

**Sexual Addictions, Compulsions and Pornography in the Family and Society**

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Interview with Art A. Bennett, M.A., Director of [Alpha Omega Clinic and Consultation Services](#) and founder of its [Unity Restored](#) website for those seeking freedom from sex based addictions, compulsions and pornography.

1. Mr. Bennett, I understand that in addition to being a director of a clinic of psychology and family counseling, you also have developed a website as a resource for those with sexual addictions or compulsions. Could you share what prompted your efforts in this area?

*“As Director of a Clinic whose mission it is to integrate the Catholic Christian faith into its work of providing counseling and consultation, I was approached by the office of a local Bishop because of the growing concern among priests who were being approached by people with these sorts of problems. Although there were already some websites out there discussing this issue, the Bishop was going to be drafting a pastoral letter and he wanted something that was more practical in focus than what was typically available. We at Alpha Omega Clinic felt that this was a critical thing to do, provide a practical resource, as we consider the human dimension of the problem - the spiritual dimension of the problem. So we created a web site that integrated the principles of psychology with the Catholic faith that could help people understand and address the problem.”*

2. What is the impact of a developing addiction to pornography on the person’s sense of self &ndash;worth?

*“A person’s self-worth takes a big hit when they develop an addiction to pornography, but often people who develop this problem already have difficulties with their self-worth. Dr. Patrick Carnes, an author and psychologist, was the first to suggest that sexual behavior could be addictive. He has written extensively on this, and notes that these people have faulty core beliefs in four areas. First, there is a high degree of self-loathing; second, they don’t want people to know what they are really like or who they really are, because they fear being rejected; third, they don’t really believe that human relationships will meet their needs, that is, they have incredible difficulty in trusting others and forming interpersonal relationships. And fourth, they believe that sex is the most important thing in their life. As Catholics, we believe that sex is very important and can be sacred. But it is not the number one most important thing. So on the front end they start out with a low sense of self-worth, but then as they engage in sexual compulsions, their self-image becomes even lower, because it impacts their ability to relate with others. They also experience a lot of guilt and shame.”*

3. Is this a problem for women as well as men? Are there differences in how this



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behavior affects males and females?

*“Yes, I think there is. Although there are many fewer studies of women, one of the things that they have found is that, while men utilize visual images more so and are pursuing pornography for sexual gratification and masturbation, women are more often found to use chat rooms, seeking emotional gratification. Women favor chat rooms two times the rate of men. They often are fighting feelings of emotional deprivation in their relationships. One of the bigger risks with the sexual content of chat rooms is that they can more often lead to an actual meeting with others face to face. In fact, some research suggests women, more so than men, are likely to act out their behaviors in real life, such as having multiple partners, casual sex, or affairs (Internet Pornography Statistics. Internet Filter Review. (2007)*

*<http://internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com>. The understanding of why women choose the chat rooms more often appears related to their seeking a more emotional connection, and research has also found that women tend to keep this behavior more private than men, which means they are less likely to seek help.”*

4. Is there a connection between pornography use/abuse and the development of more serious psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, or other addictions?

*“There does appear to be one. Pornography use doesn’t add value to life but instead detracts from life (The Science Behind Pornography Addiction, 11/18/ 04. Dr. Mary Anne Layden), so it is not surprising to see it related to a number of psychological problems. For example, Carnes’ faulty beliefs (about self-worth, relationships, etc. discussed earlier) are consistent with belief systems that are found in depressed individuals, though I do not know of any particular study that has established a causal link. However, one interesting study found that after 6 weeks of exposure to porn, men were more sexually callous towards women, more likely to trivialize rape as just a criminal offense or no crime at all, had distorted views of sexuality, had an increased appetite for more deviant, bizarre or violent types of porn, devalued monogamous sex and saw non-monogamous sex as normal (V. B. Cline, Pornography's Effects on Adults & Children (New York: Morality in Media, 1999)). “*

5. That is sobering; I wonder if you can comment on any connection at a chemical level, for example, much has been written about the “runners’ high” that an athlete might have. Is there a pornography high?

*“Yes, there is, particularly when accompanied with masturbation, there are chemical reactions in the brain. In this way, pornography is thought to be similar to other addictions, creating a “high” that distracts the person from the actual problems of their life and releases chemicals that serve to temporarily ‘medicate’ their distress. This Physical (Chemical) Motivator works through endorphins and enkephlins (brain chemicals) which are released primarily through reinforcing a fantasy state with ejaculation, and therefore increase desire for fantasy through the release of serotonin. This process has become more problematic because of the radical availability of material instantly on the internet. At the end of the day, this*



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*results in less interest in connecting with others and receiving support and affirmation in the normal course of interpersonal life. Many men report that the fantasy aspect of the activity is most alluring, allowing an escape from the problems of daily life. So there is this physical aspect to the addiction, but there are also psychological components that increase the likelihood of the addiction. For example, some report that they feel more powerful or in control when they are looking through websites and move towards this when feeling powerless in their lives.”*

6. What data and research are you aware of that supports the notion that spending time viewing pornography does damage to a person? Where is this data available?

*“Much of the data on this problem has been assembled by Patrick Carnes, and is available on the web for reference at [www.unityrestored.com](http://www.unityrestored.com) The study by Carnes showed that men who watched pornographic movies for six weeks were more callous toward women, trivialized rape, had more distorted views of sexuality and an increased appetite for deviant or bizarre types of porn. So, porn use is hardly a victimless activity.”*

7. Part of the Culture of Life mission is to understand the truth about the human person at all stages of life; I am wondering if you have any comments on how early use of pornography in a person’s life, say during adolescence, might impact their future life, relationships, or development?

*“In our clinical work, we have noted that it seems to have quite an impact. There is an arresting quality to it. When one starts using pornography excessively it really impacts their ability to relate to people. Most the time when people come in with this problem they think that the core issue is that they are obsessed with sex, but when we tested some of these people, we have found that the biggest deficit is not the degree to which they obsess about sex, but instead the deficit in how they relate with other people interpersonally (e.g., less self-confident, more anxious).*

*Although it is difficult to know which comes first, at some point they are too focused on getting their gratification on the internet rather than getting fulfillment in their interpersonal relationships, which is really how we are built to function. So if this happens when one is a young person, say 15 or 17, and should be developing their ability to relate with others and be growing in self-knowledge, your ability to develop interpersonal relationships can be severely restricted. In fact, when wives are interviewed they typically identify that they had a sense that something was wrong from the change in interpersonal interactions with their husbands, but could not quite identify exactly what it was.*

*Jennifer Schneider, MD, in Arizona has done a lot of research with the family members of sex addicts. She says that the typical wife or girlfriend will treat the discovery of this problem as if their husband or boyfriend was having an affair; they feel betrayed. Also, fathers who do this are less likely to spend time with their children and of course there is always the risk of the children observing the father engage in this behavior.*



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# Briefs

*Overall, what is most striking is how this problem impacts relationships. From the Catholic Church's point of view, this is important to clarify because it apparently is not simply an example of the Church being prudish, but instead it reflects a concern about relationships and the ability of people to love and care for others."*

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