

Dear Faith Leader;

Many individuals and couples struggling with the effects of pornography use and other problematic sexual behaviors will likely reach out to you for help and counsel. Having worked for many years with thousands of such people in distress, we would like to offer 9 *Best Practices For Faith Leaders* (see other side) as starting points for effectively helping these people.

According to extensive research, viewing pornography has a similar effect on the human brain as consuming alcohol and hard drugs. Sexually acting out behaviors generate a “high” as the brain releases dopamine.^{1,2} Prolonged exposure often leads to compulsive use in a process called desensitization and escalation. Those engaged in these behaviors typically become adept at hiding because of the intense shame they feel and the deep fear of being discovered—and its potential dire consequences. Such isolation, coupled with dishonesty, is the lifeblood that perpetuates all destructive and addictive behaviors.

Nearly 70% of spouses who receive a sexual discovery or disclosure experience PTSD-type symptoms.³ This affect is defined as *betrayal trauma* and may present as confusion, agitation, severe emotional distress and/or shock. Betrayal trauma is a significant part of the affected partner’s experience and requires its own treatment and healing.

As you learn more, you can confidently guide both the offending individual and the affected partner toward sound principles and effective resources that will help them heal and recover. We warmly thank you for your efforts to help individuals and families find lasting healing and recovery.

Sincerely,

Friends in the work of healing

S.A. Lifeline Foundation

1 See Lembke, A., *Dopamine Nation* (1st ed. 2021), Dutton.

2 National Institutes of Health, *Introduction To Behavioral Addictions*, 2010.

3 Steffens, Barbara A. and Robyn L. Rennie, *The Traumatic Nature of Disclosure for Wives of Sexual Addicts*, 2006, cdn.ymaws.com/iitap.com/resource/resmgr/arie_files/m2-traumatic-disclosure-stef.pdf.

4 Steffens, B. & S.A. Lifeline, “Understanding Betrayal Trauma: Pathway to Recovery” Podcast, 6 June 2023, retrieved June 4, 2024 from <https://pathwaytorecovery.buzzsprout.com/2171696/12956624-understanding-betrayal-trauma-and-the-path-to-recovery-w-barbara-steffens>

5 Hollenbeck, C. M., Ed.D., LMHC and Steffens, Barbara, Ph.D., “Betrayal Trauma Anger: Clinical Implications for Therapeutic Treatment Based on the Sexually Betrayed Partner’s Experience Related to Anger after Intimate Betrayal,” *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 13 Feb 2024, DOI: 10.1080/0092623X.2024.2306940

6 Manning, J. C. and Watson, W. L., “A Qualitative Study of the Supports Women Find Most Beneficial When Dealing with a Spouse’s Sexually Addictive or Compulsive Behaviors: Insights for Pastoral Counselors and Clergy,” *Pastoral Psychology*, 2007b, 56(1), 31–43. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-007-0103-0>

7 Moore, A. (n.d.), *Understanding Pornography and Betrayal Trauma*, S.A. Lifeline, Ed.; 2017 edition, S.A. Lifeline.

9 Best Practices For Faith Leaders

Supporting Individuals and Couples Affected by Pornography Use & Problematic Sexual Behaviors

1. SEE YOUR ROLE AS A FIRST RESPONDER

Seek quality education to understand the serious nature of pornography use, problematic sexual behaviors, and the devastation those behaviors can have on their loved ones. The role of a faith leader is to provide spiritual support, and direct individuals to specialized resources, much like a paramedic would help someone in immediate physical distress.

2. LET GO OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR FIXING THE PROBLEM

Recognize that you are not responsible for changing an individual's sexually acting out behavior, or for the couple's reconciliation. Encourage individuals and couples to seek support from qualified professional therapists and support groups (e.g., SAL 12-Step groups) while maintaining your role as spiritual leader.

3. MEET SEPARATELY WITH EACH SPOUSE WHO IS WILLING

This fosters open communication to address their respective needs. Due to acute fear and shame felt by the offending individual, destructive patterns are often hidden and minimized, increasing the likelihood of recurrence—and trauma for the affected partner. Thus, ongoing accountability visits are essential. Place greater emphasis on rigorous honesty and accountability over achieving religious milestones within certain time frames. This approach will be far more beneficial for their long-term spiritual, mental, and social well-being. Consider asking the affected partner what their experience has been, what they need, along with what the offending partner might be leaving out.

4. RECOGNIZE THIS IS NOT THE AFFECTED PARTNER'S FAULT

It is common that undisclosed sexual behaviors were brought into the marriage, and their escalation has caused a rupture in the relationship. The affected partner didn't cause the problem—and they can't fix the problem. Similar to a person who has been hit by another's dangerous driving, they have been harmed by their partner's destructive behavior and need their own healing and support. "Understand, faith leader, that this is not a *marriage* issue. It's something that's happened *within* the marriage." — Barbara Steffens, Ph.D. ⁴

5. RECOGNIZE THE AFFECTED PARTNER MAY BE EXPERIENCING SEVERE DISTRESS

This is normal, and their behavior might seem extreme or intense. Nearly 70% of those who receive a sexual discovery or disclosure experience PTSD-type symptoms, potentially escalating to a mental health crisis. This affect is defined as *betrayal trauma* and may present as confusion, agitation, intense anger, severe emotional distress and/or shock. Furthermore, research shows that approximately 43% of betrayed adults report thoughts of harming themselves.⁵ There might be a need for specialized therapists and group support. Treating the affected partner with respect, sensitivity, affirmation, and compassion are key factors in successful faith leader support. ⁶

6. LISTEN TO THE AFFECTED PARTNER'S STORY AND TRUST WHAT THEY ARE SAYING

Dr. Adam Moore says those who struggle with hidden problematic sexual behaviors, "are unusually skilled at creating a beautiful and believable facade. [They] may come across in your office as stable, honest and accountable. Before you accept all [they are] telling you, listen to the [betrayed partner's] experience."⁷

7. THE OFFENDING PARTNER NEEDS A BALANCE OF COMPASSION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Faith leaders should approach acting out behavior with a balanced response that avoids shaming while also not being overly lenient; this ensures that the individual feels supported yet understands the seriousness of their actions. Key warning signs include shifting blame (particularly towards the affected partner), a lack of accountability, self-degradation, patterns of deceit, and minimizing the behavior. Accountability is crucial in this process as it fosters genuine healing and relational repair.

8. INQUIRE ABOUT THE HISTORY—AND CURRENT PATTERNS—OF PORNOGRAPHY USE AND SEXUALLY ACTING OUT BEHAVIORS OF THE OFFENDING INDIVIDUAL

Understanding the full context of the current behavior brings insight into the severity of the behavior, contributing factors, and what they need to be accountable for or repent of. Learning about the duration and level of compulsive use will also help you direct them to the right support. Where behaviors have been hidden or lied about, there is a strong possibility that the offending individual may withhold information; obtaining a full history may take multiple visits, persistence, and discernment.

9. ALLOW THE AFFECTED PARTNER TO FORGIVE IN THEIR OWN WAY AND ON THEIR OWN TIME FRAME

Forgiveness, which is different than trust, is a deeply personal journey and should not be rushed or imposed. Respect their autonomy in deciding when and how to extend forgiveness. Healing is a process and is variable for each individual.