

YOUNG ADULTS

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# Dating and Pornography

By *Ensign* staff and Family Services

As young adults, we all know that dating can be exciting, scary, fulfilling, and nerve-racking all at the same time. As we start opening up to each other, we naturally want to know more about one another, and increasing vulnerability is important in building and deepening relationships. What are our dreams, fears, and beliefs? How do we feel about marriage and family? What challenges have we faced in our past or currently that we should share with one another?

As scary as talking (or asking) about problems with pornography may be, *not* talking about it can lead to devastating problems later. Each individual

pornography problem is unique and challenging, and you may not even know if it's an issue or how to bring it up with the person you're dating, so it's important that you seek guidance from the Spirit. There's no single solution for every situation, but in this article, we offer some suggestions for those of you who might be wondering:

- How can I approach the subject of pornography with the person I am dating? And when is it appropriate to ask/tell?
- How can I know if I should move forward in a relationship with someone who has a history of pornography use?
- How can we work together to overcome pornography?

Help and hope in confronting pornography in dating relationships.

Editors' note: Because "dating" means different things in different cultures, for the purposes of this article, we mean going on dates, within the standards of the gospel, in order to get to know someone, and developing a relationship with them that could potentially lead to marriage.



## For Those Who Have Struggled or Are Struggling

If you have struggled with pornography in the past or if you are currently struggling, the thought of dating may bring you a sense of hopelessness or anxiety. But if you have a sincere desire to remove pornography from your life (or have already removed it), know that with your own efforts and help from Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ, a healthy, lasting relationship is possible for you. Consider the following questions as you pursue a relationship.

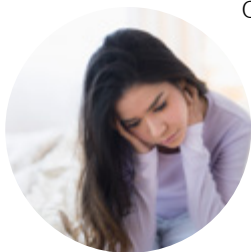
### 1. Do We Really Need to Talk about It?

A common question is, “Do I really need to share my history of pornography use with the person I’m dating, even if I’ve repented of it?” Or “Do I need to talk about current problems

with pornography with the person I’m dating?” Generally, it *does* need to be discussed—at the right time and in a sensitive way. As you have this conversation, keep in mind a few important principles:

- **Timing**—The conversation should take place when the relationship progresses to a state of seriousness that would naturally require it.
- **Honesty**—Relationships should be based on trust and honesty. Although the person you are dating might choose to end the relationship, they need to understand the nature of the problem, your current progress in addressing it, and your plan for dealing with it if it comes up again in the future.
- **Forgiveness**—Being honest about your pornography use with the person you’re dating doesn’t mean you need to go into graphic detail when discussing it. If you’ve repented and feel you’ve been forgiven, you shouldn’t feel guilty about it anymore. The Lord doesn’t remember our sins once we’ve repented of them (see Doctrine and Covenants 58:42), so your discussion with the person you’re dating is less about “confessing” and more about building trust, sharing your plans for ongoing recovery, and gaining their support.
- **Healing**— Even if you have repented, prolonged or intensive use of pornography can have long-lasting biological, psychological, social, and spiritual effects. The healing process can be hard work and take a long time, but full recovery and real healing are possible. Through that process, you will need appropriate help and support, which should include your potential spouse.

### 2. Am I Ready for a Serious Relationship?



One of the biggest differences between someone who is ready for a serious relationship and someone who is not is their willingness to be transparent with the person they are dating. If you struggle with pornography, you can either let fear take your relationship to a place of distrust or use faith to tackle challenges together.

Although it can be uncomfortable and scary to share your history with pornography, avoiding it may only deepen your feelings of fear and shame. Your fear of losing that person might even cause you to deny or



## For Those Who Are Dating Someone Who Has Struggled

Because the average age of first exposure to pornography is around 11 and it is so easy to access, most young people have been exposed to pornography in some way by age 18. This can be concerning as far as dating goes. But exposure is not the same as addiction, and there are different levels of involvement with pornography (see Dallin H. Oaks, "Recovering from the Trap of Pornography," *New Era*, Oct. 2015, 2-7; *Liahona*, Oct. 2015, 50-55). The good news is that the Atonement of Jesus Christ can provide strength and healing to all who seek it. Here are some questions to consider as your relationship progresses.

avoid sharing the whole story, which can break trust and damage your relationship later on.

On the other hand, when you respect the agency of the person you are dating, you will honor their choice to remain in the relationship knowing both *the good and the bad*. You might still be afraid of the outcome, but it's important to recognize that, given all of the information, the other person can also help you in your efforts and desire to remove pornography from your life. But whether or not the relationship works out, with God's help, you can continue on the path to recovery.

### 1. When and How Should I Ask about Pornography?

Deciding when and how to bring this up with the person you are dating may be something to discuss with your parents, older siblings, Church leaders, or anyone else you trust to give good advice. Find a way that feels right for you and then have that conversation at the appropriate time, as you become exclusive or more serious in your relationship.

That doesn't mean you need to start a first date with an interrogation into their past, but as your relationship progresses, you can seek the inspiration of the Spirit to help you know how and when to ask about their history with pornography.

### 2. How Should I Respond?

When you and the person you are dating start sharing your honest feelings, it can bring healing. It's important to be aware of your own thoughts and feelings as pornography use is disclosed—it might cause you to become critical, angry, numb, or feel deceived. But at the same time, their disclosure can also increase trust, compassion, love, and empathy between you. Consider their feelings and your own as you respond.



### 3. How Do I Move Forward?

Discovering that the person you are dating is struggling with pornography should be a cause for concern, but don't betray their trust by sharing their personal struggles with other people. Speaking in confidence with a bishop or therapist, or, with the permission of the person you are dating, with a friend or trusted leader may also be helpful.

When deciding whether or not to continue the relationship, you should continually seek guidance from the Spirit. But the following suggestions could also be helpful:

- Ask them how much pornography has impacted their life and where they are in the process of healing. They need to have shown their desire to eliminate pornography from their life by taking any appropriate actions necessary.
- Recognize that some forms of pornography use (for example, child pornography) are a major indicator that the person needs professional help and may be unsafe.
- Realize that the power of the Savior's Atonement is real. You can forgive, and they can be healed.
- Decide that you will settle for nothing less than complete honesty in your relationship and worthiness to marry in the temple.



- Understand that healing and recovery will take time. Relapses can happen, and those who are trying to recover will need support. This includes understanding their triggers (things that might cause them to turn to pornography) and supporting or helping establish appropriate safeguards.
- If your relationship is progressing toward marriage, be sure that you both agree that pornography is unacceptable and does not reflect a healthy marital sexual relationship.

The most important part of moving forward is relying on what the Holy Ghost prompts you to do, which could be anything from continuing the relationship with an understanding that the pornography use must stop to ending the relationship but continuing to support their efforts to change. Whatever you decide, the person you are dating should understand that things can change depending on their progress or lack of progress in overcoming pornography.

## Working Together to Overcome Pornography

Overcoming pornography can take time and hard work, but it's possible. And ultimately, working on overcoming it together can strengthen your relationship as you both gain a deeper understanding of the Atonement of Jesus Christ and learn to support each other through adversity. Consider the following as you work to overcome it together:

- The Church's web page **addressingpornography.ChurchofJesusChrist.org** offers many resources (including information on the Church's addiction recovery program) that can help both of you navigate this healing process.
- Consider having a specific place and time to discuss pornography so that it doesn't become the focus of your relationship. When you do talk about it, don't be belittling or condescending. Your relationship should be a safe place where you can both feel loved and supported, not interrogated or demeaned.
- Spiritual practices can help provide a defense against temptation. Encourage each other to maintain and strengthen regular spiritual habits—including meaningful scripture study and temple worship (when possible), Sabbath day observance, serving others, consistent fasting, and sincere prayer—with an increased desire to strengthen your relationship with the Savior and Heavenly Father. That relationship can help lessen pornography's hold over your lives. Discipleship is

a lifelong pursuit, and the strength we gain as followers of Christ will help us overcome all our challenges in life, not just pornography.

- If your own efforts aren't proving successful, don't be afraid or ashamed to seek out the help of a trained mental health professional in the area of sexual addiction. They may be able to help you get more insight into treating pornography use and resolving its underlying causes.
- Remember that we are surrounded by inappropriate media that tempts us to sin. If the person you are dating relapses, how quickly they get back on track is a good indicator of their commitment to rid pornography from their life. But if you begin to feel like you are more motivated to see change than they are, you should reconsider continuing your dating relationship.
- Your influence on the person you are dating can be very strong, but it should not be the primary reason for their change in behavior. Their desire to change has to come from within, not from you.

Above all, seek guidance from Heavenly Father and remember that there is always hope through the Savior. His grace is sufficient to heal and change us. His Atonement is available to both of you to give you strength and help you forgive. However, the person struggling with pornography needs to be actively seeking the Savior's help to overcome it. No one else can do it for them. Have faith, and trust Heavenly Father. He will guide you in your unique situation. ■

