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Latter-day Saint Women Podcast Transcript

Derek Hagey | Addressing Pornography Use in Marriage

KARLIE.

Hello, and welcome to the Latter-day Saint Women podcast, where we share the legacy of women of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. You'll get to know the faithful women who shaped our past and hear from inspiring women and men of faith today. I'm Karlie Guymon.

SHALYN.

And I'm Shalyn Back. We're your cohosts. Today we're excited to welcome Derek Hagey to the studio as our guest. Derek, welcome.

DEREK.

Thank you. I'm grateful to be here.

SHALYN.

As a brief introduction to our guest, Derek has a master's and a PhD in marriage and family therapy and has worked for Family Services for about 10 years and is currently a program manager. Derek was one of the subject matter experts who helped with the Church's Addressing Pornography website, which we'll link to in this episode. Derek has also taught marriage and family-related classes at grad and master's levels since 2008, one of his current courses being "Infidelity and Sex Addiction" just as an example. Derek and his wife, Morgan, have seven kids. And we are just really looking forward to talking with you today, Derek.

DEREK.

Thank you.

SHALYN.



Now that you've gotten to know a little bit about our guest, we wanted to introduce our topic. We've received some suggestions for and also questions about doing an episode addressing pornography use. And for this episode, we've chosen to focus on navigating pornography use in marriage relationships, which we know weighs heavily on the hearts and minds of many of our listeners. Pornography use is a difficult but very important topic, and our objective today is to help provide hope and support through available resources for women whose spouses have used or use pornography. And we also want to say it's often assumed that men are the ones who are using pornography, but we'll also talk about when women are the ones in a relationship using pornography and how this is more common today. And we are just really excited to learn from Derek's expertise on this topic.

KARLIE.

Yes, Derek, thank you again so much for being here. So Derek, before we jump into these questions about addressing pornography use in marriage, we wanted to start by outlining just some definitions surrounding pornography use so that we can all be on the same page and educated and understanding those definitions. So help us with that.

DEREK.

Great. Pornography is one of those things that is so prevalent in society right now. It's not something that we can go, okay, well, it's a select few people that have ever had any kind of exposure to pornography. And it used to be that way. With the invention of the internet and access to information 24/7, we also have access to a lot more things, both good and bad. And President Oaks in his 2015 talk "Recovering from the Trap of Pornography" really did a great job of laying out the levels that we see in pornography use—from inadvertent exposure to occasional use, and then more of an intensive use and compulsive use, which is more of what we think of as addiction, is that compulsive use. Even intensive use we don't really see as addiction. Often we think of that in the clinical sense, we see that as more of them using that frequently as a coping for stuff that's going on in their lives, often for emotions. They struggle with emotions and not being able to really manage those emotions and then turn to that pornography and linked with that, masturbation.

KARLIE.



Thank you. That is really helpful, I think, to understand. And that's—we'll use the term pornography use, because we understand, as you've explained, there's a whole range of what that means, and that differs from person to person. So thank you. So now, as we make this specific to pornography use in marriage relationships, talk to us more about—you've described the reality of pornography use in society today, how common is it in marriage relationships?

DEREK.

We don't really have specific statistics on that. However, I think it's more common than a lot of people think and also less common than others might think.

KARLIE.

Okay.

DEREK.

It's pretty common, though. It's not one of those things that we can sit there and go, "Well, I don't know anyone that uses pornography." Most people know someone who is currently or who has recently had a problem with use of pornography.

KARLIE.

That's helpful. And again, understanding that that's a range of levels of use. And I just think so much about we have access, like you said, 24 hours a day anywhere we are. Right? So the reality of it is—

SHALYN.

No one is exempt.

KARLIE.

Yeah, exactly.

SHALYN.

Well, I think all of us make assumptions sometimes about pornography use. And I'm just wanting to know from your perspective, what are some



of these obvious and not so obvious ways that pornography use can negatively impact ourselves, our spirituality, and our relationships?

DEREK.

Pornography is a thing that distances us from the Spirit, for sure. Whether it's the more intensive uses of pornography or even just the inadvertent exposure, we're going to be distanced from the Spirit. I think that's one of the key things that we have to keep in mind, no matter where you are on that spectrum, is that pornography does affect our ability to feel and be able to receive impressions from the Spirit. More impactful often in relationships is the way that pornography affects our expectations, both about ourselves and our spouse in the sexual relationship. And it does affect the way the husband or the wife sees their significant other. I have had clients over the years who have struggled with pornography and often judge themselves based on what they see in the pornography. And so there's a lot of shame about their use of the pornography and also about themselves as they watch the pornography, going, "I am not good enough. I'm not enough." And I've seen that both male and female, husbands and wives both struggle with that way of thinking. I've had husbands come in and they struggle with realizing that their relationship with their wife is really good because it's not what they see in those videos. And it's really impactful on our ability to recognize what is reality, what is a real sexual relationship, and how we can have a healthy sexual relationship with our spouse. It starts to get ideas about ways that we can change or try to get more excitement in our marriage, in our sexual relationship, which isn't as healthy as some people out in the world might think, because it's not necessarily what we are wanting in our relationship. The more we continue to maintain more of a simple relationship sexually with our spouse, the more we can focus on being with them rather than having those other things cloud that relationship.

We want to be able to be present in our sexual relationship with our spouse and be able to be there with them and not be thinking about the pornography or some kind of behavior or act that we saw in the pornography. Another part of that is how we expect, in general, in our relationships to be treated like the person that we see in the pornography sometimes. The person that struggles with pornography sees the man be more commanding, more in charge, and be able to get what he wants.

That transfers out of the bedroom as well to their normal relationship and expecting more from their wife, more from the relationship. It gets much more into this perspective of, "It's about me, and I want these



things. So you need to give them to me.” It becomes a very selfish-oriented perspective.

KARLIE.

These are all very interesting insights and ones I don’t think I immediately think of when—as you described, Shalyn, kind of the effects or how pornography impacts relationships. So thank you for outlining those. I think to move to the question that we have seen the most regarding this is that first moment when a spouse learns—husband or wife—that their spouse is dealing with pornography or is using pornography. And so I think the question is, what do we do if we learn that a spouse is using pornography, or maybe if they haven’t come right out and told us, but we suspect it or have seen things that would indicate that that’s what’s going on? What do we do?

DEREK.

That is one of the hardest moments in a relationship, is when that trust is broken in that moment, and we are flooded with emotions. And as those flood of emotions come, often it turns to anger, turns to negative feelings. And that anger can breed a desire to push that person as far away as possible to gain that distance, because we’re in pain. And one of the keys for that person who finds this out is to recognize the pain they’re feeling and to not run from it, but not allow it to create the reaction. Those emotions often cause us to react in a certain way. It’s almost a feeling of automatic response.

KARLIE.

Like you’re not in control. You have to respond a certain way.

DEREK.

Yeah, totally out of control. And I need to express how angry I am. And then we have to deal with the fallout of both the pornography and the anger. And rather than dealing with just the anger, we can deal with those softer emotions—those harder emotions, but they’re soft in the sense that we can actually work with them more like hurt, the pain that we’re feeling. And then working with that, we can express that we’re hurt. We can express that we’ve lost some trust in our spouse if we found out about this issue from just catching them. And there are different ways we find out sometimes and we can catch them, and that often is very difficult because then it’s in the moment that we catch them that we become



angry. And sometimes they come to us and tell us because they're trying to improve, and they're trying to get better. And again, we're still going to be caught off guard; we're still going to be angry. And in those moments, we need to look at that and respond in a way that we can with an understanding that we can move forward from this. But the immediate response is often anger and wanting to reject that person for the behavior that they have exhibited of using pornography.

KARLIE.

Derek, I would love for you to explain too why maybe in that moment that gut reaction of anger or even judgment or condemnation isn't necessarily healthy or correct. I think we're quick to jump to, "Oh, my gosh. This is it. My marriage is over. We've failed" or "This is totally ruined. We can't—there's no way to move forward." Why are those immediate reactions maybe not true?

DEREK.

Well, the immediate reactions are reactions to those emotions and doesn't really see a way forward, as you kind of explained in your question. We get stuck; we feel stuck in that moment. But when we can take a step back and look at it—often these situations come up in relationships that have been around for a long time. You've been together for a long time. You've built a life together. And so there's so much possibility for continuing to move forward. One of the things I love to do when I work with couples where there's an issue with pornography use is to help them see pornography as the problem and not the person using the pornography. Both the husband and the wife are struggling with pornography. They're both dealing with it just in the way that they are dealing with it. If—for instance, if he's using the pornography, he is dealing with that use and trying to stop that behavior, while she is dealing with the emotions of her husband's use of pornography, feelings that she might have of her own body image or self-esteem or wondering about her own abilities and attractiveness. Those are very common worries and concerns around when a spouse is using pornography. But if we can see the pornography as the problem, then the husband and wife can come together and they can express that feeling they're having. Both her, when she's feeling like, "Hey, this pornography is making me feel like I am not good enough. It's making me feel like I'm ugly or not acceptable to you," and him with the need to have someone he can turn to when he's struggling, to be able to talk about both how he's struggling and being able to talk about just in general life and stresses he's having.



Because when pornography comes in, it's often during that time of emotional heightened-ness for him. When he's feeling emotionally heightened, he's more likely to turn to pornography as a tool to deal with emotions. If it's not the more addiction level, which we find that there's actually a smaller number of people that have the addiction level of use of pornography. They're less likely to be more of the compulsive use than they are to be more of the occasional or even intensive. But those people that deal with emotions through the use of pornography could really use someone they could talk to as they struggle with the emotions. And the more the husband and the wife can work together to fight against the emotional struggles that the pornography has put into their lives, the healthier their relationship can be and the stronger they will be as a couple.

SHALYN.

Well, Derek, this context that you're giving is really helpful with the different levels of use, the why maybe pornography use is present in a marriage, and then those feelings that are happening on both sides. Because it tends to be viewed, I think, as black and white, as men versus women kind of thing. This is just really helpful to understand a greater picture. Derek, you mentioned some of these natural reactions when finding out about pornography use, especially from a spouse—this hurt, this anger, these feelings of betrayal and confusion. And I feel like that's not just initial reactions. That can come up throughout this whole process. And I'm just wondering, what are some healthy ways of communicating and coping within a marriage where pornography use is present, especially when maybe it's a longer-term use?

DEREK.

That's a great question. When it's longer-term use, those feelings will continue to come up. It's not about avoiding those feelings or trying not to have feelings; it's about being able to respond to those feelings in a way that is healthy for us and helps us grow closer to our spouse. So one of the keys is being able to communicate about our feelings. Both husband and wife need to be able to communicate in the relationship about what they're feeling at any time, whether it's pornography or some other issue. And we actually see less of that than we want to in relationships in general.

It's being able to just say, "Hey, I'm feeling really hurt right now" and be able to express why you're feeling hurt. It doesn't even necessarily need to be against the other person; it just needs to be able to be expressed



so the other person can share with us our emotion. They can share that they care about us in the midst of that emotion. So if you're hurt, being able to express that to your spouse is really important, and with pornography use, even more so, and have your spouse be able to turn towards you and say, "I hear you. And I'm sorry that pornography has become a part of our lives and it's causing you to feel pain. I love you, and I know that we can get through this together." And ask them, then, "What is it that I can do to help?" And that's the key, is being to express it and then express our desire to help each other through those emotions, through the struggles, whether it's pornography or anything else in our marriage.

KARLIE.

I see that as being a very useful skill, like you've said, for the various challenges that a couple may experience, whether it's pornography or something else. Just being able to express those emotions and, again, having your spouse be that person that you can go to to share those things and receive support from, that seems critical for the success of a marriage.

SHALYN.

Well, especially because, like you said, pornography maybe is not necessarily the issue; that's secondary to something else that's going on in this person's life or in this marriage. And so I appreciate that too, not letting these emotions drive your reaction but to be able to express them and work through them together. Thank you.

KARLIE.

What I hear too in our conversation is a lot of hope and nuance, because as we've mentioned a few times, that we've seen questions from women in the Church about discovering that their spouse uses pornography or dealing with it for many years and feeling very helpless. And in those questions, it feels like pornography has taken over their entire relationship, their entire marriage. It just looms so large that it's just like, "How do we see over this or around it or go through it?" So again, there are people listening who currently deal with pornography use by a spouse, probably have for years, maybe will for years to come. Speak about the hope that is available to couples who are in this situation who may feel overwhelmed or discouraged and especially how we can rely on our faith for strength and for comfort.

DEREK.



That's a great question. And the struggle that couples have is real. This pornography is not something that we should become okay with. It's not something we need to learn to just—

KARLIE.

Accept, I guess.

DEREK.

—accept, yeah. Accept is a great word for that. And instead, see it as something that we can overcome together. That assumes that both the spouse that's using the pornography and the other spouse both want to work on this and overcome the pornography. Assuming the spouse that is dealing with the use of pornography wants to improve and stop the use of pornography, we can see great strengths come into this couple through this process of working through it together.

I've seen several, several, several couples over the years—so many couples over the years—in therapy for dealing with struggles with pornography use, from occasional and even inadvertent sometimes all the way through to the more compulsive use of pornography. And in all of those situations, the number one thing is for them to come together and not make the pornography the center of their marriage. It is an issue. It's something that they can work through as long as they can see that they can work through it. Then it's more possible.

Sometimes it takes a lot of effort, a lot of work with counseling, both professional and not professional counseling. We can get a lot of help from those around us—our family and friends or Church leaders. And there's so much power that can come to a couple when they kneel together and they pray for help in overcoming this struggle. It's not them alone, but the Lord is involved in this as well, and the Spirit can strengthen both the husband and the wife, not necessarily to remove the obstacle of pornography but for them to be able to be strengthened in working together to overcome the pornography. It's important that we recognize how pornography is not our life when you're married; the marriage is more than the pornography.

SHALYN.



I really appreciate you saying that. It feels very validating. I was talking to a friend before this episode, and she shared with me that her husband uses pornography. And she was just sharing some of her experience and some of their journey, and she was saying, “Our marriage has never been stronger” because they are doing so much work together, with counselors, and then, of course, with our Heavenly Father’s support. And I just thought that was such a neat perspective that she just said, “Of course, it was really discouraging,” and she had all these—

KARLIE.

All those emotions.

SHALYN.

—all these emotions. And it was so difficult, and it has been difficult. But on the other end of the spectrum, she just said, “We have so much hope, and there are so many great things in our marriage.” And I know there are probably listeners that can relate to that, because when you’re focusing so much on your marriage, good things will come of that. So I appreciate you sharing that.

KARLIE.

Yeah, thank you. We mentioned in the introduction that so often in society and even in the Church, we focus on the issue of pornography use being a problem with men and with boys starting from a very young age. There are assumptions about that. And you shared with us and we know that that’s not necessarily the case anymore just because of the accessibility of pornography and, like you’ve described, just the inadvertent exposure that so many of us experience. And we’ve talked earlier about there’s a wonderful video that the Church has produced in the *His Grace* series about a woman who describes her experience with exposure to pornography and just her struggle with it through her growing-up years, serving a mission, coming home from a mission. So we’ll definitely link to that because it is so inspiring and just a very encouraging message. But maybe talk to us before we kind of tie things up about this reality that more women are the ones struggling with pornography use today and what that looks like in a marriage and the hope that’s available there too.

DEREK.

That video is one of my favorite videos, speaking as a therapist. She shared not only her struggle with pornography but also the struggles



she had with the shame she felt, because she was told all through her growing-up years, “This is not something that anyone here struggles with. This is more of a struggle for the boys, so we’ll talk about it from that perspective.” But it’s not just a struggle for the boys. Sexual feelings, having sexual thoughts is not just a male problem; women have sexual thoughts and feelings as well. And then those behaviors are outgrowths of those thoughts and those feelings. And it’s okay to have sexual thoughts and feelings in our lives. We want to make sure that we’re okay with understanding that that’s part of our life; that’s a part of who we are. And it’s healthy when we use it in the right way, when we are able to learn to manage those sexual thoughts and feelings. And I think that that’s one of those things that was really impactful from that video, is that she was able to express that she also felt a lot of shame because she was told that she wasn’t supposed to have sexual thoughts and feelings.

KARLIE.

She probably felt really alone. Like, “What is wrong with me?”

DEREK.

Yeah, and if you feel alone and you feel ashamed of this behavior so much, why would you ever talk to anyone else? Why would you share it with someone else? “It’s wrong. I’m a horrible person. I am weird.” But the truth is that everyone has the sexual thoughts and feelings. To different degrees, different levels, we’ll have some kind of sexual thought and feeling in our lives. And it’s not about removing them; it’s about learning to manage them. One of the examples I love to talk about when it comes to managing sexual thoughts and feelings is often, we’re not taught how to deal with them. We know that we don’t have those when we’re little babies. We learn about having sexual thoughts and feelings around puberty. And many of our parents, just like their parents and their parents before them, were more of taboo to talk about it.

KARLIE.

Sure.

DEREK.

Rather than addressing it and talking about it openly with our family members and say, “You’re hitting puberty. Can you and I talk?” And my sons—I have five sons. My oldest four are all boys. And they’ve all now gone through the sex talk at school. In conjunction with the sex talk at



school is often having a conversation with mom and dad about what it is and what puberty is and how they're going to have these thoughts and feelings and then learning to manage it. And the example I give people is often it's brand new when you hit puberty. Just like when you were a baby, it was brand new for you to just learn how to control your body, its movements. When you get this new ability to have sexual thoughts and feelings, it's brand new to you. You have to learn how to use it appropriately, and so there are going to be mistakes. There are going to be times where you fall short. But the more we can learn to manage it in ways that are healthy for us, the more we can find joy in that part of our lives, whereas a lot of people feel like they have to reject that part of themselves. And so that woman in that video is so strong because not only did she have to go through the struggles of the pornography use but also the shame that she wasn't supposed to have those feelings. But there's a lot of hope in that video because she was able to work through that, just as so many others have to learn to manage those sexual thoughts and feelings and be able to be in healthy relationships in general as well as in the sexual relationship with a spouse.

SHALYN.

This is such great insight for, I think, people as individuals and then also for parents to instruct their kids. I loved that example of when babies are born and they try to navigate their bodies and try to use these new skills that they're learning. It's the same. And that is a responsibility for parents that I think you've explained in a great way that is really helpful for me as I look forward to that with my children. So Derek, we recognize that everyone's situation is so different, as we've talked about, and we haven't addressed every specific situation, of course. But we would love to hear from you, if our listeners are in a situation where they need support with pornography use, what are some resources you would point them to?

DEREK.

Definitely. The Addressing Pornography website is very good. There have been some wonderful talks and articles in the *Liahona* that I would also point them to. Part of this process is recognizing when we need both informal and formal counseling—counseling with our friends and family members that are understanding or Church leaders that can help us through this process or working with a therapist. We have Family Services throughout the United States and Canada, where we're able to have therapists that are trained in working with issues around pornography use and dealing with that in their lives. We also have other therapists in the community that might be helpful and working with that.



One of the other things I love to point people to is being able to be more knowledgeable about sexual relationships and sexuality. And there are two books that I tend to point people to that I really love. One was written by some BYU professors, and it's called *Sexual Wholeness in Marriage*. It's a terrific book that addresses sexual feelings, thoughts, and principles of the gospel. And it kind of ties all those things back to how we can address those issues through a gospel principle foundation. And the other book, *You, Me, and We* by a colleague, Anthony Hughes. He's a marriage and family therapist and a sex therapist and has written that book about sexual relationship in marriage with an understanding of the gospel.

KARLIE.

Thank you for these great suggestions of places where we can get help or we can learn more. And just as we conclude, Derek, is there anything more that you would share with the women of the Church or the listeners of this podcast on this topic?

DEREK.

The biggest thing I want to share is that there is hope. You're not alone. And this problem is prevalent enough that most people have had some form of experience with it. And we can be supportive of each other. As long as we're willing to seek that support, there will be people that can support us and help us. So don't do it alone. Seek out both the formal and informal counseling and be able to recognize that you and your spouse can work through this problem together. It's not a one-person thing; it's a joint marital struggle that you can work through.

KARLIE.

Thank you for sharing that. And it's come to me as you've described this, that I think it's a tool of the adversary to make us think that we are alone and that no one else feels or experiences the same things we do. And that sort of inhibits us from reaching out, like you said, to get help and support. And I'm pretty young, but in my adult years, I've learned that almost everything I've experienced, someone else is or has experienced too. And I think that that is so reassuring. And I think that we feel strength, we feel God's love, we feel the Spirit when we connect with other people who are also trying to turn to Him for help and for hope. And I just think that that is always there.

SHALYN.



Well, thank you so much, Derek, for joining us today and for sharing your insights and your professional expertise. Thank you.

DEREK.

Thanks. It's been fun. You're both awesome.

KARLIE.

Well, thank you.

SHALYN.

Thank you.

KARLIE.

Thanks for being here.

SHALYN.

And to our listeners, thank you for tuning in to this episode of the Latter-day Saint Women podcast. We hope you'll continue to tune in and share the episodes with your friends and family members. We have been so grateful to hear from so many listeners via email and on Apple Podcasts reviews, and we hope you'll continue to share your thoughts and your feedback and your suggestions. We love hearing from you. Feel free to contact us at podcast@ChurchofJesusChrist.org with any suggestions for topics or guests.

KARLIE.

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SHALYN.

And I'm Shalyn Back. Thanks again for listening.

