

When Her Husband is Addicted to Pornography

By Vicki Tiede

She sits across the desk from you. Her head is bowed, smudged mascara and a twisted tissue in her lap are the tell-tale signs that something is very wrong. Then from somewhere deep she musters the courage to speak. "Pastor, my husband is addicted to pornography and I am a mess." What do you say?

We've all heard the staggering statistics that 50% of Christian men are addicted to pornography, but have we absorbed the fact that 50% of the married women in the church have a husband who is addicted to porn and she is dealing with the ramifications of this infidelity? Most pastors admit they aren't sure how to respond to her needs. In fact, they aren't even sure what those needs are. Let's start there and then we'll consider what to say and what not to say.

Let's be frank, church leaders are not immune to sexual addictions. That's not news to anyone. What's awkward is that pastors are often the first source of help to whom a wife whose husband is addicted will turn. If you are struggling with pornography, please get help yourself. Then recognize that you are not in the best position to be counseling a woman in this situation. Be prepared to refer her to someone who is better able to help her right now.

Assuming you are qualified to counsel her, what is a pastor to do? First, you need to *acknowledge her pain*. When a woman learns that her husband is addicted to pornography, she is bombarded by a host of emotions (anger, fear, sadness, depression, and guilt), and the pain she feels is incomprehensible. Above all, she wants and needs to know that there is hope and that God is big enough to meet all of her needs (emphasis on **her** needs.) You see, when a woman comes to her pastor with this information, the tendency is to respond with things she can do to help her husband with his struggle. Pastors often begin by talking about the addiction itself and offering resources and help for the husband. This seems logical. If the addicted husband is seeking healing, then the wife will have nothing to be upset about. Right? It's not that simple.

Bear in mind, many women report that discovering her husband's pornography addiction is more heartbreaking than a traditional physical affair. She knows she cannot begin to compete with digitally enhanced images of countless women. Nevertheless, she may tend to base her hope and happiness on her husband's choices. If he's lost his job, maxed out their credit cards, and defiled their marriage bed (Hebrews 13:4) because of his addiction, her present circumstances may seem overwhelming. Though the fabric of her life may feel like it's unraveling, assure her that God is able to meet her in the center of her pain and that there is always hope in Jesus.

What you *do not want to do* is *spiritualize the pain and offer well-intentioned platitudes*. For instance, it's not helpful to assure the wife that "no temptation has overtaken [her husband] that is not common to man" (1 Corinthians 10:13). It may be true that most men struggle with lust to one degree or another, but she is going to hear this as you condoning her husband's sin. This would also not be the time to prompt her to pluck the log from her own eye before she harps on the speck in her husband's. There may absolutely be some truth in both of these examples, but this is not the time to address it. To some this will seem like common sense, but both of these are examples of things that have been said to women by pastors.

Do's and Don'ts of Pastoral Counseling with the Wife of a Pornography Addict:

DO: Acknowledge her pain.

DO: Give opportunities to name and grieve her losses.

DO: Assure her she is not to blame for her husband's choices.

DO NOT: Spiritualize the pain or offer well-intentioned platitudes.

DO NOT: Advise her to forgive quickly and without evidence of her husband's repentance and sincere turn from sin.

What you want to do instead is *give her an opportunity to name and grieve her losses*. While she may have experienced many losses (health, financial, self-worth), topping that list will probably be trust. She trusted her husband enough to share everything with him—her heart, mind, and body. He was her safe haven, the one whose arms she sought when she felt weak or afraid. Let's be clear on this: acting on a pornography addiction constitutes a betrayal. Period. "God designed sexual intimacy to be enjoyed within the covenant of marriage. As soon as sexual pleasure is sought outside the marriage—whether with a partner or in self-gratification while looking at porn—it is adultery. Such choices will devastate

trust and have repercussions in the marriage and in the husband's relationship with God. Sexual infidelity is a tremendously difficult betrayal from which to recover, but there is hope" (*When Your Husband is Addicted to Pornography*, V.Tiede, p.84).

Think twice before admonishing her to forgive quickly. If a husband is still looking at porn on the computer, renting X-rated movies, or engaging in other sexually immoral activities without owning his choices, repenting of them or taking sincere steps to stop his behavior, then advising his wife to forgive him now would mean asking her to do what God himself will not do. Christ extends mercy and grace, forgiving *those who repent*, and we are to imitate Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1). On the flip side, regardless of whether forgiving feels merited, deserved, or comfortable, if the husband has repented and sought forgiveness, it is essential that his wife forgive, but forgiving fast is not the answer. It is essential that a wife work through the painful feelings associated with her circumstances. Forgiving her husband quickly will not make the pain stop. "The goal of forgiveness is healing and growth. Fast forgiveness sabotages the healthy work that needs to be done to experience genuine, long-lasting restoration" (Tiede, p. 239).

The single most helpful thing you can tell a wife is that *she lacks nothing and is not to blame for her husband's choices*. Likewise, it is not her responsibility to fix him. If you tell her that she needs to be more sexually attractive and available to her husband, you will compound her pain and betrayal. Sexual intimacy is part of God's design, but we must consider that design in the context of intimacy after betrayal. When a husband's pornography addiction first comes to light, it is encouraged that the couple take a sexual fast for a period of time. Sexual intimacy should be preceded by emotional and spiritual intimacy.

As churches seek intentional ways to meet the felt needs of heartbroken wives, the new release *When Your Husband is Addicted to Pornography: Healing Your Wounded Heart* is a practical instrument to begin the dialogue and meet women in their pain and betrayal. Read the book yourself in order to understand the degree of her pain and the damage done in this marriage, then give her a copy of the book to work through as well.

Everyday churches have the opportunity to help people address real issues in their lives, issues that prevent them from experiencing true intimacy with Christ. Sexual sin is one of those issues and it's

ravaging families in your church body. Your church needs to be a safe place for Christian wives whose husbands are addicted to pornography are encouraged to live transparent lives, so they can be released from bondage, grow spiritually, and have a Kingdom impact in the world.

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