



We are *all* sexually broken. And we are all invited to participate in the love, forgiveness, and healing of Jesus. A beautiful blend of research, biblical truth, and personal stories, this 8-week combination book and workbook invites us to go deeper with the Lord and experience freedom from pornography.

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The Problem of Porn

WEEK 1

I (Joy) remember how my voice trembled as I barely gathered the courage to say the words, “I’m struggling with watching porn,” to my mentor over coffee.

Do you know what gave me that courage? Someone else went first. I heard a courageous woman share her story at a college student women’s event. Until that moment, I had never heard a woman admit that she struggled with sexual sin. I can still picture the event. Thirty college students all crammed into a living room, listening to every word of this brave woman sharing her story.

For the first time, I realized I wasn’t alone and that I wasn’t a total freak for being a woman who struggled with sexual sin.

In all my time in the church, I’d rarely heard someone talk about sexual struggles, and I had never heard a woman confess porn use. When I’ve heard Christian leaders address sexual struggle and temptation, they do so as if it’s only a man’s issue. This makes women who are struggling with porn, habitual masturbation, or other unwanted sexual desires feel even more shame. I honestly thought something might be wrong with me. What I’ve learned since then is that women struggle too!

More than one out of three visitors to adult sites are women, and this number grows each year.¹ In my doctoral research, I surveyed over one thousand Christian women. Sixty-nine percent of the women felt far from God because of their sexual shame surrounding their sexual sin, and 52 percent lived a secret life, hiding their sexual sin from others.² Thirty percent of the women surveyed shared they felt sexual shame because of their struggles with pornography and compulsive masturbation.³ These statistics show that you are not alone. Sadly, many women struggle in secret.

Women all around you are carrying similar struggles and shame. When we all remain silent, no one finds the freedom to step into the light. I’m so grateful that someone went first, giving me the permission and courage to be honest. Now I want to “go first” for you!

Why Porn Is a Problem

I (Joy) first saw porn in fifth grade. My friend and I returned from summer camp and went up to my room to play. I had a small laptop sitting on my desk and my friend said, “Let me show you something.” She pulled up images of things I had never seen before—I had no idea what pornography was. In the moment, my heart began to race and I felt a tingling in my body. These feelings made me question if we should be looking at the images. I quickly turned my back, shutting my bedroom door so my parents wouldn’t know what we were doing. After this incident, I wouldn’t look at porn again until college, but it awakened my sexual desires and curiosities.

In college, I turned back to porn as a form of education—I had questions about sex and no safe person to ask. What started out as curiosity quickly turned into a coping mechanism when I felt sad or lonely. Because I never heard anyone talk about porn being an issue, especially for women, I thought, “What’s the big deal with porn? At least I’m not sleeping around.”

These are common thoughts for many women who don’t see why porn is a problem. Pornography, hooking up, sexting, and other forms of sexual experimentation are a normal part of being a teen or young adult in today’s world. So is it really a big deal if you look at pornography to address your pain, loneliness, and boredom?

We are writing this book from the perspective of two women who love God. We believe that He created sexual desire for a purpose, and that pornography is one way that we learn to misuse the gift of sex. Throughout our time together, you will see us return to this truth: your freedom journey happens when you find freedom from sin, shame, and bondage in a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Pornography is so common in our world today that we can’t even imagine what life might be like without it. In some ways, porn affects us even when we are not looking at it. Today, we are going to look at three of the biggest ways porn hurts us. What you are going

to read probably won't surprise you, but it may remind you that pornography acts as a thief, sneaking in and stealing something precious. As you read this, the purpose is not to pile on shame, but to highlight the importance of your freedom journey. We are starting with the *bad news* about pornography, but we promise we won't stay there.

PORN KEEPS US FROM OUR DEEPER LONGINGS

Imagine going to the doctor and hearing the alarming news that you are seriously malnourished. Your blood work shows that your body has not been getting the iron, calcium, and vitamins it needs to be healthy. In shock, you tell the doctor, "I don't understand! I never miss a meal!"

When the doctor asks you about your diet, you tell him that you eat the same thing every day: two donuts for breakfast, a hot dog and French fries for lunch, and a big plate of nachos and cookies for dinner. What's the problem? Your food has no nutritional value. These manufactured foods with high levels of sugar and fat keep you feeling too full for you to ever crave healthy food.

Porn works a lot like this. You have a natural desire for intimacy. You also have the natural ability to awaken sexual desire and enjoy sex within the committed relationship of marriage.

Porn portrays fake intimacy, while God and community provide authentic intimacy.

Porn shortcuts this natural desire and feeds you unnatural, manufactured pleasure.

You were not created for sex; you were created for intimacy. You may be sexually acting out every day, but you are "malnourished" when it comes to intimacy.

*You were not created
for sex; you were
created for intimacy.*

Have you ever been surrounded by people but have felt alone and unknown? When I (Joy) was secretly struggling with porn, I would leave social events with friends and go home to watch porn. I thought porn would fix my longings and desires, but what I really needed was deep friendships and authentic community. Friends who knew my struggle, yet loved me. Friends who could point me back to God and encourage me in my healing journey. I was "malnourished" in my earthly relationships and in my relationship with God, yet I was looking to porn to fill my emptiness. At the end of the day, porn didn't cure my problems—I felt even emptier than before.

Describe a time when porn or hooking up made you feel even emptier.

Read Isaiah 55:1–2. List some of the ways you have “spent money on bread that doesn’t satisfy.”

PORN SEPARATES US FROM GOD

As you will learn throughout this book, God has a very specific design and intent for your sexuality. Choosing to look at porn or sleep around is choosing to do what we want instead of seeking God for our comfort and fulfillment. While there are many reasons why you might turn to porn, you can’t get around the fact that using pornography is sin. It’s a choice to do things your own way rather than turning to God.

Daily, we make small choices that can either lead us to God or away from God. Our decisions can bring us closer to Him, like spending time with Him or going to a community group. Or our choices can separate us from Him and pull us further into sin. For me (Joy), those wrong choices felt so small, but they added up over time. Choosing to watch certain shows or follow certain people on social media didn’t hurt me at first, but seeing them over and over again negatively formed my desires. I was being sexually disciplined by what I was watching, and that led my heart closer to porn than to God. I was choosing to walk in darkness just by the small choices I made.

My struggle with porn didn’t start out this way, but I got to a point where I *wanted* to look at it. As hard as it is to say this, I desired porn and the rush and release of endorphins it brought me.

Read 1 John 1:5–10. How would you describe the difference between walking in “light” and walking in “darkness”?

Based on this passage, how does sexual sin keep you from a close relationship with God and other people?

What does this passage promise will happen if we confess our sins?

PORN TREATS PEOPLE LIKE OBJECTS

Porn impacts not just the way you think about sex, but how you view people. When we engage in porn, we are feeding a culture of selfishness. Porn trains you to approach sex with a selfish perspective. It gives you what you want when you want it. Intimacy (sexual, or any kind of intimacy) is the exact opposite. To build an intimate relationship, you have to approach the other person with the sensitivity and self-control to understand and address their needs.

Porn teaches you to *consume*. While consuming pornography, you take what you want. **Intimacy requires you to *connect***—to take intentional steps toward vulnerability, risk, and unselfish love. Sometimes couples say that they watch porn to learn how to “spice things up.” Porn and erotica (literature written to sexually arouse the reader and sometimes referred to as soft porn because it is less graphic than porn) actually do the exact opposite. Maybe at first things will “spice up,” but consuming porn and erotica will eventually erode the trust and communication needed for a loving and fulfilling sex life.

How has porn taught you to consume rather than connect?

In what ways do you think pornography in general is influencing the culture around you?

That's the bad news. But the good news is this: not only can you be set free, but God wants to heal and redeem the gifts porn has stolen from you!

Tomorrow, I (Joy) will share more of my story, but I can tell you the ending now: God healed and redeemed everything that porn stole from me. I'm living proof that healing is possible. Right now you might have trouble believing this for your own life, but I pray that by the end of this book your faith will grow as you watch miracles happen.

Why Porn Isn't Your Biggest Problem

**Trigger warning: this next section contains mention of sexual assault.*

Night after night, I scrolled through porn on my phone. Images flickered across my screen, but they always left me longing for more. One image or video was never enough to rid my loneliness or cure my sexual desire. Just like a drug addiction, one hit never satisfied me. Over time, I needed harder porn and more variety. I thought porn was my biggest problem. It turns out this wasn't true. It was a problem in my life, but it was a symptom of a larger problem. Porn was my way to cope and numb the pain and loneliness I felt every day because of the sexual assault I experienced in college.⁴

Entering college, I longed to be loved. At my college orientation day, I met a guy and was date-raped that night. My body was taken, and I was left exposed. Depressed and filled with shame, I began to question God. Did He care? Why did He let this happen? Was it my fault? I had so many questions. I struggled with blaming myself, even though it was not my fault.

If you've been abused or experienced rape, I am so sorry. I know the emotional pain that is attached to sexual trauma. The sexual abuse you experienced was not your fault. Read this line again—it was not your fault. This truth is so hard to believe for those of us who have been abused.

After being date-raped on my third day of college, I quickly turned to porn to: 1) ask questions about sex, and 2) find comfort from the trauma. The pain from that rape dramatically changed my life. I went from being a student with As and Bs in high school to having to withdraw from a college class. Instead of being a social butterfly, I stayed in my dorm room, watching porn to escape from the emotional weight of the sexual trauma.

When I doubted that any man would love me once he heard my story, I turned to porn.

When sadness was the only emotion I could feel and I just wanted to feel an ounce of pleasure, I turned to the only comforter I knew: porn. Porn never provided lasting pleasure, comfort, or hope. I felt sneaky and dirty—hiding away in my college apartment while my roommate slept in the room next door or looking at screens in the middle of the night when I couldn't sleep.

Porn became my way of coping with deeper problems and unmet needs.

Your sexual sin might feel like the biggest problem in your life right now because it is taking up so much space in your mind or because it's controlling your life. While sexual sin is a problem in your life, it's not the *biggest* problem.

For you to be set free, it is critical for you to identify and address the problem beneath your sexual sins. I'll put it bluntly. In some ways, porn worked for me. It distracted me from my loneliness and temporarily numbed my pain. But the "cure" of porn just added to my underlying shame. In order to walk away from my porn use, I had to learn to address the problems porn was hiding.

In what ways do you think porn may be "working for you" as a way to cope with difficulty in your life?

While every woman's story is unique, here are a few common reasons why women turn to pornography or casual sex relationships.

YOU NEED RELATIONSHIPS

Sarah had recently become a Christian. Over lunch, she honestly shared with me (Juli) about her battle to stop having casual sex. "There is this guy I met at work. We barely know each other, but I am attracted to him. We started flirting and the next thing I knew, I found myself in bed with him. How do I stop wanting to have sex with random guys like this?"

I asked her, "Did you feel better after you had sex with him?" She honestly answered no.

Then I asked her to reflect on what she got out of the encounter. Was there any moment during which it was satisfying? “I just wanted to be held and touched. It felt great in the moment to connect to someone even so briefly. And then I felt disgusting and rejected afterward.”

We live in a world where it’s easy to feel isolated. You weren’t created to live in a small apartment all by yourself, working sixty hours a week, and being entertained by a screen during your free time. You were made for intimacy. Whether or not you are married or have children, you need touch, you need to share life with people, and you need to be known.

While our pace of life often sabotages intimacy, it offers sex as a cheap replacement. Sarah didn’t hook up for sex. She used sex so she could experience a fleeting moment of connection and affirmation.

Clues that your struggle may be fed by loneliness:

- Temptation is greatest when you are or feel alone.
- Even if you are surrounded by people, you feel isolated, unseen, or unloved.

How would you describe your current community?

What role do you think loneliness might play in your sexual struggle?

YOU NEED COMFORT

When you have sex or masturbate to pornography, your body releases “feel good” chemicals like endorphins, oxytocin, and serotonin. God designed this release to reinforce the bonding between a husband and wife. Over time, a married couple learns to seek comfort and pleasure by pursuing and responding to one another.

Many learn to use sex or masturbation as a form of self-medicating. Sexual temptation

is less about the desire to have sex and more about escaping feelings of anxiety, restlessness, or depression.

One of the leading movements combating porn is called Fight the New Drug, reminding us that sex can be misused as a drug because it can hijack the natural pleasure centers of the brain. You then become dependent on the drug to navigate the challenges of life or even to relax or fall asleep. This is not how God intends us to use the gift of sex, whether we are married or not.

As I (Joy) shared earlier, I used pornography and masturbation to cope with the pain and shame I felt from being date-raped. I also became dependent on it to fall asleep.

Clues that your need for comfort might be underlying your sexual desire:

- Your sexual temptation is greatest when you experience physical or emotional discomfort.
- You regularly feel anxious or depressed.
- You use sex to reward yourself for working hard.

What role do you think discomfort and pain may play in your porn use?

What are some specific things that cause you to feel anxious, depressed, or emotionally distressed?

YOU NEED TO BE “SPENT”

Research shows that people who engage in demanding exercise routines have lower sex drives.⁵ One reason for this correlation is depleted testosterone by too much work and lack of rest. While depleting our testosterone because of overwork is a bad thing, this also shows that God gives us many ways to direct the energy that may be experienced as a sexual drive.

Testosterone is a “green light” hormone in the body that plays a role in risk-taking, competitive behaviors, energy, and concentration. While the amount of testosterone is greater in men than women, both genders experience a higher libido as testosterone increases. Although it’s a bit more complicated than this, think of testosterone as a regularly generated fuel that burns up when you “spend” it.

God gave us testosterone and other brain chemicals not only for their role in sex, but also as a natural means of prompting us to influence our world in meaningful ways. Jay Stringer in his groundbreaking book, *Unwanted*, notes that one of the strongest correlations for people battling pornography is boredom and a lack of purpose.⁶ When you wake up every day to exciting projects and challenges, you are addressing your emotional and biological need to positively change the world. You may also find that, by the end of the day, you are too “spent” to think about sex.

Clues that boredom might be underlying your sexual desire:

- You experience more sexual temptation when life seems dull.
- You don’t feel challenged in your everyday activities (including work, hobbies, or service).
- You often feel restless at night.

What role do you think boredom might be playing in your sexual struggles?

YOU NEED HEALING

Kaley grew up in a home that looked perfect on the outside, but behind closed doors, her father sexually abused her throughout her childhood. While as an adult Kaley hated sex, she also found herself in a cycle of sexually acting out, followed by self-contempt and shame. She felt like her life was spiraling out of control after two abortions, a life-threatening STD, and the loss of her job because of sexual misconduct.

Why would a woman like Kaley continue to put her life at risk and compromise her future because of sex? Wouldn't the abuse she suffered as a child make her want to avoid sex instead of insatiably seek it?

Trauma from our childhood often plays out and seeks expression in our sexual temptations. This is true not just of childhood sexual trauma, but also our early experiences of feeling out of control, abandoned, neglected, or dominated. We may be drawn to sexual experiences, including porn, as an ineffective way to address painful patterns from the past.

Clues that needing healing might be underlying your sexual desire:

- You find yourself drawn into sexual situations or fantasies that also repel you (for example, BDSM, which stands for bondage, dominance, sadism, and masochism).
- You have a love-hate relationship toward sexual outlets.
- You have significant trauma in your past that you haven't worked through with a counselor.

How might wounds from your past possibly impact your current struggle with pornography or other sexual temptation?

Your journey through this book is going to help you become more aware of the desires and wounds that play into your porn struggle. Overcoming temptation is about more than just saying no. As you grow in your relationship with God, you may find that He helps you address sexual temptation by meeting you in the underlying wellspring of those temptations.

Have you ever considered that your porn use may cover up deeper issues? Why or why not?

Of the four needs listed here (relationships, comfort, activity, and healing), which seems to be the one that most aligns with your experience of sexual temptation?

How We Get Hooked

For many women, their struggle with pornography began early on. Twelve years old is the average age of first exposure to porn.⁷ (As an average, that means that many girls are first exposed at even younger ages!) More than half of teens weren't looking for it but were sexually awakened by accidentally seeing graphic sexual images or experiences.⁸ Like my story, it could be a friend or family member who first opened up the internet to share an exciting image with you. While some women were introduced to porn by a significant other to "learn" about sex, others intentionally look at porn because of curiosity or questions about sex. Online porn is often the sex education of today's teen (and child).

HOW PORN DESTROYS YOUR BRAIN

Many helpful books and documentaries explain the neuroscience of the brain during sexual experiences.⁹ This is a short summary of how our brains react:

God created us to experience pleasure when engaging in healthy things like eating good food, going on a walk in nature, or getting a hug. We experience this feeling of pleasure when our brain releases a neurochemical called dopamine. The brain associates the feeling of pleasure with certain activities. When a woman starts by looking at simple images, viewing sexually explicit social media, or reading a romance novel, dopamine gets released, making a connection in the brain that links the action with pleasure. This makes you want to return again and again to that activity. Pornography hijacks this "pleasure center" of your brain so that even normal sexual experiences are no longer exciting or pleasurable.

Looking at the same explicit picture of the same sexting exchange won't give you the same amount of pleasure. This is called "tolerance." You need something different, usually more explicit, to get the same level of pleasure you once experienced.

The more you turn to porn, the more you are reinforcing the addictive behavior, and the more dopamine is needed.¹⁰ The dopamine rush from sexual thoughts or activity is so

powerful that it can override your brain's ability to make wise decisions.¹¹

Just as with drug addiction, a person can develop a tolerance for and become desensitized to different types of sexual sin. This is often the case for women who start with soft-core porn like erotica. Soon, a woman may turn to hard-core porn. Over time, porn may no longer satisfy her inner desires. Just like in drug addiction, the addict will turn to bigger and harder products.¹² She will need to spend more time viewing porn and changing the variety of images and videos she watches. This was true for me (Joy). I found myself watching things I would never have imagined watching just months before.

Eventually, you might even want to experience what you see in person by acting out sex scenes in relationships.

Not only is sexual sin addictive, but it's damaging to your brain.¹³ It reconstructs your neurological pathways and bonds you to the images because God created you for intimacy.

Have you experienced needing more and more sexual encounters and a variety of types to increase your dopamine levels? If so, how does it feel to learn about the addictiveness of a dopamine rush through sexual experiences and how it impacts your brain?

We want to tell you the effects of sexual sin on our brains to point you toward a bigger picture of God's design for sexuality. God created us as sexual beings, and our sexual desires are a good gift from Him! We need to learn how to steward this gift in singleness and marriage. Using porn or casual hookups is a misuse of the powerful experience of sex and will likely cause more pain and loneliness in your life.

WHAT IS SEXUAL ADDICTION?

Not everyone who struggles with sexual sin is addicted. All sexual sin is wrong, but addiction describes a cycle of temptation and sin that feels beyond their power to break.

If you've tried changing your habits and finding healing, but you always end up doing the same thing over and over, then you might be stuck in the cycle of addiction. If you

discover that you are addicted to sex or porn, you will need more support than this book can provide. Use this resource as a first step in your process of healing, and find a licensed professional counselor or ministry that has expertise in addressing sexual addiction.

How often is your mind consumed by the thought to turn toward sexual sin? What percentage of your life is filled with unwanted sexual behavior?

Scripture warns us to “not be mastered by anything” (1 Cor. 6:12). Read this verse in context in the passage 1 Corinthians 6:9–20. As a Christian, what does it mean to not be mastered by anything?

FORGING A NEW PATH

The good news is this: we worship a God who redeems and restores our broken sexuality. We believe you will find hope through this book as God reveals your pain and begins to change it “to bestow on [you] a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair” (Isa. 61:3).

Not only does God restore the beauty from ashes, but He also restores and renews our brains. We can have hope that even if we have been negatively affected by porn, we can be healed!

God created our brains to constantly be responding to what’s going on around us. We can slowly rewire our brains to respond to healthy inputs rather than being flooded by triggers and temptation. This is not a “quick fix” but comes with the determination to honor God with our minds and actions.

Read Ephesians 4:17–24 and focus on verse 23, “to be made new in the attitude of your minds.” Another version says, “to be renewed in the spirit of your minds” (Eph. 4:23 ESV). What does it mean to be made new or renewed in our minds?

Write your response to the hope that you can find in knowing God can renew your mind after struggling with the addictiveness of sexual sin.

We are going to spend the rest of this book in the pursuit of freedom. Whether you are addicted to porn or not, God *can* renew your mind, take away your shame, and speak His love into the deepest places in your heart. How do I know? Because He has done it for me! My friend, true freedom is possible, but it’s a marathon rather than a sprint. Hang in there because you are not running alone!

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