

Missionary Marriage Issues: Computer Sex or Me?

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Married 34 years with three adult children, Dave and Ginny sat back to back in their home office. Ginny was scanning down through the inbox of her email when her heart lurched. One message was from an old boyfriend, and she clicked on it. As she put it, "Opening that email occupied one second of my life, but that one second changed everything. I sat between the only two men I had ever loved. I was connected to one via the Internet, and the other was seated less than two feet behind me." She began emailing Mike several times each week, rushing to the computer each morning and reluctantly leaving it in the evening. They secretly called each other. Ginny and Mike set up a time to meet...

Within months of her marriage to Dan, Ashley found evidence that her computer was used to view sexually explicit pictures of women. Dan denied it was he and that he had tried to delete parts of the history. They were expecting their first baby, but her dreams of being married "happily ever after" were shattered. He soon admitted that he had lied to her, said that this was the first time he had ever done it, and promised never to do it again. A few days later she learned that he had viewed pornography at times while they were dating as well as after they were married. Ashley was devastated. She said, "A few nights ago he lied to my face immediately after promising never to lie to me again...."

Dave, Ginny, Dan, and Ashley are real people who have written their stories. They have had the courage to be open and vulnerable because they know they are not alone in what has happened in their lives and want to give hope to others.

Is this something new?

Of course, sexual temptation and lustful thoughts have been around for thousands of years. Adam and Eve tried to cover their nakedness (Genesis 3). The Ten Commandments forbid a person from coveting a neighbor's spouse (Exodus 20). One night King David couldn't sleep and while walking on his roof saw a beautiful woman bathing—and sent to find out about her (2 Samuel 11). Jesus said that we must not even eagerly desire someone sexually (Matthew 5).

Graphic images and explicit writing have been around as long as artists and authors have existed. What has changed is that the computer has made these images and writings affordable and anonymously available to anyone anywhere anytime.

- **Affordable.** Free samples are available at many porn sites, and Internet cafes have computers available at pennies a minute.
- **Anonymous.** A computer in your room means no one knows (except God and those at the website you are visiting)
- **Anyone.** Most missionaries have computers, and most have Internet access.
- **Anywhere.** Internet access (often free) is available in eating places, airports, and so forth.
- **Anytime.** The Internet is available 24-hours a day, 7-days a week.

How often does this happen?

Dave, Ginny, Dan, and Ashley show that it happens to young, old, male, female, married, unmarried,...to virtually anyone. At this point research has not been done to find out what percentage of missionaries are involved. Christianity Today surveyed pastors in the USA and found that 37% of them had a "current struggle" with cyberporn, Internet-based pornography.

People interested in computers and missions attending the annual International Conference on Computing and Mission wrestled with the dilemma of what to do when they found evidence of pornography on missionaries' computers. They had questions about who to tell and what to do. No one knew how large the pornography problem was but based on what the techies were finding on the computers, there seemed to be one. Two of the leaders wrote an article which became the core of a whole issue of EMQ devoted to missions and the Internet. They hoped this would spark a discussion of the whole problem. No "letters to the editor" ever appeared, and the authors received no letters from mission administrators about it. Virtually no one is talking about it yet. It is the "elephant in the living room" that no one mentions.

Isn't my spouse too spiritual to get involved in cyberporn?

People with higher scores on measures of spirituality are less likely to get involved in many addictive behaviors, such as gambling, smoking, alcoholism, and other types of substance abuse. Since cyberporn is relatively new, no studies on its relationship to spirituality were done before the turn of this century.

Current evidence suggests that spirituality is not a protection against involvement in cyberporn. In fact, people who seem to be more spiritual may actually be more vulnerable to it. A study conducted by psychologists at Indiana Wesleyan University and reported in 2006 in the Journal of Psychology and Theology found that those with higher spirituality scores were less likely to become sexually addicted, as the authors had expected. However, the study also found that those with higher spirituality scores were MORE likely to become compulsively involved in cyberporn. The more involved people were in religious activities and the more central the role of faith was in their lives, the more likely they were to access Internet pornography. The more people felt a sense of belonging and support in the faith community, the more likely they were to view cyberporn.

Since this is such a recent finding, no one knows why this is the case, although several hypotheses have been offered, such as cyberporn may be seen as less objectionable, but more permissible, more private, and easier to rationalize than sex outside of marriage.

How can this be?

Betrayed spouses experience a wide variety of emotions. Ashley said, "I felt ugly, not good enough and stupid...." Here are other emotions people have reported.

- Disbelief, shock, astonishment
- Anger, rage, fury
- Hurt, fear, loneliness
- Heartbreak, betrayal

- Dirty, stained
- Frightened. lonely
- Resentment, bitterness
- Violated, stunned
- Tainted, defiled

The list is almost endless. Emotions are strong, changing, and may occur simultaneously. There may be a sense of unreality, like it is a bad dream or a sense that this cannot actually be happening.

What can I do if my spouse is involved?

First here are some things to stop doing (if you are doing them).

- **Stop blaming yourself.** Regardless of what your spouse says, you can never be attractive enough or sexy enough or anything else to keep her/him from the computer sex.
- **Stop participating.** Looking at the pictures, watching the videos, sending email or instant messages, or connecting with someone via skype (with or without webcams) will only make things worse.
- **Stop being the Director of Spouse Security.** Your spouse will find ways around anything you do to get to the computer sex.
- **Stop trying to decide whether the problem is sin or sickness.** It is both—and more. It has social, spiritual, physical, and psychological implications as well as others. It is a sinful obsession with neurochemical bases.

Of course, you want to meet your spouse's needs, such as emotional, social sexual, and spiritual ones among others. You can be available to encourage, support, and pray through struggles with cycles of sin, shame, and silence. You can break the silence and encourage your spouse to make the following changes.

- **Accept responsibility.** The problem is not with you, with parents, with society, or with anyone other than the person hooked on the computer sex—your spouse.
- **Confess.** Your spouse needs to confess to God, to you, and to at least one other person (several others are even better).
- **Repent.** Repentance means more than to feel regret or sorrow. It means to turn from what one has been doing. In this case it means that your spouse will stop the behavior, stop computer sex.
- **Become accountable.** Of course, one is always accountable to God, but your spouse will need at least one other person of the same sex who will hold her or him accountable. This has to be a personal relationship, not just something like reporting to a parole officer. This person has to be someone your spouse can call at any time—and who will call your spouse as well.
- **Participate in a weekly group meeting.** Sharing one's struggles in a group setting and listening to others share is part of overcoming this problem.
- **Be willing to seek professional mental health help if needed.** Your spouse (and perhaps you) may need the help of a psychologist or counselor to supplement what is happening in the group.

Note that these changes are something you want to support, not something you can require. Although it is theoretically possible for someone to accept responsibility, confess to God, and repent—and then be over the compulsion for computer sex, it rarely (if ever) works. People are usually unable to do this on their own—or if forced by someone else.

Christian workers required to be in accountability groups are just as likely to revert or repeat as those who are not in such relationships. They just lie to their accountability partners or groups. The person has to want to change for the accountability relationships to be effective.

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