

**By Elder  
Dallin H. Oaks**  
Of the Quorum  
of the Twelve  
Apostles

## RECOVERING FROM THE TRAP OF **PORNOGRAPHY**

*All of us must learn to respond appropriately  
to media with sexual content.*

A decade ago I spoke in general conference on the subject of pornography. I added my voice to the voice of other leaders who have warned against the devastating spiritual effects of pornography. I warned that too many men and boys were being wounded by what I called the “promotional literature of illicit sexual relations.”<sup>1</sup> Pornography use of any kind is evil—it is destructive of spiritual sensitivity, it weakens ability to exercise priesthood power, and it harms precious relationships.

Now, over 10 years later, I am grateful that many, hearing and heeding prophetic warnings, have avoided and remained clean and unspotted from the stains of pornography. I am also grateful that many have heeded prophetic invitations to turn from pornography, mend broken hearts and relationships, and move forward on the path of discipleship. But I am more concerned than ever that others among us continue to fall prey to pornography, especially our young men and even an increasing number of young women.

A primary reason for the growing problem of pornography is that in today’s world, words and images with sexual content and influences are everywhere: they can be found in movies, TV programs, social media, text messages, phone apps, advertisements, books, music, and everyday conversations. As a result, it is inevitable that all of us are being exposed to sexualized messages on a regular basis.



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## I. Levels of Involvement

To help us deal with this growing evil, I wish to identify several different levels of involvement with pornography and to suggest ways we should respond to each of them.

In earlier times and circumstances, our counsel about pornography focused principally on helping individuals to avoid initial exposure or to recover from addiction. While those efforts are still important, past experience and current circumstances have shown the need for counsel addressed to levels of pornography use between the polar extremes of avoidance and addiction. It is helpful to focus on four different levels of involvement with pornography: (1) inadvertent exposure, (2) occasional use, (3) intensive use, and (4) compulsive use (addiction).

1. **Inadvertent Exposure.** I believe that everyone has been inadvertently exposed to pornography. There is no sin in this when we turn away and don't pursue it. It is like a mistake, which calls for correction rather than repentance.<sup>2</sup>

2. **Occasional Use.** This use of pornography may be occasional or even frequent, but it is always intentional, and that is its evil.

Pornography stirs and magnifies powerful sexual feelings. The Creator gave us these feelings for His wise purposes, but He also gave commandments that limited their expression to a man and a woman who are married. Pornography debases appropriate sexual expression and encourages the expression of sexual feelings outside the boundaries of marriage. Those who use pornography are trifling with forces so powerful that they can create life or destroy it. Don't go there!

The danger with any intentional use of pornography, no matter how casual or infrequent, is that it always invites more frequent exposure, which will inevitably increase preoccupation with sexual

feelings and behavior. Scientists have discovered that sexual images produce chemicals in the brain that reward sexual feelings, which then encourage more attention to sexual behavior.<sup>3</sup> Immoral sexual behavior of any kind or degree produces feelings of shame, which, over time, can be entrenched within an individual.

3. **Intensive Use.** Repeated intentional use of pornography can make its use a habit, "a behavior pattern regularly followed until it has become almost involuntary."<sup>4</sup> With habitual use, individuals experience a need for more stimulus to have the same reaction in order to be satisfied.

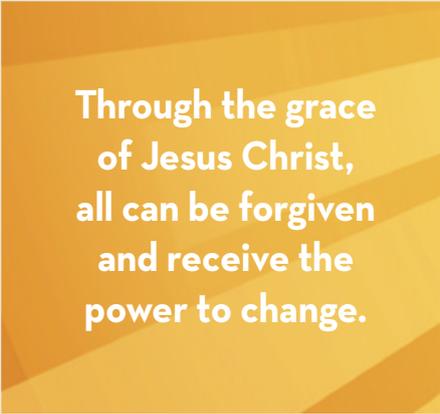
4. **Compulsive Use (Addiction).**

A person's behavior is addictive when it forms a "dependency" (a medical term applied to the use of drugs, alcohol, compulsive gambling, etc.) amounting to an "irresistible compulsion" that "takes priority over almost everything else in life."<sup>5</sup>

## II. The Significance of Understanding These Levels

Once we recognize these different levels, we also recognize that not everyone who uses pornography willfully is addicted to it. In fact, most young men and young women who struggle with pornography are not addicted. That is a very important distinction to make—not just for the parents, spouses, and leaders who desire to help but also for those who struggle with this problem. Here is why.

First, the deeper the level of involvement one engages in—from inadvertent exposure, to occasional or repeated intentional use, to intensive use, to compulsive (addictive) use—the more difficult it is to recover. If behavior is incorrectly classified as an addiction, the user may think he or she has lost agency and the capacity to overcome the problem. This can weaken resolve to recover and repent. On the other hand, having a clearer understanding of the depth of a problem—that it may not be as



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ingrained or extreme as feared—can give hope and an increased capacity to exercise agency to discontinue and repent.

Second, as with any sinful behavior, willful use of pornography drives away the Holy Ghost. Some who have experienced this will feel prompted to repent. Others, however, may feel embarrassed and seek to hide their guilt through deceit. They may also begin to feel shame, which can lead to self-loathing. If this happens, users may begin to believe one of Satan's greatest lies: that what they have done or continue to do makes them a bad person, unworthy of the Savior's grace and incapable of repentance. That is simply not true. We are never too far out of reach from the Savior and His Atonement.

Finally, it is important not to label even intensive or habitual use of pornography as an addiction because that does not accurately describe the circumstances or the full nature of the required repentance and recovery. Having a better

understanding of where a person is in the process will also allow a better understanding of what action is necessary to recover.

### III. Escaping Pornography

Now let us consider how individuals can escape and recover from the trap of pornography. This will be helpful not only to those struggling to overcome the use of pornography but also to the parents, spouses, and leaders who help them. Individuals will be more successful in both avoiding and recovering from pornography as they discuss these subjects with parents, spouses, and leaders.<sup>6</sup>

Regardless of the level of involvement in intentionally viewing pornography, the road to recovery, purity, and repentance follows and requires the same basic principles: humility, discipleship, commitment to a personal plan for change, accountability and support, and enduring in faith.



***Acting upon these truths also requires individuals to recommit to living as a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ and to doing those things that purify and strengthen them to withstand future temptations.***

## A. Humility

To truly conquer pornography and its associated behaviors, individuals must develop humility (see Ether 12:27). Turning to the Lord in humility leads one to accept certain truths, which, when fully understood, provide strength and eliminate shame. Some of these truths include:

- Each of us is a beloved child of a loving Heavenly Father.
- Our Savior, Jesus Christ, loves and knows each of us personally.
- Our Savior's Atonement applies to all of God's children.
- Through the grace of Jesus Christ, all can be forgiven and receive the power to change.
- Each of us has the priceless gift of agency, which allows us to draw on the power and strength of the Atonement.
- Individuals who struggle with pornography can draw hope from the fact that others have succeeded in this battle.
- Pornography is evil, but engaging in it does not make the person evil.
- Any individual can escape the trap of pornography and fully recover, but this is possible only through drawing on the power of the Atonement.
- True repentance from pornography requires more than simply ceasing to use it. Such repentance requires a change of heart through the Atonement of Christ.

Accepting these truths prepares one spiritually to act upon them, which opens the door to receiving the Lord's help to make the needed changes to repent and recover.

## B. Discipleship

Acting upon these truths also requires individuals to recommit to living as a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ



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and to doing those things that purify and strengthen them to withstand future temptations. This means commitment to personal religious behaviors: daily meaningful prayer and scripture study, attendance at Church meetings, service, fasting, and (when approved by the bishop) partaking of the sacrament and worshipping in the temple.

## C. Commitment to a Personal Plan

Humble disciples of Jesus Christ will gain the sensitivity to recognize the deep feelings, social situations, and physical surroundings that trigger the temptation to use pornography. Having analyzed those triggers, they will develop a personal escape plan to help them:

- Recognize triggers and cravings as they occur.
- Establish specific actions to help them withdraw from the temptation.
- Redirect thoughts and energy toward the Lord.
- Outline daily specific actions to fortify their personal commitment to live righteously.

When developing a personal plan, individuals should utilize the excellent resources provided by the Church. For example, the Church website [overcomingpornography.org](https://overcomingpornography.org) has content for individuals as well as the family

members and priesthood leaders who support them. In addition, the Church's Addiction Recovery Program is available to all members who struggle with any addictive behavior, and will also help their family members.

#### **D. Accountability and Support**

Humble followers of Jesus Christ who acknowledge that they need the Savior will also seek the help of their bishop, who was called by the Lord as their priesthood leader and who holds the necessary keys to enable them to repent. With the consent of the individuals involved and if the bishop feels so inspired, the bishop may also call someone else to work with and help them. No matter the circumstances, this counsel from President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) applies:

“Plead with the Lord out of the depths of your soul that He will remove from you the addiction which enslaves you. And may you have the courage to seek the loving guidance of your bishop and, if necessary, the counsel of caring professionals.”<sup>7</sup>

Depending on the depth of the problem, individuals may require the support of a trusted, experienced person or a professional counselor to whom they can turn at any hour to be strengthened in moments of weakness and who can hold them personally accountable to their plan.

#### **E. Enduring in Faith**

Persons who have repented and have been blessed to overcome the desire to use pornography must still be vigilant, because the adversary will still seek to exploit their human weakness. Inadvertent exposure may still occur despite all efforts to avoid it. Throughout their lives, individuals must learn to control their God-given sexual feelings and maintain their efforts to be clean.

#### **IV. Compassion for All**

Now a word regarding how we treat those who have been ensnared by pornography. All of us need the

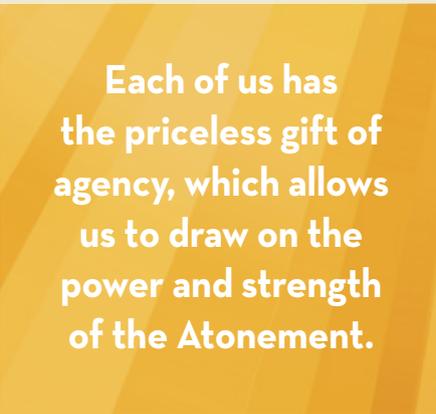
Atonement of Jesus Christ. Those struggling with pornography need our compassion and love as they follow needed principles and steps of recovery. Please do not condemn them. They are not evil or without hope. They are sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father. Through proper and complete repentance, they may become clean, pure, and worthy of every covenant and temple blessing promised by God.

When the time for marriage comes, I encourage young women and young men to be careful to select a partner to be their companion through eternity who is clean and pure before the Lord and worthy to enter the temple. Individuals who fully repent from pornography are worthy of these blessings.

#### **V. Conclusion**

Throughout our lives, all of us will encounter material with sexual content. With the guidance of our loving Savior, including the assurance from the sacramental covenants that we may always have his Spirit to be with us (see D&C 20:77), we can always respond appropriately. I testify that this is what we

should do to enjoy the blessings of Him whom we worship. As we do, we will more fully receive the peace of the Savior and we will remain on the path to our eternal destiny of exaltation. ■



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#### **NOTES**

1. See Dallin H. Oaks, “Pornography,” *Ensign*, May 2005, 87–90.
2. See Dallin H. Oaks, “Sins and Mistakes,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1996, 62–67.
3. See Donald L. Hilton Jr., M.D., “Pornography Addiction—a Supranormal Stimulus Considered in the Context of Neuroplasticity,” *Socioaffective Neuroscience and Psychology*, vol. 3 (2013), [socioaffectiveneuroscipsychol.net/index.php/snp/article/view/20767](http://socioaffectiveneuroscipsychol.net/index.php/snp/article/view/20767); see also “Porn Changes the Brain,” [fightthenewdrug.org](http://fightthenewdrug.org).
4. *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* (1989), “habit.”
5. *American College of Physicians Complete Home Medical Guide* (1999), 564.
6. In addition, young people and their parents ought to have frank but appropriate conversations about human reproduction. Youth who hear about human sexuality from their peers rather than their parents are more likely to seek information about it through pornography.
7. Gordon B. Hinckley, “A Tragic Evil among Us,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2004, 62.

# ONLINE RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES AND LEADERS

*Spouses and other family members carry heavy burdens when trying to help a loved one involved with pornography. These resources can help.*

When Church members are dealing with pornography on any of the levels identified in the article by Elder Oaks, Church leaders and the spouses or families of those dealing with the problem have several helps available.

## **Overcomingpornography.org**

This site helps people find healing, forgiveness, protection, and power through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. It includes practical guidance and resources for pornography users, their spouses and family members, and Church leaders.

## **Ministering.lds.org**

This site is primarily for ward and stake council members. It includes specific guidance about ministering to all affected by the use of pornography.

## **Addictionrecovery.lds.org**

The LDS Family Services Addiction Recovery Program offers confidential group meetings to help spouses and families of those dealing with pornography

find peace and healing by applying gospel principles. Visit this site to learn how to join these meetings.

Priesthood leaders may find the site helpful to use during interviews or in Addiction Recovery Program meetings.

Stake presidents who want to start new Addiction Recovery Program meetings in their stakes should contact LDS Family Services, their area welfare manager, or the Area Presidency or assigned member of the Presidency of the Seventy.

