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Problematic Pornography Use: A Brief Introduction

By Amanda Fenrich

The aim of this article is to contribute to the general knowledge pertaining to pornography use as a problematic behavior. Pornography addiction is difficult to define, but what professionals tend to agree on is that pornography use can become a problematic behavior (Harkness, Psych, Mullan, & Blaszczyński, 2015). A recent review of the literature found that approximately 87% of males use pornography each month, and about 58% are watching pornography each week (Brem et al., 2018). Young men are among the top consumers of pornography, and prevalence rates indicate more than 90% of males have looked at pornography in their lifetime (Miller, Mcbain, & Raggatt, 2018). Pornography use, if viewed as a problematic behavior, can have devastating consequences for not only the individual who views pornography, but their family, intimate partners, and peers.

Below are some key points that professionals should be aware of when interacting with individuals who struggle with pornography.

Link to Violence

Pornography use is associated with physical and sexual intimate partner violence in men who have higher levels of pornography use (Brem et al., 2018), which creates further complications as these individuals may find themselves entangled in the criminal justice system. As pornography becomes more accessible, there are concerns that this type of behavior is becoming normalized and may impact relationships and how violence against women is perceived (Brem et al., 2018; McCormack & Wignall, 2017).

Increase in Risky Behavior

For those with problematic behavior such as pornography use, they may demonstrate impaired control and risky use (de Alarcón, de la Iglesia, Casado, & Montejo, 2019). For example, viewing pornography correlated with higher prevalence rates of casual sexual encounters (Braithwaite, Coulson, Keddington, & Fincham, 2015).

Deviancy Toward Children

Research has also suggested that there are several individuals who try to view and obtain child pornography, but they may not initiate direct contact with a child victim (Eke, Seto, & Williams, 2011). More importantly, it is essential that child pornography offenses are detected as soon as possible to aid in reducing the demand for this deviant and illegal type of pornography (Eke et al., 2011).

Anonymity Is a Risk Factor

As individuals can remain anonymous when engaging in this behavior, it is noted that this is a key risk factor that may contribute to ongoing problematic pornography use (de Alarcón et al., 2019). As pornography is widely accessible with little or no cost and can be accessed anonymously, it is fostering an environment where individuals may experience distress and functional impairment (Allen, Kannis-Dymand, & Katsikitis, 2017).

Pornography Use Impacts Several Life Domains

Psychological, social, and employment domains can be impacted when individuals engage in problematic pornography use (Antons & Brand, 2018). Individuals struggling with pornography use may also find that they end up in financial trouble, have legal issues, experience unstable relationships, or other negative outcomes (de Alarcón et al., 2019).

Accessibility

Due to technological advancements, the internet has provided a platform for people to access pornography much easier (Miller et al., 2018). As the internet has reached broader people groups such as younger consumers, the exposure of pornography is now more widespread, including among youth and children.

Recommended treatment approaches

Clinicians should plan on being flexible in their approaches and consider using mindfulness and acceptance-based psychotherapy rather than pharmacology (de Alarcón et al., 2019; Fraumeni-McBride, 2019). As part of the intervention and treatment planning process, an evaluation should be conducted to determine the level of impairment caused by the individual's pornography usage.

Summary

In summary, pornography is a complex topic and more research is warranted to determine what truly constitutes a pornography addiction, or if these individuals who report having an addiction are actually experiencing a "perceived addiction to sexual media" as there is no official diagnosis for this type of behavior (Grubbs, Exline, Pargament, Volk, & Lindberg, 2017, p. 1734). Notably, there is growing evidence to support that pornography changes the brain similar to the changes found in individuals with drug addictions (George, Maheshwari, Chandran, & Rao, 2019). Regardless, as mentioned above, pornography use is a serious issue and can have lasting impacts on individuals who struggle with this type of behavior.

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Amanda (Mandy) Fenrich, M.A., obtained her Master of Arts in Human Services with an emphasis in Forensic Mental Health and her Bachelor of Criminal Justice from Concordia University, St. Paul in St. Paul, Minnesota. She is currently completing her Ph.D. in the advanced studies of human behavior from Capella University. Amanda is currently employed as a psychology associate for the Washington State Department of Corrections Sex Offender Treatment and Assessment Program (SOTAP). She provides sex offender treatment to individuals at the Special Offender Unit (SOU), a residential treatment unit for individuals with serious mental illness. She also has experience providing treatment to sex offenders with intellectual disabilities and is one of the authors creating an adapted sex offender treatment manual for this population. Amanda's previous experience includes working as a community corrections officer, where she supervised offenders in the Special Needs Unit with various mental health needs. In addition, she has co-authored articles and is the copy editor for Forensic Mental Health Insider.

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