



8:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. (6 CE credits)

# F6 “When Pornography is an Issue: Innovative Approaches to Psychotherapy and Couples Counseling” presented by Marty Klein, PhD, LMFT

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When Pornography Is An Issue:  
Innovative Approaches to  
Couples Counseling & Psychotherapy

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## Goals of seminar

- To examine common assumptions of therapists about porn and its use, and clarify misconceptions
- To learn how to support both partners when a couple is in conflict about porn use
- To learn how to help couples discuss the deficits in their relationship that they're avoiding via conflict about porn
- To learn how to help individuals who are too involved with pornography
- To discuss the inadequacies of the "porn addiction" model
- To explore the value of the concept of "porn literacy"

To challenge the exceptionalism of sex  
within therapy.

To challenge the exceptionalism  
around pornography  
within sexuality & relationships.

## Genuine pain about porn

- “I watch more than I intend to”
- “I feel guilty”
- “I feel inadequate compared to porn”
- “I want a partner with a perfect body”
- “I know she doesn’t like it”
- “I hate keeping a secret”
- “He has a secret life”
- “I feel left out”
- “It’s something I just don’t understand”
- “I feel inadequate compared to porn”
- “I trust him less”

“Why can’t I control my watching?”

“Why do we keep fighting about this?”

Good clinical practice suggests that we shouldn't pathologize porn use a priori.

A less judgmental attitude makes it possible to use all of our clinical tools.

Other behaviors  
we may or may not pathologize

- Owning a gun
- Consensual non-monogamy
- Borrowing money to invest
- Owning a dog
- Owning 4 cats
- Allowing child to play high school football
- Not recycling
- Watching lots of CSI-type TV show
- Getting tattoos or piercings

## How therapists pathologize patients' interest in pornography

- Involvement with fantasy
- Separate from partner
- Content is inappropriate
- Partner doesn't like it
- Spending too much time
- Facilitates an industry
- A substitute for real sex
- Expresses hatred or disrespect for women

## Common model of how porn affects consumers

porn use w/d from relationship

think of porn during sex  
disconnect during sex

## Competing model of how consumers are involved with porn (1)

x w/d from relationship      porn use

x      disconnect during sex  
         think of porn during sex

## Competing model of how consumers are involved with porn (1a)

x w/d from relationship  
↓  
porn use

x → disconnect during sex  
↓  
think of porn during sex



## X can be...

- OCD, depression, bipolar disorder
- Resentment
- Mistrust
- Sense of inadequacy
- Shame, guilt, or anxiety
- Cultural confusion
- Masturbation is the only kind of sex that is satisfying
- Over-entwinement
- Trauma, PTSD
- Inhibited sexual desire
- Boring, frustrating, or painful sex
- Couples conflict
  - \* non-sexual: money, parenting, inlaws
  - \* sexual: birth control, preferences, logistics

## Most common configuration of pornography & relationship

relationship

pornography use

## What most male & female consumers say about porn use

- Aid to masturbation
- Validates self-image as sexual, & vision of a sexual world
- Looks like abundance
- Know it's a fantasy (& know the tropes)
- It's easier than a troubled relationship
- It's no substitute for a good relationship
- They don't necessarily think of actors during partner sex
- They value actors' self-acceptance & enthusiasm
- Their partners' feelings about it are confusing
- They don't tell others to avoid it

We—and our patients—  
could be more curious  
about the contrast between  
those who experience porn pain-free, and  
their partners in pain about porn.

Rather than getting distracted by  
and blaming the pornography,  
patients & therapists might ask  
two simple questions:

- 1) What makes pictures or stories of sex  
so compelling to you?
- 2) On any given occasion,  
Why do you prefer sexy pictures or stories  
to sexual activity with a mate?

### Why some people prefer pornography to partner sex

- The sex is more satisfying
- Ongoing conflict in the couple
- No performance anxiety
- Control of the experience
- Lack of agreement on sexual routines
- No startup cost after long absence of couples sex
- No contraception or disease prevention struggles
- No fertility conflicts

Most patients (& couples) would rather not  
discuss these painful issues.

Are we raising them in session?

Or are they too painful  
for us to raise?

The painful reality of  
long-term monogamy:

Typically, the sex gets less frequent, less  
intimate, less interesting, less nourishing.

All while one or both partners may be getting  
more invested in the couple.

Conflict about pornography  
(including claims of porn addiction)  
can be a way a couple avoids  
discussing this.

Therapists who pathologize  
the decline of sex in long-term monogamy  
may collude with the couple's avoidance,  
rather than challenging it.

Therapists who simply accept  
the decline of sex in long-term monogamy  
may collude with the couple's avoidance,  
rather than exploring  
how they deal with it.

## NARRATIVES

### Common narratives about partner's porn use

- It's about me personally
- I have a right to ban it from our life & my home
- It causes our problems, and is therefore
  - 1) my business, and 2) irresponsible behavior
- I know what you think about it & how it affects you
- I know I'm not desirable enough to compete w/porn images
- Interest in porn is not normal
- I don't need to know much about it to hate it
- Use of porn is selfish

That is,  
“Your interest in porn has  
no legitimacy.”

Is that a message we want to support?

In what ways do we collude with this?

## Porn is a convenient target

- I don't feel as emotionally connected with you during sex as I'd like.
- You don't seem so excited with me.
- You have erection/orgasm difficulties with me.
- You have low desire for me.
- I don't feel attractive
- I feel embarrassed about my body
- I don't feel very sexual
- I don't feel comfortable initiating or responding

## Common myths about pornography

- Most pornography is violent
- Porn steals consumers from their partners
- Women have to (but can't) compete with porn actresses
- Use leads to anti-social behavior
- It's a gateway drug
- Porn industry promotes child porn
- Most participants in videos are emotionally damaged
- Actresses are typically hurt during production
- Reducing porn watching → higher desire for partner sex



## Common myths about porn consumers

- Consumers want to replace their partners
- Consumers dislike or fear women
- Consumers are afraid of intimacy
- Consumers don't know porn is a fantasy
- Consuming adult porn → consuming child porn
- If you watch enough porn, you get addicted
- People end up watching porn of the “wrong” orientation
- Reducing porn watching → more desire for partner sex

## POWER STRUGGLES

How much of the pornography issue  
is unspoken discomfort about  
masturbation?

If A doesn't want B masturbating,  
there's no point in  
discussing pornography.

Conflict about porn may be part of  
a larger conflict about sex,  
which may be decades old.

When sex is the center of  
a couple's alienation,  
getting them to look at porn cooperatively  
is a huge task.

## Is porn a form of infidelity?

- Don't get involved in definitions
- Legitimize pain & dismay without taking sides
- Remind each partner: polysemicity
- Ultimately, "infidelity" is just a label
- Power struggle—who controls partner's eroticism?

A common configuration of porn use  
within a relationship:

"I have the right to forbid you  
from using it."

Which means

"You better keep it secret."

Do we generally support  
unilateral action or demands  
in a couple  
when the content is not porn?

“I forbid you from knitting.”  
“You may not hang family pictures  
on the wall.”

To be most helpful,  
we need to know exactly what  
someone is objecting to.  
What problem are they trying to solve?

Whatever the problem,  
eliminating porn is only one of many options.  
We generally prefer that couples  
choose options together, right?

## Nuts & bolts of power struggle

- Does partner have the right to a porn-free house?
- How do they negotiate the contract?
- What if they can't agree on a contract?
- What is the relationship behavior complaint?
- Which partner is actually obsessing on porn?

But doesn't "porn exploit women?"  
doesn't "porn cause rape?"

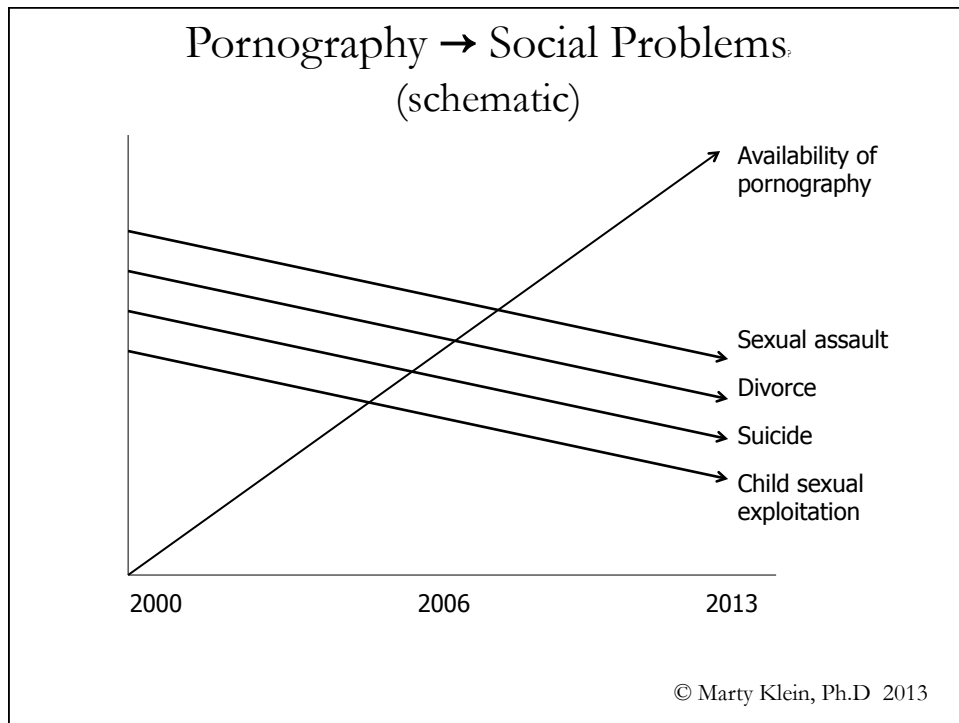
That's not relevant in discussions  
of marital conflict and marital desire.

How much legitimacy  
do we give political perspectives  
in couples therapy  
when the subject isn't porn?

“You can’t bring veal into this house.”

“You may not watch TV shows  
featuring racial stereotypes.”

“I don’t want you buying anything  
made with underage labor.”



Clinically, this data is  
completely irrelevant.

Although note that studies show  
the same pattern in Japan, Denmark,  
Czech Republic, and elsewhere

## Measuring “respect for women” since 2000, U.S.A.

- ↓ Sexual violence
- ↑ Admissions in law, medicine, business, & clergy
- ↑ Female judges, presidential candidates, CEOs
- New laws preventing marital rape
- New efforts to reduce rape in the military
- More women initiate divorce than men
- Tech firms run by women have greater success

## OVER-INVOLVEMENT W/PORN



## When people are too involved with porn

- This isn't a homogeneous group
- Differential diagnosis: OCD, bipolar, borderline, Asperger's, ADHD, anxiety, PTSD, etc.
- Does person have a sex life? Why not? Response?
- Why is s/he concerned about their porn viewing?
- Does content of porn matter? How varied is it?
- Is s/he connected to real life in any way? Isolated?
- Is over-involvement with porn or w/masturbating?
- Is masturbating satisfying?
- Shame or guilt about sex beyond porn?

## “Out of control” porn use

- Poor sense of self → immersion in ready-made world
- Inability to regulate agreements with self
- Imbalance between arousal and inhibition
  - \* dramatic disinhibition cures low arousal
  - \* high arousal feels like being alive; →  
disincentive to inhibit
- Using porn to regulate affect (amount & quality)
- Desire to be unconscious/numb
- Medicating depression, anxiety, isolation

Some people are over-involved w/porn  
in a desperate attempt to  
stay in a relationship in which they feel  
sexually dissatisfied or emotionally hungry.

Their partner (or we) may disapprove  
of this strategy,  
but the pain is real  
and the intention is usually sincere.

Discussing porn means talking about  
desire & arousal

- Wanting to increase own desire
- Wanting to increase partner's desire
- Mourning partner's lack of interest
- Wanting to enjoy state of arousal
- Wanting to enjoy more intense arousal
- Wanting to validate the ability to get aroused
- Arousal as wish for stimulation, antidote to boredom
- Arousal as difficult-to-resist stimulation
- Porn-watching as habitual

## Asking lots of specific questions

- Specific circumstances of watching
- What does he watch; how much variety
- How does he feel about watching what he does
- Does he enjoy ejaculating; feelings about semen
- How does he feel about his body, his arousal pattern
- Why protect partner from this part of his life
- How does he like his sex life; why not change it
- Any religious or moral issues
- Assess porn literacy

## “PORN ADDICTION”?

Many people would rather talk about why men are addicted to porn than talk about why men aren't addicted to sex with their wives/girlfriends.

### Self-test for pornography addiction (25 Q)

- I have purchased sexual products online.
- I have searched for online sexual material through a search tool.
- I have participated in sexually related chats.
- I have masturbated while on the Internet.
- No one knows I use my computer for sexual purposes.
- I have tried to hide what is on my computer or monitor.
- I have stayed up after midnight to access sexual material online.
- I use the Internet to experiment with sexuality, such as homosexuality.
- I sometimes use cybersex as a reward for enduring a stressful day.
- I have met with someone I met online for romantic purposes.
- I use sexual humor and innuendo with others while online.

## The diagnostic criteria for sex/porn addiction are culturally-syntonic:

- Guilt
- Shame
- Secrecy
- Denial
- Lying to mate
- Fear of loss
- Sexually ignorant or illiterate
- Fear “I’m not normal”
- Conflicted about monogamy
- Using sex to self-medicate

## “Porn addiction”?

- Any healthy porn use?
- Secrecy, guilt are culturally syntonic
- Differential diagnosis? Validated diagnostic criteria?
- Feeling out of control  $\neq$  being out of control
- Impulse problems vs compulsivity
- For this patient, why is porn easier than relationship?
- How much of this diagnosis is about masturbation?
- What (if any) fantasies are OK?
- What is “sobriety”? Why?
- Assumes a single set of normal activities & reasons to have sex
- What’s the difference between mental fantasy & visual porn?
- Diagnosis is easier than discussing low desire; boredom; inhibition; judgments

## Strategic advantages of believing in porn addiction & sex addiction

- . Better than “he’s selfish” or “he doesn’t care about me”
- . Externalize blame
- . Avoid looking at breakdown of couple’s (sex) life
- . Demonize lust, passion
- . Separate sex from other things
- . Reinforce gender stereotypes
- . Dignity of a medical problem
- . Easier than talking honestly about the relationship

Many people would rather  
maintain the narrative of mental illness  
than  
talk honestly with their partner about sex.

Patients want therapists  
to collude with this.

The contrast between  
(1a) level of interest in porn, &/or  
(1b) strength of desire for sex,  
vs.  
(2) religiosity, shame, etc.  
predicts perception of  
“I’m a porn addict.”

Current Sexual Health Reports, 2014  
Archives of Sexual Behavior, 2013

## Romance novels

- “Women’s pornography”
- No one reads 3 romance novels a year
- Content: power dynamics, gender stereotypes, violence
- Fantasy

What's the difference between  
romance novels and pornography?

What, if anything, does that tell us about  
human eroticism?

### Challenging neuro-voodoo

- No data re ED-porn link, or that ED is increasing
- No data re masturbating without porn
- No data re who isn't collapsing from porn
- Majority of brain studies to date done on rats
- Of course the brain lights up
- No data that brain changes are permanent
- Rate of marriage & cohabiting is staying steady
- Women watch porn; what is neuro-effect on them?
- Women becoming more empowered every day, despite male porn-watching



How would a given patient have to grow in order to let go of their “symptoms”?

### Growing beyond sexual impulsivity/ compulsivity

- Learn how to self-soothe
- Accept that sex changes over time
- See partner as ally, not controller
- Identify and resolve existential issues
- Realize sex can't solve all problems or fill all needs
- Develop other parts of self, other interests
- Be more willing to communicate about sex, other things
- Be more willing to take own needs seriously

What if we assume that  
the “addictive” sexual behavior  
is patient’s second choice?

What might their first choice be?  
Is it available? Could it be? How?

### Possible first choices

- Good relationship w/partner
- Non-anxious sexual experiences
- Self-revealing, and being accepted
- Non-performance oriented sex
- Enthusiastic partner—and not feel threatened by it
- Partner interested in his fetish or preferences
- Not feel guilty about what he wants in real life

What if we saw addictive symptoms  
as a statement of  
“I don’t know how to get what I want”?  
or  
“I don’t know how to arrange  
to feel the way I want to?”  
or  
“I don’t know what I want,  
but I want to feel differently”?

Many clients look outside themselves  
when they want to change how they feel:

Alcohol/drugs/food  
Criticizing partner or others  
Numbing out: TV, internet, shopping, etc.

Over-use of pornography may be  
another version of that.

The primary treatment for this is therapy.

### Therapy for over-use of porn

- What are you really hungry for?
- What are other ways to get it?
- What could you do instead of turning to porn?
- How do you feel before, during, after use?
- How do you think use affects you? Over-use?
- Can you enjoy masturbating without porn?
- How would you estimate a reasonable amount of porn use?
- What do you value about your sexuality?
- Do you know how to create enjoyable sex?
- Do you have any concerns about your penis?

## Treating over-use of porn

- Sometimes we don't
- Challenge the pathologization—by self, others
- Ask what patient wants; help them either get it, or accept that they won't
- Resolve guilt and shame
- Medication when appropriate
- Recommend couples counseling & conflict resolution
- CBT for internet disability or other phobias
- Investigate substitute sexual patterns
- Therapy to enhance self-soothing & self-esteem, reduce anhedonia, self-loathing, self-defeating narratives
- Sometimes helping patient choose their symptoms

## INFLUENCING EXPECTATIONS & EXPERIENCES

## Habituation to watching porn

Much of it is about masturbating, not porn—  
altho some people may be masturbating  
more than they used to,  
because it's easier & ecologically syntonik—  
they live most of their lives in front of a screen,  
which is now the most familiar environment.

Why do we assume there's more  
ED and inhibited ejaculation  
than there used to be?

And if there is,  
why assume it's from viewing porn?

Remember that both males & females learn far less about relationships thru face-to-face conversation than they used to.

They aren't learning as much about subtle facial & voice cues, "chemistry," or taking & adjusting to feedback.

This makes relationships more challenging.

How much of "out of control" porn use is "out of control" internet use?

The human brain has trouble managing unlimited hunting opportunities.

## How Porn Shapes Consumers' Expectations

- This is what sex is like
- This is what satisfaction is like
- This is what men are like
- This is what women are like
- This is what men want from sex with a partner
- This is what women want from sex with a partner
- “Sex” is all about the sex

This is the same dynamic,  
with similar messages,  
involved in consuming non-porn media.



## More messages from consuming porn

- This (masturbation) is what sex feels like physically
- This (isolation) is what sex feels like emotionally
- This (imagination, vs. experience) is where sex lives
- Sex isn't about extending a relationship, but something done in isolation from everything else.
- Sex involves hiding, and risks criticism & conflict
- Sex is about searching rather than finding or having
- Sex always involves novelty &/or an exact formula

This is not inherent in  
porn or masturbation—  
it's a function of our culture's narratives  
about each of them.

## Creating porn sex

- Each partner has lots of responsibility
  - No communication
  - Little tenderness
  - No self-doubt or self-consciousness
  - No buildup
  - No lube
  - No self-care
  - Uncomfortable or unrealistic activities
- 
- Attempting to get as aroused as characters seem
  - Wanting to be as aroused as you get from watching

When people try to  
create “porn sex” and fail,  
or they succeed and don’t enjoy it,  
how do they explain this?

Men and women have been struggling  
to reconcile media portrayals of sex  
with their own, lesser experience  
for over a century.

## We sometimes hear

- “He saw it in porn, and now he wants us to do it.”
- “He expects me to look like a porn star.”
- “He feels bad when he doesn’t perform like a porn star.”
- “He’s lost interest in me, but is interested in porn.”

None of this is about porn—  
they’re all about the people or relationship.

Sexually, people need to educate their mate:  
I like this, not that.

That’s not an unreasonable responsibility.  
Both genders have that job  
in every (sexual) relationship.

Women have to communicate not due to porn,  
but rather because that’s how adult sex works.

## Helpful things you can learn from porn

- Men & women can touch themselves during sex
- Men & women can insert a penis into a vagina
- Vulvas can look really different from each other
- Pregnant women can be sexual—and desired
- Women of all ages can be sexual—and desired
- A man can be satisfied ejaculating outside a vagina
- The clitoris can be important in any sexual activity
- Some men like cunnilingus; some women like fellatio
- Some people enjoy sex toys—and can use them as a couple

## COMPETITION

“If you can fantasize about  
a beautiful young woman,  
why would you focus on me?”

Check on the woman’s self-image  
as a sexual object.

“I can’t compete with those women”

- They’re not “women,” they’re actresses;  
cf competing w/Meryl Streep or Scarlett Johansson
- If partner doesn’t want you, it’s not because you’re  
not like an actress
- If you can’t accept your body & sexuality, don’t  
blame porn
- If there’s competition, it’s with masturbation
- If it’s competition with actresses, it’s with their  
characters’ enthusiasm and self-acceptance—  
which you can develop & express for yourself

All men & women must come to terms with  
NOT being just like cultural icons

LeBron James  
J.K. Rowling  
Lady Gaga  
Denzel Washington  
Nicole Kidman  
Hillary Clinton  
Sigmund Freud

This is an existential issue.

We all must come to terms  
with our mate not being  
Hugh Jackman or Jennifer Lopez.

## SUMMARY

### Promoting porn literacy

- Is porn real? How? How not?
- How is porn usually made?
- What are some odd ideas other people  
get from watching porn?
- Do you know what your mate  
actually watches?

## Assessing patients/couples

- How does your partner feel about porn?
- Why do you watch it? Why does your partner?
- How does watching porn affect you?
- Do you experience choice about watching?
- Adult porn v. child porn
- Do you have a good sexual connection with someone?
- Using porn as self-medication
- Women's anxiety about safety, or discomfort with their bodies, should be addressed separately from critiquing porn

Pathologizing porn use or low desire  
won't get at the problems  
in the (sexual) relationship.



The very first thing people need to do  
is talk honestly. Most couples don't.

That may take a while. Until then,  
diagnosis & treatment are premature.

If you don't like porn as sex ed,  
push harder for real sex ed.

Don't bash porn as a poor sex educator  
while ignoring church, media, etc..

## Notes for therapists about porn

- Porn is a content issue like any other
- Porn has no meaning; people give it meaning
- The porn consumer deserves a voice
- Does porn use violate an explicit agreement?
- Don't support unrealistic agreements or attempts
- Don't get pulled into "is porn good or bad?"
- Rigidity around porn is rigidity
- No one gets to read someone else's mind
- What's the anger/fear/loneliness about?
- What's the payoff of labeling partner "addicted?"
- No one has the "right" to a porn-free home
- You have the tools you need to treat porn-related problems

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