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Internet Pornography: Raising the Alarm

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Internet pornography is big business. In 2002, Web sites that peddled pornography and sex were the largest income generators of the Internet, exceeding both computer hardware sales and software sales.

Most of this traffic, 70 percent, occurs during normal business hours. One in six employees are having difficulties with online sexual activity. Two out of three companies have disciplined employees for misuse of the Internet, and 41 percent of those were using pornography. The most common word entered into search engines is "sex."

Most pornography on the Internet is legal, although it is an immoral industry that promotes the abusive exploitation of people. On the other hand, child Internet pornography is a crime. Internet child pornography in 2003 alone generated $3 billion. In 2002, U.S. customs officials estimated that 100,000 Web sites peddle child pornography. Twenty percent of young people who use the Internet regularly were exposed to unwanted sexual solicitations in the last year, a significant threat to their safety.

Forty million U.S. adults regularly visit Internet pornography sites. Internet pornography can entice a vulnerable person, quickly escalating into an addiction. The Internet encourages escapism in some users and may lead to a kind of dissociative state. Developing an Internet fantasy life may be used to substitute for one's real life, particularly if one's real life is perceived as unsatisfying.

A Doubly Powerful Addiction. Internet porn is doubly powerful by combining the addictive nature of the Internet with the addictive nature of sex. While most users of Internet pornography would clinically be considered to be "recreational," there are a significant percentage who are vulnerable to becoming addicted.

Internet pornography has a "Triple A Engine" which fuels its use: Anonymity, Accessibility and Affordability. It appears anonymous because one can use it in the privacy of one's office or room, and not visit an "adult" bookstore. It is accessible 24 hours a day. And it is affordable: many sites are free although there are pay sites.

But Internet use is not completely anonymous, and the FBI regularly conducts stings which result in numerous arrests, occasionally including priests. Some priests have gone to jail for using Internet child pornography.

It seems that there are no victims or any moral consequences. This is not true. Men and women pose for these pictures. There is a denigrating and abusive industry that promotes the sexual victimization of individuals for financial profit, including children. Plus, men and women who view such materials are committing an immoral act and thus they, too, are harmed.

Sadly, many individuals have found out that Internet pornography use can lead to tragic consequences. Internet sexual behavior is now one of most frequent reasons cited for divorce. Moreover, individuals, including minors, are lured into sexual victimization by predators. Also, people who are hooked on pornography may lose their families, their social lives and their jobs.

Signs of an Internet Addiction. Parishioners are increasingly confessing the sin of Internet porn use and pastors will find it helpful to know when the problem requires psychotherapeutic attention. Some signs of an Internet sex addiction: (1) increasing use of the Internet with an inability to

curtail it; (2) insisting on being left alone when using the computer and resenting intrusions; (3) not meeting one's real life relationship obligations and/or work responsibilities; (4) staying up late at night and being tired in the early morning; (5) lying about or hiding one's computer use and Internet bills; (6) living a fantasy life online and using a false identity.

Addicted persons may spend hours viewing Internet porn or engaging in sexually charged conversations on the Internet. They may use false or altered identities. They frequently find their real life relationships suffering due to a lack of attention. They become secretive about their double life and try to hide their behavior. They resent interruptions or any attempt to curtail their addiction.

Such behavior can escalate into masturbating while online or scheduling a real-life sexual liaison with someone met on the Internet. The destructive possibilities of such sexual encounters are obvious.

Those who are particularly vulnerable are isolated, dependent individuals suffering with low self-esteem. They may have limited social skills and use the internet to manage stress. People with depressive symptoms may be tempted to use cybersex to medicate their depression and to bolster their self-esteem.

In short, for many addicted to cybersex, it becomes a dysfunctional search for connection and relationship. Hence, any long term successful treatment will include, not only prevention steps to limit online sexual activities, but also developing life-giving, mature, chaste relationships with "real" people.

Men tend to be sexually aroused by visual stimuli, hence the predominance of men using visual pornography. Women, on the other hand, tend to become sexually aroused through relationships,

hence their use of sexually explicit chat rooms. However, these are general trends. Some women do use visual pornography and many men frequent sexual chat rooms.

Parishioners who are engaged in Internet sexual behaviors as an addiction will likely benefit from professional care and/or attendance at such self-help groups as SAA, SA, SCA or other 12-step groups for sex addicts. There are resources available on a number of Web sites such as: recoveryzone.org, netaddiction.com, and sca-recovery.org.

Personal Prevention Steps

Individuals with Internet sex problems can take steps to minimize or prevent such problems in their own living places. They can buy software that limits access to sex sites. Similarly, some Internet service providers (ISPs) provide family-friendly usage and block access to objectionable sites. Do a net search for "family-oriented Internet service providers" to find an appropriate one.

Using one's own real name in an e-mail address and Internet interactions can decrease the feeling of anonymity and likelihood of developing an online fantasy persona. One of the addicting aspects of the Internet is its inherent escapism. People often use false identities, attempting to preserve their anonymity and sometimes presenting an idealized image to others.

For example, shy and inhibited individuals with negative body images may try to present themselves as outgoing and athletic. At times, adults who sexually prey on vulnerable teens may take on the persona of an adolescent.

Leaving the computer in a public space and limiting its use to daylight hours can decrease anonymity. It is particularly dangerous for those with cyberaddictions to use their computers late at night in a private space. Putting computers in hallways or common rooms and leaving the

computer screen facing others can be a deterrent to illicit computer use.

Confiding in some close friends or getting an online sponsor and regularly revealing one's Internet usage in total can be a way of putting some accountability in place.

Institutional Prevention Steps

The Church is well advised to enact policies and procedures to detect, prevent and respond to Internet misuse. We are naïve in believing there are no problems with the thousands of people the Church employs in its chanceries, schools, hospitals, rectories and other institutions.

Several studies have brought to light a surprising percentage of individuals admitting to using their work computers for sexual pursuits. Typically, 12 percent of women and 20 percent of men admit using their computers at work for sexual purposes.

It is safe to say that some employees in our institutions are using their work computers for illicit sexual activities. It is important for the life and health of our institutions, and for the individuals involved, to uncover these problems and to take appropriate action, including steps toward healing and prevention.

Essential for any institution with a central server linked to the Internet is a monitoring program. These software programs provide printouts of which Internet sites are visited and for how long. Such monitoring is becoming standard practice in industry; 63 percent of large and medium sized companies are monitoring employees' computer usage, and the percentage is rising. However, employees should be notified up front.

Computer Audit

Finally, whenever personnel changes occur, including our pastors, there ought to be an audit of the individuals' computers. This will reduce false allegations, should pornography be discovered. And it provides a concrete step toward providing accountability of computer usage.

The Internet is a wonderful instrument when used with prudence. It can be used to educate people in a healthy understanding of human sexuality. But Internet cybersex has already become a major threat. It is big business; it is highly addictive; it is morally wrong; and it can be dangerous. If child porn is involved, it is illegal and those caught will go to jail. It's time to publicly raise the alarm with all our Catholic people.

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