

WHAT TO SAY
WHEN

*She's
Looking
at Porn*

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P U B L I S H I N G

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Scripture quotations from the New Testament use the ESV's alternate, footnoted translation of *adelphoi* ("brothers and sisters").

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A young woman you have been getting to know through your fellowship group asks if you can grab coffee together this week. She has something she would like to talk to you about. When the day arrives, the two of you spend some time catching up. You talk about life, work, church, mutual friends. The conversation is enjoyable, but you begin to wonder—was there actually something specific she wanted to discuss? When the next lull comes in the conversation, you remind her she seemed to have something on her mind when she suggested this meeting. She takes a deep breath, nods her head uncomfortably, and says she needs to confess something that she has never told anyone else. You're not sure if she's asking permission to tell you, but you do your best to visually lock in and nod to communicate some measure of assurance. Taking a quick look around, she lowers her voice, and then leans in to tell you . . . she's been looking at porn.

You set down your croissant and take a deep breath.

She knows it is sin, but she can't seem to stop. She feels embarrassed, ashamed, discouraged, and completely alone. She stares down at her coffee as she makes her confession, but then she glances up at you, and you can see the questions swirling—*Are you disgusted by me? Are you utterly shocked by my behavior? Can you help me?*

The Heart of the Struggle

Over the past few decades, the internet has transformed how easily we access information and services—anytime, anywhere. Want a tutorial on making baked Alaska or need toilet paper delivered to your door, *stat*? A few clicks and it's done. From choosing a paint color, to banking, to sudden needing to know what a group of flamingos is called (a *flamboyance*, for the record), there's an app for that. In a myriad of ways, the internet has made our lives significantly more convenient and efficient.

It has also turned the once-gated marketplace of pornography into an open floodplain. In 2021, biblical counselors Deepak Reju and Jonathan Holmes predicted “a tidal wave coming among elementary-school and teenage girls [who regularly interact with pornography]. . . . When [the women born after 2010] arrive in our churches as adults, a tsunami will hit our shores.”*

From a pleasure-driven and profit-oriented perspective, pornography is a dream. It is highly addictive, appeals to base instincts, and offers a mental and emotional escape. Furthermore, internet pornography has become increasingly more anonymous, easier to access, and harder to avoid than at any other time in human history.

* Deepak Reju and Jonathan D. Holmes, *Rescue Plan: Charting a Course to Restore Prisoners of Pornography* (P&R Publishing, 2021), 105–6.

In a given week approximately one-third of women aged eighteen to thirty-five will look at porn,* and the industry will profit extraordinarily off of them.†

The reality, of course, is that pornography wreaks havoc on the minds, bodies, and souls of those it preys on. It makes enticing offers of satisfaction and leaves the consumer empty and unfulfilled, with a perpetual craving for more. It mars the beauty of God's good gift of sex, makes a mockery of those made in his image, amplifies self-gratification, and ravenously exploits the vulnerable and fallen nature of humanity.

Although there is limited research on how porn affects women, preliminary studies indicate that porn has similar effects on male and female brains,‡ causing the release of high levels of dopamine (the neurotransmitter responsible for feelings of anticipation and reward). This creates pleasure but leaves the body wanting more.

* Katharina Buchholz, "How Much of the Internet Consists of Porn?," Statista, February 11, 2019, <https://www.statista.com/chart/16959/share-of-the-internet-that-is-porn/>.

† Meelie Bordoloi, et al., "Effects of Pornography on Youth: A Review," *Missouri Medicine* 121, no. 3 (2024): 195–97, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11160374/>.

‡ Ekaterina Mitricheva et al., "Neural Substrates of Sexual Arousal Are Not Sex Dependent," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 116, no. 31 (2019): 15,671–76, <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1904975116>.

Because dopamine is associated with motivation and memory, when it is released, the brain notes what triggered it and identifies things in the environment that might help recreate the experience. Porn can essentially overstimulate and wear out the reward system over time, causing the brain to become less responsive to natural sources of pleasure. It has also been shown to change sexual desires and expectations, leading to less enjoyment of in-person intimate behavior. And it can seriously affect the ability of users to delay gratification, thus increasing their expectation of immediate satisfaction in other areas of life.* The research increasingly agrees with the biblical assessment: This is no dream—it's a nightmare.

So when you hear this woman say she's been looking at porn, understand that she is not alone—she's dealing with something common and yet profoundly serious. Some women are lured in by curiosity, but many stumble in unintentionally. She may feel compelled by a hunger for sexual gratification, for validation, or for intimacy that porn satisfies temporarily. However it begins, and for whatever reasons it persists, women are increasingly finding themselves ensnared by porn.

The revelation of this sin is cause for rejoicing. Light has

* Sesen Negash et al., "Trading Later Rewards for Current Pleasure: Pornography Consumption and Delay Discounting," *The Journal of Sex Research* 53, no. 6 (2016): 689–700, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26305628/>.

broken into the darkness with her confession! But clearly the battle is just beginning, and likely there are important struggles happening internally as the conversation unfolds—for both of you. Before you even speak, I invite you to make three resolutions:

1. I will help my friend make a complete confession by embracing discomfort and asking questions that lovingly bring hidden things into the light.
2. I will listen well, seek to understand, and do my best to avoid assumptions and preconceived notions.
3. I will endeavor to point her to Jesus, who will help her find the hope of healing and lavish her with the goodness of his grace.

This is a beautiful opportunity to shine gospel light into the soul of another. And it may also be awkward. Exploring the uncomfortable and unnerving parts of this conversation will serve as an important prerequisite to a deeper consideration of distorted loves and disordered desires, paving the way toward helping this friend identify the heart of her own *particular* struggle and moving toward practical solutions in a helpful, loving way.

Take Courage: Receiving This Confession Can Be Uncomfortable

If hearing your friend say “I’ve been looking at porn” causes you not to set down your croissant and take a

deep breath but instead to drop it straight into your coffee cup and freeze, you are not alone. Sexual sin can be uncomfortable to talk about.

Broadly speaking, this is true because there is a sense in which our sexuality is meant to be *private*. It is not something we share broadly with the world but is something God designed us to express in the privacy of the most intimate human relationship—marriage—as a means of deep connection and oneness. Because of its intended private nature, the discussion of sex (even healthy married sex) may always feel a little uncomfortable.

Women have historically regarded sexuality as even more private than men, and lust is still often regarded as a “man’s struggle.” Although views on this are beginning to change, we still live with a significant gender gap. Whereas sexual struggle is generally assumed among men, for women it can often feel embarrassing or shameful to experience, let alone talk about with another woman. Before you begin to ask specific questions, it may be helpful to invite your friend to tell you anything she feels is important for you to know. You might say, “Thank you for sharing this with me. I have a few follow-up questions, but first I’d like to give you the opportunity to share any details about your struggle that you think are important for me to know.”

The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Once she has shared, it is your turn to ask some uncomfortable

questions. This is an important part of what it looks like to love someone who has confessed pornography use to you. The point is certainly not to interrogate your friend but to help her make a complete confession—one that does not knowingly leave any significant details hiding in the recesses of her heart.

If she does not mention masturbation, ask about it. Pornography use is almost always accompanied by masturbation, because while pornography can certainly satiate the lust of the eyes to some extent, it cannot fully gratify sexual longing. So the content stirs up and enhances lust, but masturbation attempts to satisfy it.

Again, this may be uncomfortable, especially for women. But gospel love enters into discomfort and messiness. Your goal here is to help your friend make a full and complete confession, because that is good for her soul (Prov. 28:13; Eph. 5:11–14). So ask questions. Ask how she is accessing porn. Pornographic content can come in a variety of forms—including pictures, videos, chat rooms, and “spicy” novels or audiobooks.

Be careful to not make assumptions. It is important to clarify what kind of pornography she is viewing, listening to, or reading so that you have a full and accurate picture of how to help. There are many different ways to engage with explicit content and justify such engagement. Perhaps she is watching AI-generated material and feels justified because “no real people are being violated.” Maybe she has entered chat rooms or listened to

illicit podcasts. Women tend to be stimulated in a more context-driven, multisensory way than men. This is, in part, why many gravitate toward written descriptions of explicit content in spicy novels or audiobooks. The character development, the setting of the scene to engage multiple senses, and the slow buildup that many of these novels use align with how women experience desire. These things may seem more innocuous than the viewing of pornographic material, but they are not. The eyes are not the only means by which human beings seek to captivate our lusts, and the pursuit of holiness (to which we are called) requires us to recognize that our flesh can be enticed through a variety of means.

So ask about the content. How is she accessing it? Are there particular gateways in her daily life? Social media is a consistent gateway to pornography for many young women in particular. It is helpful to understand how she is getting to porn. It may also be helpful to ask if there are ways she feels it benefits her. Some women, for example, utilize romance novels to increase their desire for (or enhance their enjoyment of) actual sexual experience. Some may be struggling with same-sex attraction that they restrain in public life but feed privately in this way. Consider asking about her fantasy life outside of pornography—does she have intrusive sexual thoughts or find her mind wandering toward sexual fantasy often?

It is also important to ask her about her sexual past—both consensual experiences and any sexual

mistreatment or abuse. Some survivors of sexual abuse may use pornography (or engage in other compulsive sexual behaviors) as an unhealthy coping mechanism to escape emotional pain or disassociate from the difficult feelings connected to their trauma. It might be an unconscious attempt to process, reframe, or repair the past abuse. A person with a sinful consensual sexual past may have a stronger sexual appetite as a result of past experience, and they may consider pornography use and masturbation as less damaging than the “real” acts that they engaged in previously. These patterns certainly do not apply across the board but are important things to consider as you seek understanding.

Don't panic. Be prepared. We have acknowledged that the private nature of sexuality can make it uncomfortable to talk about even in its purest forms. But sexual sin, and pornography specifically, can be uncomfortable for yet another reason—the *perverseness* of the content. It can be unnerving or embarrassing to ask the questions necessary to help your friend make a complete confession. It can be awkward to talk about what draws her to something so shame-inducing and unhealthy. And it is terrible to feel unsure how to respond when someone is sharing something profoundly vulnerable with you.

Some women will certainly feel more discomfort than others. Maybe you have found healing from sexual sin of your own, or you have walked with others down similar