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Twisting Masculinity: Harms of Pornography to Young Boys and Men

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TWISTING MASCULINITY: HARMS OF PORNOGRAPHY TO YOUNG BOYS AND MEN

Gabe Deem

Founder, Reboot Nation

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I'D LIKE TO START BY SAYING THANK YOU to Dawn Hawkins and the rest of the National Center on Sexual Exploitation (NCOSE) staff. It is an honor to be given an opportunity to join you in what I believe to be a cause of utmost importance. And thank you to all members of Congress and staff for being in attendance today.

My hope today is to provide you with the answer to a very important question. But before I do that I need to warn you in advance that the details to the answer will be graphic and blunt.

The question is what impact is porn having on our youth?

In 2011, Phillip Zimbardo gave a TED talk titled "The Demise of Guys?"¹ In this video he pointed out that a growing number of young guys are losing their motivation, and ability to be sexually intimate with partners. He suggested that this is the result of excess Internet use, specifically porn. However, he wasn't the first to suggest this.

In 2007, psychiatrist Norman Doidge published his *New York Times* best-selling book *The Brain That Changes Itself*. In it, he dedicated an entire chapter to sexuality and described a new phenomenon brought on by an increase in access to pornographic videos via the Internet. Here, he describes what he was seeing:

During the mid- to late 1990s, when the Internet was growing rapidly and pornography was exploding on it, I treated or assessed a number of men who all had essentially the same story. Each had acquired a taste for a kind of pornography that, to a greater or lesser degree, troubled or even disgusted him, had a disturbing effect on the pattern of his sexual excitement, and ultimately affected his relationships and sexual potency.²

¹ Philip Zimbardo, "The Demise of Guys?" YouTube (August 05, 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMJgZ4s2E3w> (accessed March 12, 2017).

² Norman Doidge, *The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science* (Penguin Books, 2007), 103.

Unfortunately, what Doidge was describing was just the tip of the iceberg. I know Doidge and Zimbardo were right, because what they were describing happened to me.

Let me share with you for a few minutes what it was like for me growing up with porn.

I was first exposed to porn around the age of eight. I was playing with some neighborhood friends and we found a *Playboy* magazine. At age 10 my family got cable TV, and I would stay up late at night watching soft-core porn while my parents thought I was sleeping.

The real game changer happened when I was around 12. My family got high-speed Internet. Within days, I was watching hardcore porn. I would ride my bike home from school as fast as I could and watch porn for a couple hours before my parents got home. By the time I was out of middle school, I had seen just about every genre of porn there was. I wasn't the only kid doing this. Kids at school would often exchange pieces of paper with tips on where to find it and how to hide it from our parents.

The high school I went to was one of the first schools in America to give all students their own laptop. The first thing the guys did was figure out how we could play video games. The second thing we did was figure out how we could watch porn. There were several occasions my friends and I watched porn together in class. Now, the reason I'm telling you this is to paint you a picture of how prevalent porn use was among my friends and me, and how it was a normal part of teen culture.

In retrospect, it is clear that pornography was affecting our behavior, how we viewed and treated our peers, and our sexuality. I became sexually active at the age of 14, and that is when my battle between pixels on a screen and my sex drive for real life partners began. Through high school and into college, the impact porn was having on me worsened. Ultimately, it led to a time when I was 23 and I wanted to have sex with a beautiful girl, whom I found extremely attractive; but, when we went to have sex, I couldn't. I felt no arousal, emotion, or excitement.

Now I was a young, otherwise healthy guy and I had no clue what could possibly be wrong with me, so I did what anyone would do. I got on Google. I typed in "young guy erection problem" and what I found through searching for answers completely blew my mind. I stumbled upon forums all over the Internet with thousands and thousands of guys my age or even younger all saying the same thing. They used Internet porn for several years and eventually got to a place where they could not function with partners. These guys all had one thing in common: years of porn use.

Long story short, I decided to quit. Quitting wasn't easy, but one thing that helped me along my recovery was getting educated on the neuroscience behind addiction, the neuroscience behind sexual conditioning, and how pornography can alter the sexual templates in our brains.

There are now forums with hundreds of thousands of young guys, from all walks of life, who are quitting porn for mental and physical health reasons. I saw a

need to point these young people to helpful information, so I started my own recovery community called Reboot Nation. It has grown to 10,000 members (mostly young guys) in just three years.

Recent research has documented a sharp rise in youthful sexual dysfunction over the last 15 years. A 2016 paper featuring several U.S. Navy urologists and psychiatrists pointed out that studies assessing erectile dysfunction (ED) in young men aged 18-40 from 2002 and before reported ED rates of 2-5%. But multiple studies assessing young male dysfunction *since* 2010 report ED rates around 30%. The Navy paper also included case studies of sailors who recovered from sexual dysfunction by removing their pornography use.³

So, to answer the question of what porn is doing to young men and boys, let's take a look at the most common effects guys report:

- **Anorgasmia and Delayed Ejaculation:** It becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible to orgasm with a partner. Many guys report having to fantasize about porn or masturbate while with a partner to climax.⁴
- **Erectile Dysfunction:** You can get an erection for porn but not for a real person. In severe cases you can lose the ability to get an erection to porn. Unfortunately, sexual dysfunctions are usually the only things that catch a young guy's attention.⁵
- **Brain Fog, Concentration Problems:** Nothing else in the world seems interesting to you, you find it difficult to focus.⁶
- **Increased Social Anxiety:** Increasingly uncomfortable in social situations.⁷
- **Declining Interest in Real Partners:** This happens primarily subconsciously. Sexual triggers now make you crave porn, and not connection with a real person.⁸
- **Morphing Pornography Tastes:** Over time, what used to arouse you no longer does the trick. You escalate into more shocking or extreme material, or switch to something new for the novelty to achieve arousal.

In 2012, approximately 1,500 guys on a porn recovery forum were asked if their tastes in pornography had changed with continued use.⁹ Fifty-six percent reported that their porn tastes had become "increasingly extreme or deviant." Twenty-four

³ Brian Park et al., "Is Internet Pornography Causing Sexual Dysfunctions? A Review with Clinical Reports." *Behavioral Sciences* 6, no. 3 (2016), doi: 10.3390/bs6030017.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ine Beyens, Laura Vandenbosch, and Steven Eggermont, "Early Adolescent Boys' Exposure to Internet Pornography: Relationships to Pubertal Timing, Sensation Seeking, and Academic Performance," *The Journal of Early Adolescence* 35, no. 8 (2014): 1045-1068, doi: 10.1177/0272431614548069.

⁷ Emriye Hilal Yayan, Duygu Arikan, Fatma Saban, Nazan Gürarşlan Baş, and Özlem Özel Özcan, "Examination of the Correlation between Internet Addiction and Social Phobia in Adolescents," *Western Journal of Nursing Research* (2016).

⁸ Valerie Voon, Thomas B. Mole, Paula Banca, Laura Porter, Laurel Morris, Simon Mitchell, Tatyana R. Lapa, Judy Karr, Neil A. Harrison, Marc N. Potenza, and Michael Irvine, "Neural Correlates of Sexual Cue Reactivity in Individuals with and without Compulsive Sexual Behaviours," *PLoS one* 9, no. 7 (2014), doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0102419.

⁹ "Announcing the First Official r/NoFap Survey!" *Reddit.com*, April 8, 2012, https://www.reddit.com/r/NoFap/comments/rz320/announcing_the_first_official_rnofap_survey/, (accessed March 14, 2017); Alexander Rhodes (founder of NoFap), e-mail message to Haley Halverson, April 25, 2017.

percent were bothered by this; 32% were not. It's important to see that a majority of the guys who escalated had no shame because a lot of skeptics will tell you that only people with shame around their porn use develop problems. That's not true.

The following quote from psychiatrist Norman Doidge helps us understand how sexual tastes can change: "The content of what [patients] found exciting changed as the web sites introduced themes and scripts that altered their brains without their awareness. Because plasticity is competitive, the brain maps for new, exciting images increased at the expense of what had previously attracted them."¹⁰

A 2014 study of heterosexual 16-18 year olds asked about anal sex. The researchers stated, "Anal hetero-sex often appeared to be painful, risky, and coercive, particularly for women. *Interviewees frequently cited pornography as the 'explanation' for anal sex* [emphasis added]."¹¹

I want to point out some very important and revealing quotes from the study.

One of the young girls interviewed simply said, "Obviously people do enjoy it if they do it."¹² But from the results of this study we know a main reason these teenagers are having anal sex is because they've seen actors pretending to enjoy it, not because they enjoy it. Let's look closely at another quote from a teenage boy that was interviewed, "I think that the boy enjoys it. I think it's definitely the boy that pushes for it from *watching porn* and stuff, they wanna try it. The girl is scared and thinks it's weird, and then they try it because the boyfriend wants them to. *They normally don't enjoy it because they're scared* and I, I know that like with anal, *if you're not willing, you don't relax*" [emphasis added].¹³

So what is happening? Young people are coercing or manipulating their partners into doing things they are scared to do, or don't enjoy doing, because they have been conditioned by porn to believe it is pleasurable.

In reality, what we have is a public health crisis. The **widespread use of porn is causing problems emotionally, mentally, and physically**. This isn't just affecting the user but the entire relationship dynamic and what young couples think is normal.

I did a search for suicide on a pornography recovery site a few months ago, and I got 26 pages of results of young men contemplating killing themselves. I've had a 12-year-old reach out to me for help after I spoke to his youth group because he wants to stop watching bestiality porn but doesn't know how to stop. I've had a grown man in his fifties come up to me after a talk at a conference, with tears running down his face, sobbing, because he's been addicted to porn for 20 years. And I've had parents call me, with desperation in their voices, because they've found their children, some as young as 8-years-old, watching hardcore, abusive pornography, and they have no idea how to block it on their devices. This is a serious issue.

But I want to end on a positive note. There is hope.

¹⁰ Doidge, *ibid.*

¹¹ Cicely Marston and R. Lewis, "Anal Heterosex among Young People and Implications for Health Promotion: A Qualitative Study in the UK," *BMJ Open* 4, no. 8 (2014) doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2014-004996.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

The good news is we have thousands of success stories piling up daily, mine being one of them. People are not just regaining their sexual function, but also their motivation and zest for life. When I first gave up porn it was only so I could get my sexual function back. However, after recovering and becoming educated on how porn had influenced me, I now have more compassion and motivation. I see women as humans to be loved and respected, not as objects to be used as masturbatory aids. So, what can we do? I think the first step is to raise awareness. We need to get this information out to the public so that everyone can make informed decisions.

The best way to do that, in my opinion, is through education about how porn can impact the brain. I believe sex education should include an understanding of the brain's reward circuit, and the effects of overstimulation. I stayed away from hard drugs as a kid because I knew of the potential negative effects, but I had no idea porn could have a negative physiological impact.

Lastly, we have to do a better job protecting children from being exposed to pornography and having such easy access to it. I believe mandatory filtering software on minors' Internet accessible devices would be a good step toward that.

This is a pivotal moment in human history, where technology has drastically changed the environment our children are growing up in. It doesn't matter what political party you are a part of, or whether you're religious or not. I'm pleading with you today to come together in a bipartisan effort, and take action to ensure the future health and wellbeing of our nation's youth.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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Gabe Deem is an activist for better sex education and a public speaker. After recovering from an addiction and porn-induced sexual dysfunction himself, he has spent years studying the science of addiction, and now runs RebootNation.org, a free, online community to help addicts and their partners overcome problems related to porn use. With a passion for helping others and raising awareness, Gabe now speaks internationally, and has shared his story with *Time* magazine, Katie Couric, Chelsea Handler, MTV, and many others.

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