Living Above Suspicion: Reestablishing Trust in the Wake of a Pornography Problem

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Living Above Suspicion

REESTABLISHING TRUST IN THE WAKE OF A PORNOGRAPHY PROBLEM

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"Hearts are not had as a gift, but hearts are earned,
By those that are not entirely beautiful."

--William Butler Yeats

The children’s story Pinocchio is an intriguing tale of transformation—of transforming a wooden heart into a real one. It is also a story about the distorting and disfiguring nature of lies. And, it is a story of how making promises to prove oneself brave, truthful, and unselfish can be a binding, motivational force when one is in way over his or her head and on the verge of drowning.

The story of Pinocchio has relevant parallels to the distorting influence of pornography, and it offers insights into the transformations that are needed for healing to occur. It also gives insight into the kinds of promises, and in the case of LDS families, covenants, that can be drawn upon to help set an individual, couple, or family free from pornography’s influence.

As a marriage and family therapist, I have encountered an increasing number of courageous men and women who are coming forward to speak up and out about concern over a loved one’s struggle with pornography. Most have witnessed the hardening of a loved one’s heart, have experienced the user’s increasing indifference to essential and sacred things, and have expressed heartache over feeling like they are in the presence of a stranger who is temporarily not “real” to them. In Jimminy Cricket-like fashion, they have figuratively cried, “Your nose is growing; your nose is growing!” Yet sadly the distorting influence of pornography has deadened the user’s ability to comprehend the full impact of what his or her secretive consumption and fantasy world have done. Ironically, the very thing that seduces pornography users into believing their sexual desires and curiosities can be satisfied in counterfeit ways also numbs them from being able to discern and experience the full range of human feelings needed for authentic, meaningful intimacy with a current or future spouse.

Assisting couples in overcoming this multifaceted

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problem can be a challenging task. Living above Suspicion Contracts, which are the focus of this article, may be used by therapists or clergy to assist couples in reestablishing trust in the wake of a pornography problem. Living above Suspicion Contracts, in short, are written agreements mediated by a third party (e.g., a bishop or therapist) that outline active steps each party will take to gradually reestablish trust in the marital relationship. The structured and mediated nature of the contracts has been invaluable for many couples.

This article will address the impact of pornography use, the usefulness and nature of Living above Suspicion contracts, and the stages of developing the contract, including questions that can help couples increase awareness and solidify change.

**Impact of Pornography Use**

The discovery or disclosure of pornography use is especially devastating to the marital bond. In most cases, an intense range of emotions ensues, with the overarching sentiments being shock, betrayal, anger, and disgust. From a professional and personal point of view, I balk at the suggestion that pornography is harmless or that it can “spice up” marital intimacy. What proponents of pornography do not realize is that the “spice” is often the heartache variety or misery brand, and that the adulterous nature of this secretive and addictive habit can lead to dissolved relationships, lost jobs, crippling debts, depression, or drastic changes in social, spiritual, academic, or professional standing.

**Impact on Trust and Fidelity**

When pornography is introduced into a marital relationship, trust and fidelity are impacted deeply. When we consider that Jennifer Schneider’s (2000) research found that women consider online sexual activity to be just as much adultery or cheating as live affairs, we gain insight into why trust and fidelity are affected so deeply.

The repair—or better yet transformation—of the relationship, requires *both* individuals to address the issue of rebuilding trust so they can Rededicate themselves to the marriage, while “divorcing” the unhealthy patterns that opened space for this problem to take root. Thinking in terms of divorcing patterns rather than people can provide a useful mindset for a couple faced with this kind of marital crisis. I acknowledge that for many people, especially those who are married to someone who is refusing to change or to get help, a divorce in the traditional sense of the word may be the best choice. Because each person’s capacities and resources differ, none of us is capable of judging how long someone can or should endure this kind of trial. Regardless of how people choose to cope, they need our support and fellowship.

**Dealing with Guilt and Blame**

In the majority of cases, problems with pornography began long before the couple even met. In fact, many men I have worked with report that they were first exposed to pornography between the ages of seven and eleven and that their pornography consumption gradually increased during their adolescence. Women can benefit from understanding this common history of consumption as they attempt to depersonalize their partner’s pornography use and avoid viewing it as a commentary or judgment on their own bodies, sexuality or attractiveness. Wives can cope more easily if they remember that their husband would likely be struggling with this problem regardless of whom he had married. Furthermore, any man who claims his wife is the reason he seeks out pornographic material for sexual gratification either is avoiding responsibility for his own unhealthy coping skills or is currently unable to appropriately express his needs and wants within the context of a marital relationship. Either way, habitual pornography use is the sole responsibility of the user—never someone else’s fault. A pornography user is never stripped of his or her ability to make choices in the present, even if pornography was introduced in an abusive or forceful manner in the past.

**Assuming Roles in the Healing Process**

Once an understanding has been developed, both husband and wife play roles in the healing process when pornography has impacted a marriage. Because pornography impacts relationships (even when the pornography use is still unknown to one partner), the solution requires a relational response. Such a relational response occurs when both partners recognize that they
must play a role in the healing process, and both are open
to examining how patterns in their relationship may
have left one or both of them vulnerable to unhealthy
ways of dealing with or avoiding problems.

Of course each partner plays a different role in
this process, and each has different responsibilities.
However, both play an integral role in restoring trust. For
example, only the husband is responsible
for stopping pornography use, and only the wife can relinquish the
role of “porn police” by clarifying what is in her control
and what is not. Often a wife will misinterpret her “role
in the healing process” as a “responsibility for stopping
pornography use”; such a mindset can generate feelings
of anger or hypervigilence as she constantly looks for
cues that her husband is still indulging his pornography
habit. Although understandable, “policing” efforts are
not effective in the end, and in fact such an attitude can
delay the husband from taking full responsibility for his
own actions, thus exacerbating the wife’s distress.

Although the effects of pornography can be devastating
and complex, there is hope. With professional help and
spiritual support, couples can use this situation as a
catalyst for understanding each other more deeply and
developing greater intimacy.

**Living above Suspicion Contracts**

“You can’t shake hands with a clenched fist.”
-Indira Gandhi

In the wake of a pornography disclosure or discovery,
one of the greatest challenges is the intense climate of
mistrust between husband and wife. The mistrust is
often intensified
by
the feeling of crisis and the range of
uncertainties that may surface, including the question
of whether the marriage will continue. This climate of
mistrust poses a threat to the success of therapeutic and
spiritual work: Unless the woman can trust her husband
to stop using pornography, and unless the husband can
experience that trust from his wife (assuming he has
stopped his pornography habit or is in the process of
doing so), the relationship is at a serious impasse.

**Dangerous Cycles**

What makes this kind of trust problem distinct from
others is that the emotional stress that the mistrust
triggers increases the risk of relapse in the pornography
user. This idea is supported by Robert Barth and Bill
Kinder (1987) in their statement that “the sexually
impulsive individual uses sexual activity as a means of
avoiding or escaping from personal problems, social
stress and unpleasant emotions, such as loneliness,
boredom, tension, sadness, or anger” (p.16). When a
husband is sincerely and earnestly striving to cease
pornography use, anxiety escalates when he lives in an
atmosphere where his verbal assurances are meaningless
and his partner is reeling in her own distress over his
secretive behavior. This anxiety, unfortunately, is often
managed in unhealthy ways, as the husband may escape
to the ever-ready and ever-accepting fantasy world of
pornography, which in turn fuels the mistrust.
The therapist must pay attention to how a couple deals with emotional stress and anxiety, as experts in the field of sexual addictions suggest that problems like compulsive pornography use are often a coping response to stress and anxiety (Schneider, Irons, & Corley, 1999). Use of Living above Suspicion Contracts is an attempt to address the connections between mistrust and the cycles of pornography use, while supporting the unique needs of both the husband and the wife. The ultimate goal of these contracts is to reduce the emotional stress and mistrust enough that the couple can receive help, and to buffer the user's vulnerability to the pornography temptation.

**Individual and Couple Patterns**

The diagram below illustrates some of the individual and couple patterns that I have witnessed in response to pornography problems. The goal of the Living above Suspicion Contract is to begin countering these vicious cycles by introducing what Dr. Wendy L. Watson (2001) refers to as "virtuous cycles." The interlocking patterns shown are all connected and therefore are made worse when any part of the cycle becomes more rigid or intense. It is helpful for the couple to understand what is happening in the space between them, as well as within each person (see the interlocking patterns involved in this dilemma in Fig. 1 below).

It is understandable that many women don’t want to trust their husband for a time: They have been deeply hurt, and covenants have been betrayed. In fact, some women may not be able to trust themselves for a time, as they sift through questions and self-doubts about how they “missed it” or didn’t act sooner if they suspected something was wrong; thus, self-distrust is common in the mistrust cycle. It is important to invite women to consider how long and

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**Figure 1**

**The Dilemma**

The couple does not want to move forward in their relationship unless they can trust and be trusted, and the climate of mistrust increases the risk of relapse.

The Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Patterns Involved in this Dilemma:

- Prone to Use
- Anxious or Distrust
- Suspicious

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Husband</th>
<th>Husband</th>
<th>Wife</th>
<th>Wife</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shame</td>
<td>Mistrust</td>
<td>Lack of Self Trust</td>
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to what degree withholding trust will serve a helpful purpose. Women may also need to consider to what degree withholding trust is contributing to the cycle they want so desperately to break. For example, will prolonged mistrust really protect a woman from further betrayal? Is she attempting to use mistrust to motivate her partner to apologize and change his behavior? Or is mistrust a form of emotional distance that, if maintained, will be detrimental to the continuation of the marriage?

Women are not responsible for their partner’s pornography use, but they can be a powerful influence in the healing process. It is possible for a therapist or a bishop to be supportive of the husband and wife, while at the same time extending different invitations of responsibility to each. For example, the bishop might invite the husband to take full responsibility for stopping his use of pornography and invite the wife to clarify her own boundaries and communicate her desires respectfully (e.g., I will no longer participate in sexual practices that I find uncomfortable or degrading).

**The Contract**

A Living above Suspicion Contract is a written agreement mediated by a third party (e.g., a bishop, a therapist, or a trusted friend or family member) that outlines active steps that each party will take to begin the process of “living above suspicion.” The contract is executed after there has been a full disclosure of the pornography use and of any related habits or activities (e.g., masturbation, phone sex, purchases, or live contacts).

The contract is intended to complement ecclesiastical supports, as well as intensive individual and couple therapy. As stated earlier, it does not substitute for other healing processes, but it can serve as a catalyst to get important work underway.

It is important for all parties to realize that developing the contract may require several meetings, depending on how stressed or emotional the couple is at the time they seek help. Although the couple is encouraged to brainstorm and reflect on the questions asked during contract development, we highly recommend that the couple work through the questions and steps with the help of a mediator, not on their own.

**Step One: Understand the Problem and Its Effects**

After determining that a couple would benefit from a Living above Suspicion Contract, the mediator must set the stage for contract negotiation by striving to understand the problem and its effects from the couple’s point of view. To do this, the mediator must commit to supporting both husband and wife, assume a non-judgmental stance, and be curious about all the factors that allowed pornography to take hold. The objective of this step is to get a feel for the landscape of the problem and search out the building blocks for solutions.

The following questions may be used to initiate this process. This list is not in any significant sequence and is not comprehensive, but these questions have been found effective in revealing important areas of concern and in generating hope.

1. How has the pornography use affected each individual? The couple? The family? Others?
2. What definition of pornography can both agree on?
3. What pornography-related problems are most troubling for this couple? (The causes of the anxiety and stress cannot be assumed. For example, one couple may be reeling from a related financial debt, and another couple may be concerned with the loss of social or church standing.)
4. Where do they need to restore trust in their relationship?
5. What is the couple’s definition of trust?
6. What would signify that trust is being restored?
7. What would they be willing to do or recommit to if trust were restored?
8. What role will spirituality play in the restoration of trust?
9. Why do both husband and wife think verbal assurances are not enough at this point?
10. What is at stake if the influence of pornography does not stop?
11. What is the timeline that both are willing to work within in order to overcome this problem?
12. What is the most that the couple could do to ensure that pornography does not influence their relationship in the future? (This question is based on the work of Jeff Robinson, Ph.D., 2003).
13. What gives them hope that things can change for the better? How will they remain hopeful when things are challenging or change does not happen as quickly as they would like?

14. What do the husband and wife believe to be true about one another and about their marriage that can help them stay the course?

15. What does their willingness to create a contract like this say about them as individuals and as a couple?

16. When they have overcome this challenge, what do they think they will have learned about themselves and each other that they presently cannot detect?

**Step Two: Clarify Roles**

As in any contractual arrangement, the Living above Suspicion Contract requires that roles and expectations be clear. I have found the following expectations and roles beneficial:

1. The husband’s role in a Living above Suspicion Contract involves the following commitments:
   - Demonstrate change through action
   - Acknowledge the pain caused by his secretive behaviors
   - Do whatever is necessary to make amends and abandon the secretive and problematic patterns
   - Commit to work with ecclesiastical leaders and qualified professionals

2. The wife’s role in a Living above Suspicion Contract involves the following commitments:
   - Gradually become open to trusting again
   - Outline in writing what she needs to see, experience, know, or hear in order to feel at peace with the relationship again (guidelines referred to as road maps in Dr. Janis Abrahms-Spring’s book After the Affair [1996], in which she suggests that many men need specific, concrete examples of what needs to happen)
   - Acknowledge changes her partner makes
   - Deal with her distress and hurt in ways that do not demean or shame

3. The mediator’s role in a Living above Suspicion Contract is as follows:
   - Assist in maintaining a climate of mutual respect and support (for example, by expressing concern for both parties and being careful not to take sides)
   - Ensure the contract is realistic and related to the situation, and that it promotes dignity
   - Ensure that there is a process of accountability by following up with the commitments made by the couple and acting as a witness to the agreements made between husband and wife. Accountability can also be fostered by setting follow-up dates and outlining how progress or discouragements will be reported back to the mediator.
   - Work with the couple to make adjustments to the contract as progress is made

**Step Three: Clarify Needs and Create the Initial Contract**

In this phase the couple and the mediator carefully brainstorm a list of the active steps necessary to begin living above suspicion, with “virtuous cycles” of relating to one another. During this phase mediators must remember that people who are under stress are often less creative and clear than they would ordinarily be; therefore, this portion of the contract process may need to be completed over several sessions. Most couples in this position are processing a great deal of information and can be struggling for clarity on many things, including the future of the relationship. It may be beneficial for some couples to be introduced to things other couples have done that have proved helpful. Examples from this section may be used for this purpose.

The two lists below represent items couples have actually included in their contracts. The examples are intended to provide an overview of the kinds of things that couples may include in their contract, and are not to be understood as one comprehensive list. Because each couple is different, each contract will reflect different needs and different areas of impact. Therefore, the lists below should not be imposed or prescribed, but rather offered as an example and a series of options.

**Examples from husbands. The following items have been useful to husbands who have participated in Living above Suspicion Contracts in the past:**

- I would like my wife to stop watching soap operas during the day because I think that is one habit that
affects the overall fidelity in our marriage.

- I will change my job and get out of a line of work and environment that is conducive to inappropriate material or conversation. I would appreciate my wife's support in this.
- I want knowledge of my difficulties and this situation to be shared with a mutually agreed upon group of people.
- I would like my wife and me to be able to go out once a week and not have to talk about this problem. I want moments when we can enjoy one another or focus on other things.
- I want to be able to hold my wife's hand or give her a hug and not be turned away.
- I want for us to participate in spiritual practices such as prayer, scripture study, and fasting as a couple.
- When my wife expresses feelings about this situation or about me, I want name-calling eliminated.
- I would like to join a sports league in order to focus attention in healthy ways and socialize with men in appropriate settings.
- I want to be able to share what I am learning in therapy on my own terms.

**Examples from wives. In clarifying their needs and expressing their desires, wives have found the following to be important:**

- I would like the computer removed from the home for a designated period of time. (A specific time commitment needs to be stated in the contract.)
- I would like the Internet to be disconnected for a designated period of time. (A specific time commitment needs to be stated in the contract.)
- The computer needs to be permanently set up in a public place in our home.
- I want our home to be purged of all movies, magazines, and reading material that are inappropriate.
- I want us to recommit to not watching R-rated movies or TV programs that promote immorality.
- I want our family to move to a different city.
- I want my husband to call me during the day to let me know how he is doing or just to say hello.
- I want my husband to tell me when there have been slips and what he has done about them.
- I want receipts for individual therapy sessions put in a common location until I am more comfortable with verbal assurances that he has been attending.
- I want to handle financial matters for one year or until the pornography-related debts are resolved.
- I want filtering programs to be put on his computer(s) at work and at home.
- I want overnight travel to be eliminated for a designated period of time. (A specific time commitment needs to be stated in the contract.)
- I want us to attend couple therapy once individual sessions are completed.

Once the lists have been created, items are prioritized and divided into manageable units. The couple is encouraged to place priority on the items that set immediate boundaries on problematic behaviors (i.e., computers, overnight travel, telephones). The other items on the list may be incorporated as the pornography use ceases, or as progress is made in other areas.

**Step Four: Draw Up the Contract and Clarify Its Role in Fostering Accountability**

At this point, the contract is written up, dated, and signed, and copies are given to each party, as well as to any leader or caregiver who is involved in the healing process. The role of the contract in fostering accountability is also outlined in this step. For instance, the possibilities of relapse and failure to comply with the contract are addressed during this phase. Couples are strongly encouraged to decide what needs to happen if the contract is breached by either of them. Husband and wife may have differing views on appropriate consequences. If they cannot agree on one consequence or response—which will likely be the case because different items will have different degrees of seriousness attached to them—then several responses may need to be included.

Because the Living above Suspicion Contract is intended as a mechanism of accountability, follow-up dates and renegotiation dates also need to be stipulated in the agreement. Follow-up sessions will involve meeting with the mediator to discuss progress or challenges; renegotiation dates are associated with specific contractual items that have time commitments on them. For example, if it is agreed upon that the computer will not be in the home for six months, a date will need to be set to reassess the usefulness of this action after the six month period.
It is important for the couple to understand that the Living above Suspicion Contract is intended to be a living document and that it should be used only as long as it is useful. The contract is not a punitive measure or an outline of Herculean tasks for one or both to perform, but rather a mutually supportive arrangement that can help restore a level of safety and trust needed for open and honest discussion about why the pornography problem developed and increased.

In fact, couples are often surprised at how witnessing their partner’s adherence to the contract can make them feel more secure in the relationship, and they in turn are willing to renegotiate the timeline of some of the contracted items. Although couples are encouraged to acknowledge the progress being made, it is important for them to avoid rushing this valuable process and to realize that the contract is only a catalyst for beginning the critical work of healing, not an end unto itself.

**Step Five: Increase Awareness and Solidify Change**

Once the level of safety and trust develops to the point that the couple can discuss their situation somewhat objectively, they might find it helpful to discuss a wider scope of questions that may solidify the changes they have made and deepen their resolve to be unified in their stance against pornography. These questions lead toward the capacity to look outward to a larger sphere of influence once a person has made significant changes in his or her own life. The following questions are intended to increase awareness, unity, and understanding about the issue of pornography, as well as to help clarify a couple’s stance on it:

Why do you think pornography is a problem in our society at this time?

From a spiritual perspective, why do you think pornography is rampant in the latter days?

What do you believe the effects of pornography to be?

What do you think are the societal beliefs or values that have enabled the pornography industry to grow into a multibillion dollar business?

What beliefs and values did you have to accept as true or appealing in order for this problem to take root?

What do you think made your family susceptible to the influence of pornography?

How did the problem of pornography use influence the self-image of different family members, especially mothers, wives, and daughters?

What have you learned or changed during this healing process that will help protect you from the influence of pornography in the future?

Based on Dr. Wendy L. Watson’s idea that “the Lord can alter whatever we are willing to put on His altar,” what kinds of “alterations” are needed in this marital relationship? (2001, p. 166)

How can temple attendance help you live your covenants more fully and protect you from pornography?

What messages about sexuality, men, women, bodies, relationships, and intimacy that you received as a youth might have contributed to this problem taking root?

Who in your life would be the most surprised that you have struggled with pornography? Who in your life would be the least surprised?

What people or organizations will support you in taking an anti-pornography stance?

When were you first exposed to pornography? Was that incident accidental, forced, or sought after?

Who else in your world has had a problem with pornography? How did this individual’s problem impact you? Who has been impacted by your problem?

How did your early exposure(s) to pornography influence your thinking and beliefs about sexuality, men, women, bodies, relationships, and intimacy?

Are there any ideas or beliefs that you now realize have not served you well and you would do well to abandon?

How has pornography influenced the way you feel about yourself? What does your hard work in overcoming its influence tell you about yourself?

What are some healthy ways that you can deal with stress, conflict, and anxiety that do not involve unhealthy ways of coping, escaping, or numbing out?

What needs did pornography fulfill (social, sexual, physical, emotional, curiosity)? How can these needs be fulfilled in healthy ways? What will replace pornography as a coping strategy?

As you reflect back on your relationship history, are there any boundaries that should have been in place or respected that weren’t? Consider, for example, the law of chastity, media standards, the Word of Wisdom, or dating standards.

How can these boundaries be strengthened and
Eastern cultures believe sexual potential is developed by placing emphasis on emotional, mental, spiritual and physical dimensions, as well as on self-discipline (Schnarch, 1991, p. 59). How do you think pornography has distorted or influenced your understanding of sexuality and exaggerated the physical dimension of sexuality?

What do you think you would need to start, stop, or learn in order to introduce a more accurate perspective on sexuality and sexual potential?

Do you think the kinds of conversations you have regarding sexuality (with spouse, children, or self) and the language you use to express those ideas invite or detract from the Spirit?

What would need to change in order to express ideas in such a way that you and your spouse become clearer about who you really are, as well as about the divine role of marital intimacy in progression?

Is there anything you and your spouse would like to do to recognize or celebrate the new kind of relationship you are developing?

If the societal problem with pornography continues to get worse, what ramifications do you predict for our families, communities, nations, and international community?

What have you learned through this experience that you would want to pass on to your children?

What advice would you give other couples who are struggling with the influence of pornography? What advice would you offer to those trying to be supportive of an individual or a couple struggling with pornography?

Couples can overcome pornography’s influence. Using the Living above Suspicion Contract can be a helpful step in the healing process. “Living above Suspicion” is more than a title for an intervention, however; it is an invitation for couples to rise above the worldliness and perversion that prevents them from seeing one another clearly; it is a call for honesty; and it is an invitation for light to be shone into areas of a relationship that have been damaged by secrecy and lies.

As a couple embraces the goals and objectives of the Living above Suspicion Contract, they can begin to sever the puppet strings that have held them captive and have restricted their freedom to enjoy marital intimacy in its truest and purest sense. Pinocchio’s famous tune “I had strings, but now I’m free” indeed echoes a hopeful chorus for those who may be just starting the journey toward freedom and peace from the bonds of a pornography problem, or who doubt these bonds can be broken or overcome.

References


Footnotes

1 The term “Living above Suspicion” was originally coined by Dr. Karl Tomm, an internationally recognized family therapist and psychiatrist with whom I had the privilege of completing an internship. Dr. Tomm used the phrase “Living above Suspicion” with families struggling with mistrust; however, at the time I did co-therapy with him, the term was not used in relation to pornography problems, nor in the formal, contractual way I eventually came to use it.