

Next Steps For a Concerned Spouse

By Steve Waters

Brenda's heart ached. Her husband, a youth pastor, had been arrested. The problem behind it all was even worse than the arrest itself - he had an uncontrollable sexual addiction.

For Brenda this situation was a tragedy. She felt hurt, betrayed and helpless. Yet she made it. The good news is that today their relationship is restored and continually improving. The process was difficult and required incredible patience and forgiveness on her part. It also required a lot of vulnerability and willingness on the part of her husband to look at his own life. Still, she'll tell you that their commitment to recovery paid off.

Are you facing a similar tragedy? Are you still in shock after finding a stash of on-line porn or hearing that your husband has lost his job for constantly violating company policies against personal Internet use?

Or are you just growing more and more concerned about where your spouse's on-line habits are headed. Has your spouse's daily on-line time grown from a few minutes into a few hours? Is he on-line later and later into the night? Is he increasingly irritable when you question his Internet use?

Whether your spouse is just starting to show signs of using the Internet too much or has allowed a habit to explode in some tragic way, I encourage you to fight for your relationship. You have every reason to care about the health of your marriage and to take appropriate steps to keep the Internet from driving a wedge between you and your spouse.

The tough challenge for you at this point is to direct your thoughts and emotions in a positive direction. That's difficult when you feel hurt, anxious, and vulnerable. Dr. James Dobson addresses this struggle in his book, *Love Must be Tough*: "As a love affair begins to deteriorate, the vulnerable partner is inclined to panic. Characteristic responses include grieving, lashing out, begging, pleading, grabbing and holding; or the reaction may be just the opposite, involving appeasement and passivity." Dr. Dobson says such reactions are understandable but are not often successful in restoring the relationship. "In fact," he says, "such reactions are usually counterproductive, destroying the relationship the threatened person is trying so desperately to preserve." [James C. Dobson, *Love Must be Tough: Straight Talk* (Nashville, Tenn: Word, 1999), p. 30]

So what do you do?

You start with prayer and follow with a day-to-day commitment to love your spouse the way God loves you. The purpose of this article is to give you some general direction; to answer some of the questions that are likely to be going through your mind and to direct you to resources that can help you understand and address the struggle your marriage is facing.

What if I only suspect a problem?

A large majority of the population uses the Internet on a frequent basis without having a problem. Additionally millions of Internet surfers are able to limit their use of on-line auction services, stock-trading services, interactive games, and even chat rooms to healthy, productive purposes. It is also typical for many Internet users to go through periods of something like an initial interest binge either when they first go on-line or when they discover a new resource and spend several hours exploring it.

What you should be worried about are signs that your spouse's use is getting out of control- excessive time on-line that takes him away from family, chores, and other responsibilities; irritability or anger when asked about on-line activity or asked to get offline; financial irregularities, and other dramatic changes in routine or behavior.

Additional signs may accompany a secret pornography habit or other on-line sexual activity, says Dr. Kimberly Young, a pioneer in Internet addiction research. She encourage spouses to look for changes in sleep patterns, demands for privacy, evidence of lying, personality changes, a loss of interest in sex and a declining investment in your relationship. [Dr. Kimberly S. Young, "Is Internet addiction a problem for someone you know?" Addiction Solutions web site]

One way to determine if your spouse's activity is drifting off into inappropriate areas is to simply ask them, "What are you doing while you are on-line?" If they seem defensive or deceptive, you may want to get a more accurate idea by reviewing the history files on your browser. If you have Microsoft Explorer, just click the "History" button near the top of the page. In newer versions of Netscape, you can find a history option under the "Communicator" category. For older versions, just enter the phrase "about: global" into the address box and press enter. If you have version 4.0 or later of America Online, you can just click the arrow to the right hand side of your locator bar to see what AOL and web files have been viewed recently.

The history file usually provides documentation for the locations and times of all Web traffic over the past month or so. A history file that is empty or only has a couple of files despite a lot of recent activity may be an indication that your spouse has found out how to clear the browser history (an option available in the preferences area of the browser). Your spouse may not be aware, however, that pictures from the Web sites they visit are usually stored in a temporary area called a cache file. You can usually find that file on both PCs and Mac computers by using the "Find" feature and doing a search among file folders with the words "cache" or "webcache." This folder will bring up a list of item names with the suffix ".gif" or ".jpg." By clicking on those file names, you can see what pictures have been downloaded. If you see either pornography or gambling related images, then you know that someone in your house has a problem that needs to be addressed.

Should I confront my spouse?

If you see indications that your spouse's Internet use is out of control or if you have reason to believe that he or she is involved in some form of on-line sex or relationship then you need to confront them with your concern. You don't have to be judgmental or condemning- you simply express with love the things that concern you and wait for your spouse's response. For

example, you say, "Honey, I feel like your on-line activities are taking you away from me and the family;" "I found some inappropriate stuff on our computer, do you know where it came from?" or "I love you, I'm concerned because our marriage is in trouble, I see the following: [detail specific problems]."

There is an outside chance that your spouse was not responsible for the images you found or that your spouse was genuinely not aware that his Internet use had given you reason to be concerned. Confrontation under these circumstances is helpful because it gives you the opportunity to restore trust and open communication.

However, if you are tapping into a real problem the response could be ugly. Out of embarrassment, your spouse may grow defensive and try to minimize the problem or may even try to shift blame for his actions to you: "There wouldn't be a problem if you weren't so paranoid."

Because of the unpredictability of confrontation, many spouses choose not to confront, even after they have seen early warning signs. Instead they hope for the best and just try to tolerate a less fulfilling relationship. "In that case, they need to quit looking at their spouse through their eyes and see them through God's eyes," says Rob Jackson, a Christian counselor who had to fight to restore his marriage.

"God doesn't want you to focus on what you would do to please your spouse, He wants you to focus on what He expects or requires of you-a very different standard." He doesn't want sin to keep someone from having an abundant life and a healthy marriage-even if the spouse is too afraid to confront the problem.

As difficult as confrontation can be and as unpredictable as the response can be, some guys actually want to be caught so they can be relieved of a secret struggle. "Hopefully, your spouse is like many who get caught in the trap of addiction," says Steve Arterburn, founder of New Life Clinics. "They know what they are doing is wrong. They are aware of the sorry nature of their lives. The problem is that they don't know how to initiate changes in their behaviors. What seems most painful to you may be exactly what he needs in order to begin the healing and recovery process."

"Confrontation is really your only power," says Marsha Means, an author who wrote about her husband's struggle with pornography. "You're powerless; it's up to God and that person after you confront."

How do I handle his/her denial or refusal to get help?

Don't be surprised if your spouse either denies having a problem (despite your evidence) or admits having a problem but refuses to take meaningful steps to address it.

"Denial of a problem or not wanting to get help is a symptom of the real problem and if you have to wait for your spouse to say they're finally ready, they may never get there," says Dr. Harry Schaumburg, a sexual addiction counselor. Schaumburg believes your approach should be to invite them to help you improve your marriage. You could say: "This whole thing that

you've been struggling with-without seeing change-has really taken its toll on me. I don't like how it affects how I feel about you. I want us to restore relationship. I want us to build something. You need to do this, because I'm hurting."

If your spouse will not respond to that Rob Jackson recommends that you follow the model of confrontation laid out in Matthew 18:15-17:

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' (NIV, Matthew 18:15-16)

In other words, if confronting one-on-one doesn't work, confront your spouse with witnesses: business partners, friends, or a pastor (but not your children). "Love bomb them," says Dr. Jennifer Schneider, a researcher who wrote about her response to an adulterous husband in her book *Back from Betrayal*. She recommends a format similar to the interventions spouses often use to confront alcoholics.

Rob Jackson recommends that you go into the confrontation with a treatment game plan (a support group, counseling sessions, etc.) already worked out among your witness team. If your spouse still seems reluctant to get help, you will need to say, "Here is what you are doing, here are the directives, I'm willing to get help too, if not, you are jeopardizing the relationship to the point of separation." Rob believes this approach is important because the addict needs to work as a team player and quit trying to be independent of the family. "No one family member is more important than the rest of the family," he says.

When is it appropriate for me to leave?

Christian counselors generally agree that you should physically separate yourself from your spouse if you or your children are being exploited or victimized or enduring ongoing verbal abuse or emotional cruelty. You should not tolerate an environment where physical, emotional and sexual abuse is occurring. When there is not a direct threat, however, Rob Jackson believes that separation should be the exception rather than the rule. He suggests that some women tend to minimize their husband's behavior and not recognize it as abusive. He recommends that those women go with their hearts if they feel that their husband's actions are not cherishing and have made their home unsafe.

Separation that does occur should be therapeutic, not in anger, Rob says. He compares therapeutic separation to the fire lines that firefighters often set to stop blazes. By intentionally burning a controlled area, they can remove the threat of a disastrous wildfire. Similarly, instead of having a problem flare up and destroy a relationship, a brief therapeutic separation can create an environment for recovery that will hopefully keep the couple from having to go through a permanent separation later.

A pastor or counselor who establishes goals for what the couple will try to achieve during their time apart should mediate this process. The first phase of the separation involves thirty days with no contact between the husband and wife. Any arrangements for finances or care for

children should be negotiated up front so that communication can be limited strictly to emergencies. This experience shows couples what divorce feels like. Rob notices that couples going through problems often only have a psuedodivorce. One of the partners gets kicked out of the house but then the two still have sex occasionally, have long phone calls and other kinds of on-again, off-again contact, making recovery difficult. Total separation, however, forces the spouse with the addiction to see what losing his partner completely would be like.

During this time, the husband and wife will spend time working on individual issues with a counselor. Over the next thirty days, the couple will start including a joint counseling session once a week. They will also add in a date night once a week where they spend time being civil towards each other. By the seventh or eighth week, the couple should start addressing what kind of minimal changes will have to occur for when they come back together-no infidelity, no cybersex, and so forth.

In the last phase, the couple moves back in together, maintaining a period of joint counseling and beginning to tackle long-term issues such as communication and financial management.

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