

Addicted to porn Pornography flows freely into homes, thanks to the Internet. But is it breaking the bonds between men and women?

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"Lou," broke off a five-year relationship with a man who was addicted to pornography and two years later she is still feeling the effects. "Ann," has been divorced for more than a year and blames the break-up of her 17-year marriage on her ex-spouse's addiction to porn. "Dirty, degraded, hurt and stupid" are the feelings Lou, 56, says she is left with. Ann, 62, says she only feels anger and hatred. Both women, of Bay City, opted not to use their real names for this story.

Pornography addiction may be the latest malady for those living in the Information Age. By some counts, the porn industry offers more than 4 million sites on the Internet, generating \$12 billion in annual commerce in the U. S. alone. A tracking firm, comScore Media Metrix, says about 40 percent of Internet users in the U. S. visit adult sites each month. And as with other addictions, the shame, guilt and pain may be just as great for the person in a relationship with the porn addict as it is for the addict.

Robert J. Kohn, of B-K Consultants Inc., 1300 S. Grant St., is a certified social worker who's treated plenty of porn addicts in his profession as a counselor. Kohn has also seen the flip side of the coin - the nonaddicted partner, who may have all the signs of the classic co-dependent - guilt, shame, low self-esteem and low self-worth.

The nonaddicted partner may feel responsible for the break-up if the relationship ends because they couldn't meet the addict's expectations. They may feel demoralized because they can't compete with the glossed-over porn images and porn stars who've been surgically enhanced,

liposuctioned or photo-altered. And though they are not addicted themselves, they can become just as sick as the addict, Kohn said, in addition to being confused, frustrated and angry. "The women think, 'What is it about me?' and it's not about them," Kohn said. "They think, 'What can I do?' and there is no answer."

For Lou the shame is still so intense that she has never talked about it until now. She never even told her two adult children why she ended the relationship. "I didn't know what they'd think of me," Lou said. "I was afraid they would think I was stupid ... It's something you can't say. It makes you feel like you're nothing."

A mouse click away

While pornography has always been available in magazines and movies, the Internet has made it much more accessible. People who may be embarrassed to go to an X-rated theater or step into the adult room at the local video store now can access page after page of porn in the privacy of their homes.

Adult film stars are becoming mainstream celebrities and household names, holding meet-and-greets, autograph signings and photo opportunities. Porn actress Mary Carey attended a VIP Republican fundraiser in Washington in mid-March. Another, Jenna Jameson, penned the best-selling book "How to Make Love Like a Porn Star" and hosted a pre-Super Bowl party in Detroit in February. And a bar in Sanford recently hosted an event at which fans could have their photos taken with Internet porn stars.

Interest in porn is age-old and normal, says psychologist David Greenfield of West Hartford, Conn., an expert on Internet behaviors, but it can become a destructive obsession for those who indulge in it at the expense of healthy relationships. Easy availability is part of the issue.

"It's not your father's porn," he said. "With little or no effort, as long as you have a computer, you can access some of the most stimulating content on the planet." Greenfield estimates that for up to 10 percent of porn users, relationships suffer - with many husbands spending so much time online that they cease to have sex with their wives.

What may begin as curiosity can easily escalate to dependence, and then obsession and full-blown addiction, said Bay City therapist Kohn.

"What they're looking for is what I call a mood-altering situation," Kohn said. Men are more likely to become addicted to porn, though women are not immune, he said. And clients rarely come to Kohn because they are addicted to pornography. What happens is that a woman who is having marital problems will visit his office and during counseling, her partner's porn addiction will come into the picture as an issue, he said. And Kohn said the problem is escalating, as he's seeing more and more clients with the problem.

The addiction

Porn may be more pervasive than ever, but activists and experts disagree over the extent of harm it causes. Paul Cambria, general counsel for the porn industry's Adult Freedom Foundation, says pornography is not a problem for the average person. For every couple driven apart by porn, Cambria said, there are others whose relationship is enlivened. He dismisses contentions that porn is highly addictive or brain-damaging.

Experts on the other side say online porn is as addictive as crack cocaine. "The Internet is the perfect delivery system for antisocial behavior - it's free, it's piped into your house," said Mary Anne Layden, a psychologist and addiction expert at the University of Pennsylvania. She says many of her patients, rather than improving their sex lives with porn, suffer sexual dysfunction.

For Ann, her husband's addiction progressed to the point where he was always on the computer, often sitting in his home office with the curtains closed, clicking off whenever she walked into the room. In the end he preferred to be alone in front of the computer instead of with her. "It was a lonely feeling, being married and being without him," Ann said.

Mark Laaser of Eden Prairie, Minn., says he frequently sought out pornography and engaged in extramarital sex for more than 20 years, starting in college and continuing through a career as pastor and counselor. He now runs workshops, and consults with church congregations on the issue.

"I've seen the damage it does to marriages, to families," he said. Though he stressed the need for individual will power, Laaser also faulted the porn industry for employing aggressive online technologies that "besiege you." "Sometimes it's not a matter of free will," he said. "It's a matter of invasion."

The aftermath

Lou said that before becoming involved in a relationship with a porn addict, she was outgoing, had friends and dated. "Sexually, I guess I was as normal as anyone." All that is changed now, she said. "You think less of yourself. You think you're only good for one thing, and apparently I'm not good at that if pornography has to be the starting point of everything." Now she says she has a "low trust factor" and has no interest in getting into another relationship or even dating.

Kohn said while Lou's reaction is a natural defense mechanism to keep from being hurt again, it's not healthy. "Repressing it is no good," Kohn said. "You have to bring it out and face it to move on." Kohn recommends getting counseling, getting involved in a support group and talking to others who've been through the same thing. Ann says she hopes one day to be able to get beyond her anger and hatred. "Some day I'm hoping that I can

forgive him," she said.

For the addict themselves, admitting to the problem and being willing to make an effort to do something about it is the first step, Kohn said. The person will likely have to seek professional help and attend a sexual addiction group.

Across America, compulsive porn use has spawned hundreds of support groups, treatment programs and Web sites where heartbroken spouses - mostly wives -- swap stories of their mates' obsessions.

In Bay City, the porn addict can find support at Sexual Addictions Anonymous meetings, but no such support groups exist for the co-dependent partner.

Lou, who felt such relief after finally talking about her relationship with a porn addict, is sure that there are many local women in her shoes and she may start up a support group.

- The Associated Press contributed to this report.