

Question:

I just read your article entitled "Seeking Help for Addiction Tough to Do" in the November 1st issue of the Southern Utah Focus. About 2 months into my marriage I found out about my husband's pornography addiction that he had been struggling with since he was very young. We have been married three years and he's worked to overcome the addiction. My husband is doing well but I wonder if there is something wrong with me. I struggle with feelings of inadequacy as far as body image, I am suspicious, always trying to guard myself so that I won't get blindsided again, and I sometimes have a hard time trusting my husband and believing what he tells me. It seems to frustrate us both. I wonder if there is any advice you could give me to eradicate these feelings.

Answer:

Thank you so much for having the courage to ask such a personal question. It's been my observation that there are many women who wonder about this same thing. Learning about your husband's secret sexual behavior is a traumatizing experience, to say the least. Perhaps I can share with you some thoughts that can help you make sense of what happened, what's going on now for you, and what you can do in the future.

First, let me explain why this experience has been so traumatizing for you. When you made the commitment to marry your husband, you did so with the expectation of exclusivity. It was understood that "no other" would take your place in his eyes. When your husband viewed pornography, the commitment to exclusivity was violated. In other words, your life (as you knew it) flashed before your eyes. It was gone in an instant. You were most likely left with shock, horror, anger, and profound feelings of powerlessness.

The majority of women who go through this type of betrayal feel like they're going crazy. They wonder if they're normal for feeling so depressed, isolated, afraid, and angry. This confusion often creates a profound sense of shame that drives them into hiding from others who could help them.

A colleague of mine compared this experience to an apple cart being tipped over. She says that a woman spends her life creating a beautiful display of apples that are stacked in a certain order with great personal care and attention. When the betrayal occurs, the cart flips over and all of the dreams, hopes, and order that she once knew scatter in all directions.

Most women will become paralyzed after such an event and often don't know what to do. The best advice I can give to a woman whose husband has revealed secret sexual behavior is for her to find someone to talk with about her experience. In other words, find someone who can help her gather and re-stack the "apples." This person needs to be a benevolent listener who can give her time and space to make sense of the experience. As she talks, she will begin to feel like she's not going crazy and that she's someone with worth and value.

This person should be someone who can keep confidences and who can be helpful in a gentle and understanding way. Ecclesiastical leaders, family members, close friends, and professional counselors are often the first to receive a request for help. Connecting with other women in a group setting can be a validating experience as well. Finding a safe place for emotional containment is critical early in the process.

I believe that if a marriage is going to survive a pornography addiction, it's the man's responsibility to ultimately stop the addictive behaviors and demonstrate through action-oriented steps that he's free of the destructive acting-out behaviors. Although it will take time and persistence, this is entirely possible for any man who struggles.

The woman's responsibility is to work toward being open to trusting again over time. As I said earlier, her first task isn't to trust all at once. Her first task is to feel safe and seek support so she can know who she is and where she needs to go. As he begins to live above suspicion and demonstrate more trustworthy behavior, she will have to consider how trusting again looks for her. As you've mentioned, this is where you're struggling right now. If you stay closed out of fear and insecurity, it will be difficult for you and your marriage to heal.

I once heard the following saying: "You can't shake hands with a clenched fist." When he revealed his addiction to you, you naturally closed off for self-protection. This isn't how you were used to living your life nor is it how you want to keep living. For you to be open again to trusting, it will require some risk and vulnerability. You will have to open up again for your marriage to thrive.

There are many options available to help you begin the process of taking risks toward renewing your trust in your husband. Professional counseling, self-help books, 12-step support groups, workshops, and meetings with ecclesiastical leaders are excellent ways to get direction and understanding of how to move forward in this process. In the *LifeSTAR* program that I co-direct here in Southern Utah, for example, couples who struggle with this problem receive education and support in a structured way that makes taking these risks much easier. I'm happy to send you a list of community resources, web resources, and book recommendations that can help you assess your situation.

Your feelings of inadequacy, mistrust, and suspicion will gradually wane as your husband demonstrates more trustworthy behavior. Research suggests that this process takes an average of 2-3 years to completely restore trust. Recognize that with the proper supports in place and a tremendous amount of patience for yourself and your partner, you can both heal from the effects of this betrayal.