

Is MySpace YourSpace?

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Would you, right this minute, be willing to turn over all your cyberspace records: email, text, phone, tweets, Facebook and internet searches to your partner? Would he/she be willing to do the same? To the average American this may sound like a gross invasion of privacy but given the fact that the incidence of affairs as well as pornography use is so high, it may not be such a bad idea if your aim is a happy, stable relationship. In an age when you can reach just about anyone in the world as well as check out your most salacious sexual fantasy with ease and anonymity, what's to stop you from tracking down your high school sweetheart or getting a glimpse of two women and a man getting it on? And furthermore, what's the harm?

Far too few people realize how seductive, even addictive cyber-habits can be. Think about the last time you were tempted to check your phone or computer at an inappropriate time. The anticipation of good news or an exciting contact makes just saying "no" very difficult. When you add secrecy or an element of the forbidden, this form of titillation alters your brain in a way that makes you crave even more. If the contact is a person, texts become more frequent; repartee becomes more personal; flirtation has a field day. Soon, these seemingly innocuous relationships take precious time and energy from home and work.

Why is it so powerful and prolific?

Any activity related to meeting, mating and procreating—which are survival strategies, is reinforced with feel-good neurotransmitters led by dopamine. The human brain is programmed to pay special attention to nuances related to survival and is rewarded with a surge of pleasure and urgency with each encounter. A personal note from a co-worker or a special smile from the neighbor can elicit a satisfying sensation and evoke interest. Dopamine is the marker for salience; when it is released, your brain gets the message "this is important; go get more!"

So how does pornography fit into this paradigm? Again, survival strategies play a part. Procreation insures the species will continue and sexual curiosity is part of Nature's plan. Most porn use begins innocently, i.e. with normal curiosity. But drawing the line is difficult because pornography has its own form of seduction. Nowadays you don't even have to pay for it; it's everywhere. YouTube and chat rooms have made a lethal slash into the porn business—a modern day version of "why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free?" Millions of ordinary people are willing to put modesty aside for their fifteen minutes of fame by revealing themselves in the most intimate sexual acts. Not too long ago, to see anything resembling porn you had to leave home, go to the other side of town, face real people and risk being seen before you could even view the goods—then pay money to experience it. Now it's available just about anywhere, anytime, and is (mostly) anonymous. So what's the problem?

The nature of porn, and what separates it from a nude Leonardo da Vinci painting, is the intent to produce sexual arousal. Unlike art which inspires appreciation and awe, porn elicits sexual stimulation and craving. A habit that begins with YouTube clips can lead to gateway sites that offer free peeks to grab your interest and then require payment for the next level of titillation. Viewing sexual stimulation recalibrates your sexual set point; i.e. once your mind forms a picture or has a new sexual experience, this becomes the norm. To get another thrill you need something even more exciting. This is how porn use can destroy your interest and attraction for your mate. Repeated pornography use numbs normal sexual drives and deadens your desire for a real person/partner. In addition, bizarre as it may seem, the

more shame you feel about your guilty pleasures—the more you resent your partner! We don't like people who remind us of our bad behavior. When you violate the lines of your own commitment and values you actually end up looking for faults in your partner to alleviate your guilt. "Well, if he/she were more (fill in the blank) I wouldn't be doing this." And the guiltier you feel the more vulnerable you become to the escape of a sexual high. Millions of people are currently caught in the excitement cycle of porn use or an affair, either online or face to face. And if you think it will stop where it is, research proves you very, very wrong. Relationships which begin in cyberspace eventually meet face to face in some way, shape or form.

The simplest antidote for the seductive call of cyber infidelity is an open air policy. This is good advice for children as well as adults. People closest to us have a clear sense of when we have violated our own core values or commitment. Of course privacy is important, even in love and marriage, but transparency makes life simple and honest. There's a quick way to know if you have violated your fidelity commitment: ask your partner. "Hon, is it OK with you if I get up at night after you are asleep and email Suzy/Sam at work?" Or, "Here, check out this porn site I'm paying for." If the thought of this strikes fear or anger in your heart, perhaps you need to realign your behavior to reflect your innermost values. That way if your partner reads this article and asks: "May I view your texts?" Or, "What about your emails and net searches, may I see those too?" You can say with confidence and dignity: "MySpace is YourSpace!"