

Unhooking From Porn

"I WOULD FAP out of boredom, sometimes even at work in the bathrooms. I was addicted, pathetic..."

Anon22 discovered Internet porn when he was just 12 years old.

Looking back, he recalls it clearly. "I was unable to look away. I remember everything about that first moment. The music that was playing, where my parents were in the house, the time of day." For around 10 years, Anon22 has "enjoyed" pornography downloaded to his computer once or twice a day, a compulsion that he claims ruined his social life and limited long term employment opportunities.

Worrying, Anon22 has discovered that compared to many others, his was a mild case. As I write this, there are 18,928 "Fapstronauts" doing their utmost to exercise considerable self-control.

Rather than boldly going where no man has gone before, these individuals are each trying to get their lives back on track following the realisation that they've become a little too close to their computers.

To put it bluntly, these guys (and perhaps a few girls too) are attempting to overcome their addiction with Internet porn, a condition that is becoming increasingly recognised and discussed by experts. Sadly, recognition and discussion doesn't do much to help the potential millions that are locked into this way of life.

Fortunately, there is a growing network of support for the Fapstronauts, members of the Reddit channel NoFap ("fap" is Internet slang to describe a "solo act"). Various websites offer help, suggestions and encouragement while genuine experts of the phenomenon such as Gary Wilson provide immense assistance with research and study into porn addiction on his website [Your Brain on Porn](#).

It is important to understand that heavy reliance on porn is serious; it literally ruins lives, causing disruption in relationships, jobs, first person social interaction and other ways. Just as crucial, however, is that the mechanics behind porn addiction are completely natural.

What Is Porn Addiction?

Watching adult movies and enjoying salacious images can often be a pastime engaged in by couples, but with the proliferation of porn on the Internet addiction has spiralled simply because it is so easy to access.

Desktop computers, laptops, tablets, mobile phones... the way in which addicts can get their fix have become increasingly portable over the years. With Flash available on most platforms and other video streaming tools provided on the rest, it doesn't take long to download movies and hi-res photos through a mobile Internet or local Wi-Fi connection.

A Range of Symptoms

There is more to porn addiction than simply loading up a website of images or streamed movies starring the world's biggest adult movie stars, getting to grips with it and then moving onto another activity.

In order to understand the problem in more detail, I contacted some of the users of the Reddit group [NoFap](#) to get some first-hand accounts of their experiences. This ever-growing group is a massive part of many addicts' attempts to control their masturbation habits, or as they are called in the group, "PMO" (porn/masturbation/orgasm).

What is fascinating about these guys is two-fold: one, how closely their stories match, and two, that Internet porn has become such a part of their lives that they didn't realise that they had a problem until they discovered NoFap and the work of Gary Wilson.

Reddit user m1610, found his entire social and academic life falling to pieces. "I never had severe social anxiety, but I noticed that I found it hard to look people in the eye. I became very lazy and unmotivated in my teenager years (I'm now 20), going to bed late, waking up late (often watching porn late at night and watching porn first thing in the morning for hours). I got average grades in school but managed to get a place at a pretty good university. I've just finished my final year and really I'm so grateful with both the fact I got into a good university despite my laziness and that I've sorted myself out before working towards my final grade."

Meanwhile, Teambold found that he "was generally lacking confidence, for two reasons that I am aware of: not approaching many women because porn was easier, and the fact that guys in those scenes are huge and I'm an average Joe."

"BECAUSE I WAS SPENDING so much time masturbating and looking at porn, I didn't have the energy or desire to spend time with friends."

For Anon22, meanwhile, social interaction seems as though it was something of a nightmare: "It made me very insecure and I felt very disconnected from my body and soul. Nothing flowed. Everything I said or did was held back and altered by me before I let it out, and because of this I don't think many people enjoyed socializing with me. Because I was spending so much time masturbating and looking at porn, I didn't have the energy or desire to spend time with friends."

Beyond the social issues, there is in fact a range of symptoms which are typical to those that use porn excessively:

- Tiredness
- Social anxiety
- Depression
- Isolation
- Insecurity

- Erectile dysfunction
- Lack of interest in real sex
- Lack of interest in anything other than porn
- Poor academic performance
- Relationship/marital issues
- Employment issues and job loss

Clearly – in case you were still doubtful – porn addiction is real and in terms of people living genuine, socially engaged and successful lives, it is pretty dangerous. In particular we should consider the symptoms and compare them to those that we know of from other addictions; the similarities are shocking.

You're unlikely to start stealing to fund your porn habit, but just as drug users need increasingly larger doses and alcoholics find their intake rockets over time, so porn addicts struggle to gain gratification without a new supply of fresh, and sometimes weirder, material.

A Note About Erectile Dysfunction

You probably noticed the term “erectile dysfunction” in the list above.

It's quite odd how an addiction that requires the use of a particular part of the body should result in that appendage being unable to perform when the time arises.

You're not alone in noticing this but sadly ED is a widespread issue and one of the most concerning aspects of the whole Internet porn addiction phenomenon.

When I spoke to Fapstronaut Teambold, he told me that the inability to perform was his catalyst for change.

“I would fap out of boredom, sometimes even at work in the bathrooms. I was addicted, pathetic... My only real concern was the fact that I was starting to develop ED. It worried me, but until I found NoFap I had always assumed that once it really mattered (with a real live girl) I would be hard as a rock and ready to rampage. [I was] no longer willing to take that chance.”

"I COULD ONLY ENJOY any sort of sexual pleasure with her when masturbating. Everything else I just pretended to seem more normal."

Similarly, Anon22 recalled erectile dysfunction when he was as young as 15. “When it came to my first girlfriend and having sex, I couldn't keep it up, I couldn't feel... and wearing a condom made me so flaccid. I could only enjoy any sort of sexual pleasure with her when masturbating. Everything else I just pretended to seem more normal.”

These stories are common. Reddit noFap user m1610 recalled that the erectile dysfunction “meant I couldn't really connect with my girlfriends or satisfy them the way I should have.”

Is porn really worth that?

The Dangers of Porn Addiction and Misdiagnosis

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It isn't as if addicts have been completely unaware that there was something about their behaviour that wasn't quite right. In the past, before Wilson's work became better known, some might have spent some time visiting a doctor to try and get to the bottom of the problem. There, however, they would only find themselves diagnosed with depression, or erectile dysfunction, or any one of the physical symptoms of addiction. Those that press the point are faced with common myths, such as being dismissed as compulsive users rather than addicts, or that only people with ADHD, depression or other pre-existing conditions can become addicted to pornography.

That the general practitioners have overlooked the possibility of their patients being trapped in a self-rewarding cycle of porn, masturbation, and orgasm is telling. A general lack of awareness of the problem has led to guys just carrying on, unaware of just what's going wrong in their lives and why.

But why are they unaware? Why isn't it obvious? This is something that the noFappers I spoke to seem to wonder. Should a taboo subject be allowed to let people's lives fall apart? Anon22: "People feel they can't talk about it at all, that it makes them a terrible person, and so they are unable to seek help from friends, family, often not even their significant other. They are totally alone on this and there is no way for them to get help, so a lot of them just give up and keep going with it."

Like any addiction, the mechanics of the human body play a part here, specifically the brain.

Becoming Addicted to Porn

What do you think of porn? Is it something you regularly view? Do you and your friends or roommates often spend time looking at, discussing and even sharing adult material?

With a world full of sexually suggestive adverts and characters in fiction and video games, it is little wonder that porn has become increasingly socially acceptable, certainly within a subculture of teenagers and young men.

The advent of the Internet has also made adult material available – by the gigabyte – to children. This is a harsh reality that anyone with concerns about porn addiction simply has to accept. Boys, as we are told, will be boys and with the exploration phase and bodily changes of puberty causing all sorts of emotional and physical havoc, easy access to porn (perhaps communicated between friends using the l33t term "pr0n") has the potential to throw the traditional teenaged development into chaos.

Peer pressure is only one stage of Internet porn addiction, however. It isn't even a pre-requisite in all cases. What happens next, however, is common to all addicts, whether their poison is porn, shopping or drugs.

Desensitization and Dopamine

This is where things get a little scary. It seems that overcoming addiction to Internet porn is more than just attempting to break the habit. Rather, there is a chemical process in the brain that becomes rewired

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I'm not going to attempt to give you the comprehensive ins and outs of the process here; I'm not a specialist, and for a full explanation you can head over to www.yourbrainonporn.com. However, in terms that we can all understand, the human brain becomes rewired following repetitive masturbation, thanks to a chemical called dopamine. This then results in a difference to sexual drive and interest, with addiction and the various symptoms above becoming prevalent.

Dopamine increases as we experience pleasurable feelings but too much of it over a prolonged period of time results in desensitization. It isn't just sex that gives us pleasurable feelings. Eating, listening to great music, even extreme sports can cause dopamine to be released – it basically occurs whenever we our brains interpret an activity as worth repeating. Chocolate, Lady Gaga and snowboarding can all contribute to this. These positive feelings are there for a reason: Eating helps us survive, and so do physical exercise and sex. Porn offers a shortcut to get to those same feelings, effectively fooling the body into thinking it is about to procreate or become engaged with another human being in something intimate.

In other words, guys who find themselves habitually masturbating will find that what they had previously been turned on by becomes “boring” – or more accurately, fails to turn them on. A common result of this is the quest for more porn, different porn, material that has never been seen that might even cross boundaries of taste, decency and sexual orientation.

Tackling the various myths about porn addiction has become a lynchpin of Gary Wilson's presentations. He also offers evidence based on cutting edge neurological research. The discovery of DeltaFosB, a protein in the brain that has been discovered by neurobiologists to affect all addictions, has shed light on just what happens to the human brain.

It doesn't matter whether you're over-indulging in junk food, drugs, over-regular sex or even long stretches of “alone time” with your PC, the dopamine increases cause DeltaFosB to accumulate, altering the way the brain works causing desensitization and over-use of the particular pleasure – in the case of the recovering NoFappers, Internet porn.

Researcher Eric Nestler found that DeltaFosB can be compared to a switch, one that is difficult to disable.

“Once it's flipped on, it stays on for a while and doesn't go away easily. This phenomenon is observed in response to chronic administration of virtually any drug of abuse. It is also observed after high levels of consumption of natural rewards (exercise, sucrose, high fat diet, sex).”

As Gary Wilson points out in his seminal [TEDx talk](#) this is nothing new. The history of human procreation proves that men get bored with female partners over time, becoming aroused when a new female appears; the same is true of other species. Desensitization can occur when over-indulging in other things, not just porn. If you're a fan of McDonalds, the urge to get more and more of their famous burgers and fries can dull your pleasure centres, catching you in an onion-scented version of the vicious circle in which porn addicts are caught.

Recovery and Rebooting

It all sounds pretty grim. Is this the future – billions of men shut up in their rooms, looking for some porn that will help them get their latest fix while the world goes to rack and ruin?

"[Recovery] has shown me that I have SELF-CONTROL. I'm excited to apply this in the other areas of my life. The sky is the limit, and now I know it's worth the effort. My goals are no porn ever again."

Hopefully not, and while Gary Wilson and other experts are around to share their research and encourage recovery from Internet porn addiction, hope remains. Recovery from Internet porn addiction and any related conditions (such as erectile dysfunction) can be achieved, but it requires willpower, determination and an understanding of just what has been happening. Additionally, a desire to make changes in this and other areas of life is useful to the process that is appropriately termed “rebooting.”

This “cold turkey” style experience is required because the brain has undergone the same changes that it would with any other type of addiction. Rebooting – a term usually used to describe the act of restarting a troublesome computer – is particularly apt, allowing the recovering Internet porn addict to reprogram themselves, staying away from porn, cutting back on masturbation completely during the reboot period and eventually remove the association between the two activities.

Web filters and a change of any porn-related email addresses can help, as can restoring your operating system to factory settings, thereby creating a “clean” computer. Mobile phones and tablets – indeed, any digital device used for the enjoyment of porn – should be also cleaned up and suitable software installed.

If you would rather keep your hands away from any potentially incriminating software, however, there are third party web services that can help. [SelfControl](#) [for Mac will block access to the Internet temporarily while www.getcoldturkey.com can also control your ability to view adult material should a relapse occur. Even using an adblocker can be considered to stop any salacious ads appearing on Facebook or other seemingly innocent web services. Obviously, existing stashes of salacious material should also be deleted, or in the case of DVDs, videos and magazines, binned.

“Since starting NoFap, I haven't edged, and have barely touched myself. I have ups and downs like anyone else. But the struggle has been worth it, because I've seen quite a few changes in myself.”

Because, thankfully, there is a chance of recovery; there are success stories. With nearly 20,000 members on the NoFap board – and rising with considerable speed – it seems as though this is an issue that will only gain in recognition as time goes on. The guys I've spoken to are proof that there is a desire to put Internet porn back in its cupboard and perhaps shut the door for good, and with growing awareness of the problem perhaps other previously-ignored addictions can receive the attention they deserve.

We've only scratched the surface here. If you think you may be suffering from a similar problem, take a look at the links in this article, spend more time reading the accounts of others (the guys who kindly gave their time to talk to me for this story are the tip of a massive iceberg) and give yourself a few hours to make the right decision.

Overcoming any addiction is a big step – fortunately for new Fapstronauts there is a lot of support on offer. You can also find out more about the subject via www.yourbrainonporn.com. Becoming something of an evangelist for the subject will do a lot more good than going square eyed at 1am giving yourself a bad back.