

new fruit

A WOMAN'S GUIDE TO PORN RECOVERY

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romans 8:31-38

What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one—for God himself has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us.

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? (As the Scriptures say, "For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.") No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love.

the apple of shame

It's a familiar story.

At the beginning of the world, God made a garden and set Adam and Eve over it. They were unashamed and naked, living in the full light of the glory of God. They could eat whatever they wanted, with the exception of the fruit of one particular tree.

You know what happened next. Satan, in the form of a serpent, came to Eve and told her to eat it anyway. In *The Jesus Storybook Bible*, Sally Lloyd-Jones puts it this way:

The snake's words hissed into her ears and sunk down deep into her heart, like poison. *Does God love me?* Eve wondered. Suddenly she didn't know anymore [...]

Eve picked the fruit and ate some. And Adam ate some too.

And a terrible lie came into the world. It would never leave. It would live on in every human heart, whispering to every one of God's children: "God doesn't love me."¹

Chances are, you downloaded this book because you've felt the weight of that lie. *God doesn't love me*. Maybe you felt it during an abusive childhood: "Where is God? If he loved me, he'd get me out of this." Maybe you feel it now: "I can't stop watching porn! There's no way God can love a person like me." Maybe it's both! Maybe you've spent your entire life eating that bad fruit and believing the lie.

This fruit, it turns out, also works well as a picture of what it means to be trapped in the shame and addiction cycle.

The Shame/Addiction Cycle, Illustrated

The Shame and Addiction cycle has been around for a while. Patrick Carnes illustrates it as a circle. Above the circle is a line feeding into it, with family wounds at the top feeding into shame. This feeds into the cycle itself: a preoccupation or fantasy, followed by a ritual, followed by acting out, followed by despair. Then the next trigger hits, and the cycle continues.²


There are many things to say about each step, but for our purposes we're going to simplify it.

Picture an apple—a just-off-the-limb-from-an-orchard kind of perfect apple, or the kind of cutout apple a teacher puts on a bulletin board. This perfect apple also has a little stem at the top with a tiny leaf hanging off the side of the stem. Can you see it?

Keep imagining it for a moment. The addiction cycle begins with the top of the apple's stem where we find our wounded identity. This

is nothing more than what it means to be human. The wounded identity refers to the hang-ups and hurts that in one way or another shape who we are (wounds from our families, and wounds from our own actions). It is true for both of us writing this book and it is true for you. Even healthy families leave scars.

As we make our way halfway down the stem of the apple, we find shame. Because of our identity wounds, we experience shame for any number of reasons. No one likes to feel shame. Shame speaks to who we are (though shame lies to us about that) and it is painful. So when an addict's shame (or core wound) is triggered (the leaf on the apple stem) we do what we can to alleviate that pain.



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That leads to the top of the apple itself, where we find preoccupation or fantasy. Preoccupation or fantasy occurs when an addict is triggered and begins to engage in sexual thoughts. These preoccupation thoughts can also include entitlement or justification for acting out. Even the shame an addict feels about acting out can be trigger enough to bring about preoccupation and justification. Before preoccupation even begins, an addict starts to make a choice—to act out or not—as soon as they are triggered. If a porn or sex addict gets to the ritual part of the cycle, that is truly the point of no return. It is likened to once a heroin addict places a syringe in their hand. They won't be able to put it back down again.

Now, we'll go into a lot more detail throughout the book about the various stages of the cycle, and how to find lasting freedom. For now, just hold onto this image: the forbidden fruit Eve ate, and the apple of shame that grows in our lives. We'll talk about how to turn this bitter, poisoned apple into much healthier fruit. And we'll do it by sharing both the science behind porn use, shame, and addiction, and our own lived experiences to get us through porn.

First, though, you should know a bit about those lived experiences: who Crystal Renaud Day is, who Lisa Eldred is, and why we teamed up to write this book.

Crystal's Story

Like most, my entry into pornography addiction was not something I directly sought. Instead, in some roundabout way, pornography found me. While home alone at just 10 years old, I stumbled upon a *Penthouse Magazine* in my older brother's basement bathroom. At that young age, I hadn't had a very good sex conversation with my parents, let alone a conversation about what to do if I stumbled upon pornography. When I found the *Penthouse Magazine* just casually left out one afternoon after school, it filled me with an assortment of conflicting feelings and thoughts.

First, I had an immediate, overwhelming sense of curiosity and intrigue.

Second, I had an immediate, overwhelming feeling of shame.

I knew that this magazine was not something that I was supposed


to be looking at, especially at 10 years old. For me, the curiosity I had about this magazine (and sex, for that matter) far outweighed the shame that I felt in those initial moments of my discovery. As a result, I devoured the images on each page and continued to do so on a daily basis until one day the magazine was no longer there. Once it went missing, I didn't know what to do, but I knew I needed to find it again. I searched through his entire bathroom, every inch of his bedroom, and even checked my other brother's bedroom. Nothing!

Understand, it was many months and possibly even a year later when my daily escapade with these pornographic magazines was met with an abrupt end. By this time I had become well addicted to it—though at the time, I didn't realize I was or how badly. Once my search for the magazines returned void, I began to look for replacements for them in any way I could. I wanted anything that could give me the same rush as those magazines did. I began to raid my dad's movie cabinet for any movies that had sex scenes or nudity. I convinced my brothers to tell me the parental lock passcode for our cable (they didn't know I wanted it for porn), and eventually I began to look for pornography online. Though my parents had safeguards in place, such as passcodes and filtering, they were easy to maneuver around. Pornography became an all-encompassing issue in my life. It infiltrated nearly every aspect of my life: emotionally, relationally, and spiritually. Not only was I looking at pornography on an all too regular basis, I was also beginning to engage in other unwanted sexual behaviors, including sexting online and compulsive masturbation. I even watched pornography at school and went as far as to watch it in the church office.

Then, at the age of 15, I was finally faced with the weight of my addiction when I was signed up to attend summer camp with my youth group for the first time. I was terrified that because I was not going to be home, I would not be able to engage in my sexual behaviors. It took everything in me to follow through with going. Truthfully, my decision to go or stay home came down to not wanting to explain why I didn't want to go. This was when I realized I had an addiction. Yes, it took me almost five years of this damaging and compulsive behavior for me to realize that it had become a problem. A lot of you reading this probably figured it out about yourself sooner. But knowing I had a problem and knowing what to do about that problem were two very different things.

My identity was so wrapped up in my pornography use—namely, my identity as a female and as a Christian. I was a girl who struggled with pornography. I had never heard of any other women who struggled with pornography. I was convinced that I was the only one. I was convinced that somehow there was something wrong with me and that if I told anyone about it, they would look at me like I had three heads and a tail. I was a self-professing Christian living quite the double life. On one hand, I was the good Christian girl doing all the right things in public, and on the other, I had this entanglement with sexual sin. As desperate as I was to stop my behavior, I didn't know where to turn and felt immensely stuck.

It wasn't until I was 19 years old that a friend, another female, shared her



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testimony of faith with me, which included her own history of pornography use. It was through her confession to me that I was able to confess my own. Together, we entered into a relationship of accountability. She kept me accountable and was my accountability partner for many, many years. However, it was not just accountability that I needed. I also needed the support of a counselor, and to surrender so much more than just my behaviors to God.

Lisa's Story

I never thought of myself as a porn user. Probably like many of you, it's still a label I have a hard time applying to myself.

My family was exceedingly polite. We barely talked about bodily functions, let alone joked about them. As a humorous example, I remember multiple instances as a young child where my mother would be driving somewhere and I would smell something unpleasant and ask what it was; Mom would simply say she "passed gas," and I would sit up and look for the offending gas station. It wasn't until I was in my 20s that I remembered that sort of thing and realized she actually meant she had farted.

More seriously, it meant that I had limited guidance in sexual issues. Most of my understanding of the menstrual cycle came from a "sex ed" day in fifth grade; I remember staring at the period kit they gave us and reading it more than once in the next 2-3 years before my own periods started. I think I expected my mother to just automatically fill me in on things, and she just never realized that I didn't know.

My understanding of sex was even more limited, since Mom (who was active in schools) removed me from the classes when they showed “those” films in order to handle the conversation herself. The actual conversation was her turning to me one day asking me if I knew what sex was and me awkwardly saying that it was when a man and woman sleep together; she assumed I was using “sleep” as the euphemism, when I meant it literally. I didn’t actually understand the mechanics of sex until I received a copy of James Dobson’s *Preparing for Adolescence* sometime later. I don’t even remember when I learned about masturbation for the first time, but I know I was embarrassingly old; otherwise, I just knew I wasn’t supposed to touch myself “down there.” On top of this, I was a Youth Group teen during the heyday of purity culture in the 1990s; my church avoided most of the courtship language, but we definitely focused on modesty, and how spaghetti straps could cause our brothers to stumble.

There are both good and bad parts to my upbringing. On the one hand, that protective of an environment meant that I didn’t have much opportunity to deal with sexual issues. I didn’t even have Barbies as I grew up! On the other, it meant that I didn’t have a good framework for how to handle the sexual imagery that slipped through the cracks. And it did.

My first exposure to porn was an image of a *Playboy* cover. It was small—only about an inch and a half tall. Ironically enough, it was on the back of a magazine clipping stuck in a copy of the book *The Story of the Trapp Family Singers*. My mother had kept a column about Maria Von Trapp’s obituary; it was sheer ill coincidence that on the back was a photo of a minor ‘80s celebrity wearing very little.

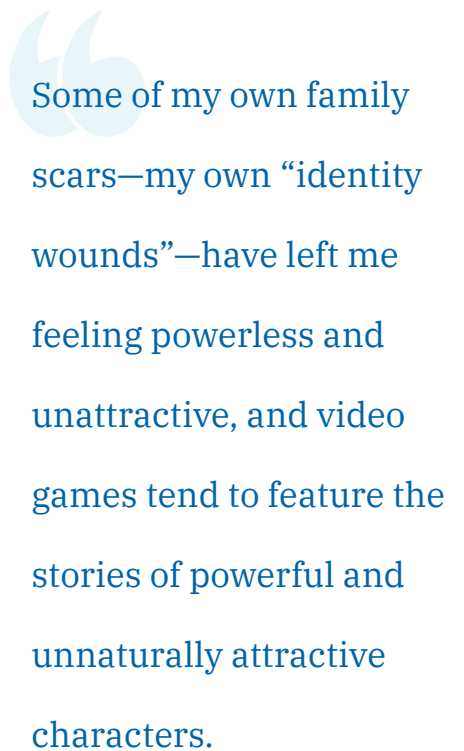
That sort of exposure defined my use of pornographic imagery through high school. Carefully stolen minutes glancing at the lingerie section of the J.C. Penney catalog. *National Geographic* magazines. Looking for the voyeuristic images in *Where's Waldo* books. The miracle of God's grace is that for me personally, none of this ever translated to searching for outright porn online. Part of that is church training (I was very much a churchy kid). Part of it is simply that we didn't subscribe to home internet access until I was in late high school, and it was dialup. Part of it was sheer stubbornness in college. I remember friends trying to convince me to watch some theoretically non-pornographic film starring a big-name male porn star; the fact that it was still *about* porn, even though it was supposed to be about a religious porn star, was enough for me to say no.

And yet I struggled in my own hidden way. I struggled when we got a copy of *The Sims* and I realized you could make the very pixelated characters kiss and have sex. Years later, living alone, I struggled with *The Sims 3*, which provided a lot more control over body shapes. I experimented with stories about promiscuous characters and made the female Sims in particular appear as naked as possible—to the extent of purchasing add-ons and browsing fan skins, all of which featured as little fabric as possible. I put the game down for two years, then picked it back up and went straight back to the struggle for a few weeks until I physically broke the disk.

Video games in general remain my temptation. Some of my own family scars—my own “identity wounds”—have left me feeling powerless and unattractive, and video games tend to feature the stories of powerful and unnaturally attractive characters. If

a game allows outfit customization, unless I actively say “no” to the temptation, I *will* wind up putting a female character in the most revealing outfits possible. Sometimes I can regain control of my impulses and stop. More often, it results in a horrible period of binging for days or weeks until I’ve finished the game. My best impulse control so far has been to avoid that sort of game altogether.

My lowest point came, ironically enough, the week before Covenant Eyes released my ebook *More Than Single: Finding Purpose Beyond Porn*. The book avoided any mention of my own struggles with sexually explicit materials (though to be fair, I also didn’t think of them as pornography at the time). The problem was, the last-minute details to meet an internal deadline were very stressful... and I was also playing a game that allowed extreme amounts of control over the character’s clothing. That last week in particular, I spent long days trying to do too much on my own, and then stayed up until 2 or 3 a.m., spending as much or more time customizing the character’s outfits as I did actually playing the game. Laying in bed, failing to sleep, I looked up fan art online (which is the closest I’ve come to searching for traditional porn). Then, on my long drives to and from work, I would fantasize about new outfits and explicit storylines for the character. Fortunately, it was a short game, but it consumed my life for about 10 days and turned what should have been a great personal celebration into one of the worst periods of defeat in



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my entire life. Just thinking about it, I have to actively fight against falling back into those fantasies. But I am learning the secret of how to say no.

A Better Fruit

We shared our stories for a few reasons. For one, we'll be returning to our own experiences throughout this book with the hope that you will be able to use them as a map to your own story and your own pain. We also want you to know that we have been there, and we have found ways out. You are reading the combined knowledge of Lisa's 10 years of experience in helping people find freedom through Covenant Eyes and Crystal's 13 years of helping other women heal through her coaching and counseling practice, Living on Purpose, and recovery ministry [SheRecovery.com](https://www.SheRecovery.com).

This book represents us learning how to trade the unhealthy "shame apple" for much healthier fruit. More than that, we have stopped listening to the lie that God does not love us. And we want you to learn that too.

the wounded identity

Our first step in healing the “shame apple” is to heal the woundedness that drives us to porn in the first place. Our identity is what connects (or disconnects) us from the branch that grew us: our family, our faith, our friends, etc. It takes that external “sap” and sends it to nourish the growing fruit. So first, we need to examine the sap (the lies and myths that feed us) and our wounded identity.

Myths and Beliefs About Women and Porn

Let’s start by examining some cultural beliefs about women and porn use. You may have held some of these views yourself.

First, many women who struggle with pornography feel like they are the only woman to ever do so. If you have felt like this, we hope that if you have come this far, you are beginning to sense some relief. In a small survey we conducted in June of 2020 specifically for this ebook, over 550 women admitted they struggled with pornography. Of these women, 39% admitted they didn’t know a single other woman who also struggled with porn, and 79% said they had wondered if they were the only woman struggling

with porn. Of churchgoers, only 7% had ever heard a sermon mentioning female porn use. And yet 50% of respondents said they watched porn at least weekly, and 15% watched porn daily.


Now, to reiterate, this survey was limited to just women who admitted to watching pornography. As a result, we can't compare

these percentages to the total population of women worldwide. However, these stats do show that for women who do struggle with pornography, many struggle alone.

This sense of aloneness compounds another common belief: female porn-watchers believe there is something fundamentally wrong with them. This myth is strengthened by the fact that the vast majority of porn recovery resources and conversations are directed toward men. This makes women feel like they have a man's problem.

That is a truly disconcerting feeling! We are here to say there is nothing "wrong" with us. There

is nothing wrong with you. There is also nothing about our porn use that makes us somehow less female than other women, or somehow more masculine. We women who struggle with porn are not statistical anomalies. Pornography captivates women in similar ways to how it captivates men, although there are some notable differences.



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Another common belief (or rather, myth) about female porn use is that women aren't visually stimulated. The stereotype is that women only struggle with erotic fiction (romance novels), whereas pornography is more commonly defined as *Playboy*, *PornHub*, or the like. Pornography comes in many shapes and sizes. It is true that many women do struggle with addiction to erotic fiction, but it is false that women aren't visually stimulated. It is true that women tend to gravitate toward more emotional forms of porn, but it is false that women are not also drawn to hardcore, mainstream pornography.

In the survey we conducted for this resource, we defined pornography as media that is used for sexual pleasure, and we asked what forms of pornography women use:

- + 78% use porn websites.
- + 62% use erotica books and romance novels.
- + 58% use live-action movie or TV scenes.
- + 35% use social media.
- + 27% use animation (e.g. hentai).
- + 21% use sexting or using other real time acts.
- + 15% use magazines.
- + 7% use video games.
- + Finally, 13% listed other forms, including fanfiction sites, message forums, lingerie sites, writing their own stories, and more.

The Deeper Roots of Identity Wounds

Now that we've spent some time dispelling a few key myths about female porn use, let's start digging a little deeper. What drives women to porn of *any* form in the first place?

There are a number of reasons, but the most important thing to understand is that addiction is not created in a vacuum. When women first come to Crystal for counseling at Living on Purpose, the conversation always begins with the client admitting there is unwanted sexual behavior in her life. The Google search terms that bring women to Crystal's website include "help for porn addiction," "women and porn addiction," and "quitting porn." However, it is not enough to simply say, "I want to stop watching porn." These addictive behaviors are usually symptoms of greater emotional issues.


Addressing a porn or sexual addiction requires a holistic look at that deeper problem. This means acknowledging that addiction is an issue of the mind, body, and spirit. Just like food disorders, shopping compulsions, or even substance abuse, pornography satisfies an emotional issue just as much, if not more than, it satisfies a physical one. This is especially true for women. Our survey confirmed this: when we asked why they viewed porn, 82% said it was for physical relief and 82% said it was for emotional relief.

These two needs go hand in hand. A growing number of researchers have made connections between untreated traumas, family issues, and unwanted outcomes like physical/mental health

issues and addictions. In *The Body Keeps the Score*, for example, Bessel Van Der Kolk notes, "It is amazing how many psychological problems involve difficulties with sleep, appetite, touch, digestion, and arousal."³ Similarly, in his book *Unwanted*, Jay Stringer draws a strong line between abusive childhood experiences and habitual porn use. He found that women were more likely to fantasize about or seek out bondage porn or rough and aggressive sex than men; he theorizes that women sought it out in an attempt to repeat shame and harm from an abusive experience in childhood.⁴ We found this to be true in our own research as well: 75% of the women we surveyed admitted they had been the victim of some form of abuse (sexual, physical, emotional, verbal, or spiritual).

What does this mean for our shame apple? Our behaviors, good and bad, come from *somewhere*, and that somewhere is usually childhood experience. Lisa, for example, can draw a direct line from childhood experiences that left her feeling helpless, abandoned, and unwanted to her temptations to make video game characters who are powerful and desirable. Even though the situations are long since over, they are still feeding that apple.

But you don't have to have experienced trauma to struggle. There's also significant evidence that overall family experiences and parenting styles have a great impact on how we learn to cope



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as adults. In his work at the Trauma Center in Boston, MA, Van Der Kolk noted that a child’s ability to handle trauma was directly related to the style of parenting she experienced. Does the child feel safe with her parent or primary caregiver? Does she learn that her needs will be met quickly, and that her actions can “change how [she] feels and others respond”?⁵ Does she learn that she has to make a true spectacle to get any attention at all? Does she learn that no matter what she does, no amount of “terror, pleading, or crying will register with their caregiver”?⁶

One big correlation is that intimacy disorders are often the root of porn and sexual addictions. Dr. Patrick Carnes explains, “more than 87% of [addicts] come from disengaged families — a family environment in which family members are detached, uninvolved, and emotionally absent. All compulsive and addictive behaviors are signs of significant intimacy disorder and the inability to get needs met in healthy ways.”⁷

We can also view these childhood experiences and disorders from a theological lens. You may be familiar with the seven deadly sins. Though not actually listed in the Bible, they sum up most of what a person with a sin nature—which is all of us—struggles with at some point in their lives: lust, greed, gluttony, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride. For the porn and sex addict, lust is not the only sin present. For many, there’s also pride, greed, and even gluttony in the form of all sorts of binge behaviors—binge-watching porn,

binge-drinking, and, yes, binge-eating. Many porn and sex addicts exhibit multiple behavioral struggles. Marnie Ferree notes that eating disorders are common among women with porn and sex addictions.⁸

If someone experiences the utter lack of proper attention, affection, and affirmation in or throughout their life, they will do virtually *anything* to fill the void, even if it just hurts them more. Proverbs 27:7 says, "A person who is full refuses honey, but even bitter food tastes sweet to the hungry." We know that pornography is a counterfeit for God's design for intimacy and sex. However, to someone lacking attention, affection, and affirmation, even the bitterness of pornography satisfies the pains of hunger. But what keeps women going back to porn even when it tastes bitter to them? Therein lies the proof that addiction is more than just behavior, right? There is a compulsion to fulfill what is lacking, and we instinctively find that fulfillment through lust, greed, gluttony, sloth, wrath, envy, and/or pride.

In his book *Be Transformed*, author and speaker Dr. Bob Schuchts takes the idea of identity disorder a bit further. He explains that while there are seven deadly sins, they are closely tied with seven deadly wounds; or rather, seven identity wounds. These wounds (the root of our intimacy disorders and subsequently what feeds our addictions) greatly attribute to our sinful appetite. The seven identity wounds are:

1. Rejection
2. Abandonment
3. Confusion

4. Fear
5. Shame
6. Hopelessness
7. and Powerlessness

Each of these wounds speaks to your **identity**—to who you are or how you feel about yourself.

1. If your wound is rejection, a common belief you might have about yourself is, “I am unacceptable as I am.”
2. If your wound is abandonment, a common belief you might have about yourself is, “I will always be alone.”
3. If your wound is confusion, a common belief you might have about yourself is “I don’t understand but I have to figure it out on my own.”
4. If your wound is fear, a common belief you might have about yourself is, “If I trust someone, I will be hurt or die.”
5. If your wound is shame, a common belief you might have about yourself is, “I am unworthy or don’t deserve love.”
6. If your wound is hopelessness, a common belief you might have about yourself is, “Things are never going to get better.”
7. And finally, if your wound is powerlessness, a common belief you might have about yourself is, “I feel overwhelmed and stuck.”

Abuse alone is enough to drive a wedge in the foundation of our identity. But these seven identity wounds attack our very identities as daughters of God.

Crystal's identity wounds were rejection, abandonment, and confusion—a recipe made for self-soothing and self-reliance in less than healthy ways. She and her father were not close growing up, as his job kept him on the road more than he was home. He was a wonderful provider, but she didn't have an emotional relationship with him. Additionally, when she was a young girl, around the age of 8, her mom succumbed to her own identity wounds of childhood trauma when a mental breakdown led to her being diagnosed with clinical depression. Even though she got help and began to improve, between Crystal's dad's emotional absence and her mom's struggle with depression, she learned from an early age how to take care of her own needs.

But how do you learn to self-soothe at a young age without good parental guidance? Crystal picked up unwise habits—first, she developed an unhealthy relationship with food starting at about the age of 8, and second, with pornography after her first exposure at the age of 10. Pornography replaced food and became a counterfeit for longings for the attention, affection, and affirmation that she had been craving since early childhood. She didn't realize that at the age of 10 that she was longing for the love of a father that she didn't have at home—or rather she didn't feel she had at home. She didn't realize at the age of 10 that pornography was medicating deeply held beliefs she had about herself. It wasn't until she entered recovery and sought counseling that she realized what she had been doing all along.

Do any of these identity wounds resonate with you? More than one? Be honest with yourself about what draws you to porn. Not just on a physical level, but on an emotional one, as the result of

your own identity wounds. Then, we strongly encourage you to seek counseling, especially if you experienced specific instances of abuse as a child. Only 33% of the women we surveyed shared they had sought counseling for their addiction issues. Seeing a Christ-centered pastoral counselor, such as Crystal, or a licensed clinical counselor, can help you find healing for the wounds that are drawing you further into addiction, which can lead to true, long-lasting recovery.

healing the wounded identity

So far we've talked about the wounds that left us vulnerable to pornography in the first place. Again, we recommend seeking out a trained counselor to heal deep wounds. But there are still steps you can take to start healing your wounds and find lasting freedom now. This starts with claiming a better identity for ourselves.

Identity is sometimes a bit of a touchy subject, since American culture redefines it frequently. But what does identity actually mean? The barebones, literal dictionary definition of "identity" is defined by Oxford Dictionary as "The fact of being who or what a person or thing is."

Who or what are we? Who or what are you? And what exactly determines who or what we are at all?

As we have discussed already, our identity is often defined by our wounds. Your wounds may have been in charge for a long time. But do we have any control over them? Can your identity change?

Grab a pen and, based solely on the dictionary definition of identity above, take just a moment to write down 2-3 words you'd use to identify yourself. This isn't about how others identify you, but how you honestly see yourself right now, in this moment.

What did you write? Unfortunately, most of us probably didn't write down nice words. For a lot of you, it might have been words like "dirty," "broken," "lonely," "unlovable," or even "unworthy." But why is that the default? Maybe it is because every:

- + 1 in 5 women are addicted to porn.⁹
- + 1 in 4 women have been sexually abused by the age of 18.¹⁰
- + 1 in 4 women have had an abortion.¹¹
- + 1 in 5 women are survivors of rape or sexual assault.¹²
- + 1 in 5 women experience domestic violence.¹³

You may have a lot of reasons to see yourself badly. You may have a lot of reasons to fixate on the negative instead of the positive about yourself. That is because if we're totally honest, we tend to identify ourselves by (1) a sinful or negative behavior we've engaged in, (2) an insecurity we believe about ourselves, and/or (3)

something that was done to us that was out of our control.

For a long time, before she found healing, Crystal would have defined herself by these three words:

alone

* **anxious**

overweight

Not so nice, are they? Before we tell you how she chooses to identify herself today, let's look at a story from scripture to help illustrate this idea of identity a bit more:

Jesus got into the boat again and went back to the other side of the lake, where a large crowd gathered around him on the shore. Then a leader of the local synagogue, whose name was Jairus, arrived. When he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet, pleading fervently with him. "My little daughter is dying," he said. "Please come and lay your hands on her; heal her so she can live."

Jesus went with him, and all the people followed, crowding around him. A woman in the crowd had suffered for twelve years with constant bleeding. She had suffered a great deal from many doctors, and over the years she had spent everything she had to pay them, but she had gotten no better. In fact, she had gotten worse. She had heard about Jesus, so she came up behind him through the crowd and

touched his robe. For she thought to herself, "If I can just touch his robe, I will be healed." Immediately the bleeding stopped, and she could feel in her body that she had been healed of her terrible condition.

Jesus realized at once that healing power had gone out from him, so he turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my robe?"

His disciples said to him, "Look at this crowd pressing around you. How can you ask, 'Who touched me?'"

But he kept on looking around to see who had done it. Then the frightened woman, trembling at the realization of what had happened to her, came and fell to her knees in front of him and told him what she had done. And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace. Your suffering is over."—Mark 5:21-34 (NLT)

How do you think it felt to be this woman? Can you identify with her? You might not be able to identify with her physical condition, but certainly you can identify with her emotional pain. Her embarrassment. Her insecurity. Her desperation for healing.

Let's look at her physical condition from a cultural perspective. How did society at the time see this woman? Leviticus 15:25-27 (NLT) tells us that:

If a woman has a flow of blood for many days that is unrelated to her menstrual period, or if the blood continues

beyond the normal period, she is ceremonially unclean. As during her menstrual period, the woman will be unclean as long as the discharge continues. Any bed she lies on and any object she sits on during that time will be unclean, just as during her normal menstrual period. If any of you touch these things, you will be ceremonially unclean. You must wash your clothes and bathe yourself in water, and you will remain unclean until evening.

Did you notice a theme in there? In just three short verses, in less than 100 words, this woman—and even the furniture she sits on—was identified by just one word five times: **unclean**. How was this woman ever expected to see and identify herself as anything other than unclean? Unfortunately, given the implication of this definition, it is likely she also identified with these words too: **unwanted** and **undesirable**.

For 12 years this woman lived with a physical condition that transcended a physical problem and became an all-encompassing burden that affected every aspect of her life. Since she was ceremonially unclean, she would not have been allowed in public and would have been treated as an outcast. She had likely stopped leaving the house altogether. As women who struggle with sexual addiction, it is not a hard leap to relate to her, is it? We often feel like outcasts, tossed aside, and forgotten.

But on the day Jesus was there, she didn't allow her condition to keep her from getting to Him. She didn't allow her condition to keep her from dropping to her hands and knees to crawl through a crowd of people who had previously shunned her. She didn't allow

her condition to keep her from the healing she knew she could receive from Jesus. And how did Jesus respond to her? He didn't call her unclean, unwanted, or undesirable. Instead, He calls her by ONE word: **daughter**.

Now to go back to the beginning and Crystal's own identity words. These were the words she formerly used to identify herself:

alone

As you already know, for nearly a decade I struggled with an addiction to pornography and unwanted sexual behaviors that began at the age of 10. I believed without a shadow of a doubt that I was only one woman who struggled in this way. But that was a lie out of the mouth of the devil himself. The enemy wants us to believe we're alone in our conditions. But it was through the testimony of another woman that I was given the opportunity to be set free. And I have been free from this addiction for 12 years now.

anxious

I am also a woman who suffers from an anxiety disorder. It was so bad at one point that I didn't drive a car for almost 12 years. Like this woman who suffered from bleeding for 12 years, I too suffered daily for almost 12 years from debilitating anxiety. It wasn't something that I could explain. As much as

I tried, it didn't make sense to people that I didn't drive. It alienated me from friends and caused strain in relationships. But that too has been overcome as God has been healing me through the renewal of my mind. I am not totally anxiety-free, and some days are still bad days, but for six years now I have been back behind the wheel.

overweight

For as long as I can remember, at least 25 years, I have been overweight to the point of obesity. I didn't eat all that badly. Exercise didn't help. But every time I went to the doctor, I was told to watch my diet and exercise. I recently discovered I have a medical condition that contributes to my weight gain and inability to lose weight, and it also contributes to the infertility I have been facing for almost a year. But my weight and my infertility do not define me.

Grafted in to Bear New Fruit

Just as these words don't define Crystal, your negative words don't define you, no matter how scientifically accurate they may be. Your identity is *not* determined by your addiction, your mental health struggles, your weight, your relationship status (or lack thereof), or any of that. What *does* define us is the vine we are attached to.

Think about that “shame apple.” Your identity wounds were formed by your attachment to your family tree: the mother who gave birth to you, the parent or guardian or foster care system that raised you, the siblings and friends who played with you or abused you. Sure, there is probably some good mixed in with it; Lisa, for example, can attribute the reason her struggle never got worse than it did to the many things her family did right, even while her struggles are an arrow pointing directly to the mistakes they made and the challenges they faced. But even a good family will wound you—that’s just the reality of sin—and as long as we remain firmly attached to those wounded roots, we will continue to bear the fruits of bitterness and shame.

But, dear sister, in Christ we are *not* grafted onto those roots anymore. We have been grafted into a new vine. Let’s look at the words of Jesus in John 15:5, 7-9 (NLT):

Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. [...] But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted! When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father. I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love.

Did you hear that? We are attached to a holy and perfect vine, a vine that was wounded for our sakes but cannot be wounded by us. Romans 11:17-18 makes it clear that we are grafted into this new vine. At the moment of our salvation, God changed our

attachment from our broken family situations to the Tree of Life. He looked at you and said, “I want this dear, precious daughter, with all her pain and all her shame, to be attached to **my** vine. Then my life will flow into hers, and she will be made whole.” We still have to put hard work into it from our side, yes. But we can look at our broken families and know that we now belong to the family of God. And in time, the bad fruit of shame and addiction that has been growing in our life will be changed into the good fruit of God’s own life and abundance.

Claiming Our New Identities

Right now you may be asking, what does it actually mean for Jesus to define your identity, instead of your wounds? What would that mean for you as a woman who struggles with pornography to have your identity determine by who you are in Christ and not by what you have done? What would it mean for your recovery and your future?

For some, the idea of Jesus defining you is a scary thought. That is because the way in which we see ourselves has the greatest impact on how we think God sees us. For some of you, there is the belief that you’ve done too much or sinned too greatly to deserve God’s love, and for others, there is the belief that you must look or act a certain way (perfect) to be accepted by God.

We’ve just seen how that’s not true. But how do we live that out? Let’s start by looking at 1 Peter 2:9 (NLT, emphasis ours):

...you are a **chosen** people. You are **royal** priests, a **holy** nation, God’s very own **possession**. As a result, you can show

others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.

We don't know what words you wrote down at the beginning of this chapter, but each and every one of you is called by God as His **chosen — royal — owned — daughter**. And with that in mind, we can redefine identity too: "Nothing less than who Jesus says you are."

Now that we have a new definition for identity, take the words you wrote down earlier in this chapter and prayerfully reflect on what it would mean to redefine your own identity into who Jesus says you are. Here's a list of 40 scripture references and declarations inspired by these verses that speak to who you are in Christ. We encourage you to look these up, write these out, and even read them out loud to yourself. When we speak scripture out loud, we put the enemy on notice that we will no longer be defined by his lies! Consider writing them in dry erase marker on your bathroom mirror, or put your favorite verse on a slip of paper next to whatever tempts you. Make one or two of them a phone wallpaper. Put them in the most visible spots possible as tangible reminders. Let the truth of God's Word wash over you and renew your mind and your identity.

1. **I am a child of God.** (*Romans 8:16*)
2. **I am forgiven.** (*Colossians 1:14*)
3. **I am saved by grace.** (*Ephesians 2:8*)
4. **I am justified.** (*Romans 5:1*)

5. **I am sanctified.** (*Hebrews 13:12*)
6. **I am a new creation.** (*2 Corinthians 5:17*)
7. **I am the head and not the tail.** (*Deuteronomy 28:13*)
8. **I am kept in safety wherever I go.** (*Psalms 91:10-11*)
9. **I am having all my needs met.** (*Philippians 4:19*)
10. **I am casting all my cares on Jesus.** (*1 Peter 5:7*)
11. **I am strong in the Lord.** (*Philippians 4:13*)
12. **I am holy and without blame before Him.** (*1 Peter 1:16*)
13. **I am victorious.** (*Revelation 21:7*)
14. **I am set free in Him.** (*John 8:31-32*)
15. **I am complete in Him.** (*Colossians 2:10*)
16. **I am free from condemnation.** (*Romans 8:1*)
17. **I am given authority over the enemy.** (*Luke 10:19*)
18. **I am more than a conqueror.** (*Romans 8:37*)
19. **I am an overcomer by the Blood of the Lamb and the word of my testimony.** (*Revelation 12:11*)
20. **I am born of God and the evil one does not touch me.** (*1 John 5:18*)

- 21. I am walking by faith.** *(2 Corinthians 5:7)*
- 22. I am bringing every thought into obedience to Christ.**
(2 Corinthians 10:5)
- 23. I am transformed by the renewing of my mind.** *(Romans 12:1-2)*
- 24. I am the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus.** *(2 Corinthians 5:21)*
- 25. I am dead to sin and alive to righteousness.** *(1 Peter 2:24)*
- 26. I am chosen.** *(1 Thessalonians 1:4)*
- 27. I am being changed into His image.** *(2 Corinthians 3:18)*
- 28. I am one with Christ.** *(John 17:21-23)*
- 29. I am fearfully and wonderfully made, and my soul knows this.**
(Psalms 139:14)
- 30. I am united to the Lord; I am one spirit with Him.**
(1 Corinthians 6:17)
- 31. I am a daughter of God, one in Christ Jesus.** *(Galatians 3:26-28)*
- 32. I am built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ.**
(Ephesians 2:19-20)
- 33. I am a daughter of light and not of darkness.** *(1 Thessalonians 5:5)*
- 34. I am chosen of God, holy and beloved.** *(Colossians 3:12)*

35. I am a holy partaker of a heavenly calling. (*Hebrews 3:1*)

36. I am an expression of the life of Christ. (*Colossians 3:4*)

37. I am being formed into a royal race, a holy priesthood.
(*1 Peter 2:9*)

38. I am reconciled to God. (*2 Corinthians 5:18*)

39. I am accepted in Jesus Christ. (*Ephesians 1:5-6*)

40. I am washed in the Blood of the Lamb. (*Hebrews 9:14*)

defusing triggers and rituals

Now that we've spent some time looking at the branch and stem of our apple—our identity wounds and the stem of shame—it's time to look at the other parts of the apple. Specifically, we're going to look at the leaf of triggers.

In his book *Out of the Shadows*, Dr. Patrick Carnes (who was also one of the first to popularize the term “sex addiction”) suggests that in the addiction cycle, an addict first experiences preoccupation or fantasy, which leads to rituals, which leads to acting out, which finally leads to despair. Often despair is followed (or simply covered) by a phase of good behavior: avoiding acting out, doing good deeds to people who you may have hurt either consciously or unconsciously (your husband or kids), but eventually, the feelings of despair hit a trigger, sending the addict back to the beginning. The persistent relapse that occurs with a habitual porn user or addict can be almost entirely attributed to this addiction cycle.

Do you recognize yourself in this cycle at all? Can you see what triggers might keep dragging you back into it? One of the key

components of recovery is identifying your triggers and rituals—the behaviors that send you towards pornography or other unwanted sexual behaviors in the first place.

Identifying Triggers

Some triggers may be obvious, like a porn binge after seeing a movie with a sex scene. You didn't necessarily expect to see the triggering content, but you did, and your brain went into autopilot.

Other triggers may have to do with your emotional or physical state in the moment. One common acronym for emotional or physical triggers is H.A.L.T.: Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired. For example, do you tend to use porn more when you've slept poorly or are under a lot of stress, like Lisa? Or maybe when you've had a fight with someone? Or when you missed a meal? (Side note: hunger can also sometimes be confused for boredom).

Understanding your triggers goes a long way in stopping the cycle. Understanding your triggers can help you from entering into the cycle at all. So work to identify your triggers. Unfortunately, you may have to be triggered before you realize what triggers you. But once you do, you can begin to take these steps:

1. Avoid triggering situations (intentionally remove yourself from triggering situations).
2. Anticipate triggering situations (see triggering situations before they happen).
3. Manage triggering situations (by learning to manage your emotions).

Here's how these three steps have played out in Lisa's life:

One of the reasons I love video games so much is because computer games are one of the ways my family bonded. I spent hours watching my brother play the original *Prince of Persia*, and hours solving puzzles with my dad in *Myst* and *Riven*. It's no wonder I gravitate to games instead of TV or Netflix. But the problem with video games, as fun as they are in moderation, is that they often scratch a similar itch to pornography in that they provide a false sense of accomplishment. Much like porn allows you to project yourself onto the performers, games allow you to see yourself as the protagonist, slaying the beasts and saving the world. Or in more open-ended games like *The Sims*, it allows you to live a life completely different from your own.

The first time I got *really* stuck in digital voyeurism, I was working at an unstable and very stressful job and living in a very temporary rented basement. Everything about my life was unstable. What's more, I was beginning to hit that season of weddings, where it felt like all my friends were settling into long-term relationships, if not marriage, and I was once again dealing with the heartache of a one-sided crush. So bringing home a game where you could customize not just clothes and houses but even body shapes

was like throwing a torch onto a pile of fireworks drenched in gasoline.

Can you see my triggers in this? Stress, combined with the wrong kind of video games, tempts me to fall to sexual behaviors. Looking at the three steps, then, I've learned to:

1. Avoid certain video games completely. I will never play *The Sims* again. Even now I don't trust myself with it. And I am very careful about certain fantasy role-playing video games; even though I'm sexually attracted to men, I'm cautious about games with female protagonists because I'm more likely to stumble with them.
2. Anticipate times of weakness. If it's been a stressful day and I'm playing a game with even the possibility for temptation, I'll switch to a more relaxing puzzle-based game for the night, or possibly skip the video games entirely and turn on Disney+ instead.
3. Manage stress better. I've learned to recognize when stress has slowly been building in my life (whether from work, life, etc.), leaving me vulnerable to temptations in video games and other areas of my life (like food). I've become more intentional about patterns of sabbath rest in general, and I have started being more proactive about planning vacation days just for the sake of taking a break.

All together, these have helped me avoid triggering circumstances in general, and have helped build resiliency to make it easier for me to say no when temptation arises.

Identifying Rituals

If triggers are the unconscious environmental factors that set off an identity wound, rituals are the pattern of learned behaviors that lead you to act on it. They are the point of no return.

A ritual is any behavior that precedes acting out after preoccupation has led to justification. When you enter into ritual behaviors, you have essentially already made the choice to act out.

The choice component is key to understanding the difference between a ritual and a trigger, though they can often be used interchangeably. A ritual involves making a choice, consciously or unconsciously, that almost invariably leads to pornography. For example, in *No Stones*, Marnie Ferree tells the story of a sex addict who found herself stuck in a pattern of one-night stands; her rituals included putting on specific clothing and makeup, going to certain clubs, and drinking and smoking.¹⁴ In reality, the young woman had made her choice to act out as soon as she had put on the outfit and makeup, no matter what she told herself. As another example, one friend said that one of their rituals was opening the Instagram app after 9 p.m. Simply by saying no to Instagram late at night, they reduced their pornography consumption. One of Crystal's

rituals involved using the computer late at night. She knew that if she logged on when no one else was awake, she would be tempted to use chatrooms that would lead to cybersex behaviors. In both of these examples, creating concrete boundaries with technology aided in their ability to avoid rituals.

Hopefully you can see why your rituals need to be identified and removed altogether. One way to do that is by establishing what are called top-line and bottom-line behaviors. Bottom-line behaviors are any behavior you need to avoid in order to experience physical, mental, emotional, sexual, and spiritual wholeness. Bottom-line behaviors look like drawing a line in the sand—a line you cannot cross. (In early recovery, it is more like drawing a line in the sand, then taking a few steps back to draw a new line.) We've already listed some examples of behaviors that needed to be cut. Some other bottom-line behaviors include:

- + Only using internet-enabled devices (computers, smartphones, tablets, etc.) that have accountability software like Covenant Eyes installed.
- + Uninstalling dating or hook-up websites and apps so you can't use them for attention, affection, or affirmation.
- + Avoiding any movies or TV shows that contain simulated sex or nudity. (A good rule of thumb is to ask yourself if you would watch it with a 10-year-old in the room with you.)
- + Avoiding books or music that trigger fantasies or longings.
- + Being honest with yourself and an ally who is holding you accountable for your actions or feelings.

Top-line behaviors, on the other hand, are any healthy activities you go to instead of the bottom-line behaviors. Top-line behaviors help you to establish new coping skills. Some examples of top-line behaviors include:

- + Establishing care with a trained counselor for emotional healing and support.
- + Complying with medication as prescribed by a physician or psychiatrist.
- + Praying and reading the Bible daily to practice Scripture memorization.
- + Establishing a routine to promote overall health, such as getting adequate sleep and rest.
- + Connecting with a safe friend or family member by phone or in person every day.
- + Engaging in appropriate physical connections, such as a massage, or pedicure.
- + Developing hobbies to turn to instead of your rituals.

Let's take a moment to dig deeper into these top-line behaviors.

Counseling and medication. We're not going to go into much depth with this one, since we've already touched on the importance of it, but we will reiterate a few things:

1. **Counseling and medication do not make you less of a human or less of a Christian.** Jesus has the power to heal people miraculously, but He usually doesn't. Even the woman with the bleeding disorder had spent all her money

on doctors before she went for the miracle cure. Seeking professional help does not in any way indicate a lack of faith; it simply means you have a body that needs healing.

- 2. If you are dealing with woundedness due to childhood trauma in particular, it is especially important to seek out counseling.** American culture encourages self-reliance, but sins committed against your body by another person will best be healed with the help of another person.


Praying and reading the Bible daily. God has grafted us onto a new vine. He took care of that. But we can be part of the act of abiding in the vine, and we do that through regular disciplines of prayer and Bible study.

Now, we want to make one thing clear: *do not read the Bible for the sake of appearances*. Marnie Ferree puts it this way: “Are you practicing spiritual disciplines like prayer and Bible study out of an authentic desire to grow closer to God, or are you unconsciously trying to appear like you’re holy and doing the right things?”¹⁵ If you were a “churchy” kid, it can be very tempting to read the Bible or pray because you’re supposed to.

Don’t get us wrong; God can still use our bad motives for spiritual disciplines to transform us in spite of ourselves. Even if you choose to read your Bible daily just for the sake of appearances or the routine, it will still bear fruit in your life (Isaiah 55:11). But ask yourself: are you reading the Bible and praying so that you can learn to love Jesus more, or so that you can look better in your church, and maybe present yourself as less sinful than others?

Conversely, are you reading your Bible because you think God's love for you will change if you do or don't read it? It will not. As author and speaker Gretchen Ronnevik said, "If you got up and read your Bible this morning, that doesn't mean God loves you more than the people who slept in. It just means you got to hear about his love."¹⁶

If you're new to these spiritual disciplines, there are plenty of free resources out there (including a free plan by Covenant Eyes called *Overcome Porn: The 40 Day Challenge*, available for free from Covenant Eyes. We encourage you to search online for reading plans, and try out a few until you find one that works for you. Read a Psalm each morning. Listen to a chapter while you're brushing your teeth. Everyone is different! The main thing we want to emphasize is that your goal should be to make it a daily habit—again, not to make God or others love you more, but so you can daily see God's love for you demonstrated in His word.



If you got up and read your Bible this morning, that doesn't mean God loves you more than the people who slept in. It just means you got to hear about his love.

As a closing thought on this section, you may even be thinking, "But I don't even feel like I love God like I know I'm supposed to! Will reading the Bible daily do any good?" Yes! That's part of the point! You won't love someone until you get to know them, and the Bible and prayer are our tools to get to know God. If you feel that way, maybe pray the prayer to God found in Mark 9:24: "I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief." He will answer that prayer.

Establish a routine for health. We are embodied creatures, and our physical needs are not inherently sinful. Mankind's first job was to grow food (Hunger). Mankind was created for companionship; creation was not complete until Eve was created (Loneliness). God rested on the seventh day of creation to model a pattern for us (Tiredness). The important trick is to not be ruled by these things. When we are, we're more prone to temptations like porn.

Consider your triggers. Is there one that tends to be more of an issue than others? Think of one way you can adjust your routine to help improve it.

Maybe your trigger is hunger. Keep healthy snacks around, and remind yourself to nibble on them throughout the day. Treats like almonds, baby carrots, and dark chocolate may work well.

If your issue is sleep, things may get a little trickier, so be willing to experiment. If you have issues with insomnia, for example, setting a bedtime two hours earlier than you usually go to bed won't work. Your body isn't used to it, and you'll get frustrated. Instead, try setting an established bedtime a little before you normally go to bed. Turn off all screens at least half an hour before bed, and don't allow yourself to even check to see if you've gotten any texts after that point.

One thing worth noting is that a lot of women who are dealing with unwanted sexual behaviors also feel disconnected from their bodies. This is especially true for victims of sexual assault. You may have learned to avoid certain feelings in your body. As Van Der Kolk explains, "Traumatized people are often afraid of feeling. [...] their

own physical sensations [are] now the enemy.”¹⁷ In other words, we may not even be aware that we’re tired or hungry. But that makes a new routine all the more important! If you can’t tell when you’re hungry, then it’s especially important to establish a routine of healthy eating. Same with sleep. You may pride yourself that you’ve learned to work on four hours of sleep with lots of coffee, but your use of pornography to “unwind” may be your body’s way of screaming at you that it needs sleep.

If this is the case, consider adding other routines that help encourage awareness of your physical state. Yoga is the cliché, but it’s suggested for a reason: it encourages you to sense every part of your body. You can also consider things like weight-lifting, community sports, or running. Whatever you do to exercise, learn to pick up signals from your body through what you do. Does a weight feel too heavy, too light, or just right for the movement you’re doing? Is the hamstring pain an even soreness from working the muscle a new way, or is it trying to signal to you that you are doing a movement incorrectly and need to stop before you injure yourself? Whatever you choose, make it a routine that will improve your life, and use it to learn to listen to your body.

Connect with someone daily. Remember that survey we conducted? It found that 67% of respondents were single and have never married. That’s a lot of us who are probably trying to do life alone! That still includes Lisa, and that included Crystal until she was 33 years old. It’s not an easy place to be, especially when we’re overwhelmed with sexual desires.


We’ll get to the sexual aspect of recovery in a few chapters. For

now, let's focus on the companionship aspect. In short, we were designed for companionship. The Bible says that the first woman was created literally because it was not good for the first man to be alone. And while our worth as women extends far beyond whether or not we ever get married or have kids (read *Worthy* by Elyse Fitzpatrick and Eric Schumacher for a deep dive there), we are made to be in community with one another. We need each other. And we women especially need each other while we're in recovery from pornography addiction.

Ferree notes that this plays out in recovery counseling: male patients tend to prefer "homework" for therapy, while female clients were more successful if they talked the assignment out with their therapist.¹⁸

In other words, accountability is one of the key components of recovery in general—but it may be especially important for women. The relational aspect of recovery through an accountability partner (or "ally") may be downright necessary. Our allies are safe people to act as sounding boards to see our triggers and talk through our emotional states.

The question then becomes, beyond your therapist, who is your ally? Who do you trust to see your messy side? Who are you willing to allow into your shame to help you do the important work of recovery?



...we are made to be in community with one another. We need each other. And we women especially need each other while we're in recovery from pornography addiction.


If you're fortunate, you already have at least one other woman in mind: someone who is godly and mature. We recommend against picking a male friend or pastor; you run the risk of transferring your addictions to that person instead. As Jessica Harris puts it, you want to avoid making that person your "porn surrogate."¹⁹ For most of us, then, picking another woman as an ally will be a safer option, and for some of us, it may even be an opportunity to develop one of the first healthy, non-sexualized relationships in our lives.

Once you've found your ally (or allies), sit down with her and talk through what you want the relationship to look like. At Covenant Eyes, we use the mantra that an ally's role is to "Affirm, Ask, and Achieve." She is to affirm you in your fight against pornography and ask the tough questions about your struggles and temptations to help you achieve your goal. Schedule regular check-ins with her! Marnie Ferree says, "If you're in the habit of making a call every day no matter what, you're more likely to talk about your struggles during that call than if you had to make a specific effort when you're in trouble."²⁰

We also strongly recommend using accountability software to provide your ally with more concrete details about your struggles. Covenant Eyes Screen Accountability™ monitors your computer, smartphone, and tablets, evaluates screen activity for pornographic images and videos, and sends highly blurred screenshots in a report to your ally. This takes the guesswork out of accountability. The antidote to the secrecy and shame that has kept you trapped in the cycle of addiction is openness and honesty, and accountability software makes it easy.

Engaging in healthy touch. Another common trend for victims of trauma in particular is that they have never engaged in healthy, non-sexual touch. Ferree says, “Most [addicts] find it hard to separate healthy touch from sexualized touch, and may misinterpret what you intend as an innocuous, affirming hug or pat on the back.”²¹ Even if trauma isn’t part of your story, chances are good that you’ve been engaging in unhealthy sexually-oriented touch, and specifically masturbation.

One of the important lessons we need to learn is how to interact with our own bodies, and the bodies of other people, in non-sexual ways. This is especially true if you feel disconnected from your body, as is true with many trauma victims. In *Courage, Dear Heart*, Rebecca Reynolds tells the story of her youngest son. Adopted from a Chinese orphanage at three years old, “M” rarely cried; he was more likely to hide behind furniture until he calmed himself down. Reynolds realized that the orphanage had enforced a policy prohibiting cuddling, and as a result he had never learned to find his body in space. A lack of cuddling in infancy, Reynolds writes, means that these children “sometimes wiggle constantly, banging into the world around them. They are looking for the edges of themselves.”²² Reynolds worked intentionally with M, physically touching him and slowly walking him through the stages of infancy. Finally, learning that he was physically safe and present, he learned to cry. “He stepped bravely out of the rejection of his past,” Reynolds writes, “trusting his family with the reality of his pain.”



One of the important lessons we need to learn is how to interact with our own bodies, and the bodies of other people, in non-sexual ways.

So how do we do this at age 15 or 25 or 35 or 45? We do it by finding ways to physically touch ourselves or receive touch in intentional, non-sexual ways. We cannot understate the importance of physical touch. We were given physical bodies, broken by sin; and Jesus not only forgave sins, He healed physical bodies. In *Handle With Care*, Lore Ferguson Wilbert writes,

Jesus cared for people's bodies. On top of the miraculous ways He healed people, He also did the subtle things. He lifted chins, He touched faces, He wiped tears, He washed feet. [...] He also did not neglect His own physical body. He took a rest when he was tired. He pulled away when He needed to. He slept. He ate. He drank. He walked. He took care of His incarnated body, and so should we.²³

This may take a few different forms. Start engaging in healthy self-touch by doing things like rubbing moisturizer under your eyes. Notice the dark circles and recognize your body's need for rest. Rub lotion into your dry elbows or knees. Give yourself a hand or scalp massage, and recognize the tension from the day as you work out the knots in your muscles.

Practice healthy touch with others too, if possible. If you're married, take a sexual detox and use that time to practice physical, non-sexual intimacy, like shoulder massages or hand-holding. If you're single, look for opportunities to practice healthy touch. Talk to your ally about helpful ways she can physically touch you, like greeting each other with an intentionally prolonged hug or splurging for the occasional therapeutic massage.


Whatever you do, use it as an opportunity to ground yourself back in your physical body, and remind yourself of this: you were made for so much more than sex.

Developing hobbies. We won't spend much time here; the ebook *Hobbies and Habits*, available for free from Covenant Eyes, dives deeply into their importance for your recovery. For now, the key thing to realize is that you have been spending literal time engaging in rituals and acting out sexually; that time will need to be filled. Try picking up something you used to love as a kid, like an instrument, or drawing, or maybe pick up something new, like taking a course to learn a new language. Try to find at least one hobby that's easy to pick up when you notice you've been triggered, or when you're about to enter into one of your ritual behaviors.

In other words, use it as your escape plan when the urges are strong. When you've been proactive in practicing healthy behaviors, you'll be more likely to turn to them instead.

Stopping Behaviors in the Moment

Making an action plan to prevent triggers and rituals before they start will go a long way in helping you stand firm. But what do you do when you slip up and begin to act out? What do you do when the physical cravings are too bad? The reality is, especially if you have fallen into a true addiction, you will experience withdrawal symptoms. You will experience cravings. Marnie Ferree says, "Many



When you've been proactive in practicing healthy behaviors, you'll be more likely to turn to them instead.

women report feeling nauseated or having other gastrointestinal distress. Some have headaches and other body pains. Insomnia is common."²⁴

Fortunately, the cravings will pass. Unfortunately, you'll have to ride the wave. Ferree says, "Within thirty to sixty minutes at most, the majority of women report the urge subsides."²⁵

Plan ahead for those moments. Stand up and take a walk. Text your ally. Take a long drink of water. If you find yourself falling into fantasies, find some exercises to ground yourself back in the present. Take a moment to put your feet flat on the ground and physically feel them, one body part at a time, from your toes to the crown of your head. Even something like blinking rapidly and moving your eyes back and forth may break the power of the urge; Van Der Kolk notes that the therapy technique of Eye Movement Desensitization and Processing (EMDR) was discovered when a psychologist "was walking through a park, preoccupied with some painful memories, [and] noticed that rapid eye movements produced a dramatic relief from her distress."²⁶

Whatever you wind up doing, the most important thing is that you fight. Resist the temptation with all your power. Lean on God for the strength to overcome, and cling to James 4:7 (NLT, emphasis ours) as a promise: "So humble yourselves before God. **Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.**"

steps of meaningful recovery

So far, we've looked at the identity wounds that made us vulnerable to porn in the first place, and we've looked at the triggers and rituals that lead us to act out. But what about the pornography use itself? If our wounded identity is the connection to the branch, and the stem and leaf are our shame and triggers, then our porn use is the flesh of the apple, and it needs to be addressed too.

Before we dive into the recovery process, it is important to note that not every person recovers the same way. Not every person requires the same care. Not every person recovers at the same pace. Your recovery won't look like Crystal's or Lisa's. Though there may be similarities, your recovery journey is unique to you. That is because none of us have the same story, the same wounds, or the same triggers.

Over a decade ago (2007 to be exact), when I first began sharing my story and helping women to be set free, I didn't really know what I was doing. I was a girl with a story and a journey, and not much else. I was thankful for one woman in particular, Marnie Ferree, who pioneered female sex addiction recovery. It was her written materials that I used in the first groups I ever facilitated for women with pornography addiction. Because of her, I learned what it meant to walk women through recovery. Unbeknownst to her, she became my mentor in this field, giving me confidence and inspired me to learn all I could about addiction recovery. True, lasting, meaningful recovery. This kind of recovery requires a holistic approach: Body, Mind, and Spirit. And this approach begins with surrender.

You should also keep in mind that giving up porn may not be the hardest part of your journey. While porn is a contributing factor in your addiction—a big one—it is not just the porn that you are addicted to—instead, you're also addicted to your own brain chemistry. Porn has literally rewired your brain for more porn. Let's take a look at what that means. (This is just a high-level overview, of course; fuller details can be found in the free ebooks, *Your Brain on Porn* and *The Porn Circuit*, both available from covenanteyes.com, as well as Crystal's book *Dating Done Right: Pursuing Relationships on Purpose*.)

The Neurochemistry of Porn

The pleasure principle tells us that the brain registers all pleasure in the same way, whether the pleasure originates with a drug, a monetary reward, a sexual encounter, or a satisfying meal. That is one big reason why sex, alcohol, shopping, and food addiction are so closely related in women!

When you have an orgasm, brain chemicals are released in the pleasure center of the brain (the same ones release when you fall in love!). These include dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, and a rush of endorphins, among others. These are brain chemicals designed to bond you to another person when you fall in love or have sex (particularly oxytocin, which is referred to as the cuddle hormone). When these chemicals are released without a sexual partner, the bonding occurs with the pornography or the fantasy that is used during masturbation. That is why pornography, fantasy, and especially masturbation become so addictive.

But there is another contributing factor to the difficulty of sobriety for women who try to recover from porn and sex addiction. Every month we females have a buildup of hormones leading up to ovulation and then a letdown of hormones leading into our menstrual period. When we said that giving up porn wouldn't be the hardest part of your journey, this is what we meant. Women are biologically designed to be super-charged hormonally for sex prior to ovulation. A lot of women struggle with acting out the most during this time of the month. Additionally, when ovulation ends and period is imminent, the sharp drop in hormones can lead to mood issues (depression, anger, etc.). These feelings can

If we want to break free, we need a clean, extended break to allow our bodies to heal from bad habits.

also be triggers for acting out. A lot of women who experience painful cramps or migraines also act out for relief from these issues.

Moreover, pornography use escalates itself. It thrives on isolation and patterns. It thrives on core wounds and beliefs. And it demands escalation to satisfy increased cravings and desires. Many porn users (male and female) grow desensitized by what they watch and will progress to more extreme types

of porn or personal interactions, such as sexting. According to Marnie Ferree, 81% of women who struggle with porn will see their behaviors shift to in-person encounters.²⁷ Crystal's rock bottom moment found her in a hotel waiting for an encounter that she had arranged online. She knows she is fortunate that she did not go through with it, but it was a major wake up call for her.

Using anything as a standard behavior to satisfy an emotional or non-essential physical need, be it porn, sex, food, or masturbation, speaks to an unhealthy dependency on it. If we want to break free, we need a clean, extended break to allow our bodies to heal from bad habits.

Commit to a Detox

Committing to a total sexual abstinence period of at least 90 days at the beginning of your recovery is not just a suggestion, it is a **requirement** in order to experience clean brain chemistry to begin to feel the emotions you have been medicating—a willingness to feel them leads to the ability to heal them.

In Marnie Ferree's book, *A L.I.F.E. Recovery Guide for Women*, she describes the benefits of a 90-day abstinence period from sexual activity and intentional sexual thoughts, even if an addict is married. The 90-day model originates from an Alcoholics Anonymous mantra of "90 meetings, 90 days," which refers to the first three months of intentional detox and sobriety in an alcoholic's recovery. She explains, "a healthy recovery program with transformation as the goal, requires a total, absolute abstinence period from all sexual activity and intentional sexual thoughts." She goes on to explain:

An abstinence period serves sexual purposes and has a variety of benefits. First, by abstaining from sexual activity and fantasy, you'll experience a cleansing of your brain chemistry. Just like an alcoholic needs to be sober for a number of days to get the alcohol completely out of her system, the same principle applies to those recovering from sexual addiction. A sexual time-out is a form of detoxification.²⁸

The first step to take to commit to an abstinence period is the same first step in addiction recovery: **surrender**.

Steps for Recovery

This brings us to the steps you can begin to take for meaningful recovery in your life. Again, this is a high-level overview. These steps were adapted from Crystal's first book, *Dirty Girls Come Clean*. In it, she devised a series of steps (not so unlike the Twelve Steps) for meaningful recovery and expound upon them in a series of 90 daily devotionals in her second book, *90 Days to Wholeness*.

The steps are:

1. Surrender
2. Confession
3. Accountability
4. Responsibility
5. Sharing

Surrender begins by having a posture that says, "I have become powerless to my addiction, but I have also become powerless to what drives it." You admit to yourself and to God that you need a detox. You admit to yourself and to God that your actions are not just behavioral. You admit to yourself and to God that you have been using pornography, fantasy, masturbation, and/or other unwanted sexual behaviors to self-medicate. You admit to yourself and to God that you have identity wounds that you can't overcome on your own and you need help. You admit these things as an act of surrender and begin to take larger steps toward healing.

Confession is just as it sounds. Confession requires you to come out of the darkness of isolation by telling another soul about your struggle. Isolation is a feeding frenzy for addiction. The longer we live in isolation, the more difficult it is to open up. We make excuses. We justify. In fact, it is easier to believe there is no one to tell than to actually tell someone.

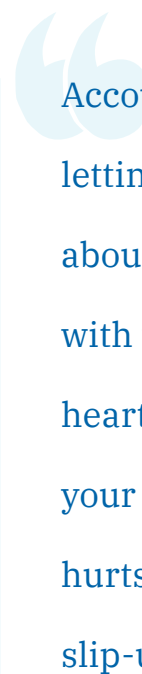
Telling someone is a much bigger deal in your head than it will actually be to do it. Confess to a friend, a family member, or even a church staff member or counselor. Just be sure the person you tell is someone who is safe with your story.

Accountability is our third step. We already talked a bit about the importance of an ally in the last chapter, but let's revisit.

We were never meant to walk difficult roads like this alone. God created us for community, but when shame enters in, we turn inward as well, leaving others outside of our pain, our shame, and our struggle. For some, your identity wounds prevented you from creating healthy attachments and you have to practice. Accountability is about letting someone in. It is about being vulnerable with them about your heart, your emotions, your temptations, your hurts, and your slip-ups (because again, they will happen).

Remember, the most important part of accountability is the relationship itself—the person or people you choose. Who can you trust to see your messy side? Who are you willing to allow into your shame to help you do the important work of recovery? Perhaps it is the same person you will confess to. Perhaps you have someone else in mind. Whomever it may be, we encourage you to choose a safe female to be your ally. Women who have male allies open themselves up to a potential inappropriate attachment.

Remember too that accountability is best when it's supported by systems and tools. Schedule regular meetings even if you've had a period of sobriety. And sign up for Covenant Eyes and send your ally your accountability reports. This will help her be specific as she helps you recover from online temptations.



Accountability is about letting someone in. It is about being vulnerable with them about your heart, your emotions, your temptations, your hurts, and your slip-ups.

Responsibility is the next step in the meaningful recovery process. To be honest, addicts often play the blame game, especially as they are leaving a life of addiction and are in the early days of recovery and detox. That is because it is often easier to project responsibility off of yourself and divert it to the actions of others, which releases you from personal responsibility. Taking responsibility for your actions is a vital step to take in your recovery. Regardless of whatever identity wounds you have experienced, you are responsible for the choices you make today.

If you find yourself struggling with taking responsibility, many women find success in quitting porn after understanding that pornography is a form of human trafficking. Pornography is not a victimless activity. We encourage you to learn more about these issues at the National Center on Sexual Exploitation at NCOSE.com.

Sharing is the last step in the meaningful recovery process. God never wanted you to experience what you experienced—your wounds, your addiction, etc.—all of which are a result of sin entering the world long ago and were not a part of God’s original plan for you. But God will never waste an experience or a hurt in your life when you allow Him to use it. He can use whatever it is you have suffered through to bring glory to Himself. He does so in such a way that can help others as well. That is why you can take comfort in sharing your story with those who need to hear it.

How can you use your story as a support to others who struggle? Some examples could be joining a SheRecovery.com group, or simply be an encouragement to others in the SheRecovery.com Online Community. Pray for God to open up doors of opportunity for you.

Handling Slip-Ups and Transference

Meaningful recovery takes the notion “Once an addict always an addict,” and turns it on its head. However, meaningful recovery also matters because it is all too easy to experience a transference of addiction when you don’t adequately deal with the first one. Addiction transference is a type of relapse, which is defined as “to fall back into illness after convalescence or apparent recovery.”²⁹

Take Crystal’s example from childhood. She went from food addiction immediately into pornography addiction when pornography began to satisfy her needs in a greater way than food did. Meaningful recovery meant letting go of dependency, coping, and self-medicating, and finding healing and joy in healthy behaviors.

But what happens when we do have a slip-up, or even relapse? First, let’s hear a story about a time Crystal had a slip-up:

Almost six years after I left pornography and my other sexual addictions behind, I slipped up. I had just returned home from a four-day whirlwind trip. I had gone from Kansas City to Los Angeles, to Las Vegas, back to Los Angeles, and finally returned to Kansas City. Temptation is not a sin ... acting on your temptation is. I was stressed. I was exhausted. I was lonely. It was the addict’s trifecta, even for a recovering one.

I remember the rituals that began to unfold in my mind. The deep pangs of emotion that I was feeling in that moment were so strong I could taste them. But instead of connecting with my accountability partner or doing a redirecting exercise or, more importantly, going to God, I chose to go against everything I knew to do and went to the one thing that I knew would leave me most empty. It wasn't pornography, but instead, it was the one area that had been the most difficult for me to keep in check: phone sex.

Looking back, if I were ever going to slip up, it would have been with phone sex. It was the one area where I didn't have accountability. No one in my life had access to my phone records, so I knew if I was going to do anything, I could get away with it. It ended as quickly as it began but when I picked up the phone, I made the choice. The point of no return.

Crystal chose to tell you about this because she hopes you, the woman who is striving for freedom, will learn from it. Even when you think you have all of your bases covered, look again. But she also shared it with you because it is important for you to understand that slip-ups happen.

A slip-up does not make you a failure. A slip-up is also not a relapse. (A relapse is a prolonged return to old behavior). And slip-ups are not cause for you to believe you will never overcome. If you let it, a slip-up can actually be a great learning tool—they help you shore up your weak spots.

The only way you fail in recovery is by not getting back up when you slip. There is no room for shame in your recovery. Shame has only one goal: to keep you stuck in the seemingly never-ending cycle of addiction. Shame will tell you all is hopeless. Shame is also not from God. Romans 8:1-2 (NLT) tells us, “There is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death.” But unfortunately, for so many who fall victim to shame, they believe the lies of shame. Have you experienced thoughts such as these?

“I am a failure.”

“I am a hypocrite.”

“I am unlovable.”

“I am undeserving.”

“I am a bad person.”

If yes, then you are a victim of shame. We know that the enemy of your soul “prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). In order to defeat shame, you have to learn to

discern the voice of God from the voice of the enemy.

1. God's voice is quiet and non-intrusive. He pursues you with words of life and grace.
2. The enemy is loud and invasive. He pursues you with words of death and despair.

God loves you. He loves you unconditionally. But He loves you too much for you to stay in the cycle of sin and shame. Even at the beginning of all sin, God called Adam and Eve out of hiding, and instead of shaming them more, He clothed them in their nakedness. And just as He pursues you with life and grace, you can pursue Him with confidence knowing you will be accepted because while you were still a sinner, Christ died for you (Romans 5:8). In Him, there is no shame, only hope.

This thing you battle, the cycle of sin and shame, does not have to be a life sentence. There is hope for a life free of addiction. These recovery steps are imperfect, but they are a good place to start. And as slip-ups and even relapses happen, you may need to repeat them from time to time to stay on track. Recovery is a long journey, and rarely an easy one, but a journey worth every step.

growing better fruit

Throughout this book, we've used the metaphor of an apple to explore the things that drive us to porn and keep us trapped in a cycle of shame and addiction. We've looked at how we're removed from our old wounds and shame and grafted into the family of God. We've looked at triggers and rituals, and how we can take action to prevent them before they appear. And we've looked at the fruit itself, and how to heal it.

But if we want full healing, we need to not only heal the old poisoned fruit—we need to start cultivating new, healthy fruit instead. Otherwise, we run the risk of transferring our addictions and unhealthy coping mechanisms to something equally or even more unhealthy.

The Importance of Hobbies

We've touched on hobbies at various points and will re-emphasize that it is critical to find healthy activities to combat the urges of porn. Rather than suppress our needs and desires, Jay Stringer explains that, counterintuitively, we should look to your desires and lean into them. He writes:

What we must learn to do instead is look over our shoulders to find the oxygen we most need. Everything in us will tell us to keep our heads down to the ground of our misery. When we do this, it's common to hear ourselves say, "I don't have time" and "I am not worth it." [...] Allow yourself to think about where you want to go or what would be good for your body, even if it seems impractical. For instance, in times that I feel particularly busy, I know that my body needs to surf or hike. [...] I will often say to my wife, "I need six hours on Saturday morning to get into the mountains. If I do that, what do you need for the afternoon? I'd love to come back together in the evening to play games with the kids."³⁰

In other words, Stringer has learned to listen to his body's cues and interpret them as a need to spend time in nature. He has learned to lean into his hobbies and work out ways to make them practical and achievable. As another example, Lisa led worship in college; she has learned to pull out her guitar and play old worship songs (badly) in the privacy of her home as an outlet for feelings of stress and powerlessness. The guitar came out nearly daily at the beginning of COVID-19 panic in particular.

Again, we won't go into much detail here. You can find more information and practical strategies in the free ebook *Hobbies and Habits*. Rather, we're going to spend the rest of the chapter focusing more directly on the reason you picked this book up in the first place: your struggles with sexuality.

Understanding Biblical Sexuality

Part of meaningful recovery from pornography and other unwanted sexual behaviors means embracing biblical sexuality. For some of you, that idea may rub you the wrong way. God. Sex. Church. Those things don't always sit well together. This is especially true if you have experienced rejection, judgment, or even abuse at the hands of church leadership, your parents, or other loved ones—with a shame-based view of sex.

Somewhere along the way, the Christian church turned sex into something that is dirty and shameful. We can thank purity culture, in large part, for that. But the truth is, sex is good. Sex is so good. And do you realize that God thinks so too? God created sex not just as a means of procreation but also for pleasure and intimate connection. It is also an act of worship that a husband and wife enter into together.

But sex is not just for your own pleasure. That is why it is so important to distinguish biblical sex from secular sex or pornography. Unfortunately, we live in the tension today of a hypersexualized culture where everything is acceptable, including female porn use, and a church culture still deafeningly silent about the pleasures of sex, let alone about the implications of porn use for women.

God created sex not just as a means of procreation but also for pleasure and intimate connection.

In the survey we conducted, 90% of women attend church services regularly, and 41% of them have heard their church openly discuss pornography. That is an improvement from just a few years ago, but less than 7% of the women we surveyed have

ever heard their church openly discuss female pornography use. Less than 7%.

Paul warns us in 1 Timothy 4:1-5 (NLT) that:

some will turn away from the true faith; they will follow deceptive spirits and teachings [...] These people are hypocrites and liars, and their consciences are dead. They will say it is wrong to be married and wrong to eat certain foods. But God created those foods to be eaten with thanks by faithful people who know the truth. Since everything God created is good, we should not reject any of it but receive it with thanks. For we know it is made acceptable by the word of God and prayer.


Those are some pretty bold words from Paul, but what does it mean? It means that there will be people who reject what God created, both those who claim to be Christian and those who do not. Unfortunately, there are believers who get caught up in legalism and forget grace. There are also believers who have their heads in the sand, unwilling to face the realities of sexual sin in the church (like the fact that women have sexual desires too). There are nonbelievers who hold little to no standard for biblical sexuality, where everything is permissible without consequence. And then there are those of us who fight for God's standard, understanding the implications of our sin and the insurmountable grace of God.

What we can take away from Paul is to not forget God created sex, and it is good. We are also not to forget the enemy has his ways of distorting it, both inside and outside of the church. We are also not

to forget that the good sex God created is set apart for marriage, but even sex in marriage is not for selfish gain: “The husband should fulfill his wife’s sexual needs, and the wife should fulfill her husband’s needs. The wife gives authority over her body to her husband, and the husband gives authority over his body to his wife” (1 Corinthians 7:3-4, NLT). These words of Paul were controversial because at the time women were still not seen as equals, especially in marriage. Sex is not about having your own needs met. Rather, it’s about serving your spouse as well.

Over the next 90 days, while you’re participating in that detox, use it to find ways to both serve and delight in your husband. Yes, delight. Your porn use has most likely disconnected you from him. This is the time to go back to those early days of dating, before you were physically intimate. Get to know him again and rediscover the man you fell in love with.

Now, per our survey, two-thirds of you may be saying, “But I’m single! I don’t have a spouse! What am I supposed to do?” First, remember that while sex is a wonderful, God-given gift, attaining it is not the ultimate, most important thing a person can do. If you are single and wrestling with your sexuality—the waiting—please understand that not having it is not keeping you from being fully human. You are a whole person, deeply loved by God, just as you are.



If you are single and wrestling with your sexuality—the waiting—please understand that not having it is not keeping you from being fully human. You are a whole person, deeply loved by God, just as you are.

This is important. You are whole just as you are! Many churches have put undue emphasis on marriage, even going so far as implying that we women in particular are incomplete if we're not married and having kids. This is a lie of the devil. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul makes it clear that singles are on equal footing with married people, and in fact those of us who are single, as Lisa still is, may actually be in a better position to follow Christ than our married friends.

That, of course, doesn't negate the fact that we're sexual beings. Every 28 days, give or take, we have a physical reminder of the fact that our bodies were created to carry another life within us. But we need to learn to understand those physical longings through the lens of a God who gives us good and perfect gifts in their time. Lore Ferguson Wilbert, then single, wrote in an article for *Christianity Today*:

Those who have wrestled deep with their prolonged chastity have experienced something of earth's groans in wait for her Creator. A friend recently confessed struggles of waiting sexually for her upcoming wedding day. I was able to tell her the hunger pangs of longing she feels for her fiancé are akin to the hunger pangs we feel when we're fasting. Those pangs teach us we're waiting for a better feast. For the one fasting, the feast isn't the break-fast, and for the virgin, the feast isn't the wedding night. The feast is the marriage supper of the Lamb and an eternity spent with him. But those pangs are still real and felt, to pretend they're not is ignorant.³¹

(For the record, even if you do get married, sex isn't going to be

perfect. Even married people don't get it right! Trust us when we say, you want to learn these truths now, not later.)

Whether we're single or married, we need to learn to handle our sexual appetites. When it comes to biblical sexuality, instead of asking what's a sin, ask yourself if what you are questioning (masturbation, porn, etc.) is actually God's best for you. In 1 Corinthians 6:12-13 (NLT), Paul says this of discerning sexual sin:

You say, "I am allowed to do anything"—but not everything is good for you. And even though "I am allowed to do anything," I must not become a slave to anything. You say, "Food was made for the stomach, and the stomach for food." But you can't say that our bodies were made for sexual immorality. They were made for the Lord, and the Lord cares about our bodies.

In *Pulling Back the Shades*, Dannah Gresh and Dr. Juli Slattery propose that "when you are not sure whether something is okay, put it through Paul's filter:

- + Is this beneficial? Is it good for me? For my husband? Is it good for our marriage?
- + Does it master me? Can it be habit-forming or addictive?
- + Is it constructive? Does it help me grow and mature? Does it build our marriage?
- + Is it loving? Does this action show love toward others or is it selfish?"³²

These filtering questions are especially helpful about the gray areas that scripture doesn't specifically speak to. Paul goes on to say in 1 Corinthians 6:18, 19b-20 (NLT), to "run from sexual sin! No other sin so clearly affects the body as this one does. For sexual immorality is a sin against your own body... You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body."

Paul is not saying that sexual sin is the worst sin a person can do. What Paul is saying is that sexual sin is powerful because it creates soul ties. It is inherently bonding. And breaking those bonds is immensely difficult, as you well know.

Still, we can look to Jesus and trust Him that we can overcome the sinful longings of our bodies, even while we acknowledge the physical pangs. In *Handle With Care*, Wilbert puts it this way:

What Jesus says in regards to take care of bodies and denial of bodily urges is remarkable: He says care and denial are a both/and instead of an either/or—deny *and* care. He says a practice of denying our appetite is good, enabling us to redirect our gaze, heart, desire, body, and mind to the Lord. But at the same time, He says, take care of your body. Your embodied self. He is saying your face matters, your hair matters, your teeth matter, your whole body matters. God hasn't forgotten the felt needs of your body: in fact, Jesus says, God will not overlook you and will reward you.

Will the reward be marriage? Great sex? Even mediocre sex? At the very least an orgasm experienced in the intimacy of

marriage with another? I don't know and you don't know. We don't need to know. God knows and God sees, and not in an evil, conniving, harsh, disciplinarian way. In the Christian Standard Bible (CSB) translation of [Matthew 6:16-18], Jesus doesn't say "God." He says, "Your Father." I love that. Your Father, the one who provides all you need and who helps you order your desires rightly and who holds you when you fall and helps you get back up and carries you when the way seems too hard. In a time when you fast from sexual intimacy with another, the Father is still near.

We know this because God came in flesh, dwelt among us, and no temptation known to man was uncommon to Him. *Jesus was in every way tempted as we are yet without sin.* Jesus Christ doesn't just know your desire for comfort or relief; He knows His own. He wept in the garden begging His father to take the cup of suffering from him. We always follow it quickly to His next words, "Nevertheless, not my will but yours, be done." But we miss something magnificent if we move too quickly. God in flesh, Jesus, the man, wept over His desire for comfort over calling. He bent, prostrate, begging His Father to relent, solve, save, remove, or intervene. We know the end of the story and He did too, and yet He still begged. He knew the temple of His body would be raised again in three days, and we know our bodies will be raised with Him in glory. [...] Knowing that our full freedom is coming, we are still waiting. Groaning. Anticipating. Aching. And sometimes failing and repenting too.

And your Father sees.³³

What does all of this mean? It means, as we begin our recovery and face the pangs of withdrawal and the external forces of temptation, we can know that our pangs stem from the good gift of our bodies. And we can know that we are grafted onto a vine that enables us to overcome our sinful temptations with better, holy desires. As James says,

“God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, ‘God is tempting me.’ God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else. Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death. So don’t be misled, my dear ... sisters.” —James 1:12-15 (NLT)

the coming garden

At the beginning of time, shame entered the world through a garden. It entered when our foremother listened to a lie and ate fruit from the wrong tree. Even now, millennia later, we're still listening to Satan whisper lies into our ears, "feeding back through every scar [we] have received," so embedded in us that we think Satan's voice is our own.³⁴

But it's not, and we don't have to listen to it anymore.

We are no longer attached to the vine of our sin and shame. We have been grafted onto the Tree of Life. In this life we will never bear perfect fruits—that's the reality of this fallen world. We can stop bearing the fruits of shame and bear good and healthy fruits, yes; but they will not be perfect on this earth.

But there is a coming garden, at the heart of a city, where we will dwell with our God. All of the poison of shame within us will be completely gone. All the scars we bear from our past, visible and invisible, will be washed away. We will see the incomplete picture of marriage, and all of the sexual desires and brokenness within us, made whole as the Bride of Christ.

Read these words from *The Jesus Storybook Bible* aloud. Let them sink into your heart and mind as a promise:

And the King says, “Look!
God and his children are together again.
No more running away. Or hiding.
No more crying or being lonely or afraid.
No more being sick or dying.
Because all those things are gone.
Yes, they’re gone forever.
Everything sad has come untrue.
And see—I have wiped away every tear from every eye!”³⁵

Sister, He will make *you* new.

recommended resources

90 Days to Wholeness

In *90 Days to Wholeness*, Crystal Renaud Day challenges women to throw down and break free from addiction and is designed to be a holistic approach to recovery (body, mind, and spirit). Available now as a paperback coloring journal or ebook at livingonpurposekc.com/books.

Virtual Coaching

If you seek one-on-one help to find freedom, Crystal Renaud Day offers virtual coaching and pastoral counseling services. Learn more at livingonpurposekc.com.

More Than Single

www.covenanteyes.com/singles-guide/

When you find yourself “stuck” in singleness, waiting to move on to the next phase of life, it can feel incredibly frustrating. Many people

believe they have no recourse other than turning to porn. In this book for singles, learn how to discover freedom from porn and joy in singleness.

Hobbies and Habits

learn.covenanteyes.com/hobbies-and-habits/

Can your hobbies and daily habits really help you find freedom from porn? In our powerful and practical ebook, we explore how to harness the power of habit to quit porn for good. You'll learn how changing your environment helps you to quit, why community is essential to kicking the porn habit, and how healthy hobbies retrain your brain.

The Porn Circuit

learn.covenanteyes.com/porn-circuit/

Science shows us that acting out with pornography taps into our powerful neurochemistry, and this can quickly lead a person to use porn habitually. The good news is that the brain has a lifelong ability to wire and rewire itself. Discover why people become obsessed with pornography, and how to break the cycle of porn use.

Transformed By Beauty

info.covenanteyes.com/transformed-by-beauty

Beauty can change your life. It can heal you from the wounds of pornography and help you have a redeemed vision and sacramental approach to sexuality. In this ebook, you'll meet a priest, a musician, a ballerina, and a bodybuilder who all have one thing in common: They found freedom, healing, and peace because they encountered the beauty of a transcendent God.

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about the authors



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Crystal Renaud Day is a pastoral counselor, certified coach, author, and speaker with over a decade of experience working with women, couples, and teen girls. She holds a Master of Arts in Pastoral Counseling: Life Coaching from Liberty University and numerous certifications in counseling and coaching specialties. Crystal owns and operates Living on Purpose Coaching & Pastoral Counseling and is the founding director of SheRecovery.com (formerly Dirty Girls Ministries), an online ministry helping women overcome porn and other unwanted sexual behaviors.

Her work has been featured in the New York Times, ABC News, Christianity Today, The 700 Club, and more. Her books include *Dirty Girls Come Clean*, *90 Days to Wholeness*, and *Dating Done Right*. Crystal resides in the Kansas City area with her husband Tim.



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Lisa Eldred is the Educational Content Strategist at Covenant Eyes and the author of numerous blog posts, email challenges, and ebooks, including *More Than Single: Finding Purpose Beyond Porn* and *Hobbies and Habits: Fighting Porn With Purpose*. Her writing has also appeared on www.lovethynerd.com, and she publishes poetry at www.wasabijane.com. She lives in Lansing, MI.

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