrible as this seems to her now, maybe it can blend into the background as time goes on. She'll see other things about me again and remember that I'm not so bad. If we can just focus on other things, the positive things that we share and can continue building together..."

All the while, there is an inner detector in most women. Here's what it's monitoring: "Are we close? Are you there for me? Will you listen to my concerns? Do we share? Do we talk? Are we together? Working as one? Do I know what's going on with you?"

Unfortunately, when he gives her time and space, the very method by which he was so desperately hoping to reestablish the good connection they once had, the inner alarm sounds for her: "He won't let me in! He doesn't care about what I'm going through! I'm disconnected from him! He doesn't want to talk! He won't take my input! He shuts down when I approach him! He's pulling away. He is more distant than ever!"

From this perspective (the only perspective, by the way, that she's capable of at this point) what can be done to address the problem? She can feel the person who is most

important to her slipping away. She has to do something: “I’ll keep talking, reaching for and calling out to him. I’ll express to him how much I’m hurting. I’ll amplify my calls of distress. I’ll do anything I can to get through to him in hopes that he’ll hear me and respond by coming toward me so that we can be close again...”

In and of itself, her behavior is not a problem. Texting him to see if he’s at risk of having a problem today or asking if he is attracted to that woman who just walked by are simply reflexive behaviors fueled by a very important instinct: to protect their connection and preserve their relationship. The only problem is that it triggers a different reaction in him. His reflexive behavior is not the problem. By not bringing up the issue and focusing on other things he is trying to reassure her and minimize the damage. The only problem is that his reaction triggers an even stronger reaction in her than the one that provoked her initial reaching out in the first place! Here are two people with legitimate needs and sound relationship instincts. The problem is that their reflexive behavior doesn’t clear the air, it creates more smoke for the other. Who then creates more smoke for them. These are two well-meaning people who are doing their very best. Over time they may come to see each other as enemies in this process, but it is really only the cycle between them that’s the enemy.

### **The Truth Is a Start, but It May Not Set You Free**

Based on what I’ve described so far, it may seem that we could move a long way toward helping couples interrupt their negative cycle by simply explaining to them the difference in what they are seeking from each other, the gap between them regarding what they most need from the relationship. He could draw closer to her and make sure

she feels like they're together as a couple through the thick and thin of this problem; she could approach him and tell him her needs in a calm, non-threatening way. By making sure he doesn't deny his wife what she most needs by the way he approaches her with his greatest needs, He can make it easier for her to meet his needs. And she can do the same.

Sounds simple enough. However, such explanations and understanding are rarely enough to help couples keep from escalating into negative cycles. To understand why, it's important to explore the way our relationship instincts work.

Our relationship instincts are inborn and we can see them in operation from a very young age. What happens when a child is thrust into a new and unfamiliar situation? Suddenly, relationship dependency needs take precedence over everything else. The child looks to that one person, the single most important person in his or her life, the one with whom they have bonded, who provides the solid external basis for the emotional security they feel internally. If they check in with mom (or dad or another primary caregiver) and get reassurance, it's almost as though they've now taken a deep breath of relationship oxygen. They are freed up from that most basic, primary need and they can now explore the room, socialize with the strangers there, and enjoy themselves. They're now free to be themselves: relaxed, happy, creative, and resourceful.

If a child is not able to reconnect with mom and get the reassurance he needs from her, his distress will increase and his "attachment behavior" will escalate. His cry amplifies. If she's out of sight his searching intensifies. The rest of his world closes down and he adopts a very narrow focus. If he was eating, now he's "all done." If he was playing, he's no longer interested. He'd rather be alone and lick his emotional wounds than socialize. Quite literally, at this point, nothing else matters to him.

Human infants need relationship oxygen as frequently as polar bears need to breathe. Polar bears can certainly submerge and swim beneath the surface of the water, but just briefly before they have to come back up to breathe. Babies can't go long without reconnecting to mom or we'll see (and hear!) evidence of their distress. Toddlers are becoming more independent. They're more like seals: they can go a little longer, but they still come back for oxygen regularly. If they don't get it when they need it, what happens? If their parent is unavailable, they'll tug on mom's leg whine to get her attention.

As adults, we're no longer like polar bears or sea lions, but neither do we transform into jelly fish or some other completely air-independent sea creatures. We are more like whales. We may seem more self-sufficient and less needy because we can operate longer between those deep breaths of relationship oxygen. However, we need them just as intensely and just as immensely nonetheless. In the 1960s, John Bowlby, the pioneering attachment theorist suggested that our relationship needs and our dependency on key figures in our lives continues "from cradle to grave." Researchers since that time have continued to amass evidence verifying Bowlby's claim. It's universal: we have a healthy need to feel that we are safe and secure in our primary relationship. If we're not experiencing a desperate sense of neediness, it's probably because we sense that our primary attachment is secure!

I point this all out to demonstrate why it's so hard for a husband and wife to set their own perspective aside, empathize with a spouse, and make sure he or she gets what they need. When it feels like giving that very thing would deny me of what's most important to me, the relationship oxygen I've been feeling deprived of and am now

gasping for... forget it! I can't do it. Being understanding and accommodating of my spouse's needs becomes mission impossible at that point.

And so we see loving, intelligent, creative, well-intentioned husbands and wives locked in a to-the-death struggle (to the death of the relationship at least), because both feel so threatened by the way the other approaches the issues surrounding his pornography habit. Unless these negative cycles are interrupted, neither spouse can hope to get what they need from the relationship. They will remain deprived of the peace, closeness, and healing that they both so urgently need.

### **How Not to Break a Negative Cycle**

These negative cycles don't have to continue. Either spouse can help interrupt the cycle by doing their part differently. If both spouses are working together to interrupt the old pattern, the payoff is even bigger and comes quicker.

However, some of the common sense ways we try to interrupt the cycle usually don't work very well and are not recommended. For instance, trying to explain to our spouse why they have nothing to fear when they're afraid. Telling them that their concerns are silly or unrealistic or in other ways trying to talk them out of their reaction. Amplifying our communication (our voice, our language, our emotion) in an attempt to get through to our spouse. We think, understandably, that if we can just get our point across, our spouse will finally "get it." Suddenly they will feel loved, secure, at ease because we hit that sweet spot we've been aiming at. So we keep shooting *our* arrows to try to hit *their* sweet spot. These are the exact arrows that would reassure us, after all.

On the other hand, we may try to “suck it up” and “bite our tongue” and simply be the more understanding, patient one. Be the bigger man (or woman) in the relationship. I’ll give more, and take more of what hurts without lashing back, and thus we won’t be fighting and the relationship can heal. It may be a worthy effort, and it’s certainly admirable, but it usually can’t be sustained.

It can’t be sustained because the reasons we get into intense conflicts—or at least have the urge to fight even when we don’t—are *very* important. The intensity of our emotional reaction to a relationship provocation is usually proportional to how threatening that issue, event, or experience. Intense emotions rise when it looks like we start to lose hope of getting the relationship oxygen we need from our marriage. This is why it doesn’t work to just try to restrain our natural reaction at such moments. Pretending that we’re not whales, that we’re jellyfish and can stay submerged even longer when we’re in need of air, doesn’t make us jellyfish. Furthermore, it doesn’t give our spouse the opportunity to build the bond between us by responding to our need and meeting it. It denies them the chance to touch the depths-of-our-soul sweet spot when it’s really in need of being touched. To pretend we don’t need doesn’t make our need go away, nor does it help us meet it. It just leaves our craving lingering, and it gets stronger, building toward a future gasp for relationship oxygen that may be even more uncontrollable, uncontrolled, and potentially destructive.

## **Getting to Tenderness**

So what can we do that might actually work to interrupt a habitual, negative cycle? We can take the time to become aware within ourselves and then take the opportunity to reveal to our spouse what we want most deeply and what we fear most profoundly. These are the deeper relationship instincts that drive our cycle-escalating behavior. Until now, all our spouse has seen is our behavior and all they hear are our words, and so they are left to come to their own conclusion about what's driving our reaction. Usually, those conclusions are far scarier and less flattering than what's actually going on inside of us.

### **Talking About Deeper Yearnings and Fears**

Lane was jobless and his hunt for work wasn't going well. Throughout the previous five months, his wife, Shelly, had been the sole breadwinner. Lane had struggled with a pornography problem, so when Shelly arrived home at the end of the day and Lane was still in his sweats and looking disheveled, it was natural for her to wonder whether he'd been working on his job hunt at all. He kept telling her that he was staying

away from porn, but she couldn't help but wonder on such days whether he had relapsed to that habit.

They were both feeling stressed-out and worried, and so all it took was a single comment from one or the other to serve as a spark, and a familiar, negative cycle between them would be set ablaze. For instance, Shelly might come home and ask, "What have you been doing all day?"

It was a reasonable question, and natural for her to ask it straightaway.

What had he been doing all day?

Well, on a typical day he'd been watching some TV, feeding the dog, thinking he should walk the dog, mostly puttering around, tinkering to see if he could fix their old DVD player... oh, yeah: and playing way too much X-Box. And throughout the day, of course, feeling guilty that he wasn't being more effective. Trying to psych himself up to make phone calls about job openings. Vowing that tomorrow he'd get up earlier and exercise, then hit it hard and "put himself out there" with potential employers when he was feeling at his best, instead of risking interacting with executives who might hold his future in their hands when he was feeling like this, feeling so... blah about himself.

After that kind of day, she gets home, done up in her business suit, looking sharp, and asks, "What have you been doing all day?"

What does he say? What can he say?

Frankly, he's tongue-tied. As he stammers, she continues: "You do realize we've burned through our savings and now the credit card balance is over fifteen thousand dollars. I'm getting burned out in my work, especially when it feels like my paycheck has

to cover everything. Did you look at pornography today? Did you struggle with temptation? Please tell me that at least you're doing well at avoiding that."

Now that, he can answer. "I told you, it hasn't been a problem for two-and-a-half weeks—*three* weeks now." She walks over to the living room area and notices X-Box discs strewn across the bookshelf. She knew he wouldn't be that careless about evidence of his pornography use if he was caught up in that addiction again.

"Yeah, you say that. But how can I be sure? You didn't tell me in the first place until I discovered it for myself."

Of course, this cycle can escalate further—much further. He can defend his addiction recovery efforts and his job-hunt attempts; she could argue that she has plenty of reasons to be concerned. He could say that perhaps he should just give in to urges if she assumes that he's guilty anyway. She could say that it's that flippant attitude about fidelity that makes her worry that he might be headed toward an affair. He could accuse her of blowing his problem way out of proportion. She could accuse him of being calloused, not the guy she thought she was marrying, if he doesn't get why this is a big deal to her.

In the end, of course, these arguments got Lane and Shelly nowhere. Neither one felt understood or supported, and the wedge between them kept deepening.

We could have started on either side to try to exit their negative pattern, but where Shelly had been so hurt by Lane's pornography use, I was hoping that Lane might take the first steps to deescalate their cycle. In order to have any hope of doing that, I knew that we would have to get down to the tender emotions that fueled his defensiveness.

I tried to explore what Lane had been feeling, but had so far had a hard time putting into words. “What’s that like for you, Lane, to be at home while Shelly’s out there working. To be hoping and working to get a job and to not even have a promising lead after five months. That must be *very* difficult for you.”

Lane nodded, eyes downcast. “It’s been so tough. At first I thought this was just going to be a bump in the road. I’ve never gone more than a couple of weeks between jobs. But I have very few connections here. All my friends are in Colorado. Maybe it’s the economy, but I’ve also started to worry that maybe it’s me. Maybe I don’t have what it takes to succeed. You know, your mind starts playing tricks on you like that. Most of the friends I keep in touch with seem to be weathering the financial storms right now. What’s wrong with me? By age 28, shouldn’t we be in a more stable situation? Most of my friends back home own their own places by now. Here we are still paying rent, and struggling even to do that—only doing that because Shelly’s out there bustin’ her behind. I start feeling like a disappointment to her. I can get pretty down on myself.”

“That is really hard for you. To sit there feeling like, ‘Maybe I don’t have what it takes to succeed and maybe Shelly’s worse off for being with me.’ That hurts.” The feeling was palpable in the room. Shelly looked intently at Lane. His face was red and his eyes were glistening. After a minute, I continued. “Boy, it’s tough to sit there feeling that emotional pain for very long. And even tougher to get on the phone to make phone calls or look for places to send your résumé when you’re feeling that way. It’s a lot easier to distract yourself by playing X-Box or even get into the tug-of-war with yourself about whether to walk the dog or not. Do you think that perhaps even the pull of pornography,

that you're more vulnerable to it at times when you're feeling bad like that, because of the escape and the high that it would provide?"

"No question, I'm more at risk when I'm stressed-out like that" Lane acknowledged.

"What would it be like for you to share those down feelings with Shelly at the end of the day when she gets home? Everything we talked about just now: 'Shelly,'" I role-played, "'I'm here wishing I were more on the ball so that I had something better to show you at the end of the day, so that I could measure up in your eyes. But instead I feel ineffective and worried that I may continue to fail in my efforts to find work. I compare myself and find myself wanting, and I'm afraid that you will compare me and find me wanting, too.' What would it be like to go to her with those raw feelings and open up to her? Have you done that before?"

"I haven't, because she's already burdened with so much. I've burdened her with so much. I've just felt like this is something that I need to deal with on my own. It's my problem, I need to work through it. But do you know what, I know what kind of woman she is, and we've been close enough before where we've been a support like that for each other. When my younger brother died, I cried on her shoulder and she was really there for me. We cried together... I needed her so badly then and she was such a support. Maybe I need her just as much now, in a different way. Maybe I need to start doing that—talking to her. I think I could try that."

Then I turned to Shelly. "What would it be like for you to hear about Lane's day? What if he opened up to you like that about his struggles and feelings?"

Shelly's response was immediate. "I wouldn't like hearing it. I really want a man who is there for *me*. I have never liked playing the role of the strong one in our relationship, and right now working full-time while he's out of work... it just heightens this imbalance even more. I want to go to him at the end of the day and have him be my soft place to land. I can barely hold my own head above water, emotionally, these days; I can't keep him afloat. I don't want to be the one who has to be strong for both of us anymore."

Shelly's voice sounded crisp and sharp. Her response made complete sense, but I was shocked. I hadn't seen it coming at all. I thought we had been building a bridge that Lane could use when he was feeling bad and needed support. A genuine, relationship way to meet the needs that he was trying to escape by going to his distractions and addictions. And now to discover that Shelly was by no means ready for it. Unfortunately, we were at a time in that therapy session when I needed to be wrapping things up. I knew another client was waiting for me in the lobby. Perhaps what I had been hoping for could still happen, but it didn't look like it would be happening anytime soon. I ended by empathizing with Shelly's need for support and then summarized by saying that they both needed a lot of support right now, but were also both feeling like they didn't have a lot to give. The mood was pretty low for both of them as we ended.

After the session, I wondered whether I should have cautioned Lane against opening up to Shelly about his emotions at the end of the day, at least for now. Would it be disastrous if he showed his vulnerability in that way, only to have her respond harshly because she was in such a state of need at the time as well? I suspected that it would set them both back. I worried that perhaps I'd done more harm than good because I'd gotten

him to open up about some pretty tender feelings but then missed the cues that she might not be ready yet to be receptive and supportive.

### **Vulnerability Evokes the Nurturing Instinct**

Lane and Shelly walked into my office at the beginning of the next session hand-in-hand. They were also smiling. This couple was full of surprises for me. “He came to me this week,” she said as we talked about what had gone differently. “When things were hard we talked about it. He didn’t just escape with the TV or the X-Box—or even worse, with porn. He told me when he felt discouraged and gave me the chance to be there for him.”

“What was that like for you?” I asked.

“Oh,” Shelly beamed, “it felt so nice that he let me in. I just held him and told him how sorry I was that he was struggling. That I knew how hard this was for him, and how much I admired him that he hasn’t given up. I also reminded him of all the hard things he’s done in the past. Building his own catering business from the ground up. Rehabbing after his motorcycle accident. This is no different—the pornography or the unemployment. He can conquer these challenges, I know he can. I really believe in him. I know he will.”

“How was that for you,” I asked Lane.

“It would have been nice to hear from anyone, but coming from Shelly it meant the world to me. On her own she’s a strong person; on my own I could do a lot of good things, I’m starting to feel that again; but together it feels like we’re invincible, especially

with God in our corner. We're going to make it through this down time together, I'm sure of it."

That ended up being the final session for Lane and Shelly because they couldn't afford to continue counseling. I knew that there was no guarantee that this new direction would continue, but I was really happy that they had tasted again what it is like to open up to each other, give and receive support, and work together as one.

It fascinates me that Shelly reacted so differently during the real interaction than she herself had predicted when I asked her about how she might respond. It's not always safe to open up about vulnerable feelings because sometimes our spouse is not in a place where they can view us compassionately and respond supportively. However, my experience with Lane and Shelly reminded me how powerful tenderness can be. While attacking or retreating tends to elicit a similarly reactive response in our partners, genuine vulnerability tends to evoke, almost involuntarily, compassion and support. When distress is expressed in its most honest form, in a tender way, it evokes in the receiver a nurturing response. Vulnerability, when we're able to take it in, naturally and predictably evokes from within us our nurturing instinct.

Of course, it's difficult to maintain the purity of emotional distress. It's difficult to stay emotionally naked, even in front of a spouse we've been with for years. Our minds naturally want out of distress. We go, for example, from hurt, which feels vulnerable, to anger, which feels powerful. Or from afraid, which feels vulnerable, to withdrawn and resentful, which enables us to feel protected from the view of whomever was making us anxious. We want to feel safe instead of exposed. We want to feel powerful instead of weak.

However, when we attack and demand, the self-protective instinct in our beloved will be evoked. We make it mission impossible for them to support and nurture us. It's just natural and automatic.

Here's a metaphor I often share with clients: imagine that you're driving along a remote stretch of road. You come upon a car pulled over, hood raised. As you approach, the driver of the car looks you straight in the eye, points the tire iron he has clenched in his fist directly at you, and then uses it to try to wave you over to the side of the road. Of course you understand his distress. You've been there before yourself. But what does his firm and demanding bid for help evoke in you? What would your natural response be? As I painted the picture, your instincts were telling you something. What was it? Tune in for a moment to your gut. What is it telling you to do as you see this guy pointing his tire iron at you and jerking it toward the side of the road?

That's right! Keep driving. Pass right on by. In fact, *accelerate!*

Okay. Now imagine a slightly different scene. You're driving along the same road, you see the same car with the hood raised. As you approach you see the downcast face of the driver. You sense how distraught he is. Looking at his eyes, it's unmistakable. No demand whatsoever; just vulnerability. Tune in now. What are your instincts telling you to do? We may decide to keep driving, and there are lots of good reasons to do so, but to do that we'd have to override a powerful nurturing instinct that may have been evoked. We'd be interrupting a powerful sequence of tenderness that has been initiated and is well underway. We are much more likely to pull our car to the side of the road and approach this second driver. Not only because we're good, caring people, but partly because of the way their state of need was conveyed to us.

I often tell my clients that this is one of the main tragedies of addiction. When a husband goes to an addictive substance or behavior when he's struggling or in need of support, he denies his wife the opportunity to nurture him. Women, in particular, have an extremely strong nurturing instinct. If you deny your wife the opportunity to do what she instinctively craves, you are diminishing the quality of her marital experience. It can be heart-wrenching for a woman who naturally wants to nurture to live with a man who doesn't come to her. In fact, women who are denied regular opportunities to nurture might even get downright cranky! Even though I'm joking by saying it this way, many wives have agreed that they've felt an emotional distance or wall in their relationship that has distinctly affected the level joy and vitality they've felt in their marriage. They don't even *want* their husbands to do as Lane wished he could, and just handle hard things on their own. Remember, closeness, togetherness, supporting each other is that relationship oxygen that most women need in order to feel secure, complete, and confident.

### **Deepening Conflicts into Tender Exchanges**

Carl was very hesitant to talk to Olivia about tender feelings because he had so often felt judged and rejected by her. Despite that, over and over again in group therapy he had heard that he had a choice between reaching out and acting out—that he needed to learn to talk to her when he was in need or he'd remain more vulnerable to relapse. Before he had always concluded that he was going to “do it on his own,” that he would work so hard that he would succeed in his recovery without involving her. That hadn't worked out very well for Carl. Now he decided that it was time to try again.

It didn't take long before Carl had his chance. Olivia was 20 minutes late to pick him up at work on a Friday night. He had ridden the bus that morning because they had a wedding reception to go to that evening. She'd been running errands with a friend with whom she co-owned a jewelry making business. He could feel himself getting worked up and he wanted to keep his wits about him to increase the chance that their conversation about it might go well. He sorted it out a bit: I know that it's not just the fact that she's running late. I know that it's not her doing this *to* me. I know that a big part of it is what I bring to this, my expectations. He remembered something we had talked about. There's an old saying, "I love you, not just for who you are, but for who I am when I'm with you." I shared with him this perspective: "It's not just who you are that makes me upset, it's who I am when I'm with you." So he thought about it: when she's late, what do I become that I dislike? How do I start to see myself that makes me so uncomfortable? What do I want the most and fear the most? Then he realized: I wish I was so important to her that she was waiting there early at my office when I'm done with work. Maybe it sounds vain, but I want to be the most important thing in her life. I want to be on her mind. When she's late it starts to feel like I'm an afterthought. There's the laundry, the kids, the customers... and, oh yeah, gotta pick up Carl.

Before she arrived, Carl remembered the last time he'd been upset when she was late. Olivia had gotten upset herself that he was making a big deal out of it. "You're a big boy," she retorted, "why can't you go down to Barnes & Noble for 10 minutes and entertain yourself?!"

Carl was sure hoping that this time would go differently. Later that evening, when they were driving home from the reception, Carl said, "I'm not trying to blame you

because I'm realizing that it might be tricks my own mind starts playing on me. However, I want so badly to be number one in your life. I want to come first. I want you to feel like you can't wait to be with me. I know you can't fake that and I'm not asking you to. But especially after a hard day at work I just crave it. It would turn the world around for me in those moments. It's not what time you arrive to pick me up that gets to me, it's if I start to worry that I'm just not very important to you. I want so badly to be important to you."

This time, Carl could tell by looking at Olivia, that her usual shield wasn't coming up. "You have no idea how stressful it is to me when I'm running late," Olivia said. "You can ask Rochelle. We were stalled at the print shop and she said, 'What's up, why are you shaking?' I said, 'Carl's going to be waiting for me in an hour and a half and we still have all these other things to do!' I always thought you were being a Nazi about the time thing and I didn't understand it. I felt so put in a box by it. I wondered why you were being so rigid. It felt so controlling. You know how I hate feeling controlled. So sometimes I rebelled verbally, but emotionally I kept trying so hard to measure up and get there on time so that you wouldn't be upset. And then always feeling like I was failing in your eyes. I'd really come to resent that. But now I can see more of what's going on for you at those times. I don't want you to feel that way any more than you do! I can see now that I should have just relaxed and called you: "Hey, we got running late at the printer. I want you to know I'm thinking about you. I wish I were there with you rather than stuck here in traffic." Let you know that I want to be with you just as badly as you want me to be there on time."

Having opened up the topic of conversation, Carl and Olivia talked about her passion for her business and the fact that Carl sometimes felt pushed to the background

by it. “Sometimes I worry that you have more fun with Rochelle than you do with me. I remember when we were first married and you wanted to be around me that badly. Your friends were got upset with you. We were so into each other that we ignored everything and everyone else. I long to know that you feel that way about me.”

“Rochelle and the jewelry don’t come before you. It is something I love doing, but a big part of it is that it’s easy for me. There’s no pressure. I get lots of feedback that I’m getting things right and people are satisfied with my efforts. You and the kids need so much from me. I love you and them, but sometimes it feels like I don’t have enough for you. I get burned out. And then, when I let down my effort or get things wrong in that arena, I feel bad about myself. I don’t want to fail in my most important roles. It’s not all your fault; I know part of it is the pressure I put on myself. But when I can see in your eyes that you’re disappointed in me, it just kills me. That’s why I lash out at you when I’m afraid you’re being critical. Not because I don’t care about you, but because I care so much about how I’m doing in your eyes.”

Carl’s honesty—first with himself and then with Olivia—helped her leave her defenses down and made it easier to talk about how she started to see herself when they fought and enabled her to talk about her deeper wants and fears as well. They’d been able to get to the tenderness beneath the conflict that kept coming between them, and they both ended up feeling like they’d bridged some of that distance.



### **She Needs You Now More than Ever**

Two months ago, Steve's told Lisa, his wife of four years, that he had been struggling with a pornography habit since the time he was single. Before that disclosure, Steve had thought that, despite this shameful secret, he and Lisa had a basically good marriage. Lisa had also felt like their marriage was strong. She sometimes talked about wanting to feel more connected and emotionally open with each other—wanting to feeling like they were truly “one” as a couple, but she would never have guessed that Steve was struggling with something like this. He had always been spiritually devout and his integrity was impeccable in so many other areas of life. At least it had seemed that way to Lisa.

During my first appointment with him, Steve said, “Telling her about my addiction has complicated everything.” Lisa couldn't fathom why he had kept his struggle from her. She couldn't help but wonder about what he had seen and how it might have affected his view of her when they were physically intimate as a couple. She worried about what this meant for their future.

“Over the past few days, she's been really sad. She won't talk to me, won't look me in the eye,” Steve said. “I've been wanting to be close to her, but when I come around

it seems like it makes things worse. The other day I walked in the living room and sat down on the couch next to her when she was reading. She started to sob. I thought, being around me just opens the wound for her again. I started to feel like she wanted me to stay out of her way. I also felt like her sadness was bringing me down. At times she's been cold, acting as though I'm not even there. I came to the conclusion, if we're going to be enemies over this, I'll stay away from her. I started to keep my distance."

"But then," Steve recalled, "Last night I was at the library doing some work on a school assignment. We talked on the phone and she seemed so sad again. My instinct was to just back off and find a reason to hang up. But I was feeling spiritually in-tune yesterday. Something inside me didn't let me hang up. I felt like I needed to hang in there, that there was something for me to learn. 'Stick with it. Stay on the phone until you can understand a little more about what's going on here.' So I kept waiting to see if I could elicit anything about what was going on for her and what she needed.

"She finally let me know, sobbing on the phone, that she was terribly lonely. She wanted me at home with my arms around her. Of course, I came right home. Realizing that she wanted me there with her, and the tenderness I could see in her as she expressed it, softened me. I broke down. We cried together and held each other for a long time. It felt so good to discover that she still wanted me close. Despite the hurt, she didn't want to be rid of me. It's such a relief that I don't have to banish myself from her presence as penance for what I've done. We can stay close to each other as we work through this."

### **The Depth of Pain Can Overwhelm both Spouses**

Discovering Kyle's pornography problem has left Vivian questioning the very foundation of what she thought they had together. "It's changed something at a very deep level, and I don't know if we're ever going to be able to get that back."

When Kyle's secret habit came out, it rocked Vivian's world. It left her doubting the man she used to trust implicitly. It made her disgusted by how sexualized US culture has become. (She almost smashed their TV set. She cancelled their satellite service. She actually did set his laptop behind the tire of her SUV and then drove back and forth over it several times. Then she chucked his iPhone in a lake.) Perhaps worst of all, Kyle's vulnerability to pornography left Vivian feeling insecure about herself. Every aspect of her body that she'd ever found fault with came rushing back to her mind. For a brief period, whenever she became self-conscious she felt like an amalgamation of all of those less-than-ideal bodily features, and nothing else. All cellulite, moles, hunched posture, and wrinkles. She felt claustrophobic in her own body. Then she cursed herself for ever taking emotional risks during lovemaking. "I was playful and uninhibited. I tried to dress all sexy. What an idiot I was! I thought that only he and I shared our own little world of sexuality together. If I'd known all the fantasies that inhabited that world for him I would never have felt free enough to be that way with him." She also questioned Kyle: "Why wasn't I enough for you?" she asked him over and over again. "What was it about these women that was so appealing that it drew you away from me and ruined what we had?"

Every time Vivian asked such questions, it wrenched Kyle's heart. "That's not what it meant to me!" he insisted. "I don't want to be with any of those women. I was just caught up in the pull of it. I told you before, I'd get tunnel vision and I didn't think about

you, our family, my religious beliefs. I'd get lost in it. I'm not saying that makes it right, just that I wasn't choosing it over you. I was caught up in the compulsion."

In a way, Vivian was glad that Kyle was trying to reassure her. As bad as it was during the bad times, Quite often, she'd come back to herself and her usual view of Kyle, her usual way of feeling about herself. It was almost like they could pick right up with their old lives and move on. Miraculously to her, she found that she could even lose herself in physical intimacy with Kyle again when he was attentive and she knew he was mentally "with her." Nonetheless, the emotional rug would get pulled out from under her again by some event or some memory, and rarely did his explanations help during those down times. Quite often, in fact, his insurances made her feel worse. "You have no idea what it's like for me, do you? In a way it bugs me that you're trying to talk your way out of something you behaved your way into, something that has hurt me so badly. I'm not wrong for feeling this upset, and all of your talking starts to sound like rationalizations and justifications—as though it's really not that big of a deal, what you've done. As though I should be able to understand that it wasn't that serious in your mind, and thus not be so affected by it. When I sense that that's where the conversation's going, it hurts even worse. I feel even more alone and wounded. Not only have you injured me, but you won't stay with me while I recover from how it's affected me. You want to put a band-aid on my compound fracture and pretend it's a scratch. I'm not going to let you do that, and it really offends me that you would want to."

Kyle was not trying to minimize her pain, but he started to realize that the way he was handling it was unintentionally perpetuating—and perhaps even exacerbating—

Vivian's suffering. However, he didn't yet understand how to make it better. In fact, he had begun wondering whether he could.

### **Why it's So Hard to Be There for Her**

The depth of her need for him to listen and understand makes it all the more painful when he misses the boat and fails to be there for her in that way. In the great majority of cases I've seen, it's not that he doesn't want to be there for her. He simply has his own perspective and struggles that get in the way. When the distress she feels over his pornography problem becomes apparent, he may be taken back by the severity and depth of pain she suffers. Emotional distress is not the most comfortable river for him to swim in to begin with, and now when it looks to him like she's gasping for air and being ripped at by piranha, it's a lot for him to witness. And then to be asked to join her in the midst of that distress... Whoa! It's enough to take his breath away.

Eminent marriage researcher John Gottman used physiological measures to assess men and women's bodily responses to emotional conversations. He found that when the topic content was upsetting, although men might appear to be "keeping their cool," their bodies were taking quite a ride. Their heart-rate elevates, their breathing deregulates, their blood-pressure rises, they sweat. The wives of these research participants often seemed more heated and passionate, but the men reacted internally and physically to a much greater degree. Furthermore, the stress hormones that get dumped into our systems when we're feeling "stressed by distress" don't dissipate readily or quickly. The men remained amped-up over a longer period of time than their wives did.

It may not be accurate to say that emotional upset is always more upsetting to men than it is to women, but it might be true that we're usually not as adept at handling and managing it. This all may play some role in why women and men respond so differently to emotional distress. As we discussed earlier, women instinctively share their distress to soothe it, while men instinctively try to better a distressing situation if they can, and avoid it altogether if they can't.

I'm not trying to give a man an excuse to not be there for his wife when she's hurting. I'm just explaining in hopes that he can see why it's so difficult. Of course, the hope is that yet he'll keep trying to do it so that he can get better at it than he has been. The hope also is that if she understands how challenging it is for him, she can be patient with him as he works to improve. Otherwise a wife may wonder, "How hard can it be for him to just sit there, to simply be with me as I talk about how I feel?" She's more patient when she understands that he's doing more than sitting and listening. He's trying to managing the arousal of his own nervous system. He's resisting the instinct, crying out within him, to simply apologize and promise to do better so that the discussion can be over with. Or to tell her his problem wasn't as bad as she has come to believe it was. He's resisting the urge to change the subject. He's resisting the urge to feel hopeless and give up the possibility of things ever getting any better. When he faces her distress up-close, his inner demons drag him into a funhouse with all kinds of contorted mirrors. Reality takes new shapes that can be quite hard to handle.

It's quite a challenge for a man to learn to really listen to his wife's experience and how she feels about it. In the process, it is not primarily *her* distress that he is learning to tolerate, but his own. It hurts him to see her hurting. Add to that his

knowledge that she is hurting over what he has done. This is the bride he treasured, the woman he most likely still treasures, although he let her down in weak moments. This is the woman he has worked to support and care for. This is the woman he has sworn to and wants with all of his heart to protect. For the vast majority of men this remains true despite what they may have done in the throes of craving and addiction. It was only when they were not in their right mind that they did the hurtful things they've done. And now, to witness the charred and smoldering emotional and relationship landscape in an area that was once verdant... that, for some men, feels like too much.

### **Why She Looks to You When She's in Pain**

If a woman has been hurt by her husband's pornography use, she feels a strong need for support from another person. Most women have a handful of people in their lives that they *could* reach out to. She could go to her mother when she finds herself feeling troubled, disheartened, or hurting. She could go to a sister or a close friend. She could seek help from a therapist. She could go to an ecclesiastical leader. Some men find it surprising, however, that their wives want most to come to them.

Of course, part of it is because her husband is the one who has been involved in pornography. It wouldn't be as fruitful to ask a friend why he started, why he kept looking, and why he didn't open up about the problem earlier. Also, it is her husband who, for his own good as well as hers, needs to know how she has been hurt by his pornography use. He needs to understand how his behavior has hurt her so that he can stay a better course in the future, make amends, and seek forgiveness from her.

However, there is another, even more important reason that she goes to him to talk about her pain. It's because he is her husband. He is her one-and-only. He is the one she most wants and needs to turn to when she is hurting about anything—even including those hurts that he may play some role in. He is, in the words of relationship researchers, her *primary attachment figure*. It is her deepest instinct to go to him. Viscerally she senses that it is a response from him alone that she wants.

This is important to remember because many men, after hurting their wives, feel that they've lost that privileged status in her eyes. In fact, now they may even feel like the jerk who it hurts her to be around. They pull away to spare her the pain of closeness to the perpetrator who has created her trauma. However, all of the support and consoling and listening that a myriad of other supportive people can do won't hit the depths-of-her-soul sweet spot for her like a receptive, validating, compassionate response from him can.

When the communication of her pain seems unrelenting and even seems to amplify over time, some men fear that their wives may relish being in the hurt role, or may be using the hurt over his pornography habit as club to beat him with. That's just not true. Usually, repetition and amplification usually only happen when the wound gets reopened in some way or if there's a sense on her part that initial communications haven't been fully received.

One day I was pushing my four year old daughter, Sarah, on the backyard swing set. Her two-year-old brother, Sam waddled up and planted himself on the swing next to her. Pretty soon they were both giggling and going strong. I got distracted for a minute watching the older kids play ball at the other end of the yard. I turned back in time to see Sarah dismount and walk toward the ladder to the slide. Then I realized she was in tears.

“What’s the matter Honey?”

“You didn’t push me!” She sobbed.

I realized then that I must have stopped switching back and forth between them during the time I’d been distracted.

“Honey, I’ll push you some more. Come get back on.”

“You didn’t push me!!” She wailed.

“Honey, I was pushing both of you. I can push both of you.”

“You didn’t push me!!!”

She swiped the back of her hand across a wet face. “Honey, Sam needs a turn, too. You don’t want Sam to feel…” Then I stopped. I realized that this was something I talk about with clients all the time. Here it was, right in front of my face: emotional distress. How was I handling it? My knee-jerk reaction had taken me straight to the default modes of explaining, defending, suggesting, and trying to make it better. Perhaps I didn’t have to do any of that, I realized. Maybe she just needed to be heard, and to know that what she was feeling registered with me. I walked over to the slide, put my hand on her arm, and looked her square in the eyes. “You were so sad when I pushed Sam instead of you.”

“Ye-ah!” she wailed.

“You wanted me to keep pushing you.”

“Uh-huh.” Her sobs were winding down already.

“And you felt bad when I didn’t.”

“That made me sad,” she said, in an almost calm voice. “You’re my Dad. Dad’s shouldn’t *do* that.” She sat there for a few seconds more. One more wipe of her face and then her eyes widened, “Hey Dad, wanna watch me go down the slide?”

### **She Has to Know that You Get How Badly She’s Hurting**

When I talk to couples who are working through a pornography problem in a way that enables them to feel closer than ever before, I’m always curious about what made the difference. Some cite that it is key moments of connection and sharing, with all the walls down, that are enabling them to draw together like never before and lifts their recovery to a new level.

Brian said, “It was that night in our bedroom that turned things around. For the first time, when Leslie expressed her concerns and fears, I just listened. She was sitting on the bed, so I knelt down in front of her so that we were looking eye-to-eye.

“I could see that she was feeling troubled about things again,” he continued. “Before I’d always tried to apologize, make promises and plans, and show her how angry I was at myself for what I’d done. This time I just knelt there in front of her and listened. As she described her hurts, she cried, and when she did, I cried with her. We just stayed there and cried together about the pain and hurt that my sins and secrecy had caused her.”

Leslie called out in distress. Brian heard and let her know that he knew how badly she was hurting. Leah felt soothed and a little more secure than she had before. This is a sequence that can occur over and over again. It’s a virtuous circle that deescalates Leslie’s distress and the tension between them. It replaces the vicious circle that used to get going between them.

**ZZZ THIS IS ALSO COVERED IN PREVIOUS CHAPTER:** There are researchers devoted to studying the bonds we form as human beings and how we take comfort from our closest relationships. Originally, this research focused on those whose dependency is most obvious: young children. The researchers observed that, when facing a strange situation—unfamiliar surroundings and new people—children look to their primary caregiver, usually their mother, for reassurance. When a caregiver is responsive to a child’s distress or signs insecurity, that child is soothed and more able to calm down again. The child is put at ease. Having been reassured, that child is then free to move on to other things. They more readily smile, play with the toys in the room, and interact with the other kids or adults. Having checked in and rediscovered their most important relationship to be a secure base, they feel more confident, and they’re now freed up to focus on other things in life.

### **Sitting Together with the Pain Helps Soothe It**

Some men have benefited from having a metaphor in mind, a mental handle to hold onto, enabling them to stay put when they want to run away and listen when they want to change the subject or plug their ears. One of these is the idea that listening to her pain is like clearing the gunk from the mouth of a spring. Imagine a spring of water with a great big stopper plugging it. You unclog it, only to discover that the water that flows from it is murky and yucky. You think, “This is no good, I don’t want this kind of water,” and decide to plug the hole back up. Here’s the problem: you can’t tell this by what you see from the surface, but that gunky, polluted water only goes from the mouth of the spring and down about twenty feet into the ground. Beneath that, the water is pure and

clean. By plugging the spring back up, not only have you left the muck still right at the surface, you're holding back the refreshing, life-giving water that could flow from deeper down and keeping it from coming out.

The women we work with whose husbands have hidden a pornography habit from them and lied to them about it usually have a lot of pain and anger to work through. Even when their marriage has been good in many other ways and they have a lot of positive facets to their relationship, giving them good reason to stay together and work on the marriage, it's no small thing to try to come to terms with virtual infidelity. Watching these upset feelings come out can be very distressing for husbands. If men respond to their own distress by stepping back from the situation and giving their wife space and time to heal, it can leave her feeling worse instead of better. It's like plugging up a spring when it's trying to clear out the crap that's ready to be purged. When we fail as couples to spend lots of time together talking, processing, sorting through feelings and questions, the wife is left with all of the gunk right there at the surface ready to burst out. And that's usually just what it does.

It can be disheartening to some men—and their wives, too, for that matter—because the gunk seems to come back again after they thought they'd cleared it all out. However, over time they learn that they can trust the same process again every time yucky stuff comes to the surface again. While the initial clearing can be quite an ordeal and may take weeks or even months, many of the later ones require just a brief acknowledgment and validation of the pain, and then we can more readily move on to other aspects of life.

## **Healing Broken Hearts**

It had been eight years since Vanessa had caught Ray in the act of having sex with a prostitute. Then over the subsequent three weeks he had disclosed to her other details of his sexual addiction. Now, she had grown apart from the friends who had known her then. They couldn't understand why she hadn't left Ray. Vanessa had stayed to work on the marriage partly for the sake of her kids, but also because there was so much good in the life she and Ray had built together despite his infidelity.

In the years since that time, they had been working to rebuild their marriage and become closer. Vanessa felt like the healing wasn't finished, but that they were still headed in a good direction. "Don't get me wrong," she said, "there are still things that dredge back up the hurt. I'll see something on a TV talk show about infidelity. Or someone makes a joke of it—which really stings because I think, they have no idea how devastating it is if they can trivialize it like that. Or even things that may not seem related, like my teenage son smoking cigarettes and then hiding it and lying about it. It reawakens that feeling of being deceived by someone I love. When I have a hard time like that, Ray will come and rub my feet. Sometimes he doesn't say anything. Other times he'll say, 'I'm sorry you're going through this. It must be hard.' It's so great to feel that he's got my back. If I have a bad day, I can talk to him and it won't turn into a fight. He won't pretend that what happened didn't happen. It allows me to feel like, even though it's still hard, I'm not a freak for not being able to let this go and be over it. It's okay that sometimes I still hurt from it. As much as he wants me to be okay, he wants even more to know how I'm really doing. Knowing that, I can relax and not feel tense. I can feel at peace. I'm still troubled by those wounds at times, but I don't have to have the added

pain of beating myself up over my current reaction. I talk to him and he doesn't act like it's bugging him. That turns the world around for me. He puts me first and really listens to what I say. And he keeps rubbing my feet. I've told him, 'As long as you keep rubbing my feet, I'm not going anywhere.' It helps me feel loved and secure. It lets me fall asleep. Having my feet rubbed is like a drug."

Like a drug? Actually, it's the other way around. Drugs that soothe the nervous system only do so because they mimic the natural soothing that occurs when we're physically touched by someone we love. ZZZ REVISIT AND GIVE MORE DETAILED DISCUSSION OF OXYTOCIN. I'm convinced that this process was a part of how Ray was helping Vanessa heal.

Since so many men have a hard time staying close to their wife when she's in distress, I asked Ray how he had been able to stay and keep rubbing Vanessa's feet and listening. "I could see from the beginning that she was stuck in pain from what I'd done. After she first became aware that I was cheating on her and addicted to sex, when I heard her talk about it, it was almost like watching her sit in a scalding hot tub. By bringing up the topic, she was inviting me to soak in there with her. I'd dip my toe in by listening briefly, and then I wanted to get out and get away. Can't we do other things and focus on other things? But then once, as I was about to walk out of the room when she was collapsed there, overcome with sadness, I realized that I couldn't in good conscience walk away. I knew that she was there because of me, and I felt the obligation to stay there with her, to sit and soak with her in the scalding hot tub if necessary. I've tried to do that ever since."

## **Exercising the Courage to Be There for Her**

As challenging as it is to listen and acknowledge her pain, there is nothing like practice to strengthen our ability to tolerate distress. Unfortunately, that means time in the saddle: time spent hearing about her hurts, her worries, her insecurities that have resulted from your behavior. It also helps some men to remind themselves to simply breathe. “Take in a breath, just like I’m taking in her experience. Take in oxygen just like I’m taking in what she’s feeling.” When we find ourselves immersed in distress, our instinct is to brace against it and hold our breath. But then we’re more likely to be looking for an escape. We act like we need to get out of this situation like we need our next breath, because, in a way, we do. We get defensive, impatient, and less able to really be with our spouse. So it may be as simple as this: sit, look her in the eyes as she talks, listen, and breathe. Remind yourself to keep breathing, and hopefully that will help you keep listening.

It’s also helpful to remember why she was so hurt by your behavior: it drew *you* away from her. It came between her and the one person who means the most in her life. When we as men can put aside our shame long enough, we realize that her pain is not about us failing to measure up in this important area of life. It’s not about us being unworthy or unlovable because of our misbehavior. She’s hurt and angry because she’s genuinely scared. She’s experiencing a clear and imminent danger of losing the connection she has with you, the connection that means more to her than anything else. No wonder she gets distraught and overwhelmed and agitated. Who wouldn’t? After all, you are *that* important to her.

## **Letting Her Have Her Feelings**

I recently overheard a conversation between one of my colleagues, Scott Peterson, and the wife of one of his clients who is being treated for a pornography habit. She seemed pleased with her husband's progress, so Scott asked her what was better now. What she *didn't* talk about was as significant to me as what she did. She didn't say, "It's such a relief that he's not looking at dirty pictures anymore" or "I'm so glad that he's not fantasizing about being with other women." A look of relief on her face, she said, "I'm free to talk with him about what I'm feeling now. It's so nice to be able to just be real with him. He used to get so out of sorts if things weren't just so, if I were upset or if I didn't feel the way about things that he thought I should. He couldn't handle my emotions. Now I can just say it like it is. I don't feel like I have to walk on eggshells in the way I word things."

To sit and listen as your wife talks about how she feels. To put aside how it affects you, what it means about you, or what you might need to do about it. What's her experience? To really try to take that in and empathize with her. That may not sound like much, but it's actually quite difficult. It's also one of the most powerful and profound things we can do for another human being. It's one of the most important gifts we can give to our spouse.

I recently talked with a couple who had, several years earlier, worked through issues related to the husband's pornography habit. Now that things were on a better track, they both said that their marriage was even better than it was before. "Better than before you found out about the problem?" I asked.

“No,” she answered, “they’re better now than they were before he even *had* a problem.” That may be a difficult to imagine. Until you realize what a unique thing it is for us as men to really listen to and be with our wives when they feel emotionally raw. If working through how hurt she feels about this problem can help us do better at that than we’ve ever done before, that’s really saying something. Then perhaps it’s not surprising that a wife would say that, all in all, she has no regrets. That she wouldn’t go back and change anything. That she wouldn’t trade what she has now, even though to get it she’s had to go through that hellish experience to attain it.

Married life is a minefield when the husband can’t tolerate his wife’s distress, when he takes her expressions of frustration as attacks and her complaints as criticisms. As he at first strains just to sit through discussions about his pornography problem and over time develops the ability to really listen to her feelings about it, he’s training at the highest of high altitudes. A year down the road when he comes home from work late, she will complain to him. Instead of taking it personally and getting mad or defensive or scarce, a man who has trained at high altitude will be able to really listen to how hard her day has been for her. He’ll be able to see that it’s not (just—or even primarily) about him. She just saved her distress up for him because he’s her husband. Now he can see more clearly what a good thing that is—that it’s him she wants to reach for when she’s feeling bad. He’ll be able to move toward her instead of fighting or fleeing. And she’ll have the kind of man she really wants in her life.

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As important as it is to repair the damage that has been caused to a marriage by pornography in the past, it's even more crucial for a husband to prevent relapse to his pornography habit so that healing wounds aren't reopened and relationship injuries aren't aggravated even further. The next two chapters will explore why we got stuck in a porn habit, why we stay stuck and, more importantly, how we can get out—for good.

Chapter five explores the raw and emotionally vulnerable feeling states that put us at risk of relapse. We have become conditioned, over time, to believe that what we need at such times is a sexual release, but it's not. We may *want* sex, but we *need* emotional closeness and support at such times. Chapter six is about reaching out to her at such times instead of going back to porn. When it comes to actually meeting our key emotional needs rather than just numbing them temporarily, when it comes to the emotional oxygen we all crave, pornography doesn't hold a candle what our real relationship offers.

### **The Feelings that Fuel Addiction**

Women may have a hard time getting why men are so vulnerable to the draw of pornography. That's part of why some wives just can't leave the problem alone, just can't get it out of their heads. It keeps troubling them: "I would never fantasize about having sex with someone else. I thought he had the same values and sensibilities as I do. I thought he felt the same about me as I did about him. I thought fidelity to our vows was just as important to him as it was to me. He's a decent guy in so many other ways. Has he been faking that all this time? Are his apparent spirituality and religious devotion nothing but a ruse? How could he be what he seems and yet do what he's done?"

### **Helping Her Understand What Porn Does to You**

It helps her to hear from you what was going on as you descended into a compulsive habit. Perhaps not so much about whether you prefer blondes or brunettes and what kind of tantalization (marketing by pornographers) you find irresistible. But it can help her to hear that you get tunnel vision just like an addict who is craving any other fix, which blocks out thoughts about faithfulness, family, and the values that usually guide your behavior. Perhaps most of all, it's helpful to hear why you were afraid to tell

her about it. It's usually not, as most women fear, simply that you were afraid you would lose your access to pornography and opportunity to view it once she knew about the habit. It's helpful for her to hear from you what your fears and worst-case-scenario fantasies were.

I've found that some information I can bring to these discussion can also be helpful, although this territory can get dicey for me as a male counselor. When I talk about the physiological basis of male vulnerability to pornography addiction, it may come off like I'm excusing bad behavior, which I don't mean to do. Despite that risk, I keep diving in because many wives find it helpful to understand some of the factors that may be influencing their husbands:

*Men have a more robust dopamine response.* Men were found to release higher levels of dopamine than women in response to the ingestion of amphetamine, which may help account for why we have a higher incidence of addictive disorders.

*Testosterone fuels sexual motivation.* Males produce 10-20 times more testosterone, on average, than women. Women receiving testosterone supplements find that their sex drive increases. In the words of one, "I found myself looking at men's body parts and thinking about sex at random times during the day. I always thought that I was living on a higher plane than my husband because that was the way he's always been about sex. Now I realize that it was more about hormonal differences than a gap in our spiritual evolution. Dang."

Even in the best of marriages, when testosterone levels between spouses differ, which is usually the case, it takes time to come to understand and honor each other's varying sexual desires and sensibilities. It's no secret, of course, that usually it's the man

who has higher testosterone levels and a greater desire for sex, although some husbands and wives have roughly equal sex drives and in a minority of cases it's the wife who wishes they were more sexually active. I remember a revealing discussion with my wife, Jenny, early in our marriage. She was reading in the Old Testament about a king who had concubines. "Gosh, she said, I can't imagine wanting to have sex with all these different people besides my spouse. Can you?" I sat there for a minute, and then said, "Actually, I think maybe I can. Give me just a minute and I'll tell you for sure." She reached over and slugged at me. She wasn't really trying to connect with her punches, but she was genuinely offended. As time has gone on and differences in our drive and sensibilities have continued to play out in other ways, I think I can speak for both of us when I say they've come to enrich instead of diminish our relationship.

*Sex is an extremely potent motivator for male primates.* Researchers found an ingenious way to measure the motivation of Rhesus monkeys. They offer them Berry Berry Juice in varying amounts, giving the monkey a choice between the juice and some other desirable object. The monkey may choose, for instance, to play with a ball when offered the choice between it and three ounces of juice. However, when offered enough juice, let's say five ounces, the monkey opts to go for the juice instead. In this way, the researchers created a hierarchy of priorities. These monkeys liked toys, but they loved the opportunity to gaze at a dominant member of their clan. However, nothing else held a candle to the biggest motivator of all. The monkeys rejected every offer of varying amounts of juice in exchange for the opportunity to keep gazing at the hindquarters of an estrus female monkey.

How different are we as humans from Rhesus monkeys? It's a question I ask audiences when I teach continuing education classes to other mental health professionals. Then I say, "Let's find out." On the screen is the Powerpoint slide I just used to illustrate the study just described. I'm not sure if she's estrus or not, but there's a full-screen picture I managed to find on the internet of the backside of a female monkey as she walks away from the camera on all fours. I walk back and stand beside a male in the audience, pull out a container of grape juice, and say, "This 14 oz. bottle of juice is all yours, but only if you're willing to stop looking at that picture." I've tried this in dozens of cities around the U.S. To the relief of every other male in the audience, not one of these men has proven unable to pull it off.

Of course, this is the joke: we're different as humans... and yet not all that different as humans, by nature. We have the capacity like no other animal to subdue and tame our nature. None of the men I work with want to convince their wives they can't help themselves because they're just like animals. That's exactly her worry, and it's exactly what they work over time to eventually disprove. Nonetheless, these animal studies can help to some degree as we attempt to understand our vulnerability.

*Men have a more powerful neurological response to porn.* Researchers compared brain images of male and female subjects as they viewed erotic film excerpts. For the most part, both genders showed activation of corresponding brain regions. However, the men not only reported significantly higher levels of physiological arousal, they also, unlike the women, showed significant activation of the hypothalamus. As Marnia Robinson explains it, it appears that pornography has the power to hijack a male brain's command center in a way it cannot in females.

In order to help women empathize a bit, I sometimes bring up another interesting piece of research. They've discovered something that differentially affects women's brains, although not quite as powerfully as the degree to which erotica does men's. There is a substance that triggers a more robust response in the female hypothalamus compared to the male. So, what lights up women's potent "command center," this area of the brain that determines what rivets our attention and motivation vs. what's ignorable? Any guesses about what that substance is? It's not cocaine. It's not heroin. It may be shopping, but that's not what the research measured. That's right, it's *chocolate*.

Of course, the physiological factors we've explored so far in this chapter represent one small slice of the whole story. Not only is being male an incomplete explanation of the problem many men have with porn, it does absolutely nothing to suggest solutions. We'll always be men, just as our wives will always be women. She might be more vulnerable to an eating disorder because she's female, but acknowledging that would do nothing to help her overcome one. To have any hope of healing, we need to turn the discussion from our physiology to our feelings.

### **Most Relapses are Brought On by Emotion**

Sometimes addictive urges leave us alone. We can go various periods of time without the slightest hint of a problem. All's quiet. Looks like the coast is clear. Maybe this monkey is off my back once and for all... Then suddenly, *Whammo!* Old cravings hit again, seemingly from out of the blue.

Every day can be like setting out across a minefield when we are just beginning our recovery—or are not yet in recovery—from addictive patterns. With each new day,

each new week, each new month, there is the hazard of potential relapse. However, like the soldier walking through the minefield, we see no apparent signs indicating where the mines are located. We can be going along, thinking everything's fine, and then suddenly we're back, caught up in a familiar primitive reaction.

Trent put it this way: "I'd driven by that billboard dozens of times and it didn't even tweak me. Then, for some reason, that night, seeing that image up there had an awfully potent effect on me. I felt like Odysseus, trying to sail on past as the sirens sung out to me. I knew I was in trouble. 'Tie me to the mast! *Tie me to the mast!*' Why is it that I can do so well managing my thoughts for a time, to the point that I wonder whether I even have a problem anymore, and then suddenly be so vulnerable to that pull?"

I've spent many years being curious, hour-after-hour, sitting side-by-side with clients, who were curious themselves, as we explored the nature of the dominoes in their lives that preceded their most potent cravings. We keep trying to trace the stream back. "There's the acting out behavior. It's the dreaded waterfall you're trying to avoid. But what was going on right before you felt the strong pull at the cusp of the falls—the rapids above the waterfall, so to speak? Then even earlier, the swift running stream above the rapids? What was going on around and inside you? Then the slower running stream before that? All the way back to the still waters, that point at which you last felt a sense of complete freedom?"

At first, doing this work, I thought we'd be discovering an extremely broad range of assorted precursors. I didn't even know if it would be possible to develop an exhaustive list of vulnerability-heighteners because of the uniqueness of individual

human beings and the vast potentiality of the human psyche. Nonetheless, I was hopeful that we might eventually amass a fairly comprehensive catalogue of triggers.

This process has become more exhilarating over the years, not because of the vast variety, but because of the profound similarity of the terrain above the falls in all of our lives. *For most of us, the urge to return to self-destructive behavior is usually most potent when we feel emotionally raw or unacceptable in some way.*

### **We Have a Hard Time Reading Inner Signals**

Some clients come into treatment having already made the connection between feeling bad and wanting to act out sexually. For many others, it's not apparent at first, or even for awhile after they start looking for it. That's why addictions aren't overcome overnight: this process takes time and practice.

Part of the problem is that we get confused. We get our signals crossed. Research has shown that those of us who struggle with addictive cravings and compulsive urges are more likely than the average person to suffer from what psychologist and researcher Peter Sifneos calls alexithymia. The latin prefix *a-* means an absence or lack, *lexi* denotes language, and *thymos* refers to passion or emotion—in short, we have a hard time knowing what we're feeling and putting it into words. We have difficulty recognizing emotions for what they are, and so we naturally have a hard time expressing and effectively managing the visceral arousal associated with them. This leaves that energy charged within us, just waiting to be converted to addictive urges and cravings.

It's more challenging to identify what's going on inside us if we received feedback when we were younger that our feelings weren't important. One client, Kent,

remembered fishing at Strawberry Reservoir as a child with his younger brother Kelly, his dad, and one of his dad's buddies, Rock. His dad had a short temper, so at first the kids didn't complain when they saw dad pull out a six-pack of beer, peel the tab off one, and throw a can over to Rock. As the day wore on and the temperature rose, the kids kept wondering what they were going to drink. Kelly kept pleading to Kent in whispered tones, until eventually Kent finally approached his dad. "Me and Kelly are thirsty." Kent remembered that his father didn't even lift his gaze from the lake. "Adult beverages, son. You already know you can't have any."

Kent also recalled a family trip to see the dinosaur bones in Eastern Utah. They were driving a particularly long leg of the trip. Once he felt like he wasn't going to be able to hold it any longer, he finally spoke up. "Dad, I have to go to the bathroom." Dad's terse reply: "No, you don't."

Even as an adult, Kent got feedback that he'd better not trust his own feelings. When his business finally did well enough that he could afford the luxury car he'd always wanted, he called his dad to share the great news with him: "Guess what I just bought and am driving down the road in right now?" Then he to hold the phone away from his ear, his dad's voice was so loud: "A BMW?! Why'd you get a BMW?! *Everyone* knows that Lexus makes a better car than BMW son!"

I recall discussing in a group therapy session another client's recollection of elementary school yearbook portrait day. Chris had been excited to wear his favorite shirt—a multi-colored striped knit turtleneck—for the pictures. "Oh, no, no, no," his mom said as he walked into the kitchen, ready to go. "We'll be sending a picture to grandma, so you need to wear the red shirt she bought you for Christmas." Chris hated

that shirt. It was a button-up Sunday shirt. And it was already too small for him. “So I put up a real stink,” Chris recalled. “I did *not* want to wear that shirt.”

“Hold it right there,” I said to Chris as he was about to finish the story. “Leave us in suspense and we’ll pick it up at this point next week. If you have time, look through your keepsakes and see if you can find your picture from that year.”

Next week, Chris walked into group carrying a manila envelope. He pulled out an 8 x 10 glossy showing four rows of nine-year-olds with gap-toothed smiles decked out in bell-bottoms and fat-collared shirts. We gathered around and scanned the faces, looking for Chris’s features in one of the kids. Immediately one of the group members yelled and pointed. Middle row, left side. First thing I saw was the long-sleeved velvet-chocolate-cake colored shirt, buttoned all the way up. Then there was young Chris’s face, gazing out at us from the photo, looking like he was being choked by a tight collar but attempting to smile nonetheless.

It’s not that parents traumatize kids when they force them to do something they don’t like. Nothing’s more common in childhood—even a healthy childhood—than being made to do things you’d rather not. The kind of squelching that leads individuals to suppress and eventually become ignorant of their inner signals is much more pervasive. It doesn’t result merely from being made to wear a shirt you hate. In fact, growing out of touch with one’s feelings may have as much to do with the individual’s reaction as the way they are treated. Maybe some kids fight through experiences that send the message to them that their feelings and wants are invalid and manage to maintain a solid attunement to their inner reactions despite the flak they get when they assert themselves. Maybe vulnerable individuals simply care more about the feelings and reactions of

others—which in moderation is a desirable trait for sure. Their conscientiousness leads them to put aside their own wants and needs and focus on pleasing others.

Individual differences might also play a role in other ways. It might be that some of us are less able to make sense of inner signals because of inborn differences in our capacity for processing our inner reactions and making sense of them. While we may be influenced by experiences growing up to disconnect from our own emotions, there is also evidence that such differences are at least partially innate. Men are more prone to alexithymia than women, and some gender-based brain differences that may help account for that.

Far from laying the blame at parents' feet for struggles their kids have as adults, I'm primarily hoping to highlight a common experience among those who struggle with addiction: for whatever reason they've come to have a hard time picking up and responding effectively to inner signals. They're cut off from their visceral selves. They learn to direct their attention elsewhere when they experience an unwieldy impulse or unwanted emotion. No wonder, then, that inner signals get crossed, and they crave alcohol when fatigued, pursue sex when bereaved, or overeat when they're really suffering from feelings of loneliness. For most people in recovery, much more important than understanding how and why they got where they are is learning how they can still grow out of their old patterns and free themselves from where they've been stuck.

### **Catch Raw Feelings Before They Turn Into Cravings**

Roger was running fifteen minutes behind schedule. He sped along through the morning traffic, hoping he'd hit all green lights, trying to make up at least some of that

time. He was still feeling keyed up a couple of minutes later, as he walked briskly through the side entrance of the nursing home where he worked. Vaughn, the center's physical therapist, was standing at the nurse's station as Roger passed. Vaughn looked up from the clipboard he was holding and gave Roger a wry smile. "Look who decided to finally show up for work," he said, and then with a flourish of movement exposed his wristwatch and checked it with raised eyebrows.

To anyone watching, it would have seemed that Roger laughed the comment off as he continued down the hall, but he could feel the heat of the flush lingering on his face. Walking into his office, he was struck by how messy he'd left it. Binders were stacked and papers strewn on the desk. He thought of Vaughn's workspace: pads folded, balls all on the rack, belts hung in a row from longest to shortest. An empty feeling started in Roger's gut and swirled up to his throat—a mix of envy, shame, and frustration. He sat down and picked up one of the binders. His feelings seemed to settle and fade as his mind turned to his work but a tightness in his chest lingered. Medical procedure codes and prices started to fill his mind, drawing his attention from the distress he'd just been feeling.

Then Roger caught himself. "Wait a minute. I can handle this differently. Nine months ago, this is the kind of experience to which I wouldn't have given a second thought." He sat back in his chair and took a deep breath. "I'm glad I know how important moments like this can be."

Roger had come to understand that he would set himself up for a greater risk of relapse to his addiction if he ignored strong feelings and tried to act like he wasn't fazed by events that impacted him emotionally. He had learned that simply acknowledging that

he was feelings something when he felt it was key. He'd been working on owning his emotional reaction, whatever it was. It was just a matter of being real with himself, settling in to whatever was going on inside, instead of mentally scrambling to get away from what he was feeling. He paused, stared at the wall, and tuned in. There was that yucky, pasty feeling in the pit of his gut. "I start to see myself as this bumbling loser," he thought. "My mind flips open the rolodex that catalogues all of my weaknesses. Yep, that's what got kicked up just now."

Roger had also learned just how helpful it was to reach out to his wife Peggy at such times. He opened up his cell phone and sent her a text. "Feel bad over running late. Seems all my flaws pop into view. Wish I felt more on the ball." It wasn't long before he heard back from her: "Sorry you started the day feeling bad. Glad you reached out. You know I love you." That felt nice to Roger. His next breath was more relaxed and full. He could feel the tension of the morning dissipating a bit.

### **Stirred Up Emotions Drive Addiction**

It may seem to us like it "works" when we try to distract ourselves from distressing emotions, the way Roger used to. However, even when they're ignored, emotions continue to have a rousing effect on the body and brain. Feelings crank up the nervous system. That energy builds inside of us and needs some kind of outlet.

What happens to this visceral arousal? Where does the energy from stirred-up, unacknowledged emotion go? There has been some interesting research demonstrating that, for some people, it fuels compulsive urges and cravings.

In one study, two groups of college students were invited to showings of several movies. A group of average female college students were shown what the researchers considered to be an emotionally neutral movie: a travelogue of India. When the movie ended, they were invited to enjoy the snacks at the back of the room before leaving. After the students all left, the researchers weighed the snack trays to figure out the average number of ounces consumed by each woman.

A second group, made up of women who struggled with compulsive eating, were shown the same movie and offered the same spread of treats. Once again, the trays were weighed and calculations made. The researchers discovered that the average number of ounces consumed were virtually the same for the women in each of the groups. That was a bit surprising: even when they were offered an abundance of snacks, the compulsive eaters showed the same restraint as the other women.

The researchers didn't stop there, however. They invited both groups in to watch another movie. This time it was "An Officer and a Gentleman." If you've seen it, you may remember how you felt when the Richard Gere character, finally a Naval officer, swept the Deborah Winger character into his arms and carried her out of the factory where she worked. One of Hollywood's most emotion-packed endings. Credits roll. Again, for the college women, there were treats. The average women ate about the same amount they had after watching the travelogue. But after the next showing, when the compulsive eaters left the room and the researchers went back to complete their measurements and calculations, they didn't need a scale. The trays had been cleared entirely. They, on average, ate much more than the other women had.

The implications of this research are clear: if we've struggled with compulsive or addictive behavior, we're more prone to relapse in an emotionally charged state.

### **Acknowledge the Source of Emotional Energy To Neutralize It**

Simply owning our emotional reactions—recognizing that we're feeling something when we're feeling it—goes a long way toward preventing relapse to addiction. Unacknowledged feelings remain generic energy that can more easily be given another label and converted into an impulse to relapse.

University of Illinois researchers Norbert Schwarz and Gerald Clore phoned Chicago residents and asked them to rate their sense of well-being and satisfaction in a variety of areas of life. Perhaps it's not surprising that those who were interviewed on sunny days rated themselves as being more satisfied and better off than those who were interviewed on rainy days. (Schwarz, N. & Clore, G. 1983. Mood, misattribution, and judgments of well-being: Informative and directive functions of affective states. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 45: 513-523.) It's easy to understand why the weather might affect our mood, which in turn might affect the way we feel about other things. Nonetheless, in everyday life, most of us are not aware of the effect that mood-altering factors have on our decision-making. Stirred up emotional energy can color our perception of everything regardless of how it got stirred up. As we move through our day, it's easy to forget the energy's origin, especially if we tried to suppress our reaction and move quickly past the negative feelings. Plus, we get caught up in the other things in our lives that we're seeing through now-tinted lenses. We assume that it's the mayor's job performance that makes us so annoyed with him we want to throw the bum out of office.

We suppose that it's our coworker's failure to do her fair share of work on the project that has us feeling disgruntled. And, most dangerous of all, we conclude that we're out of sorts because it's been so long since we've had a fix and we're really Jonesin' for what our addiction has to offer.

While it's easy to miss the factors that influence our emotion and color our perception, it's possible to identify them. Once we do, there's genuine power in awareness. Simply seeing the factors that trigger emotional reactivity can diminish their influence. In the weather study described above, a second round of subjects were asked an additional question at the beginning of the interview, before they started rating aspects of their lives: "How's the weather in Chicago today?" (The interviewer was calling from another city.) After answering that single question, those subjects who were phoned on rainy days rated themselves as being just as happy and satisfied with their lives as those who were phoned on sunny days. Their mood may not have improved, but once it was attributed to the weather it had no effect on their judgments about other things. Once influences on our emotional state are nailed down, made conscious, and put into words, they are no longer convertible and transferable.

This principle was applied to help addicts free themselves long before Schwarz and Clore did their research. Starting in 1943 a group of recovering alcoholics sat together in a small room in St. Catherine's hospital talking about what they were learning about factors that increased their risk of drinking. We can imagine their conversation: "When my wife and I get into a fight, I'm more vulnerable." "Going on a business trip by myself is like walking through a minefield." "If I try to go without lunch, instead of

feeling like I'm starving later in the day I crave alcohol." "I struggle more when I'm beat and need some rest."

As they looked for and talked about the slippery slopes throughout the minefield of their everyday lives, they discovered that it wasn't just the craving of alcohol or the urge to drink that they had to watch out for. These early members of what we now know as Alcoholics Anonymous were finding that if they didn't take care of themselves nutritionally—by depriving themselves or going too long between meals—they were more at risk of consuming alcohol. If they harbored resentments, lost their temper, or worked themselves into a fit of anger about something, they were more at risk of drinking. Not only that, but if they felt isolated, like they had no support, spent too much time alone instead of around other people, they were more likely to get intoxicated. And finally, when they were worn out from working too hard or not getting enough rest or sleep, when fatigue got the best of them, they were more likely to—what, take a nap?—no, *drink!*

In other words, these increasingly wise members of this budding fellowship were developing an increasingly detailed map not only of the catastrophic hazards, drinking, but of the inner precursors that surrounded and led up to it. They simplified their observations to a point where they could be easily recalled later. They used the mnemonic H.A.L.T. to remind themselves and each other not to get too hungry, angry, lonely or tired—or if they did (after all, these are naturally and regularly occurring states in our lives) at least it they might remember that they were in a slippery zone. The H.A.L.T mnemonic was a handle to hold onto, helping them assess and differentiate the cloudy, swirling motivational undercurrents that tugged and pulled and pushed at them in

the heat of impulsive moments when things can otherwise seem completely overwhelming, chaotic, and confusing.

We can imagine the first few times when fellowship members said, “Instead of going to the bar, why don’t I lay down for a nap instead?” or “Maybe I just need to get a bite to eat.” Confusing different drives and needs may sound silly when we’re in a calm, rational state, but in the heat of the moment it’s a trap we fall into quickly and automatically unless we remind ourselves to tune in to other inner signals besides the impulse to pursue addictive behavior. As we cue ourselves to turn our attention inward when we experience a craving, we set ourselves up for those “a-ha” moments when what was right there all along finally becomes apparent.

When we are progressing in our recovery, everyday life is no longer like trekking across an unmarked minefield. Instead, because of the work we’ve done to identify our emotions and other inner signals, we have an increasingly detailed map of the terrain we’re traversing. We come to see the areas of the terrain that slope down toward the mines on the minefield. Instead of just avoiding the mines themselves, we avoid the slopes around them, lest we get there and discover that they’re particularly slippery today. Or, if we do decide to take a path that puts us anywhere in the vicinity of what might be an active mine, we make the necessary preparations and take the precautions that are prudent. Our feelings, rather than increasing the likelihood of relapse, can provide guidance and motivation for our journey.

Once we see them for what they are, our feelings (and other inner signals like hunger and fatigue) can remain what they are: signals that we need something. Then, what is genuinely needed can be sought, so that the need doesn’t remain unaddressed and

unfulfilled, leaving the energy within us revved-up and ready to stoke our appetite for sex or some other potentially addictive behavior.

### **Feelings You've Been Ignoring Can Guide Your Recovery**

Vernon had resolved to avoid pornography and masturbation many times in the past, so he was hesitant to begin his efforts anew. However, he could see that his habit was only getting worse as time went on, so he sought help from one of my colleagues. I met Vernon in our Wednesday evening relapse-prevention group. Over a year later, as he ended treatment, Vernon was managing temptation much more effectively. Let's explore the keys to his progress.

Vernon was extremely impulsive and hyperactive as a kid--he would have been diagnosed with Attention-Deficit Disorder if he were a child today. As a young child, he lived by the Nike motto: "just do it." He never paused to consider other options or potential consequences, he just jumped into everything he did with both feet. Needless to say, his parents became frustrated; they spent a lot of time scolding, reprimanding, and lecturing Vernon. "Looking back, I think that I spent most of my early years in trouble of some kind," he recalls. In school, Vernon was singled out by most of his elementary school teachers as the "trouble child." Even more traumatic, however, were Vernon's interactions with his peers. He was ridiculed for not fitting in, for just being himself.

He recalls his fifth grade year as a turning point. He had developed the habit of rocking back and forth when he had to sit still. Habits like leg-bouncing or other repetitive movements are common among kids who have Attention-Deficit Disorder and chronically understimulated nervous systems. They're sort of like a driver whose car

engine has been set at too low an idle speed, who must keep his foot lightly on the gas pedal at intersections so that the engine doesn't kill. Well, during that year, as the kids around him became more socially aware, they honed in on what was different about Vernon with an even greater zeal. Other kids began mimicking him and one group of his classmates started calling him "the woodpecker." His teacher would occasionally walk back and put her hand on his shoulder to remind him to sit still. Then one day, as she was walking around to help class members with their math, she stopped dead in her tracks. She turned around, glared at him and yelled, "Vernon, will you *please* stop that rocking?! I've had it up to here with that squeak, squeak, squeak all the time!"

To this day, Vernon can recall that entire experience vividly: the look on his teacher's face, all of the other kids staring at him, and the excruciating sense of shame that overwhelmed him. "I vowed that day that I would do whatever I could to never be singled out again. I started to direct all of my energy toward looking normal so that I would blend in with the crowd." For Vernon, this primarily meant restraining his impulses, holding his energy inside instead of acting on it. He restrained the urge for perpetual motion and forced himself to sit still instead.

In some ways, Vernon's strategy worked. He became more aware of how his peers acted and learned to play the part of a more subdued kid. Although he rarely stood out in a negative way, however, Vernon paid a high price for his conformity. He remained self-conscious and careful throughout most hours of the day, which tired him out. "I remember being so relieved to finally get home from school at the end of the day. I would just sit there on the couch in a trance, staring out the window. Several times my mom expressed a concern that something was wrong, "You keep sighing such heavy

sighs.” I realize now that I was just trying to come down from the tension of my school day.

Having adopted such a tightly controlled lifestyle, Vernon suffered from a shortage of opportunities to release his energy and relieve his tension. He expended a lot of effort in public, yet even when he was away from others and therefore didn't have to worry about fitting in, he had a hard time letting down his guard and settling into a peaceful and relaxed mode of existence. For Vernon, life in school must have been more draining than it was for a typical classmate, who may have felt self-conscious in the hallway or during gym class perhaps, but able to let down his or her guard at times throughout the day such as during class or at lunch when he or she was with a small group of friends.

Without these normal--and very essential--periods of release and relief, Vernon's life provided fertile soil for the development of an unhealthy release. Given these struggles, one can understand why Vernon was like a weary desert traveler who happened upon an oasis a year or so later when he experimented with masturbation. He discovered that, for a time at least, sexual stimulation could keep all of his stress and self-consciousness at bay. And then, almost as a bonus: sexual climax always left in its wake a lingering sense of peace and well-being.

Sexual fantasies and self-stimulation afforded such a pleasant escape from Vernon's usual anxiety that what started out as an occasional outlet quickly burgeoned into a compulsive behavior. He descended very quickly down the spiral of dependency: He failed to develop other methods of releasing and thus became more and more reliant on sexuality. When he came in for counseling, this pattern had been deepening for two

decades. I worked with Vernon when he was 28-years-old. He had tried many times over the intervening years to set aside sexual behavior as a way of relieving stress and dealing with other problems in life. Nonetheless, he remained dependent on sex and felt compelled to seek sexual releases many times a week, sometimes several times a day. Rather than a solution to stress, it was clear that his obsession with sex was a significant problem. It interfered with the rest of his life, intruding into his thoughts when he was trying to concentrate at work and gobbling up precious free time.

After hearing Vernon describe the role sexual release had played in his life from an early age, it didn't surprise me that he had spent years struggling unsuccessfully to resist his impulses. I presented to him and the rest of his therapy group the following scenario:

Imagine that you are the board of directors for the New York Transit Authority and you are receiving all kinds of complaints about the conditions of the Queensburrough Tunnel. It's always too crowded, and as a result of all the traffic, it is beginning to fall apart. For weeks, scraps of mortar have been falling out of the ceiling and onto the cars below. Yesterday, a commuter had a brick fall through her windshield and onto the passenger seat of her car. When a couple of your workers went out to investigate, they discovered that one of the steel support girders in the center of the tunnel is now exposed and appears to be coming loose. You conference with your top engineers and they inform you that the tunnel was never designed to bear this much traffic. Fortunately, if the daily load is drastically reduced, with just a few minor repairs the bridge will last indefinitely.

"How do you suggest we address this problem?" I asked the group. They came up with all kinds of ideas: "Allow traffic to flow toward the city only in the morning and

away from the city only in the afternoon and evening.” “Shut it down on the odd days of the month and open it up on the even days.” “Restrict the flow of cars by using a stoplight as a traffic meter.” “Narrow down the number of lanes.”

These were all good suggestions, but Vernon recognized a potential problem: “If you only work to restrict the use of the tunnel and do nothing else to solve the problem, watch out: you may just end up with a riot on your hands. In addition to reducing the traffic on this one route, we’d better address the bigger picture. Wouldn’t we also want to check out all of the other routes onto Manhattan and make sure they are able to handle some of the traffic? For instance, what if we discover that the Brooklyn Bridge has been closed for repairs and the Triburrough Bridge is jam-packed every morning, so much so that many commuters avoid using it? Wouldn’t that help explain why the tunnel has been overused? In addition to restricting the use of this underground route, we’d better make sure all of the routes *over* the river are open and in good repair. We don’t want to just stop traffic from going underground, we want to address the problems so that there won’t be such a *need* for it to go underground.”

The same thing holds true as we attempt to overcome a destructive habit. As we block our unhealthy releases, we discover that your needs and uncomfortable emotions become more apparent and troubling. We aren’t able to stay on the right track forever by simply “white-knuckling it” through the kinds of difficulties we once masked by addictive behavior. Instead, where we once avoided life we must now work to develop the skills that enable us to cope with life. The more healthy routes we have for handling life’s daily challenges, the less compelling our underground routes will become.

In treatment, Vernon began to see that his sexual behavior, which he had always

seen as a bad problem, was also a bad solution. He had become so reliant on sex precisely because other opportunities for release were so rarely exploited. When sex is used so frequently to release in this way, the need to develop other releases is easier to ignore. In other words, sex does the job just barely well enough to keep us from developing outlets that would do the job even better.

Throughout his time in treatment, Vernon worked to develop above-ground routes to meet his need for release from the internal pressure he was feeling. He came to value the *feeling* of freedom that his compulsive behavior provided, even as he continued to try to overcome the behavior itself. That freedom, he realized, was the silver lining to his dark side. He recognized the need to incorporate opportunities for healthy releases into every aspect of his life so that sexual temptation wouldn't have such a powerful pull on him. For instance, instead of waiting to release until the end of the day after he came home from work, Vernon started to exercise more freedom at work in several different ways:

By tracking his physical tension, Vernon had become aware that he held his body stiff and restricted his breathing when he was trying to make a good impression (which was quite a bit of the time). In an attempt to loosen up, Vernon practiced taking deep breaths several times throughout the day. When he noticed tension creeping in, he tried to interrupt the pattern by stretching and wiggling around a bit in his seat.

When Vernon caught himself feeling like he had to be careful, he would write down the "rules" that he felt an internal pressure to live by. He discovered that most of these were self-imposed rules which had very little to do with the actual expectations of his employer or coworkers. Of course, after the trauma he had experienced as a child,

Vernon was naturally making every effort to err on the safe side. However, the pendulum had swung too far and he was spending way too much effort second-guessing the feelings and preferences of others. For instance, Vernon felt that since he had the least education of all the members of his team, he probably should get to work earlier and leave later than everyone else did. As he opened his mind and experimented with freedom, he realized that his boss really meant it when she said she was much more interested in his productivity than in the hours he put in. Vernon allowed himself to release from concerns about the clock and keeping mental tabs on the hours of overtime he was putting in.

As he gave himself a little breathing room in this way, Vernon discovered that all of the excess energy, which had created such problems for him as a kid, fueled his efficiency and allowed him to get more done than ever. He began to recognize that what he lacked in formal training, he made up for in drive and enthusiasm. He could see that what once seemed like only a weakness was also one of his greatest strengths. As Vernon turned his attention away from concerns about what other people were thinking and from how much time he was putting in, he also found that he could lose himself in his work and enjoy the process to a greater degree.

Vernon started to notice that his tension, agitation, and fatigue seemed to cycle throughout the day. Instead of trying to “push through” periods of lagging productivity, Vernon began to take brief breaks for short walks. “At first I felt guilty, like I was being lazy,” he said. “Then I noticed that the smokers never apologized when they went to get their nicotine fix. Always having my nose to the grindstone was one more way I used to be a slave to the need to not stand out or be noticed.”

Making these kinds of changes in our lives is a fascinating and challenging

process. While we certainly experience an increasing sense of freedom as we break out of familiar patterns, it can also feel intimidating and at times even spooky. “The first I acted as though it was okay not to put so much pressure on myself, it was an act of faith,” Vernon said. “Mentally I was convinced that things would turn out fine, but emotionally I felt the sense of having just violated some unwritten rule that was keeping the planet in its orbit. I don’t mean to sound overly dramatic, but I remember the distinct feeling that I should look down and see if my body was still intact. When I looked down and discovered that there was no bullet hole even though I was breaking some of my life-long, self-imposed rules, I felt almost giddy with a sense of freedom and expansiveness.”

Later as Vernon looked back on the process of treatment, he realized why he had never been able to completely conquer his compulsive behavior on his own. He had been trying to kick his bad habit because of the problems it caused without looking at the ways it was also serving as a solution to important and ongoing problems in his life. He described treatment this way: “I came in to overcome one of my greatest weaknesses. In the process I discovered that I also had to reign in qualities I had always seen as my greatest strengths—my ability to push myself and take on more pressure to perform up to standard.”

When I last talked to Vernon, he was continuing to experiment with approaching his schedule in a more flexible way. He still arrived at work at 7:00 a.m. most days, but he didn’t push himself so hard during his morning routine and he didn’t stress out so much when he got held up in traffic on his commute. On slow days when he had extra time, he sometimes left work to take care of personal errands. “Last Thursday I decided to leave at 3:00 in the afternoon so that I could go to a program at my daughter’s school,”

he recalled during his last group therapy session. "I had always missed those kinds of things because I was so compulsive about work, and I knew that it would be a good thing to take time out to go see her perform." However, just as he was getting ready to leave, Vernon's supervisor and her boss came onto his floor of the building. "That really tested my resolve. But then I realized that it wasn't my boss that I was standing up to at all by trying to make these changes in my life, it was the harsh critic, the slave-driver, within me. I wanted to explain myself as I left, or maybe try to sneak past them unnoticed. But over and over again my boss has emphasized productivity over rigid rules like dress codes or clock-punching, so I decided to test my fears. I walked right past them and smiled. 'See you tomorrow!' Guess how my boss responded: "Have a good afternoon." *Have a good afternoon!* I couldn't believe it. All this time thinking I was a slave to other people's expectations, and now to see that almost all of them have been my own."

It was easy for Vernon to acknowledge the need to change his sexual behavior; the need to reduce the rigidity and tension he took on around other people was more difficult for him to see. Even recognizing this kind of problematic pattern can be extremely difficult because we become so accustomed to our own lifestyle habits. Just like a fish may be the last to notice water because it is always immersed in it, we may have a hard time identifying and seeing the need to combat the inertia that keeps us in unhealthy and unnecessary styles of responding to life. Progress is possible, however, if we're willing to humble ourselves, engage in self-examination, and open ourselves up to help and guidance from others as Vernon did.



## **Turning to Her Instead**

There's more to recovery from an addiction than identifying our emotions. Once we get better at acknowledging when we're feeling bad, what do we do with those feelings? Feelings arise as a way of telling us that there's something we need. To successfully move beyond an ingrained porn habit, we must develop other, better ways of trying to meet our needs. It's not just about seeing the light on the dashboard, it's about opening up the hood and addressing the problem it alerts us to.

### **What We Really Need When We Go To Porn**

Of course, we don't need another dose of our addiction when we feel bad. That's not what we need at all. What we *do* need is pretty straightforward, even if we've come a long way from trying in a direct way to get it. At one time in our lives we knew what we needed when we felt emotionally raw or needy, insecure, or unsure of ourselves. Even very young children are aware of what they need at such times. We naturally yearn for someone important to us to listen, to really see that we're struggling, and to empathize. We know we need their support. We yearned to know that they feel bad that we feel bad. That's what really hits the spot, in a deep-down, soul-satisfying way.

Not only did we know at a very young age that we need this, we knew instinctively how to get it. We hadn't yet learned to pretend, hide, camouflage, or beat around the bush that we do as adults. We went directly for it. We tried to get it by expressing our distress to the one person upon whom we are most dependent—in the lingo of human development experts, our primary caregiver.

The satisfaction that comes from seeing understanding and empathy in the eyes of our number one attachment figure, that's not just for kids. John Bowlby, the father of the field of human attachment research, claimed that this need for emotional connection and relationship support extends from the cradle to the grave. Ever since he made that claim, the research data supporting it have continued to stack up. Every one of us, at every age, has an ongoing need to reach out, confident that we'll find someone who is there for us when we're struggling emotionally. And, whether we like to admit it or not, emotional ups and downs are a regular part of our everyday lives. We are in need a lot of the time. Each time that person is there for us, they become ever more important to us. The experience has strengthened the attachment between us. The lid was off the superglue, and we're more bonded than ever.

Unfortunately, however, over the years we may have learned to stop doing what once came naturally. For various reasons, we may have concluded that that's not such a great idea. It hasn't gone well for us. Perhaps we have suffered disappointment or deprivation at key times when we reached out. Or maybe we feel ashamed of the needs that would otherwise prompt the urge to reach out. We're loath to look weak, thin-skinned, wimpy, unmanly. Instead of reaching out for support when we're emotionally distressed, we keep our feelings inside. We try to stuff our feelings back down when they

threaten to bubble up to the surface. We pretend that what hurts or unsettles us emotionally really doesn't. We may become so good at pretending that we ourselves become convinced that upsetting stuff doesn't upset us.

However, emotions that have been buried alive don't just die off. All of their potency and energy remains primed and ready to drive us. If not in the direction of expressing ourselves in a way that enables that emotion to discharge as it's shared, then in the direction of our most self-defeating habit. The feelings that prime us to seek emotional connection and relationship support can also prime us to relapse to our addiction. Because of all this, reaching out for emotional connection and relationship support is one of the most effective tools for relapse-prevention.

### **Turning to Her for Help in Your Struggle against Porn**

I remember trying to convince my client, Ivan, when we began working together, that he should disclose to his wife that he had recently been struggling with pornography again. "I don't think I can bring myself tell her," he insisted. "Four different times now she's become aware of my struggle, and each time it's been so hard on our marriage. Last time she admitted that she would have left me by now if it weren't for how hard it would be on the children. I'm afraid that if she becomes aware that I'm struggling again, it will end up being the final straw."

Ivan was hoping that through his work with me he would overcome this problem once and for all. "Then I'll clean everything up with her and at church," he said. "The problem is that I have confessed so many times to different ecclesiastical leaders and to

my wife, but those confessions have never changed things. I don't want to go through all that again right now until I know that this time will be different."

"Well," I responded, "besides coming in to see me, at this point 'this time' doesn't look very different at all from past times. You say that you have confessed so many times, but haven't you always kept this problem a secret and only told your wife about the nature and extent of the problem once she discovered evidence of it or caught you in the act?" Ivan acknowledged that this was the way things had always gone.

At my suggestion, Ivan decided to talk to his wife, Tina, and set up a plan with her to approach the problem in a completely different way, with a completely new set of ground rules. He made a commitment to be honest with her, and to tell her immediately, within an hour at the most, of any pornography viewing. He took her for a drive on a Sunday evening while the kids were with grandma and grandpa.

"Honey, you know that this has been an on-and-off struggle for a long time. I've become convinced that I can no longer continue vacillating between being completely free from it at times and being totally consumed by it at other times if I hope to preserve our marriage. Of course, the completely free times can remain as they are. However, I know I have to change the way I handle the times when, in the past, I have allowed myself to become completely consumed by it. To avoid those times when I struggle so deeply and over an extended period of time, I need to let you in on what's happening earlier on, at those times when I'm just starting to be caught up in it again. Then you can see the process in its earliest stages and help me during those times. Those are the times I usually keep it a secret because I'm so ashamed. Of course, it's easier to keep it a secret then because the evidence is just starting to accrue. In the past, I've wanted to keep

you from being hurt and angry, so I struggle on my own. Of course, I also manage to rationalize that I'm not yet in very deep. I tell myself, 'that it was just once. I'll steer clear of it again from now on and that one time doesn't have to be a big deal.' Of course, that just sets the stage for me to later think, 'I've already given in once. What's one more time?' I never plan on getting back in over my head, but that's inevitably what happens. Then I think, 'I can't tell her now; she'll be mad that I've kept this much a secret!'

“With all of the struggles I've had—having engaged in hundreds of pornography-viewing sessions—my best guess now is that I'll probably succumb to temptation again, maybe even several times, before I'll be able to give it up for good. Therefore, I want to ask for your help in containing my future lapses before they get out of hand. I wish I could commit to 'never touching the stuff again' with some confidence that I'll follow through. However, you've seen how well it goes when I do that. But I know I can make and stick with the following commitment: If I do give in to temptation. I will never let more than an hour elapse before I contact you and let you know what I've done. It will be hard for me to do it, but if I know that we're going to work together to conquer this problem, that will give me the strength to do it.”

Tina was indeed angry and hurt when he disclosed that he had gone back to this old habit that had so damaged their relationship. However, it didn't end up being the “final straw” for her. She was willing, albeit skeptical at first, to go along with the approach he was suggesting.

Ivan was alone in a hotel room the first time he viewed pornography after making that commitment. He was embarrassed to call and wake up Tina at 1:15 in the morning. He almost talked himself into putting it off until the next morning. “Couldn't I do it

during the first *waking* hour after a slip?” he asked himself. He was also afraid to tell her over the phone. He almost rationalized to himself that he could tell her “within an hour of seeing her in person.” However, he decided to stay true to the commitment he had made. Tina recalled, “I was groggy when I answered the phone, but I immediately came fully to my senses when I heard Ivan’s voice on the phone and realized what he was calling about. I was so angry, maybe it was a good thing he wasn’t there. Here I was taking care of the kids, working harder than ever because he was away on a business trip, and he was entertaining himself in a way that took him even further from me and the family. I was so upset. I let him have it.”

“That was hard for me,” Ivan recalled, “but you’d have to understand the hell I’ve put myself through in the past to understand it when I say that it was actually a relief to have it out in the open. If I hadn’t called and told her, I’d have been slinking around the next morning trying to focus on my work commitments with a lump in my throat and a dark cloud over me. Then, I’d be tempted to get another fix of pornography to numb the guilt and shame I was feeling over what I’d done. This time, I felt stronger for having faced up to my wife about what I had done. I didn’t argue with anything she said. I accepted it as the consequences of my actions.

“That, perhaps, is the biggest difference this policy of immediate honesty has made for me,” Ivan concluded. “Before, I could get caught up in enjoy the engine of the train—viewing the pornography—and then delude myself into thinking that it might not have a caboose—the effect the pornography viewing had on my wife. I tried to take the pleasure without facing the pain. Of course, as soon as the engine passes, you know for sure that the caboose is on its way. So I’d try my best to outrun it. If I can just work hard

enough to do better, be careful enough not to let my secret out, no one ever has to know. What I was really hoping was that I would never have to suffer for my choices. Of course, it never worked out that way. Well, having suffered in that way over so many years, it was refreshing to stand up and face the caboose. I felt like I was regaining my integrity—not completely yet, because I was still violating my values by viewing pornography, but it felt like I was getting back on track.”

Initially, Tina was afraid that she might not be able to bear hearing about all of Ivan’s struggles along the way. “The entire problem is so repulsive and horrible to me. I assumed that a yucky feeling would linger with me all the time once I knew he had succumbed. Fortunately, it was easier than I thought it would be to say, ‘I’m sorry you made that choice, Ivan,’ and then in my mind add, ‘I’m glad it’s your problem, not mine.’” Ivan viewed pornography a total of seven times over the subsequent year and a half. Now, three years since his last struggle, Tina recalls some of the benefits of Ivan’s commitment to immediate honesty:

“I had told Ivan many times, so I’m not sure why it took him so long to finally get it, that his lying was always a bigger threat to our marriage than the pornography. The viewing of pornography took up less than 1% of his time. He might make the decision to do that on an impulse. On the other hand, following that act, he had to deceive me 100% of the time to keep it a secret. He was being dishonest every hour of the day, every day of the week, sometimes for months on end. After the first two or three slips he had, I really came to trust that he would tell me within minutes of having a problem. Then, I stopped worrying. I didn’t have to wonder—when we were on a date, when we were in bed together as a couple, when we were sitting in church, when he was playing with the

kids—how well he was dealing with this problem. I could finally *know* how he was doing, for a change. I didn't have to try to read his mind or be a detective. I stopped wondering and feeling like I had to ask him about it all the time."

### **Turning to Her Further Upstream**

In the Sexaholics Anonymous 12-step group meetings he had started attending, Ben heard other attendees talk about the importance of "rigorous honesty." He remembered how distraught Kristy had been when she talked about feeling he had violated her trust. He knew that his secrecy had been a big part of not only her trust, but his problem. Ben resolved to be completely honest with Kristy about his struggles and feelings from then on.

Now that the problem was out in the open and he and Kristy were working together on it, Ben experienced fewer cravings than he had before. As time wore on, however, the old urges to view pornography started to hit him again. On tough days, he'd let Kristy know about it. Although she appreciated his openness, she was concerned that he was struggling.

During one counseling session, it was apparent there was unresolved tension between them. "I told her I was struggling," Ben said. "She asked for more information. I wasn't sure whether or not I should tell her. I knew it might hurt her if I told the truth." In an effort to be rigorously honest, he told her that, while driving around in his van for work that afternoon, he had stopped at a traffic light. A black convertible pulled up next to him with an attractive woman at the wheel. "I hate to admit it, but I started to fantasize about her. I told Kristy about it. She was upset. Then she wanted to know more about the

fantasy, but it was just a brief lapse, a wandering of my mind. It wasn't that detailed. But Kristy assumed I wouldn't tell her more because I knew it would upset her even more. She thought I was holding back. I tried to think back and see if any other thoughts had come into my mind. But then my mind was on that topic again, thinking sexual thoughts about a strange woman. I told Kristy that I didn't think it was good for us to dwell on it."

"*He told me* it wasn't a good idea for him to dwell it," Kristy said. "Of course it isn't. That's exactly why I'm so frustrated with him. Why does he keep doing it?"

Many things can trigger unwanted sexual thoughts in someone who has a history of sexually acting out. Stress, feeling isolated, visual cues and even boredom are common triggers. Sexual thoughts are like a lightning rod. They can draw all of our energy and attention. They are a powerful symptom of an inner struggle. However, when we dwell on the symptom we can miss the cause and more importantly, the cure. Being honest about having sexual thoughts is one part of honesty, but it's not the biggest part, nor the most important. We encourage clients like Ben to pay attention inwardly, to be on the lookout for other feelings and needs that might be in play when sexual urges hit. If he feels lonely because he's out driving on his own all day, it might be a relief to think about sex instead. However, those sexual thoughts are obscuring something much more important. He needs to be honest with himself, rigorously honest, by acknowledging the loneliness. The sexual thoughts are closer to the surface. It's easier—and may seem manlier—to feel sexually interested or aroused. It's more difficult to admit more vulnerable feelings and softer inner experiences. He needs to start by being honest with himself about what he's feeling before he can be deeply honest with his wife.

The next time Ben told Kristy he had been tempted that day, she saw the usual bait, but she didn't take it. Instead of asking about the content of his tempting thoughts, she was more interested in what, in particular, had happened that day to make him vulnerable. "What had your day been like up to that point?" She asked.

"Kind of a drag, I guess," Ben responded.

"What was going on inside for you?" Kristy asked. Ben pondered her question and thought back. He couldn't put his finger on anything. Still, that brief discussion helped him to feel hopeful and cared about and to be on the lookout the next time temptation hit. He was in a more curious frame of mind a few days later when illicit thoughts kept popping into his mind. "Sex is the most attention-grabbing feeling, but what else is going on for me?" he wondered. "I'm driving around replacing copier toner cartridges, and it's boring. I know that's part of it. It's hard to see people driving around in nice cars. I go into offices with all of these sharp professionals. Am I envious? Seems like they have important things to do and places to be. Do I feel less important than them? Sometimes I wish I'd stayed in school and earned my degree. I don't feel like I'm living up to my potential." Ben's forehead was getting warm and there was a lump in his throat. "I worry that other people look down on me. I guess that's why it's nice when women find me attractive. It makes me feel like I still have it. Like I'm worth paying attention to. That I'm admired and important, like I have something to offer."

Ben knew immediately that it would be much tougher to be honest with Kristy about these feelings. After the kids were down that night, he talked to her about what he had felt that afternoon. As he did, the feelings came back. Sitting on the side of the bed, he looked down at the floor as he shared his self-doubts. "Part of it is that you were with

your old boyfriend for three and a half years before we got together. His business is thriving now.” Ben’s throat almost wouldn’t let the next words out: “Do you ever regret marrying me, with all the financial struggles we’ve had?”

Kristy looked Ben in the eye. “The financial struggles have been the easiest part,” she said. They both laughed. It felt good to both of them to laugh together, with how painful things had been. “None of our struggles have ever made me sorry I chose you. I watch you in the backyard kicking the ball with Trevor. I see you wrestling with Isaacc. Little Crystal just can’t help herself from jumping into the melee. I’d never trade you in and take a chance on my kids having a different father.” Kristy thought for a few moments. “Even the hard stuff, we’ve done it all *together*. We’re spending our Saturday afternoons fixing the flood damage in the basement because we can’t afford to hire it out. Listening to the oldies station and CDs no one else would like but us. The funny thing is, that time together is precious to me. It’s just the two of us working. I wouldn’t have it any other way. I cherish all my memories of times like that with you.” Ben felt as if she was looking straight into his soul now. “I love *you*, Ben. I love that you’re willing to work so hard doing stuff you don’t really like to support our family. I don’t want any other man. I want you. Which is why it hurts when I’m afraid that you don’t desire me. When I worry about your attractions to other women or sense you’re hiding something I feel so unsure, and I want so badly to know I can trust you and feel secure in your love.”

“Look what I’ve done to you,” Ben said. Looking into his eyes, Kristy knew that he had really heard her, was genuinely seeing how much she had been hurting. “I don’t want to minimize my sexual problems,” Ben said, “because I know they’ve fueled your insecurity. But I do want you to know that my struggles are my struggles, they have

nothing to do with your attractiveness or desirability. Everything I've done so far in my recovery, and everything I'll do in the future, I'm doing because I want to be—I want to become—the kind of man you can count on. That you can put all your trust in. That is who I want to be. I know these are just words, but I'm going to keep doing whatever I need to do for the rest of my life to show you that I mean what I'm saying.”

These types of heart to heart discussions continued to happen with Ben and Kristy. They not only helped their relationship recover but they helped Ben overcome his old pattern. It takes a while for most couples to learn to communicate about their deeper feelings and ask their needs to be met the way Kristy and Ben did. Each partner's history and insecurities create an entire minefield of other less helpful reactions that can be set off along the way. As couples keep trying however, the understanding they develop can change everything. Each is more likely to see the other's deepest, once-obscured needs and become more able to help meet them. As understanding and communication deepen, distress lessens and tensions diffuse. A wife finds it easier to relate to and identify with a husband when he talks about the quieter, more genuine aspects of what's going on inside him. This is the same man whose sexual struggles may have only weeks ago so put her off that she wondered, “What kind of man did I marry?”

This is the powerful nature of the crisis in marriage that pornography can ignite. It can tear couples apart. Or, if both partners are willing, the struggle can be used as an opportunity to draw together, becoming stronger and more united.

### **The Courage to Be Real**

It can be extremely difficult to stay with what we're feeling, and even more challenging to convey it to another person, when we feel emotionally raw. It is a time when many people, particularly men, are more prone to pull back from other people and stay inside themselves. It's even hard to reach out to the one person who is most important to us and with whom we ought to feel the most safe.

Such was the case for Glen, who said during our first session, "I've never been a good communicator. I keep things inside." He recalled not wanting to be a bother to other people from quite a young age. His parents had divorced when he was six and he remembered thinking that his mom had enough on her plate just dealing with her work at the post office, feeding the family, and paying the bills. Plus, his sister had a learning disability and required quite a bit of help with homework. Although Glen recalled feeling lonely at times, he made the best of the situation by riding his bike around and exploring the foothills near their home. He said, "I had a dog I could talk to—Lucy. And I actually did talk to old Luce, quite a bit."

Glen's wife Melanie accompanied him to the next session. She said at one point, "I'm open with Glen about everything. He knows when I'm not happy about something. With him it's a different story. Sometimes I can see that something's eating at him when he's upset, but he won't say anything. He doesn't come and talk to me about it. Maybe it's because I have a bad temper and he's afraid he'll set me off."

Glen acknowledged that that was exactly what went on inside for him. "I don't want to hurt anybody. I don't want to approach her with anything that would upset her or make her feel bad. I don't even approach her for sex, and it bothers her that I don't."

“Sometimes I wish he’d be more aggressive,” Melanie chimed in. “I’ve told him, ‘Just come and take me sometime. Pursue me.’ It would be so nice if he’d put himself out there with me and let me know, in no uncertain terms, what he was feeling or what he wanted.”

When I proposed that there were usually emotional precursors to addictive behavior, Glen wasn’t so sure that applied in his case. However, he was willing to entertain the possibility. He also committed to experiment by opening up to Melanie about what went on inside for him, even though he knew it would be very challenging.

It didn’t take long before he had something to open up about. One month into our work together he admitted that he was getting frustrated about how things were going at home. They had learned that Melanie was pregnant, and she was much more tired than usual. She spent a lot of her time laying down, resting, and playing on the computer. The night before Glen arrived home at seven o’clock to a couple of days worth of dishes piled in the sink and toys strewn on the floor throughout the house. He had his son and daughter help straighten up the messes they had made and then started attacking the dishes. As he was finishing up at the sink, Melanie said “Maybe we’d better pull some chicken out of the freezer.” Glen looked up at the clock: 8:00 p.m.

In my office Glen was shaking his head as he thought about that night. “I was trying to be Superdad and Superhusband for a week; now I’m starting to dip into my ornery phase. I work late and come home to more work. I don’t wind down before I go to bed so I end up feeling too tense to fall asleep. Or I take time to wind down and then I’m up late watching TV or on the computer and I don’t get enough sleep.” I asked Glen if he’d gotten back into a pattern of viewing pornography. He looked at me sheepishly and

was hesitant at first, but then acknowledged that he'd viewed it a couple of times over the last few days.

I started to explore with Glen what had been going on for him emotionally during this difficult time. "What goes on inside for you when you walk in and she's at the computer and there's lots of work to do?"

"First, I tell myself that she's pregnant with my child. She's doing this amazing, physically brutal thing. She's making this sacrifice for our family, for us. I need to suck it up. That helps me get to work on what needs doing, even though I've just put in a twelve hour day at work. *However...* over time I start to feel bad. I get resentful. Last night I looked over at her, distracted at the computer, and thought, 'I am not important to her. The thought of me and what I need hasn't even registered to her. It feels like I'm on my own. I don't have a partner here.

As we explored what had gone on the previous Saturday, the night he had first used pornography again after a month and a half of abstaining, we discovered that a lot of the same feelings had been stirred up. "She seemed checked-out physically, but also emotionally as she sat at the computer. She was tired and ready for bed early, but I wanted to stay up. If she'd had more energy to stay up and be with me, I would have felt more like we were a couple. I'd been feeling lonely, even at those times when she had asked me to lay there and hold her. It doesn't feel like our relationship right now. It feels like she's a shell of herself."

I reminded Glen about how vulnerable feelings take the lid off our emotional superglue: when we feel most in-need, we are most primed to become dependent. He is in-need, but feels like he can't talk to Melanie about how he's feeling. If he could, that

might bring relief. He needs some bridge out of distress. If that one—communication in his marriage—is not open for traffic, he’s going to be a lot more tempted to take the old faithful one—pornography. I challenged him to open up to Melanie about how he was feeling. Not to blame her, but just to share his struggles. “Let her off the hook. Tell her she doesn’t need to change a thing. But you need to share. You can’t afford to keep this stuff in.”

The following week Glen described how challenging it had been to start the conversation when he was feeling frustrated and unimportant. “It was tough. The first couple of nights I couldn’t get around to talking to her about how I was feeling. Tuesday night I worked late. Got home at 6:15 to find the usual mess and no dinner in sight. I had a meeting with the Boy Scout troop that I help lead at 7:00 that night. I said, ‘This frustrates me. I’ve been working hard and you’re on the computer. I’m not going to get dinner.’ She seemed to take it okay. I let her know, ‘Just because I’m saying this to you doesn’t mean you have to make it better or change what you’re doing. I’m just learning that I can’t afford to hold this in.’ Monday night I’d just done my usual, trying to pick up the slack without saying anything. I’d felt tense all night. But Tuesday night was a contrast. I felt really good after that communication. I went to Scouts. Ate cold tacos when I got home at about 8:30, I didn’t like that. But I felt calmer; there was a different mood. It wasn’t like there was a pillar of light or the voice of angels or anything, but it was better.”

Throughout the coming weeks, Melanie continued to feel quite taxed by her pregnancy. It was hard for Glen. Two weeks later he said, “She doesn’t want to do much besides taking baths and showers. I went trick-or-treating alone with the kids. It feels like

it gets heavier and heavier over time to carry the burden. But I've noticed that once I open up to her, it seems to help reset things. The burden gets off-loaded, for some reason, even though she's not able to do any more than before. The fact that she'll listen to what I'm feeling and seems to care makes a big difference. It's like we're partners at heart, even if I can't be pregnant for her and she can't take on more of the burdens of family life.

Glen also reported that over time he was becoming less afraid of conflict. I talked to her last Tuesday night and said, "I have Scouts every week. We really need a different plan for dinner on Tuesday night." She argued back at me. I said, "I'm just trying to communicate!" She said, "I'm communicating back! Arguing is communicating!" When it was all said and done, I wasn't sorry I had brought it up, and I don't think she felt blamed, either. It felt good not to hold it in, even though we had a bit of a conflict over it."

I asked Glen how intense the temptations to seek pornography had been lately. "I've had a crappy week at work, and I can tell that I'd really be feeling on edge by now if I'd let the stress build up. If I weren't conveying more of my true feelings at home, I think it would be overwhelming. Instead, the stress feels more manageable now. Likewise, if I catch myself having a sexual urge or craving, I'm diverting myself more easily. And I do think there's a connection: when I'm more stressed and holding it in, I'm tempted to go to that for comfort. When I unload my stress by talking about what I'm feeling, I get the relief more directly, in a better way."

A week or so later, Glen reported, "Some of the usual issues are came up this week—stress at work, stress at home, but as Melanie and I are closer they didn't affect

me as much as usual.” Glen’s statement reminded me of a growing body of research demonstrating that relationships can provide a very powerful buffering between us and the stresses that would otherwise impact us. In one such study, subjects were asked to hold their hand down in cold water for as long as they could stand it. This is a pretty straightforward measure of how much stress people can tolerate. Longer length of time in water = more stress tolerated. Half of the subjects looked at a picture of their family as they held their hand under the water, while the other half didn’t. Those who had that simple reminder that helped them keep their primary support system in mind lasted significantly longer than those who didn’t. Emotional connection and relationship support does provide what we need when we’re stressed. Pornography is a lousy counterfeit for that. It dissipates some of the emotion temporarily, but leaves us worse off in the long run.

Many women in Melanie’s shoes will report later that even though their husband was really good at keeping his pornography consumption a secret, they had always felt that there was something their husband had been holding back. Despite years of marriage, he remained, to her, a somewhat mysterious character. Once men start opening up the way Glen was, their wives often report feeling a tremendous sense of relief, a sense that they are finally beginning to really get to know their man. A growing confidence that he is being real with her—and perhaps even with himself—for the first time. When they come home to their emotions, there is an increased sense of comfort these men have about being in their own skins. This growing sense of openness on his part also leaves her feeling more confident in his recovery from addiction. Wives are less apt to check the history on his internet browser or grill him about how he spends his free time. Once she

has her finger on his emotional pulse in this way, she has the sense that she really know what's going on with him. She doesn't have to wonder and search and guess and cross-examine, none of which ever left her feeling truly, deeply at peace anyway.

### **It Takes Brute Courage to Own Our Neediness**

Thomas Merton said, "Sometimes the invitation to beauty may come to us masked as humiliating sickness or weakness." This lesson was driven home to me as I worked with Leon, a client at our clinic and also a fellow mental health professional who works with child abuse victims and their families. He came to see us because he had been trying to rely on an addiction to try to bring a spark of excitement and renewed motivation to a life that had been drained of its passion by a decade and a half of overwhelming professional demands. Although he came in seeking help in overcoming his addiction, we quickly discovered that his addiction was not only a problem, it was a solution. Of course, it was a bad solution that had created even more problems in his life, but it was at least an attempt to stem the burnout he was suffering as a professional.

As Leon was nearing the end of his treatment, we talked together about a deep shift that had taken place in his perspective: "I've always seen myself as someone who needs to be strong enough to help others. This theme even showed up in my taste for literature. I must have read the first hundred pages of *Les Miserables* half a dozen times over the years. I was so inspired by the story. I love the priest's generosity and grace. He reached into lives and gave exactly what was needed. He gave up his church and allowed the building to be used as a hospital. And, of course, there was what he did for Valjean: when the poor man had really made a mess of things and had no way out on his own, the

priest stepped in. He forgave him without even being asked. Even though he had been robbed of his silver, he stepped in and gave even more—the candlesticks and complete forgiveness. He spared the man the consequences of his own actions. He offered grace to one who had not even thought to seek it.

“What I have learned in the process of trying to recover from my addiction,” Leon continued, “is that in the story of my life, my role is not that of the priest, like I always wanted it to be. I realize now that I am Valjean! I am continually drawn back to that story because I crave the kind of grace he received. I want to be cared for and spared suffering. For years, I felt like my role was just to provide that for others. As hard as I tried, however, it seemed that I just didn’t have it in me. I felt like a charlatan. Now I’m finally beginning to see that I don’t need to be ashamed of my weakness. I don’t have to be the source of that goodness, I can be the recipient. I can let others help me. I can rely on the grace of God. I can receive love, I don’t need to just keep giving. In fact, I can’t. I’m not the vine; I’m only a branch, if anything. It’s okay for me to be a Valjean.” As Leon talked, I realized that he even looked physically lighter than he had when he first arrived at our clinic. “This wisdom and freedom,” he said, “I owe to my addiction. It was the only weakness blatant enough that I could no longer keep pretending that it wasn’t there. I was so proud of my role as the strong one, the *helper*, that I don’t think I ever would have willingly acknowledged my own neediness and put myself in the role of recipient. I would have almost preferred death to that shame and humiliation of having my addiction discovered. But it forced into the position of being the needy one for a change, and for that I will be forever grateful.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “There is a crack in everything God has made.” In our pride, we want to deny that we have any cracks. We cram putty in them and walk around pretending we’re fine. However, it is only by way of accepting our needs that we can open up the possibility of their being met. In the words of Leszek Kolakowski, “The Sacred is revealed to us in the experience of our failure . . . the awareness of human insufficiency . . . the lived admission of failure.”

### **Accepting and Conveying Our Neediness**

It’s no wonder it took a while for Earl to see the connection between feeling bad and being tempted to act out sexually. It was often a day or more after something hurt his feelings before he’d become more prone to escape by fantasizing about sex. Even after he did trace his way back to emotionally charged events, Earl was reluctant at first to talk about them because he felt like they were silly little things and he was embarrassed that he’d had such a strong reaction to them. Seeing some of his coworkers pull into the parking lot after they’d gone out to lunch together without inviting him, for instance. He brought his lunch from home, he reasoned, so that wasn’t anything to feel bad over. Even when he tried to dismiss and disown those kind of emotional reactions, however, he became more aware as we worked together that his mood sometimes took a distinctly darker turn when events like that occurred in his life. They left him feeling more down, and then the resulting down state became fertile ground in which addictive cravings could take root, sprout, and grow.

Earl learned how helpful it was to talk such feelings out. One day he told me about his most recent close call. It had been three in the afternoon, and he’d long ago

observed that he was more at risk in the afternoon at work. He'd gotten on the internet to take a much needed break from spreadsheets and customer calls. However, checking the usual news sites, sports scores, and extended family blog had left him still unsatisfied and feeling more than the usual reluctance to go back to the grindstone. "I was that close to going back to my old standby," he recalled.

Earl couldn't identify anything earlier that day that had made him feel bad or might have put him more at risk in some other way. "What about yesterday?" I asked.

"Yesterday was my birthday," he said. "There was no shortage of things to feel good about. My wife threw a little family party for me and everyone sang happy birthday. He sat quietly for a minute as he thought back on the evening. "You know, I feel ungrateful and kind of wimpy for saying this because Carolyn went to a lot of trouble to think about me... and make spice cake, my favorite... but whenever we get together with my in-laws it does quickly become a walk down memory lane for the Russell clan. It's easy to feel left out. I guess I need to own that more: I do get feeling left out. Yeah," Earl said with a sigh, "that's what it was. I've always had a thing about birthdays being a special day. All about that person. You know, as a kid we were let off the hook for all our usual chores on our birthdays. I'd like to have felt more like it was about me on my birthday." Earl was quiet now, introspective. Then, breaking his reverie, he looked at me sheepishly. "Is that totally immature and selfish?"

"I have a different question for you," I responded. "Was it real?"

"Yeah," he said with a shrug and a smile. "I guess it was."

I might be attaching too much significance to that particular moment, but it always seems to me at such times that I'm watching someone come home to themselves.

Coming home to their real selves, warts and all, not just who they wish they were or are trying to be, and settling in. It's a nice, satisfying thing to see.

How our spouse responds when we get real can be very important. After Earl left my office that day I thought about all the unhelpful ways I might respond if I were in his wife's shoes and he told me that he felt bad on his birthday. "Birthday wasn't good enough for you, huh? Do you know I went to the grocery store twice that day—first to get eggs and then later because we didn't have enough cream cheese for your favorite frosting? And this is the thanks I get?"

In addition to feeling hurt ourselves, it's natural to want to make a case for why our spouse shouldn't have felt hurt, or for how they should have handled things differently. "I didn't ignore you on your birthday! I don't know why you're so thin-skinned. Remember, I tried to draw you into the conversation my family was having around the table. *You're* the one who left the room to check on the kids and then didn't come back for 45 minutes. How can you expect to feel a part of things?"

Even though it is quite natural, it's not very helpful to take our spouse's feelings personally and become defensive. It's much more helpful to acknowledge their feelings and treat them as valid. However, even when we get that far, there are pitfalls to beware of. We may conclude that we are to blame for their distress, for example, when in actuality another person's feelings are usually not our fault. Very little good can come from "Sorry I ruined your birthday." We also may conclude that, if we're going to treat feelings and legitimate and important, we need to soothe them or make things better: "Let's go out to dinner this weekend, just you and me. You'll have my full, undivided

attention. Next year, in addition to the cake, I'll make your favorite meal, too. We'll make it your best birthday ever."

When Earl talked to Carolyn, to her credit she listened with compassion as he described how he had felt. The main thing we need when we're feeling bad is for someone important to us to willingly take in what we're feeling and try to understand what we're going through. "Oh, honey," she said when he finished, "I didn't realize that you were feeling that way." She looked him in the eye and reached her hand over and pressed it against his neck. "I can see it now. I can understand why you got feeling unimportant."

This process of acknowledging and validating the other's emotions will sound familiar because it's exactly what we earlier recommended that we as men can do to help our wives heal from the trauma they've experienced. It's exactly what our wives need from us in everyday life when they're feeling bad. This commonality not so surprising, these are universal human needs.

In fact, when Earl told me about how Carolyn responded, I thought of the incident on the swing set with my Daughter, Sarah. She wasn't that different from Earl. It didn't help when I said, "I'll push you some more." It didn't help when I explained that she needed to take turns with her sibling. It wouldn't have even helped if I had promised to be the best dad ever for the rest of her life. Her distress wasn't primarily about me anyway, it was about her. She was feeling distraught over being ignored. She finally felt heard and was able to calm down when I empathized with her. She then knew that I knew how she was feeling, she could see that I had allowed it in, and the little part in her brain that was blaring like a smoke alarm finally got the feedback it needed: He knows what

I'm feeling. I'm not alone in it anymore. She had the emotional oxygen she needed to turn her attention to other things. She was ready to have me watch her go down the slide.

Not long ago a colleague told me about a video on YouTube of a tantruming little boy. The first thing you see is a boy crying on the floor. Camera in hand and still running, his mother stands up and walks out of the room. The tantrum stops as the boy stands up to come see where Mommy went. As soon as he comes into her line of sight (and into view of the camera) again, he drops to the floor with a wail. After a moment, she backs around another corner. The result is the same: silence until he reappears, and then he immediately tumbles to the floor again in tears.

I would have laughed harder at the video, except that it reminded me of how I am when I'm physically ill. I don't moan in pain, even if I'm in pain, unless my wife is within earshot. When we're hurting, we want to know that someone we care about knows that we feel bad and cares.

One of our sons had a hard time talking to me and his mom when he was upset as a young child. However, he didn't just keep his feelings in. He'd go find a pencil and paper and make a sketch for us like the one on the following page (Include actual drawing from my son here). He'd bring it in and wait for us to acknowledge its meaning. Then and only then, it seemed, he could move on.

There are still times when we feel just like my son did when he drew this picture. It's painful to feel that way, but even more awful is to feel all alone when we're swamped by such feelings. Take the risk of reaching out. As we tell our kids, "Use your words!" If you're not going to talk, at least draw your spouse a picture. Sure, you are at risk of being

seen as more of a wimp than you've ever been before, but you'll be a lot less vulnerable to the pull of porn.

### **She's Your Best Guide in the Unfamiliar Realm of Emotions**

Jerry had been free of problems with pornography for just over a year. His wife, Wendy, still felt insecure about his recovery and frequently checked in with him about it. One Friday night as he walked in the house after work Wendy said, "You had a problem today, didn't you"—meaning a relapse to pornography.

After doing well for so long, Jerry had begun to wonder how long he'd have to be on track before she'd have more confidence in him. To his credit, however, instead of getting exasperated, he went over, took her face in his hands, looked her in the eye and earnestly said, "I haven't. It's still going well honey."

Wendy responded, "It's just that you have that same look about you—that vacant look in your eyes you used to get when you were caught up in your addiction." She paused for a minute, then asked, "Is there something else going on for you?"

Jerry sighed and shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't think so."

"Well I think it would be worth exploring a bit, don't you?"

Jerry shrugged again. "Maybe, but you're going to have to help walk me through it."

They walked into their bedroom together and he laid down. She sat next to him on the edge of the bed. "How was work for you today?"

"It was alright. Pretty good, in fact. I mean, it's Friday, so I was looking forward to the weekend."

“No stresses about your deadline next week? No run-ins with coworkers or management?”

“Things are going fine, really.”

“Was there anything else that was on your mind today?”

“Like I said, I’m looking forward to the weekend. Tomorrow should be nice. We’ll take care of the yard the morning, go to the kid’s soccer games, and then still have some time to relax. And then Sunday... I’m really honored that Bensons have asked me to be the one to offer the prayer when we all get together to pray for Roger. I’m so glad my life’s back on track again so that I feel worthy to offer spiritual support when people are in need. It means a lot to me that they asked. His entire extended family will be fasting. He told me last week that both of their parents will be there, and his brother will be in town from Arizona.

Jerry paused for a moment. “I hope that goes well. I’m looking forward to it, but at the same time it is intimidating. I hope that I say the right things—that I’m in-tune with the Spirit. I feel clean and capable of receiving inspiration, but I hope... I want it to be everything they’ve been hoping and praying for. I love them so much and want so badly for the Lord to bless their family. They’ve put their trust in the Lord and in me. I know God will be there for them, but I really don’t want to let them down on my end. I guess my confidence in my spirituality has taken some hits over the last few years.

“Oh...” Lyle let out a long sigh, and then he laughed. “Yeah, that’s it! That’s what’s been building up inside. I care so much about Roger and his family. I want so much for the Lord to bless them. I don’t want them to suffer anymore. I don’t want to let them down. They’ve suffered so much disappointment already. I hope that I can be strong

in my faith, for their sake. Yeah, that's what I've been concerned about. That's what's been bothering me."

Wendy, relaxed now, was nodding her head as she lightly patted Lyle's chest. Lyle sat up and hugged her. "Thank you my dear. Oh man, you know where I'm coming from. You know how afraid I get that I'll let people down. But wow, ahhh. It sure feels a lot better to talk it out."

It does feel better to talk out our feelings. And, as I so often remind clients, if you don't *talk out* your feelings, you're leaving yourself at risk of *acting out* on them.

### **Helping Each Other Heal Old Wounds**

It was midnight and Tim was pacing around his motor home. The fire had long ago died out. Dinner was lukewarm in the Dutch oven. Sylvia had made the three hour drive from their remote campsite back to town the night before so that she could spend the day catching up on some crucial things at work, but she'd planned on being back by dinner time. Tim didn't think she'd been in an accident on the way back, but there was no way for him to be sure. All his calls were going straight to voicemail. He tried not to think about the three men he'd caught her corresponding with by email and exchanging explicit chat messages with. Despite his efforts, however, some of the things one of them had said to her had popped into his mind: "We'd be great together." "You really ought to move out to Florida so that we can make a go of it."

At first Tim had felt so crushed by the revelation that he contemplated ending his own life. Of course it was partly about those relationships, but there was even more to it. He'd been vulnerable to the fear of abandonment before he'd ever gotten together with

Sylvia. Since the discovery of Sylvia's virtual affairs a few months ago he'd spent a lot of time working to become more aware of the connection between his overwhelming emotional reaction to her behavior and similar feelings from earlier in his life. He had been a handful to his parents as a child, and remembered listening to them argue over his custody. That is, for as long as he could remember, both of them wanted Tim to live with the *other* one. Finally, he had gotten into a fistfight with his younger half-brother at his mom's house. That and some other acting up and involvement with the law had led to his removal from his parents' custody and placement at age fifteen in the first of a series of foster homes.

Tim now knew that he was more prone as an adult to feeling rejected, abandoned, and like he had to face the world alone because of those early experiences. That knowledge didn't necessarily help him feel better now as he gazed out into the silent black Wyoming sky, but it helped him at least make sense the lump in his throat and the ache in his heart.

Tim didn't have a way of knowing exactly how out of proportion his feelings were about the current situation. However, he'd talked with Sylvia quite a bit about his feelings in the past and she'd been understanding and supportive. Therefore, when she finally arrived at quarter after one, he felt free to simply pour out his soul to her: his worry, his impatience, the way the time had stretched on and became an eternity, his anger, his love and feelings of need for her, and scariest of all his fear that she had left and wasn't coming back.

Sylvia informed him briefly about the extra work that had been piled on her and the dead cell phone battery, but she didn't get defensive or minimize his emotional

reaction. The beef stew remained untouched in the fire pit as she held his hands in hers and listened attentively to all of Tim's hurt and fear. They talked about the feelings that were fresh, but also about the deeper, long ago wounds that had been reopened by the days events.

They finally ate and went to bed an hour or so later. At 5:00 Tim woke up in the middle of a nightmare. He woke up Sylvia and described reliving in his dream having to use his first foster family's bathroom supplies. He shared a bathroom with their two boys, and for some reason it really bugged him that he had to use their shampoo and soap. Then he cried as he recalled his first Christmas in foster care, away from his family. His mom had waited until Christmas evening to call and talk to him. He hadn't heard from his dad at all. He had remembered having that same lump in his throat, the one that had been there before Sylvia had arrived back at camp, that entire first holiday season he spent living in the home of strangers. Sylvia squeezed Tim tighter and rocked gently forward and back as she told him how sorry she was that experienced that. How much she knew it had hurt him. How tenderhearted she knew he had always been underneath the hardened shell of a rebellious teenager. Tim didn't remember falling asleep, but the next morning he felt that there had been lifted from him a burden he hadn't before even realized the full weight of.

It's counterintuitive to view moments marked by raw emotion as great opportunities for bonding. I wouldn't see them that way myself, except for hearing from couples like Tim and Sylvia about experiences like this. It is tough, but couples can start to see them this way and resist the impulse to go back to their old conflict-ridden patterns. Then, when they're honest with themselves and their spouse about their most

tender feelings, their spouse can give free rein to their own nurturing instincts. This is when hurts that are even older than their relationship, hurts that are an entire lifetime old can be soothed and can start to be healed.

### **Over Time, It Becomes Less and Less About Sex**

Tim had been excited for his business trip to Chicago for a professional conference ever since he'd been promoted. The first morning at the convention hall there was a lot of back-slapping and friendly greetings. These people all seem to know each other, Tim thought. He wondered if he stood out as a new guy. He felt out of place. As the morning went on he started to worry that maybe his boss had intended him to be doing the kind of socializing and networking everybody else there seemed to be doing. He wondered, "Am I not cut out to be a product manager after all?" He remembered, to his relief, that in the afternoon there would be a breakout session with just a handful of people from around the country with job descriptions like his. He was more comfortable in small groups.

Almost immediately in that meeting he started to feel like he was in over his head. "I should have finished my degree," he thought. He made a comment, but it seemed to fall flat and the discussion moved right past the topic he brought up. By the end of the afternoon he had a lump in his throat. It was going to be a long three days. By dinnertime he was looking forward to the chance to relax on his own and get a bite to eat. Seated at his table in the restaurant, as the stress was just starting to melt away, a large group of people, some of whom he recognized from the convention, was ushered to a group of

tables right beside him. A couple of them glanced his way and seemed to recognize him. He sat quietly and ate as they chatted and joked and laughed together.

As he left the restaurant to walk back to his hotel, Tim called his Sexaholics Anonymous sponsor. "Trip's not going exactly as I'd hoped." When he got back to his room and into bed, he called his wife, Karen.

"How's it going there, Honey?" she asked.

"Not too well," Tim said, feeling the lump rising in his throat again. It was quiet on the line for a moment.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah... sorry," he said, getting even more choked up. "I guess I just miss you guys... being away from home. Plus, it really caught me by surprise, how unsure of myself I feel here. Like a fish out of water here. Everyone's seems so on-the-ball. I'm just, well... me."

Softly, Karen said, "Ohhhh, honey. I'm sorry it's been a hard day for you." They were both quiet. Finally Karen continued, "I wish I could be with you there right now. I'd just wrap my arms around you and tell you how much we appreciate you going out there, slaying the dragon to take care of us. We're cozy and happy here and you're going through the tough stuff to keep us that way."

Tim laughed through tears that had welled up. "It seems a little silly that it's tough to sit through a couple of meetings and check out some booths, but I guess it has been today."

Karen promised to check in with him midway through the next morning. After he said goodnight to the kids and hung up the phone, the emotion that had been building up

all day was still right there, ready to overflow. Tim let it come. He put his head in his hands and sobbed. He wiped his eyes and blew his nose and then cried again. For a couple of minutes the tears flowed. As they subsided, he felt spent, but relaxed and, in a way, clear. Like he'd been cleaned out of the gunk that had been building up. That night, he said, he slept like a baby.

He awoke early the next morning feeling rested and refreshed. That day at the convention wasn't a picnic, either, by any means, but he recalled later that he felt a little lighter, freer to be himself. He regretted that he was not more socially skilled, and his lack of ease and grace hit home to him a couple of times again, but he felt a bit less tense about it. He knew he wasn't perfect, but didn't feel quite as much pressure to be. He noticed at the end of the day that he was breathing freer and didn't feel nearly as uptight as he had the night before.

I first heard about his business trip from the counselor who leads the therapy group Tim attends. When I did, all I could think about was Sherlock Holmes and the story of the dog that didn't bark in the night.

You might remember that story: A thief stole a prized horse from the stable. While everyone else was looking for clues the thief may have left behind—what's here now that wasn't before, the master detective was thinking about what *hadn't* happened that should have. And no one had heard anything out of the ordinary. And yet, there was the dog, unharmed and seemingly unmolested. Holmes' conclusion: The thief must have been someone the dog knew. The pool of suspects sufficiently narrowed, the thief was discovered straightaway.

What was the dog that didn't bark in the night for Tim? During that trip and in his description of it afterward, he never brought up the topic of pornography. He hadn't viewed pornography, but neither had he experienced a craving for pornography worth mentioning. He hadn't had to resist with all of his might potent urges to view pornography. He had simply been willing to acknowledge what he was going through, stay with his feelings even though they were distressing, and talk about them.

I asked Tim how different this was than the way he would have handled the same feelings before he was in recovery. "I know exactly how I would have handled them, because I used to travel all the time. I would have sneered at "all of these shallow people who act like they're best friends with these business associates they only see twice a year. I would have tried to convince myself that I was better than them for not being so slick, "I'm no used car salesman." I don't know that I would have admitted to myself that I felt bad that I'm not as smooth and charismatic as I'd like to be. I'm sure I wouldn't have lasted the day. I would have snuck away to go golfing or at least sightseeing, probably missing big chunks of the convention in order to avoid staying there and feeling out-of-place. Then I would have had to figure out how to cover up that missed time when I reported back to my boss."

Although Tim didn't talk about sex and he certainly didn't have sex during his trip, did he experience anything that in any way resembled sex?

He did have intercourse with his wife. Think about it: here are the definitions of intercourse, in the order they appear in my volume of Webster's: 1. dealings or communications between individuals, groups, countries, etc. 2. interchange of thoughts, feelings, etc. 3. sexual relations or a sexual coupling, esp. coitus. Tim may not have

experienced #3 but he communicated with Karen and had a true, deep interchange of thoughts and feelings that left both of them feeling close and in-touch. There was a sense of immediacy and vitality to their connection that porn never could have mimicked or approximated, no matter how faithfully he had kept going to it.

After he hung up with Karen on the phone, Tim certainly experienced a series of involuntary rhythmic contractions and a subsequent sense of tremendous relief. It happened when he cried. Feelings like the ones he'd had on that trip had surely always been there, building up for Tim. How would things have gone had he not recognized the strong feelings he was having and dealt with them for what they were? He had many trips to look back on and see how it would have gone. "I'd get back to the hotel and try to go to bed, but I usually had a hard time dropping off to sleep. I'd lay there, feeling uneasy and out of sorts. I'd flip on the TV "to help me wind down." It never helped me wind down. I'd see something titillating and I'd get more stirred up. Then turning off the TV seemed impossible. Sometimes I stayed up until two, three, even four in the morning. Usually I'd keep watching until I found something that was all-out pornographic. Eventually, of course, I'd masturbate. Only after that could I fall asleep." With all of the emotional buildup he had always experienced, but without any awareness or expression, is it any wonder that he used to stay up until he could finally experience some release?

I thought about Karen's nurturing, soothing response: "Ohhhh, Honey. You love us so much. You are *my* man, out there slaying dragons." I thought about how comforting that must have been for Tim to hear in his moment of greatest need. He was primed, receptive, and in need of connection and renewal, and she didn't disappoint. Throughout his earlier years of travel, he had been in just as great of need. However, he didn't know

what he needed and he certainly didn't know how to reach out to Karen for it. In fact, nine months earlier, in his first few weeks of recovery, he had gone on a business trip to Texas. He hadn't yet learned to identify what he was going through emotionally and stay with it instead of distracting from it or trying to escape it. Therefore, he couldn't talk with Karen about it. He was honest with her when they talked on the phone during that trip and admitted that he had a harder time resisting temptation on the road than he did at home. Her response? "I'm here on my own day and night taking care of your children and you're off engaged and interacting with other people during the day and then at night you can't help but wanting to think about having sex with other women?" She didn't say the next part out loud, but to herself Karen even wondered, What kind of a creep did I marry?

Karen didn't marry a creep. She'd married a man who would, nine months later, elicit a very different response in her: "Ohhhh, Honey. You love us so much. You are *my* man, out there slaying dragons. You take care of us so well. We're so secure here because of you." She responded differently because he was able to reveal to her the real Tim. He was the same man having much the same experience, but he had learned to choose connection—to himself and to his wife—over addiction. And he didn't long for the old days. He didn't have to white-knuckle his way through temptation. In his heart of hearts he much preferred the path he was on.

What goes on within Tim—deep down, emotionally—was a fresh revelation not only to Karen, but to Tim himself. ZZZZ\_\_\_\_\_ said \_\_\_\_\_. He had learned in his recovery that to overcome his double life, he had to not only be honest about his

behavior, but rooted in and true to his emotions. Only when he was real with himself could he be real with Karen.

I keep Tim and Karen in mind when I work with couples who are in the beginning stages of dealing with a pornography habit that he has kept secret from her. It helps me remember the kind of relationship couples can have, if they keep working at it. Early on, she may be tempted to leave because of how bad she's been hurt and how little compassion he seems to have for her pain. He may be tempted to give up on the relationship because of how ashamed he feels and how little hope he has of ever making things better between them again and finally being the man she really wants.

However, I remind myself that a pornography problem can be a cancer in a body that has a lot of other strengths and reasons to survive. The problem is not the body—the couple. Each spouse may have admirable intentions and strengths. Nonetheless, the cancer can do terrible things to the best of bodies. Tim was not a terrible guy who didn't think about or care about his wife. And yet the pornography habit made him exactly that in her mind. Fortunately, when couples are willing to draw together and risk being tender and real with each other, healing can happen and closeness can return. It's so much easier to connect with the tender, feeling person who is behind the reactive behavior and words that are so often all we see from the surface.

### **Porn Is No Match for Real Connection**

Alex was discouraged about the rate of progress in his relationship with his wife Tonya. Even though he hadn't acted out sexually for eleven months, she still seemed distant, disinterested, even disconnected. It was almost as though, during the time that he had been so caught up in his addiction, she had come to terms with his emotional absence and moved on with her life without him.

I could see that Alex's heart ached as he talked about the loss of what they'd had before. "I'm coming to believe that we'll never get back to the friendship and closeness we once shared—or anything near it. She used to refer to me as 'my miracle' to her friends. I loved her kids, solved her financial problems. But I worry whether she'll ever be able to be happy with a knight in tarnished armor."

Over the previous year-and-a-half, Alex had made tremendous progress in his individual recovery. He had learned to sit through his cravings when they'd hit instead of locking horns with them. At first it was hard to maintain his attention on this inner process that had always gotten him into trouble, but he'd gotten better at it with practice. He discovered that there was a life cycle to temptation and the feelings that came in its wake. He now knew that if he waited them out they'd dissipate on their own. He

practiced being mindful, or aware of the workings of his mind rather than simply being carried along by his thoughts. Here were some of the waves that washed into his consciousness when he was tempted: At first he'd feel the excitement of, "I could go do that again. The good stuff is waiting right there for the taking." When he just sat with that titillation, he noticed that the next wave quickly came, stirring up feelings of embarrassment, fear of the costs of that lifestyle, and a sense of loss over the price he'd paid for his transgressions already. As the tide of desire continued to rise, he'd think "It seems so gratifying, I'm going to lose control..." Again, in the wake of that wave he'd notice a rejoinder, "but then I'll lose everything."

He thought back on those times when he first practiced watching the tug-of-war in his mind and becoming more aware of its nature instead of entering whole-heartedly into it. "That's when it would seem that the losses I was going to suffer over this would devastate me. I'd invited this boulder of sexual addiction into my life, and its impact was now rippling out and affecting everything: my family, my extended family, my business, my health. I knew that if I continued I'd become a pitiful person, a loser. I'd be left with a sense of despair." Simply sitting with all of those feelings allowed them to dissipate. Alex discovered that the tide didn't keep rising, it eventually ebbed. Thinking back on that work he said, "I hadn't ever before realized that if I let those sexual cravings and other feelings come, one emotion would flow to another and eventually the ship seems to right itself without having to put up much resistance. It was really helpful to stay with it and watch the feelings almost change themselves. Temptation, when has it occurred since doing that work, hasn't seemed as dangerous."

Earlier in life, Alex never would have suspected that he could experience this level of empowerment in the midst of an urge. For as long as he could remember he had been waging a Herculean war against temptation. “It took so much white-knuckling. I would hum hymns to myself, quote poetry, think of my father being with me. Those were sometimes the only things that kept me from giving in, and sometimes then only by a thread. At times I’d go five or ten years with no mistakes, but all the time battling, trying to control myself. Even when I was serving as an LDS missionary or later as a bishop, the thoughts kept coming to me. I had to keep trying to keep all the feathers in the room, all the animals in the bag. As long as I had total focus, I was okay. But if the bag got a little hole and one of the animals squirmed out, I was in trouble. It was an even bigger fight. Eventually I dropped the bag. They all got loose. I stopped trying. I convinced myself that the boundaries I did maintain were important, like no sexual intercourse outside my marriage, but looking back I can see that that was only to help myself feel better about what I was doing. I was committing adultery, no two ways about it. Having failed to conquer the compulsion, I was trying to accommodate it. Of course that didn’t work. Then it expanded at an even more accelerated pace. It was taking over my life. That was when I knew I had to talk to Tonya and get some help.

It had never occurred to Alex before coming to treatment that his sexual urges might arise from displaced emotional needs. However, when he thought back on his younger years it made sense to him that he had gone to sex for comfort when he needed emotional connection and relationship soothing. He recalled how terrified he was the summer of his seventh year when his mother locked herself in her room for a week crying and then was admitted to a mental hospital. He didn’t know whether she’d be coming

back. For years after that, she was in and out of institutions. Alex knew that she loved him and wanted what was best for him, but he could never predict from one day to the next whether he could count on her to be there for him in times of need. He tried to be strong so as to not add to her burden. He became convinced at an early age that he had to take care of himself emotionally. When he discovered masturbation a short time later, sexual thoughts and feelings became a reliable standby that he'd use to help himself feel calm enough to get to sleep at night, occupy himself when there was nothing else to do, pacify himself when his feelings were hurt, and generally to alleviate unsettled feelings whenever he didn't know what else to do.

He had learned that if he would sit and breathe in the midst of a craving long enough, it eventually faded, like a wave settling back into the sea. Then he could comb the still-moist beach of his consciousness for the remnants of the emotions that may have triggered the urge in the first place. "It was enlightening that as I just sat with sexual feelings, they would evolve into these other things." Although he had been doing great work along these lines, he still stood at the frontier of the most important part of his recovery: the healing of his relationship with his wife. There's a huge difference between becoming aware of emotional needs and honoring those need by building a genuine emotional connection with another a real human being.

Reaching out is a huge risk, because our beloved doesn't always respond in the way we hope. It wasn't surprising to me that, in the beginning of this work, Alex reached out to Tonya sexually. It also didn't surprise me when Tonya rejected his advances. Here's what he said at that time: "She said she wasn't ready. 'Sorry, I just need some time.' I've been rejected by her several times recently. It hurts more to be rejected than to

go without. I'm discouraged. I don't know if things will ever get better. I've decided not to approach her anymore. I don't need one more rejection with everything else going on."

The "everything else going on" that Alex referred to included cash flow problems for his business and an upcoming appointment with the urologist. He had been checking in with the doctor every year over the last few because his PSA levels had been elevated, raising the specter of prostate cancer. Two weeks later, Alex's furrowed brow spoke volumes. "The levels were high enough that they took a biopsy. My dad died of that cancer. He didn't have his prostate removed and he ended up suffering the last ten years of his life. I'll probably have the surgery, but I've talked with a couple of friends who've had it and it virtually ended their sex lives. Because of the state of my relationship with Tonya right now, I've given up on sexual intimacy." Alex seemed to look past me. "I may have already had my last intimate encounter. What I've had so far is all I'm going to get. Given my lack of hope for things improving with Tonya, mentally and emotionally I could almost go back to acting out right now. Part of the temptation of illicit activity is that there was no variety or spice with Tonya, even when we were having sex. It was the same thing every time, so what incentive is there to work to get back to that? And then I think that there's only a slim possibility of it ever returning even to that. The only thing that keeps me from trying to find a connection with someone else is that she made it clear that that would be *it* for us. I do know that she's a critical part of my life and my future. I know that she's essential to my spiritual salvation. I have to give up the thought that there's a better option outside our marriage, that it would be better to start over fresh with someone else." As he talked about his life with his wife, Alex seemed to come back to his senses. "If I left her, there may not be anything else that would keep me from being

forever lost in the black hole of addiction. It would be spiritual suicide. Plus, she does want the relationship to work,” he said with a sense of resolve, “and I just can’t risk losing her because I didn’t do my part.”

I referred Alex and his wife for marriage counseling with my trusted colleague, Jack Boden. He helped Alex see that Tonya was not disinterested in him or uncaring about their relationship at all, but rather was still aching. She had retreated from him to the safety of aloneness, not because she didn’t love him, but because he mattered so much to her that she couldn’t bear to be hurt again by him in the ways that she had been. She had put on a good face for the outside world. She had continued to play the part of a committed wife and involved member of their community and church. However, she carried within her now a deep pain that was never far from the surface.

During marriage counseling sessions Tonya shared with Alex that she had long worried that he didn’t want her, but would rather have had someone younger and with a more perfect body. She feared that he was looking for someone he’d prefer to her, and could easily dump her if and when he found that woman. Of course this made sense to Alex, and he knew that this very worry might be going on inside her because of his struggles, but he comprehended her dread in a much more profound way as he sat across from her for an hour at a time during those counseling sessions and looked her in the eyes as she described her pain and the panic at the thought of losing him, the most important person in her life.

The counselor asked what she would need from Alex in order to feel differently, to be convinced over time that this wasn’t true, that he did want her and that she wouldn’t lose him. She said that the work he had done to recover from his sexual compulsions had

helped, but for some reason hadn't been enough. "Logically I know that he's working to avoid infidelity, but some part of me... in my heart I guess, I dread that maybe he's staying out of a sense of duty or to keep providing a solid home base for our kids and grandkids. Deep down I'm not convinced that he wants to be with me." Jack had watched Alex sit and patiently listen to Tonya. He knew that Alex had been allowing her experience to impact him, really letting her feelings in. He had also seen the difference that had made for Tonya, and knew that she might be more ready to ask for what she needed from him. Again Jack asked what she needed from Alex, what he could do to help when she felt afraid that he didn't really want to be with her.

"He could come and spend time with me. Sit and hold me or hold hands with me at the end of the day. Talk about the day together. Knowing that he chooses to spend that time with me might help me feel like he really does want to be with me. It would be nice if I felt like you need me, too, if I felt like what I do and offer and give makes a difference to you."

Over the next few months, Alex and Tonya got together and spent some time talking at the end of almost every day. They had some physical contact like holding hands, sitting side-by-side, and occasionally cuddling. They sat together or sometimes walked around the block. Alex was surprised how often the topic of feeling not-wanted came up for Tonya. It got triggered in their relationship if he didn't ask her opinion on a decision or got working late and forgot to call. But she also felt pained when their daughter chose to stay with her friend when she was in town instead of staying at their place. It welled up when two of her friends in the neighborhood went to lunch without inviting her. Sitting together by the fireplace and talking throughout the coldest winter

months of that year, Tonya began to feel freer and their conversations ranged more widely. She revealed to Alex the pain of having wished that she could receive as much of her Dad's attention as her two little brothers did. She recalled rubbing her fingers on the worn red velvet armrest of his easy chair, trying to will him to put down the newspaper that stood like a brick wall between them. She recalled the emptiness she felt in her first marriage as her husband moved from one exciting, unfruitful venture to another, always caught up in the anticipation of success and riches. He was always animated, but she was always in the background. There never seemed to be a place for her in his dreams.

As Tonya opened up her heart and shared these hurts, a heart-wrenching picture of her pain was becoming clearer and clearer to Alex. Most distressing of all to him was the role he could see that he played in deepening her wounds. On the one hand he realized that his addiction was about him and his inability to cope well with his own emotional reactions and needs. On the other hand, he had always known that Tonya had taken his behavior as a personal rejection, and he thought he'd understood why. There are enough obvious reasons. However, now he could see even more deeply. When he turned his attention to other women, even imaginary ones by way of pornography or anonymous prostitutes, he was subjecting Tonya to one more experience, in a long line of them, where she felt unwanted, uninteresting, easy to ignore... easily resistable. By that time in her life, it had left her feeling utterly discarded. "I had fallen head-over-heels in love with you. I'd never felt adequate in the other most-important relationships with men in my life. Finally, I was in a relationship where I was adequate—you let me know that I was enough for you and more. I thought that for our first ten years together. Then, to discover that I wasn't, that you had these other attractions. My world crumbled."

She was speaking to Alex frankly about how he had hurt her, and yet he didn't run away. He didn't even look away. He kept listening. He was there for her when she needed him the most, when she was feeling pain over the rejection she'd received from the one person who mattered most to her in his life: him. Tonya kept talking about her hurt, and seemed to value tremendously the time they spent together in the evenings. Even though their topics were often painful ones, Alex noticed that, as the weeks went on, she seemed brighter-eyed and quicker to smile. It occurred to Alex that his listening might be a key part of his making amends to her.

As I kept meeting with Alex, I could tell that his listening was not only affecting Tonya deeply, it was having a profound impact on him. "I've felt deeply the hurt I've caused her, and it hurts me. I'm so motivated not to ever do anything that would cause her that grief again. Especially in light of the love she's expressed. Despite the pain and all we've been through, she's continued to hold this deep and abiding love for me" Alex said, shaking his head in amazement. Alex sat quietly then, in reverence of his wife's grace and resilience. I could tell that her feelings for him had become sacred to him.

A month or so later Alex said, "We're connecting more sexually. It's not as spontaneous as it was in our earlier years; intimacy requires more preparation. But if I set the stage and I'm sensitive and thoughtful, I'm never met with rejection. I'm realizing that and learning that. Tonya is coming around and wanting to have all the connection we've had at previous times. She is wanting to be more careful and she's a tad bit guarded. But I know where that comes from and I honor its importance. It doesn't make me feel rejected or impatient, like it used to.

Alex also found it very healing to go to Tonya when he was in need. This was so different for him than how he'd learned to handle things growing up. He had taken to heart his father's attitude about complaining. When they worked together in the yard and Alex would grumble his dad would respond, "If you can't handle it out here, get in the house with your mom and sisters." This had helped him develop a great can-do mentality and a toughness that had served him well in most areas of life. However, he realized now that he had taken it too far by figuring he had to be tough and close off his emotions even in his most intimate relationship, where it was safe to express more vulnerability. He said once, I don't have to give up that warrior mentality... but even a warrior needs to at times put down the shield, take off the armor, and let someone care for him and nurse the wounds he's suffered out on the field of battle.

If he lost a client at work and felt less wanted or needed, he'd talk to her about it at the end of the day. When he was worried about his health and had concerns about his medical treatment he'd share with her his feelings of fear and vulnerability. During a messy period of conflict with a coworker, usually supportive colleagues and superiors seemed indifferent. He suddenly felt lost at work, which was usually a comfortable place for him. For a week-and-a-half he couldn't wait to talk with Tonya each night about how it was going. Not just the events but the frustrations, anxieties, and regrets that were triggered. "Instead of just whining about the situation or dogging on people at work, I was telling her about what was going on inside of me. That I was feeling empty and disconnected and alone. It was such a relief to be able to be real with my wife, to reach out and know she would be there for me, even when it was really hard stuff. That's so

different for me than what I sometimes did before, by running to her and gossiping about work.”

When Alex came home at the end of the day borne down with trouble and perplexed with care and difficulty, it felt so good to be met with Tonya’s mild and easy attentiveness. It calmed his soul and soothed his feelings. The more he reached out to her, the more he found that during the day at work, when his mind started going to despair, he craved the solace of her affection and kindness. He knew that he could come home and pour out to all his complaints without reserve, and that she’d share his burden and soothe and encourage his feelings by her gentle voice [Reference here for some of the language: JS Mann]

A month later, Alex told me that the progress in their physical relationship had stalled. “We’ve had nothing, sexually speaking, for a couple of months. I was impatient before, but now I’m realizing more and more her view. I’m content with the connections we *are* making.” Before he went in for another PSA test to check on the growth of his prostate cancer, he told her “We may not be able to have sex in the future, and I’m trying to be okay with that.” Tonya was touched by that expression. It indicated to her that he was rising above his obsession with sex and his attempts to control that part of their relationship. Alex confided that he did occasionally have vivid dreams of Tonya coming to him and initiating affection.

Regarding urges and cravings, Alex said at that time, “I’m becoming more relaxed with respect to my destructive behavior. I still have the desire to look at porn or seek illicit sex from time to time, but it’s not as often. A big part of what has softened it is having come to understand over the last couple of months more than I did before the pain

I've caused Tonya. I regret having ever lectured her about forgiveness. No explanation, talking, recitation of scripture is going to affect her. If anything will it's my being attentive; swallowing my pride, and attempting to be close. I may be rejected, but only for now. For a while I told her that I was leaving it up to her to initiate physical contact so that she could wait until she was ready. At the time I convinced myself that I was doing that to avoid putting pressure on her or putting her in an uncomfortable situation. However, as time went on and I got real with myself, I could see that I was doing that as a cop out, almost a punishment. I need to keep reaching out.

Alex went back to expressing physical affection, but he took baby steps instead of giant leaps. He looked for opportunities to hug Tonya, hold her hand, and rub her feet or her back. Eventually, she thanked him for that. She softened and expressed gratitude for his persistence. "Even when I've been a cold fish, you kept letting me know you wanted things to be better." She acknowledged then that she had been afraid of responding too soon to his efforts. She hadn't wanted to "let him off the hook" and let him think that what he'd done wasn't as big a deal as it was to her. She hadn't wanted to give the impression that she wasn't upset and hurt. Alex knew that Tonya had been holding back, so that wasn't news to him. Nonetheless, it felt good to hear her acknowledge that she wasn't coming in his direction, and to understand why.

A month later Alex reported, "My time with Tonya is getting better and better all the time. Our focus has turned from my sexual problem. That hardly ever comes up anymore. Even when my indiscretions do come up, before long she dismisses the topic and moves on. Sort of like, "We've already talked about that and worked through it." Now we spend a lot more time talking about her depression, the difficulty she has being

motivated and happy about anything. She always feels like she's not enough. That thought goes through her mind constantly. I offer her compliments, but she struggles to accept them. Now, gradually, she seems to be taking more in, but she's felt the other way for so many years. She talks a lot about her youth. Her father never encouraged or praised her. She said, 'I've never felt like I was able to be what I was supposed to be.' She felt like she couldn't keep men happy. Even God: she felt like a disappointment to her Heavenly Father. It broke my heart when I heard that, because there isn't a kinder gentler person on the face of his earth. She's been singing for 40 plus years, but always focused on her mistakes and shortcomings after she performs. The last time she tried to sing, it was in church. I didn't hear a problem with it at all, but she sure did. She felt like she failed, and also felt like He let her down. He knew how badly she wanted to do well, and that she was doing it with a worshipping heart. She has talked to me over and over again about how devastating it is to feel abandoned and unwanted by God. I'm just listening and trying to support her and let her know that I hear her and feel for her over how hard that is. I've learned not to try to talk her out of it or sweep those feelings away.' Over the year-and-a-half I'd worked with Alex, I'd never seen him cry, but he was choking up and tearing up now. "I need to be there for her when she feels so discarded. I just have to keep making sure that I'm there for her when she's feeling so vulnerable, that I'm there for her when she needs me to be. She needs to feel God's touch and tenderness. She's missing it so much. If I can play any role in that, if she can feel his hand reaching out and touching her through my presence or attentiveness, I want desperately to help provide that for her."

A month later when we met Alex said, “Tonya and I are more cuddly, touchy. We seek out each other before either of us leaves or when we get back to the house. We’re not really home until we’ve touched base with each other. We talk in bed at night. We’ve been leaving the TV off and taking time to just hold each other.” They’d taken a trip to the Montana and stayed in a cabin on a remote lake. “After we got back from that getaway Tonya said that it was the happiest she can remember ever feeling,” Alex recalled with a contented smile. “We were in the moment, enjoying each other. There were no pressures: the phones didn’t work, we didn’t have email. We were nestled in this huge old-growth forest. We took long walks on the beach holding hands. Our relationship, our intimacy, our communication, our concern for each other—everything’s been growing very well. We pulled our chairs up to the picture window looking out over the lake and held hands while I read a book and she worked on Sudoku puzzles.”

Later that session, when we were talking about his individual recovery, Alex said, “Because of how close we are and my sense of the impact my behavior has had on her, temptations don’t have much impact on me these days. That’s been one of the biggest changes. I had little sense before of the impact my behavior had on her. I had convinced myself that it was only affecting me. Before this process I didn’t realize the pain and impact it created for Tonya. I honestly believed in the early stages that she didn’t care that much. Particularly with the masturbation: I had convinced myself that it was a personal thing that didn’t hurt anyone else.”

Fast-forwarding another month, Alex reported, “The assignments we received in marriage counseling have become standard practice in our relationship. We take time every evening to talk and hold each other. We make a bigger deal of the hellos and

goodbyes, good mornings and good nights. I go find her when I get home and make a point of reconnecting. I didn't realize what a big deal those moments had become until I came home one afternoon and couldn't find her. She usually leaves a note, but this time she hadn't expected me to get back before she did. A couple of her friends in the neighborhood had come over and talked her into going on a walk with them. I tell you, I was walking around that house like a lost puppy. I was so glad when she got home and I could see her, give her a hug, and check in about the day.

“The gradual shift has continued and now in our conversations there's even less focus on the sexual mistakes I've made. Now it's about us and about her. Never feeling like she's enough, and the way my behavior a year-and-a-half ago reinforced that. We had a very good relationship when we were dating and courting and during the first part of our marriage, but it has new depth now. I don't think I *understood* her the way I do now. As horrible as my behavior was, something good has come from it. It's strengthened and helps us get closer emotionally. Maybe that's the way it is—whenever someone's with you through experiences like that, you get closer. My love and appreciation is greater now because she's been there for me in my hardship. And now she's grateful because I'm there for her in her struggle. She deserves to feel better about herself. She's the only one who sees herself as inadequate; everyone else sees her as good and accomplished. Most of the time I just listen and try to understand, but some of the time I can't help sharing my feelings about her. She's getting better at taking compliments. I'm almost grateful that she has a bit of this struggle so that I can be a part of the solution and show her my gratitude for helping me solve my issues. We plan to renew our wedding vows in a couple of years, once my disciplinary process with our

church is complete. It will be a nice chance to recommit. I'm hoping that it might be a breakthrough for her to realize I was willing to go through whatever process I needed to be with her forever. I so want her to have the confidence that she is enough."

At the end of the session, Alex summed it up: "Things are progressing well. I was impatient in the beginning, but now I have a better understanding of how difficult the things she's working on are. I know they can't be rushed."

It was a couple of months before we met again, and Alex still looked at ease. "Tonya had surgery. It was a good experience to be there waiting on her. I love her and want so much to be for her what she truly deserves. I did the big weekly dinner for our kids and grandkids on Sunday—cut up potatoes and put the roast in the Crock-pot. My daughters brought a salad and desert. For three or four days she was in bed and I looked after her. I stayed home from work during those mornings. I'd help her get going and wash her wound, put ointment on it, and cover it with fresh bandaging. Twice a day I'm her nurse like that. She is so appreciative and feels bad that I have to take the time away from work. I don't feel bad at all—it's bonding for us to have this experience together. It's so different now, so much better. It makes me excited about the future."

Finally, I asked Alex about how he felt his individual recovery was going. "I don't feel much of a pull back to the addiction. The strengthening of our relationship is probably the reason I don't feel any need to seek validation or intimacy anywhere else. We don't have sex as much as I'd like, partly due to Tonya's health issues. I'm fine with that because the emotional connection is so close. We are the best of friends. We enjoy spending time together. She keeps talking about our vacation in Montana, saying 'It was the best vacation we've ever had.' We've backpacked in New Zealand, sailed in the

Caribbean, and been to some other exotic places. This one was different because we were close and open with each other. I enjoyed it as much as she did. The connection between us has expanded, and that, in turn, has totally deflated, totally taken away any pressure to go back to the destructive behavior. It's been months since I've even had a desire to masturbate or go back to worse stuff than that. In a way, I've been mystified by the loss of that appetite, and in fact at times almost frightened by the lack of urge. I've wondered if perhaps I had a new medical problem. I've never been here before. Throughout my life, as far back as I can remember, I've had that compulsive drive. Now I'll feel sexual feelings here and there and realize that I haven't lost the ability to have them, which is a relief in a way. However, they don't feel imperative, they're not obligatory. It feels so liberating to not have my life dominated by sexual thoughts and compulsions."