Dear Alice,

My boyfriend of two years and I are rarely having sex. About once a month, down from twice a week. I have discovered that he is very involved in reading porn mags and also looking at porn online. I confronted him, he said he would try to focus more on me, not porn. Then I found that nothing changed and he was still looking at porn. He told me that he believes that he is addicted to porn. He says that he keeps telling himself not to look at it, but always does. He threw all his porn in the garbage and told me to put a site blocker on his computer. My questions: Can he really be addicted to porn? Are the steps that we have taken to control this problem sufficient? I don't know where to go to get help with this and I am really torn apart. Please tell me where to go from here.

Signed,
focus on us

Answer

Dear focus on us,

Porn can certainly be a polarizing topic — some argue that it ruins marriages, leads to unhealthy sexual behaviors, and even encourages sexual aggression. On the other side, proponents say that it can enhance sex lives, provide a safe recreational outlet, and potentially reduce sexual assault. Unfortunately, research on whether it’s addictive or not is inconclusive. The type and amount of porn an individual consumes is difficult to measure, especially with the introduction of the internet, which allows people to access it anonymously. With that being said, pornography use hasn’t been classified as an addictive disorder and therefore no formal diagnostic criteria or recommended guidelines for treatment exist.

While there’s no formal diagnostic criteria, some search research indicates there still may be the potential for addictive behaviors, as excessive porn consumption has been described in some scientific literature as “online sexual compulsivity” or “problematic pornography use (POPU).” In addition, researchers point out that online porn use has the “triple A” factors of accessibility, affordability, and anonymity, which might make it more likely to become addictive. Further, some
research indicates that the processing in the brain from POPU reflects similarities to addictions to substances. Yet, medical professionals seem conflicted on whether or not problematic consumption of pornography is best considered a disorder of its own or a symptom of other disorders. There’s also a fear that pathologizing the behavior or deeming it a disorder will distract from other underlying issues, such as certain thought processes and feelings of shame that are driving the behavior. Still, the general consensus among researchers is that compulsive porn consumption isn’t a true addiction, at least as defined in the traditional clinical sense.

Although some people may struggle with porn consumption, people could find watching porn offers some benefits. For instance, they might feel that pornography provides access to sexual cues that match their specific sexual interests that aren’t available to them elsewhere. It could also be that pornography helps stimulate sexual function that’s difficult to sustain in other settings. It may be that people develop expectations from watching pornography that are unrealistic and can only be fulfilled by continuing to watch porn. On the other hand, it’s also possible that porn helps develop expectations that are something to which they aspire, and they find it helps to stimulate their sexual relationships.

This isn’t to say your boyfriend’s porn habits aren’t causing him and your relationship some trouble. Regardless of an official diagnosis, compulsively viewing pornographic materials to the point that it affects other areas of life, such as someone’s health, job, or relationships, might indicate the need to seek additional support. This is especially true when a person has tried on their own to stop the undesired behavior but are unsuccessful. If your boyfriend hasn’t been able to stop watching porn but would like to, despite attempts to do so, you could suggest that he talks with a mental health professional. Alternatively, or in addition, both you and your boyfriend could try therapy together, in the form of couples counseling. This may provide a platform for you both to talk openly about how these behaviors are affecting you and your relationship.

If you’re unsure about how to start the conversation with your boyfriend, you could try asking him questions such as: What exactly does he enjoy about porn? What does watching porn do for him (feelings, emotions, thoughts, etc.) that he may feel like he isn’t getting from other sources in his life? In some situations, compulsive behaviors are linked to other thoughts and needs in the person’s life. If your boyfriend is unsure about these issues or not comfortable discussing them with you directly, you could suggest working with a mental health professional to mediate the discussion and help you both process together.

As you reflect on your relationship, it’s also good to think about your wants and needs: What would an ideal sex life with your boyfriend look like? How often would you like to be intimate? What are your general feelings toward pornography or erotica? If the decrease in sex is related to something else, not his use of porn, will you still view his porn usage negatively? Would you be open discussing and addressing the other factors that are leading to the decrease in intimacy? Clarifying your feelings and thoughts about this situation may help you decide how to proceed.

Alice!

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