

HEARTBREAK and HOPE



When a Spouse Uses Pornography

Seven ways the spouse of a pornography user can not only survive heartbreak but also see a promise of hope.

Amy made the choices every parent desires for a son or daughter. She was sealed in the temple after receiving a strong spiritual impression to marry her husband.

Prior to their wedding, her husband-to-be made a courageous choice as well, admitting to her that he had used pornography.

A short year later, Amy realized that his struggle with pornography was not in the past. Three years into their marriage—when they had an eight-month-old baby—Amy suffered the unimaginable pain of her husband's having an affair and being subsequently excommunicated from the Church.

How did Amy survive the heartbreak? How do the many other women and men with similar circumstances survive their pain?

Many spouses and other family members of pornography users have discovered helpful and hopeful behaviors common to their own and others' journeys. And they have courageously shared their stories.

The Church website
OvercomingPornography.org

terms seven of these common behaviors as “vital behaviors.” These behaviors—experienced at an individual pace and in an individual order—have proven to be, for many, vital to emotional, mental, and spiritual healing.

Vital Behavior 1: Address the Trauma of Betrayal

Learning about and addressing the trauma, self-blame, and other reactions a person has when discovering pornography use by his or her spouse.

When Eva found that her husband was involved with pornography, she felt “intense pain, anger, heartache, depression, and obsession.” Obsession is actually a common feeling for someone who experiences the trauma of betrayal of a spouse's pornography use, and Eva's behavior in response to these intense emotions is also not unusual. She began to obsess about her husband and his actions. Where was he? Who was he talking to? What was he doing? His pornography and sex addiction became the center of her life, and she desperately wanted to fix him, believing that if she could get his problem under control, they would be happy.

When Jamie learned of her husband's pornography use, she reacted with an understandable desire to control whatever she could. She thought she could arrange the life of her husband, Jon, so he wouldn't seek instant gratification through pornography, and he would, therefore, have no other option but to choose righteousness. She wrote daily lists for him: what he could do for fun and what chores he needed to complete.

A pivotal moment in Jamie's journey came when her bishop was inspired to emphasize, “Jamie, this is not your fault. Nothing you are doing is making him look at pornography. He is choosing.” And just as she was not the cause of his looking at pornography, she also could not be the cause of his stopping. Intellectually, she already knew what the bishop told her, but Jamie says that after the bishop's reminder, “the lists stopped. I gave up trying to control his behavior and trying to force him into righteousness—and I focused on myself.” In effect, Jamie gave herself permission to feel her own hurt and to work on her own recovery.

In addition to relying on the Lord, spouses can find help and support from family, friends, Church leaders, and professionals.

After Jamie's realization, Jon struggled and relapsed often, but he took responsibility for his own actions. And as they each worked on their own healing, Jon and Jamie found that they could heal better as individuals and as a couple.

Vital Behavior 2: Share Safely

Finding understanding, support, and validation through sharing appropriately.

Another turning point for Jamie and Jon came when one of their children needed a blessing. They called their home teacher, who bravely explained that he was seeking help to deal with his own struggles with pornography. He offered to find someone else to give the blessing. That openness lessened the shame Jon and Jamie felt about their own situation, and Jon finally felt safe enough to discuss his addiction with someone besides Jamie.

When the home teacher's wife offered to talk with Jamie, Jamie didn't see the point since her talking wouldn't fix Jon—and at that point, fixing him was her goal. Yet after she and the home teacher's wife visited, Jamie felt lighter. Nothing had changed. Jon still struggled, but she was relieved that someone else knew what she was going through and her world hadn't come crashing down.

Vital Behavior 3: Rebuild Spiritual Confidence

Feeling and following the promptings of the Holy Ghost and having restored trust in God.

When Amy faced her husband's excommunication, she knew that the Savior could provide the answer to the crushing weight she felt. However, she says, she wasn't sure how "to bridge that gulf between where I was and the healing power of Jesus Christ." How, she wondered, could she possibly find—or build—a bridge?

At first she tried to lessen her pain by vigilantly watching her husband and pleading with the Lord to heal him. But one day a spiritual prompting changed everything:

Amy realized that controlling someone else's behavior isn't part of Heavenly Father's plan and wasn't helping her come closer to the Savior. So, she says, the biggest thing she had to do was begin her own journey of healing—and turn her husband's journey over to him. She came to understand, through inspiration from the Spirit, that she needed to stop living her life as a reaction to pornography and trust in the enabling power of Jesus Christ and His Atonement to strengthen and bless her.

As she looks back, Amy says that at no point did any of her searching or investigating of her husband produce a feeling of peace. Life "was continual turmoil," she says. "And the only peace I found was when I recognized that Heavenly Father had a plan" for her husband and for her. When she used her own agency to turn to God and seek His help, "the help came" and the gulf between her pain and the Savior's help didn't feel quite so wide or the pain so weighty.

Vital Behavior 4: Get Help

Finding a pathway to healing through resources such as literature, a qualified therapist, a mentor, or a proven healing program.

After 25 years of marriage, Gina learned about her husband's pornography use and his infidelity. Traumatized, Gina called her bishop. She soon found



that he was an understanding listener who let her cry when she needed to—a blessing she acknowledges that not every spouse in her situation has.

Gina remembers that in one of their first meetings, her bishop “advised I get counseling immediately, not for my marriage or for my husband, but so I could have solid support as I faced the challenges ahead. He wanted me to feel cared for, and he knew that he did not have the background that might be needed. He saw my depression and anxiety and advised me to talk to my doctor about any medical help I might need.”

Over the next few years, Gina regularly attended support groups and counseling and sought the support of family—sometimes calling them to ask them to pray for her on her hardest days. She has learned, she says, that “Heavenly Father will never leave me in darkness.”

Vital Behavior 5: Be Open and Honest

Speaking with loved ones regularly about a personal journey of healing and recovery and doing so in an openly candid and authentic way.

Melissa decided to try one more time to save her marriage, which seemed distant and disconnected. That’s when her husband, Cameron, told her honestly about his pornography use. At her urging, he agreed

to tell the bishop, and eventually they both talked to their parents. But, as he explains, it “took two years to finally see that there was more to repentance than telling a few people and saying a prayer.” He had to learn that not looking at pornography wasn’t enough. To truly be in a state of recovery, he had to turn to God and find healthy ways to deal with the stress, fear, shame, and anxiety that triggered his craving to look at pornography.

After a relapse, Cameron agreed to attend an addiction recovery program and, over time, has come to understand that the Savior does not give up on us as soon as we make a mistake.

Through also attending a 12-step program, Melissa feels that her family finally has the tools to move forward. She remembers how difficult the 12-step meetings were in the beginning, but she was motivated by a facilitator who suggested that Melissa “try us for 90 days. If you don’t like us, we’ll refund your misery.” Melissa eventually realized that just as she felt hope from others’ stories, maybe she could help others feel hope by sharing her experiences.

Melissa used to believe that if she stayed married, she would only pretend to be happy. Her perspective changed when she realized that the Savior saw potential in her, in Cameron, and in all of Father in

Heaven’s children. He put all He is—the Light and the Life of the World—into saving us and giving us another chance. Because of the Savior, Melissa says, she can now smile in a genuine, I’m-happy-to-be-alive way.

Vital Behavior 6: Set Boundaries

Creating appropriate boundaries with the pornography user and establishing a structure that allows functioning and healing.

Well into their journey of overcoming pornography, Jon and Jamie discovered how helpful it was to set boundaries, and they still have them today—even after a good amount of sobriety—because of the peace of mind that boundaries provide. Jamie says that when she was most vulnerable, setting boundaries “protected my heart.”

She and Jon agreed that there were appropriate times and ways to discuss issues surrounding a relapse. They agreed not to have “text wars” but to speak in person. They also agreed that if a discussion was turning into an argument, they could take a break and talk later.

Many of Jon and Jamie’s boundaries relate to how they communicate, but some of their other boundaries take the form of if/then statements in which they agree that certain actions will lead to certain consequences. That, Jamie says, allows them both to feel that life isn’t quite so chaotic.

Prayer, scripture study, and temple attendance help struggling spouses receive the Savior's healing power.

Vital Behavior 7: Practice Self-Care

Engaging in daily routines that heal and nurture mind, body, and spirit.

Gina remembers that soon after she met with her bishop for the first time, he advised her to do a few things that seemed like the standard answers. “He gently urged me,” she remembers, “to get to the temple, read my scriptures, continue in prayer.”

In the challenging years that followed, Gina found that the “standard answers” were her means of caring for herself. The scriptures became her sanctuary. “I would read a verse, write it down, and try to ponder what it meant to my situation, and then write those thoughts down,” she explains. “I knew that, more than ever, I had to hear the Lord’s word and have it take deeper root in my understanding. I could make so little sense of the rest of my world, but for the time I was in the scriptures, I was making sense of something—one verse at a time.”

Likewise, prayer and temple attendance took on new meaning. “When I was done pouring out my heart,” Gina remembers, “I would say, ‘Heavenly Father, now it’s Your turn.’” And she would wait quietly and listen. “Even in the darkest hour,” she explains, she realized that her “spirit was growing.”

Living in Hope

No individual’s journey of healing is the same as another’s, and each one is a process—not a destination. Common in many stories, however, is a realization that no amount of pornography use is OK or normal. As a result, when someone engages in any frequency of use or any level of involvement, his or her spouse will experience feelings of heartbreak, betrayal trauma, rejection, shame, and questioning of self-worth. Pornography use damages the connection, trust, and communication essential to a healthy relationship—making it vital for a spouse to seek



hope and healing.

Also common is the comforting discovery that in this bitter experience, spouses can

come to know the sweet not by finally finding it on the far side of their trials but by turning with hope to Jesus Christ in the midst of them.

Today, Gina is divorced and focused on her healing and that of her children, and she often reaches out to help women in similar circumstances find hope. Melissa and Cameron remain married and work to live in recovery. So do Jamie and Jon, who actively help other couples find the healing they have found through the Savior and His Atonement.

Eva is divorced and regularly attending 12-step meetings, where she finds safety and validation as she works on her recovery. She has come to understand that while she once made her husband’s addiction the focus of her life, healing comes as she puts the Savior at the center of her life and efforts.

Amy and her husband are still married—although he continues to relapse. Amy, however, testifies that peace comes when she watches general conference thinking, “How can I heal my pain?” not, “I hope my husband hears this.” She knows that Jesus Christ’s healing power and her faith in the infinite nature of the Atonement provide hope—not only for her husband but also for her.

One sister affected by pornography may speak for all when she says, “The Savior doesn’t want us to try harder; He wants us to turn to Him sooner.” These seven vital behaviors help women and men in their efforts to do that. ■

TWELVE TRUTHS

In addition to working on the seven vital behaviors, many family members of those who use pornography have also found hope and healing by studying the following 12 truths, found in the Church's Addiction Recovery Program materials. For more information about the materials and support for spouses and family members, see addictionrecovery.lds.org.

1. *God "will console you in your afflictions" (Jacob 3:1).* Pornography use is serious, but we can find comfort in knowing that God is aware of us and our situations, that He will never abandon us, and that He will support us in our afflictions.
2. *"Shake off the chains with which ye are bound" (2 Nephi 1:23).* We are not responsible for another's actions or to blame for another's addiction. As children of God who understand our divine nature and destiny, we know that we are free to act and to exercise our agency to make choices for ourselves.
3. *"He will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people" (Alma 7:11).* As we give our burdens to the Lord, we understand that He can heal our deepest pain, that no blessing will be denied us, and that change takes time.
4. *"Draw near unto me" (D&C 88:63).* The Lord's help is essential, and we can find it by partaking of the sacrament, attending the temple, and seeking the companionship of His Holy Spirit.
5. *"Work out your own salvation" (Mormon 9:27).* We cannot control someone else and heal his or her addiction, but we can focus on our own healing, take care of ourselves, and gain understanding by learning about addiction.
6. *"Bear one another's burdens" (Mosiah 18:8).* In addition to relying on the Lord, we must seek appropriate help, including support from family, friends, priesthood and Relief Society leaders, mentors, support groups, and professionals.
7. *"In everything give thanks" (D&C 98:1).* Even as we experience discouragement, fear, and anger, we can also find joy as we acknowledge and express gratitude for the hand of God in our lives, recognize our own gifts and talents, and see the good in our loved one who is addicted.
8. *Be "firm and steadfast" (Helaman 15:8).* We can set appropriate limits to protect ourselves and our families—while not enduring abusive behavior of any kind—and seek the Lord's direction as to if and how a relationship should be preserved.
9. *We "have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty" (2 Corinthians 4:2).* Pornography use thrives in secrecy and can begin to be addressed only as we are honest with ourselves and with our loved one, establishing open and honest communication with him or her.
10. *"Lift up the hands which hang down" (D&C 81:5).* We can love and pray for our loved one, offering greater support as he or she is ready to accept it.
11. *"Bear all these things with patience" (Alma 38:4).* Recovery is a process, and while relapse should not be used as an excuse, it can be responded to with love and hope.
12. *"My peace I give unto you" (John 14:27).* As we exercise faith, we can find the peace the Lord promises, knowing that He will assist us as we extend forgiveness to those who have broken promises and hearts.