Given the ease of access to such materials—made possible in large measure by the Internet—it is not surprising that there has been a marked increase in those who access and then become addicted, at varying levels, to pornography. For those wanting to overcome the effects of pornography in their lives, is there hope and where can they turn?

Fortunately, a wealth of information and resources exist to help individuals deal with these difficulties. The work of psychologists Victor Cline (see pp. 10-17), Patrick Carnes, and others have opened our understanding to the idea that sexual behavior can be highly addictive, just as much or more so than drugs or alcohol. Additional insights about the causes, consequences, and cures of these problems are available from the great religious traditions of the world. In this article, I will explore the real harm of pornography use from both a social science and my particular religious perspective and suggest a model for breaking the grip that pornography has on so many lives.

Broadening the Perspective on the Nature of Pornography

There are those who argue that pornography is a matter of free choice—and that there are no negative consequences of its use. With regard to the issue of “freedom of expression” or First Amendment issues, suffice it to say that this argument does not stand up to reason or the rule of law, as is evidenced by U.S. Supreme Court rulings that allow communities to regulate the display and distribution of patently offensive material of a sexual nature. In addition, the very idea that pornography use is a matter of free choice is challenged by the work of Patrick Carnes, who cogently argues that sexual behavior, including pornography use, is highly susceptible to becoming addictive, which by definition means that self-control—or choice—is lost.

Those who address the issue of whether pornography is
harmful have often sought to demonstrate a causal relationship between pornography and sex crimes. While scientific research is as yet unable to demonstrate irrefutably that pornography causes sex crimes, it is clear that there is a strong correlation between pornography and sex crimes. Numerous studies have demonstrated that pornography is a common antecedent to sexual crimes, that sex crimes often mirror behaviors viewed in pornographic depictions, and that most sexual criminals have been heavily involved with pornography use.

While these studies are an important step in demonstrating why pornography is a problem, there are drawbacks to this line of thinking. If our understanding of the “harm” of using pornography is reduced to the idea that, if it is used, the user will end up committing a sex crime, we fail to recognize the broader potential “harm.” Certainly not all who use pornography become sex criminals, which might suggest to some that pornography isn’t all that bad. However, such thinking is misdirected, as Carnes’ work on levels of severity of sexual addiction illustrates. Level I involves behaviors commonly considered to be “harmless” or socially acceptable such as the private use of “soft-core” pornography that generally leads to sexual arousal, often culminating in masturbation or other forms of self-abuse. Level II includes behaviors that cause significant negative consequences to the individual and perhaps annoy, offend, or frighten innocent people, such as sexual harassment or exhibitionism. Level III includes behaviors that place innocent victims at risk of major harm or trauma, such as child sexual abuse or rape. Carnes also presents anecdotal evidence that suggests at least two important things. First, most people engaging in behaviors at a more serious level have had experience with behaviors in the levels below it. Second, many people have engaged in behavior at only one of the three levels of severity, but the intensity of their addiction to those behaviors has escalated over time.

In other words, of those who engage in Level I behaviors, some, but not all, will eventually end up in Level III. But if we define harm as ending up in Level III, we entirely miss a huge segment of the pornography user population that may be experiencing intense addiction to behaviors at the lower levels of severity.

So, if we don’t define harm as ending up at a point where one commits sexual crimes, how should we define it? I would like to offer two major harms in which pornography use is likely to result, even for those who never progress beyond Level I or Level II.

**The True “Harms” of Pornography**

Educator and religious leader Jeffrey R. Holland delivered a profound treatise on the subject of why unhealthy sexual behavior is harmful. “In approaching this subject [of personal sexual purity],” he said, “I do not document a host of social ills for which the statistics are as grim as the example are offensive. ... What I wish to do is more personal—I wish to try to answer questions some of you may have been asking: Why should we be morally clean? Why is it such an important issue to God? Does the Church have to be so strict about it when others don’t seem to be? How could anything society exploits and glamorizes so openly be very sacred or serious?”

His answer to this question, in essence, is that any sexual behavior outside of marriage (or unhealthy sexual behavior within marriage, for that matter) is damaging because we are abusing and misusing sexuality for the gratification of personal lusts and desires rather than to accomplish the divine purpose for which it was given. If viewed within a Judeo-Christian context, sex was designed to be the force that creates life and that promotes healthy, long-term intimacy and bonding between spouses. All forms of unhealthy sexual behavior can be viewed as exchanging these divine benefits for the gratification of temporary, carnal lusts. In so doing, we abuse the souls of ourselves and other individuals, we initiate a natural drive within us that is designed to bond us together as one with our spouse and often leave it no true object to bind us to, and we miss a profound opportunity for what many have described as a spiritual connection between ourselves, our spouse, and God, in exchange for the temporary gratification of
our individual lusts and desires. Pornography use is a particularly stark example of this because it is impossible to even approach the realization of these divine purposes by using it. It is also exploitative to use these individuals for our gratification, even though we may argue that they have “chosen” to pose or perform.

The second major harm is that pornography use has the effect of increasingly cutting us off from our feelings. Our feelings serve to provide us with feedback that keeps us connected with ourselves, with God, and with others. Unpleasant feelings suggest to us the need to make changes, such as guilt over treating a spouse unfairly, which can lead to a positive change in behavior. Pleasant feeling serve to give us peace and reinforce spiritually healthy behavior. Essentially, pornography users experience an ever-increasing cycle of using pornography to deal with unpleasant feelings. This then leads to difficulties in their relationship with themselves, with others, and with God. Being thus cut off from these sources of emotional strength, the person is then more susceptible to the influence of negative thoughts and beliefs that end up in their minds. As religious leader and former Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson puts it, we are allowing unhealthy characters onto the “stage” of our mind. Over time, these unhealthy thoughts gain more and more of a presence, and the ingestion of this emotionally unhealthy “substance” results in what Briere describes as replacing the healthy emotional regulation strategies with destructive emotional avoidance strategies.7

Negative or unpleasant thoughts and feelings (such as feeling you are worthless and/or inadequate; you always will be, you can’t change your situation), if dealt with in a “regulatory” way, can actually be quite functional as the person experiences healthy guilt over mistaken behavior and then makes appropriate changes. However, when we deal with these thoughts by using “avoidance,” the thoughts become more and more destructive. The reason is that the harder we try to keep such thoughts out, the more they try to come in. As this occurs, we find that increasingly powerful avoidance experiences are necessary to get away from the thoughts. For those who have found “release” in pornography, the pornography itself becomes that avoidance experience. This usually leads to the development of compulsive behavior patterns as we find that pornography use temporarily relieves our negative feelings. The problem with this cycle is that this same behavior—the viewing of pornography—then causes more negative feelings (guilt, shame, etc.) and is ultimately inadequate for relieving the cause of the negative feeling because we have not dealt with it directly.8 Not only does this cut us off from our negative emotions, it also dampens and ultimately snuffs out the ability to acknowledge our feelings at all. Thus, the cause of a person’s distress is hidden from view so that they cannot deal with it directly. The result is that the person is then more susceptible to problems in relationships because there is a sense of feeling cut off or isolated in their shame. This then becomes part of the cycle as these relationship problems become further evidence to the users of what they see as their worthlessness or inadequacy.

At one level, pornography is a sign, a symptom if you will, of an inappropriate perspective on the sacred gift of sexuality. But that is only one symptom. I submit that the real problem in our society is not the proliferation of pornography. The real problem is that our understanding of the true nature of sexual relationships is becoming increasingly polluted. We have traded that which is of most worth for something less—life giving, commitment-solidifying, joy-producing sexuality for transient, sensual, immediate gratification. In so doing, we have also stumbled onto a powerful “mood-altering experience,” as Carnes puts it,9 to deal with the stresses of everyday life.

In working with clients who are struggling to overcome pornography use and the associated dynamics, I have seen a host of negative effects. Depression, low self-worth, hopelessness, fear, guilt, shame, financial problems, eating problems, anxiety disorders, inability to deal with sexual abuse issues, inability to form lasting relationships, idealization of hoped for relationships, intense criticism of actual relationships, disturbances in relationships (particularly spousal and parental) are
Why should we be morally clean? Why is it such an important issue to God?

Just some of the negative consequences I have seen associated with pornography use. And as individuals struggle to deal with these issues, they feel that their progress is washed away with each relapse.

There are those who would argue that there is not conclusive proof that pornography use causes these problems, but I think the true importance in understanding the issue of harm in pornography use is in knowing not only what bad, even criminal, things might happen if it is used. Rather, the other side of this issue is what good things are not likely to occur because of the fundamental misuse of this sacred binding power for an impersonal, two-dimensional encounter.

Indeed, the true harm of pornography use is much broader than previously thought: marital happiness, self-esteem, stress management, parenting relationships, etc., are all potentially compromised by the use of pornography, particularly if that use is addictive in nature. There are many people whose addictions are not, in their view, very “severe,” but who are nonetheless suffering a great deal because of the intensity of the addictions. Even those who are only “dabbling” are still playing with fire and, at best, are failing to experience the great benefits that come with an appropriate understanding and practice of sexuality.

Overcoming Pornography Habits and Addictions

Inasmuch as many pornography users—or those trying to help them—don’t know where to go for help, I will now recommend where a person can obtain help and then describe the process I use when counseling with those who use pornography.

Three main sources of help are currently available to deal with this problem. Each of the following sources is described only briefly, and the reader is referred to a range of additional resources for more information.

Ecclesiastical Intervention: Currently, there are several Christian ministries that provide basic education about the problem of pornography—its causes, consequences, and cures—and refer people seeking treatment to resources in the community. Many clergy members also provide ongoing counseling and support to individuals and their families.

Professional Intervention: By far the most influential work on the issue of sexual addiction is the work done by Patrick Carnes, and I would recommend that anyone seeking professional intervention should find out if the agency or therapist is thoroughly aware of Carnes’ work, although this is only one prerequisite for seeking appropriate treatment. Additionally, there is a wealth of information on addictions and compulsive behaviors in general that are very applicable to the issue of pornography addiction.

Peer Groups: Twelve-step groups such as Sexual Addicts Anonymous, Sexaholics Anonymous, and others provide an important resource to the community. These groups provide an atmosphere of tolerance and understanding about the person’s problems and offer guidance and support to them as they go.
...Marital happiness, divorce, self-esteem, stress management, parenting relationships, etc. are all potentially compromised by the use of pornography....

through treatment. Such groups represent groundbreaking efforts in informing us that pornography is a problem, that it has harmful effects, and that we understand a great deal about why the problem occurs and how to deal with it.

A Model for Helping One Out of Pornography Addiction

By way of clarification, the model I describe assumes a religious dimension that is compatible with the views on sexuality that I have previously described. In the model I use in the treatment of pornography addiction, there are five primary ideas: Hope infusion/shame reduction, structural analysis and change, process analysis and change, relapse analysis, and getting help.

Hope Infusion/Shame Reduction Activities: As previously stated, individuals with pornography problems are in a cycle wherein the core beliefs of “I am bad, insufficient, or inadequate,” “I always will be,” and “Nothing I do seems to change these facts” compel them to use pornography as an escape. Faith is the opposite of these beliefs. Faith says, “I make mistakes but believe that I can be made whole through repentance and change”; “Even if I never fully recover in this life from my flaws, if I do all I can do, I will be better in the next life”; and “With help from God, I can do anything.”

When individuals have initially accepted the need to overcome pornography, one of the most important things is for them to experience an increase in hope and a reduction in shame attributable to their problem. The messages that the problem should not be seen as evidence of their worthlessness, that help is available, and that God and others are interested in helping them overcome this problem are all crucial. In order to receive this message, they need the kind of information provided in Carnes’ and others’ works to understand the true scope and cause of their problem, to identify and accept the consequences of the problem, and to start working on comprehensively changing themselves. They need support from spouses, ecclesiastical leaders, and trusted friends. Spouses also need to be helped to understand that the addiction is not their fault and is not evidence of their worth as a person. What is needed is to understand that pornography is not the problem, it is a symptom. The true problem is the “vicious cycle” between the lack of connection with feelings and lack of connection with others (i.e., spouse, God, others). Pornography has
the unfortunate effect of increasing the intensity of that cycle. Once this understanding is gained, individuals can go to work on changing the problem through structural and process interventions, with help from others as needed.

**Structural Analysis and Change:**

Once individuals decide they are ready to change, the next step is to find a way to get the behavior stopped or slowed significantly. Finding someone to call in times of escalation in the addictive cycle, creating a relapse avoidance plan, and reducing or eliminating access to troublesome materials are all key to making this happen.

My clients then conduct what I call a **Structural Analysis** in which they identify situations, conditions, habits, and materials that tend to lead to pornography use. After doing this, we work together to begin changing their environment in ways that will bring about immediate reductions in the ease with which they can access pornography and the extent to which they are inadvertently exposed to tempting materials. Placing the computer at home in high traffic areas, putting Internet filters on the computer, and canceling cable subscriptions are examples of basic structural changes.

It is important to be realistic about what level of structural intervention is necessary to prevent a person from accessing pornography when faced with the temptation to do so. The key to knowing how intense these interventions need to be is to ask, “What wouldn’t I do to access pornography in the heat of temptation?” Anything less will fail in preventing the individual from accessing pornography or other tempting materials. Even if some things that are very enjoyable and even worthwhile have to be lost initially to effectively “filter” one’s self, drastic changes may have to be made (e.g., canceling cable will lead to the loss of many good programs but will also reduce access to the bad).

As recovery progresses, many of these structural changes will fall away, either because they are not practical to maintain (e.g., the Internet home page designer who has no access to the Internet) or because they are not necessary anymore (e.g., “The TV can come out of storage but the VCR stays; I can watch television without feeling tempted to go rent pornographic videos as long as the VCR isn’t there”). As restrictions are reduced, individuals should be careful to not go too fast and should always err on the side of not having access to tempting materials, even when good things are still given up.

In addition to making structural changes to avoid things they choose to access, individuals should also make changes to avoid unwanted or inadvertent exposures. Examples might include choosing to avoid “good” websites that have inappropriate advertisements, going through the grocery drive through while a spouse pays for groceries rather than waiting in line near troublesome magazines, and sitting facing the wall at restaurants to avoid lustful thoughts while watching others.

**Process Analysis and Change:**

As individuals gain some control over their behavior, the focus shifts from reducing incidences of relapse to doing the intense and centrally important work of learning a new way of viewing life and dealing with distressing and unpleasant feelings. Individuals should understand and recognize polar thinking (e.g., “I am either good or bad”), performance orientation (e.g., “My worth is only as good as my performance”), emotional avoidance as opposed to regulation, and knowing when they are “under the influence” of the core negative beliefs about themselves. Learning to work through and regulate—rather than avoid—their emotions is key to recovery. Individuals and spouses should focus on learning to employ this same model in their marriage to help them learn to discuss unacknowledged needs and feelings instead of blaming each other for hurt feelings in the relationships. Many individuals actually appear to be “addicted” to the belief that their spouse doesn’t accept them, leading them to create conflict, which supports this assertion and helps them avoid their core beliefs that they are the one who is an inadequate spouse.

Analyzing and changing how such individuals deal with negative emotions will both help them deal with temptation more effectively and also to live their lives in such a new way that old temptations don’t carry the same weight. Repairing and strengthening one’s relationship with...
themselves, their spouse, God, and others is central to the process. Scriptural and other religious exercises are an essential part of learning to deal with emotions more effectively.11

Under professional guidance, there are also many useful processes that can be learned from the areas of self-hypnosis, relaxation training, stress and anger management, yoga, martial arts, physical exercise, and neuro-linguistic programming.12

Relapse Management/analysis: For some wanting to quit using pornography, the obvious goal is to never use it again. Unfortunately, it probably never occurs that one day they have, for the first time, the thought of quitting—and then never use again. In fact, multiple relapses are common. These relapses undermine the users’ motivation as they are consumed with thoughts of despair and hopelessness. Because of the tendency for pornography users to have a “performance orientation,” they are inclined to believe that being completely “over” the problem is the only true sign of progress. I propose that, instead, the following four factors should be viewed as signs of progress. 1) Increased ability in emotional regulation. 2) Decreasing severity of the relapse; for example attempting to access pornography on the Internet but quickly turning it off as soon as it comes on the screen is less severe than viewing pornographic sites for 10 minutes on average before having the inclination or strength to exit. 3) Increased time between relapses. 4) A decrease in how long it takes after a relapse to “get back on the wagon” and use the relapse management skills to deal with the relapse.

Then, in order to deal with the relapse, the individual should follow this five-step process: 1) Openly and explicitly confess to God, and do whatever possible to connect to Him. 2) Go to the spouse (or other trusted friend, clergy, or professional) and do the same. As they talk with God and others about the problem, some focus should be on recognizing the signs of progress listed above, without minimizing the seriousness of the relapse itself. 3) Conduct a structural analysis and commit to specific changes. 4) Conduct a process analysis that includes asking, “What was I thinking about that led to the relapse? How was I handling stress? How was I handling my relationships with myself, others, and God? What were the core negative beliefs I allowed to influence me?” Then make specific change commitments suggested by the answers to these questions. 5) Get busy living life differently.

Getting help: Motivation is an emotion that occurs when desire and hope come together. Since those who struggle with pornography also struggle with hope and shame, they often appear to suffer from a lack of motivation. Individuals report profound deficits in faith and hope and feelings of futility in overcoming the problem. Spouses of pornography users often report feeling angry or hurt that the user appears to be indifferent about a relapse. As stated above, some relapses are probably to be expected. Making the changes outlined above is a very new and difficult process that can take years to fully learn for any of us, more so for the user of pornography. Such individuals will only work on overcoming the problem to the extent they are “motivated” to do so. The difference between the motivation they have and the amount they require can be made up with the help of others. Ecclesiastical leaders, spouses, parents, siblings, friends, peers, members of 12-step groups, and professionals can all play a role at different times and in different ways. The main thing offered by others is that they can promote knowledge, hope, and accountability. As they do so, the individual will increase in motivation (which is really an increase in faith). In this way, the support network and the individual get into a “virtuous cycle,” which leads to an increased ability to obtain the necessary information, hope, and accountability without as much assistance from others, as well as provide that same stability to others.

Professionals working in this field can help in providing all three of these key factors. However, I suggest that their role more appropriately is to be one of a “team” of individuals working to promote these three goals. They can assist individuals in setting up their support network and offer professional direction to both the individual and their network. They can also assist in accelerating change, especially in the area of process...
skills such as marital conflict resolution skills or emotional regulation skills. As the support network of the individual grows in helpfulness, the need for professional help will decrease. This is especially true if few serious issues are present. Professional help should definitely be sought in more serious situations such as when there is significant addiction, other addictions, severe consequences (especially in regards to relationships), a history of sexual abuse or perpetration, or other commonly co-occurring psychological difficulties (e.g., depression or suicidal thoughts).

Conclusion
The use of pornography is an increasingly common and potentially very harmful behavior. As individuals follow the model that has been presented, their ability to connect to feelings will start to increase, which has as its outgrowth an increased ability to connect to spouse, God, and others because they are now feeling emotions of love and joy as well as sorrow and healthy guilt. Church leaders, spouses, friends, peers, and therapists can assist and in so doing empower the individual to increasingly apply these principles on their own. As individuals make these changes, they will experience increased stability in their sense of self worth, have more fulfilling relationships with God and others, and begin to experience the joy and peace for which our emotions were designed. They will begin viewing life through a healthier lens, and their relationships will improve also. Thus, a period of reparation and healing occurs where the effects of the unhealthy belief system and cycle are overcome, relationships are mended, connection with God and others is strengthened, healthy sexuality is learned, and the individual is transformed.

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2 See chapters 4 and 6 of Kastleman, op. cit.
3 See Patrick Carnes, Contrary to love, Center City, MN: Hazelden, 1989, and Out of the shadows, op. cit.
4 Stan Weed, Pornography: a review of scientific literature, National Coalition for the Protection of Children and Families. See also www.enough.org for references to other studies.
5 Jeffry R. Holland, “Personal Purity”, Ensign, Nov. 1998, p. 75
9 See Carnes, op. cit., p. 14
10 The website www.latterdayfamilies.com provides a list of community, faith-based, and 12-step resources. (Click on the link, “Overcoming Pornography.”) A list of scriptural and doctrinal exercises is also listed here as well as information for how to set up a systemic social support system.
11 ibid.
12 The area of neuro-linguistic programming is very new and, to my knowledge, has not yet been applied to treating pornography. I list it here as something I think can be a useful adjunct to traditional approaches.

As the individual makes these changes, they will... begin to experience the joy and peace for which our emotions were designed.