

CP601

Couples Counseling and Human Sexuality

“Couples Case Analysis and Treatment Plan: Fred, Carol, and Pornography”

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## Couples Case Analysis and Treatment Plan: Fred, Carol, and Pornography

### Case Background

“I just knew he was out there waiting for me,” Carol says to you during the couple’s first session. She tells you she thought Fred would be her “prince”, the ideal man, everything her first two husbands weren’t. She found her first husband cold, uncaring and insensitive. The second connected better but was weak and needy. As who they really were became clearer to her, all hope of the special marriage she’d longed for grew dimmer, finally ending in divorce.

She and Fred have now been married for two years. Their relationship has been exciting and fulfilling for them up until three months ago. Carol discovered Fred’s involvement with pornography on the net. He carries a great deal of shame at this having been found out. Fred reports to you a longstanding pattern with this beginning in puberty. “I am always the star when I’m doing this stuff,” Fred says to you. His family had high expectations for all their children, in everything. He was good at school, getting high grades, good at sports. When he came across some porn in his father’s closet he became hooked on something deeper than just the stimulation of it. He entered a fantasy world where he could be different from this good, perfect, performing person he felt his family expected. “All I think about is how many people look up to me and how disappointed and hurt they’ll be now this is out. People will find out I’m really not special. I’m just ordinary, even bad.”

Carol and Fred also report to you that their sexual relationship was passionate and exciting for them both during the early part of their marriage, but it gradually became less frequent and exciting. Now Carol feels betrayed, just like with her first two husbands. “I feel like Fred has had a mistress all this time. He’s lied to me,” she tells you. “I just feel dirty every time he says he wants to make love. To whom, I wonder? Certainly not with me!”

Other than these things they report no specific problems physically, are both in good health and have had recent annual check-ups. You ask about their family histories, but each describes not knowing a great deal about their parents’ personal lives sexually.

### Description and History

Fred and Carol present as a post-newlywed couple with distinct issues surrounding trust, impulse control /addiction, marital expectations, communication, shame, image, and sexual intimacy. While the presenting issue is Fred’s long-term habit with pornography other issues are looming just below the surface. Carol is on her third marriage and evidences a very external “locus of control”, believing that fate is the bringer of her would-be “prince charming” rather than her own discriminating

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participation in mate selection. A longitudinal study of 131 children of divorced parents (Wallerstein and Lewis, 2006) revealed that as they became adults these females consistently omitted typical stability criteria when selecting partners (e.g. a good father, a person who provides good treatment, a person you want to wake up next to in 50 years, etc.) resulting in a 57% divorce rate when these individuals wed before age 25 and a 40% overall divorce rate (compared with a 9% divorce rate from identical controls with intact-parent marriages). They also frequently accepted the first offer of marriage and were rarely out of a relationship for more than a brief period of time, preferring not to have to ever be alone (ibid, 2006).

Fred's self-assessment of being viewed as a "bad" person exemplifies what Carnes (1992) describes as the addiction cycle of "preoccupation, ritualization, sexual compulsivity, and despair" leading to a variety of negative consequences that progressively emanate from the unmanageability of sexual addiction. These resultant experiences include an ever-growing secret existence, a socially withdrawn lifestyle, and feelings of low self-esteem sometimes bordering on self-hatred, which in turn confirm the person's faulty beliefs and lead them to believe they are unlovable or undeserving. Fred's comment that "I'm always the star", however, indicates the likelihood of the presence of an additional element in his case: that of the competing negative "anti-hero" image of glamorous decadence (ibid, 1992).

Many pornography voyeurs (Carne's "level 1 sexual addicts") initially see their behaviors as recreational and "victimless" and thus deem them harmless. However, the growing risk of unintentionally being discovered (as Carol did with Fred) poses new threats to relationships, reputation, and work life that eventually snowball into an ever-

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increasing cycle of secrecy and shame. Excessive time consumption in preparing for and screening pornography as well as a tolerance/withdrawal syndrome begins to set in often mandating a greater variety, frequency, or intensity of subject matter when viewing pornographic materials. These factors along with the clear inability to curtail or stop pornographic consumption all point towards a very life impacting problem, not only personally but for a marriage as well. Stack, Wasserman, Kern (2004) observe that happily married couples are 61% less likely to use cyberporn than troubled couples. Ninety percent of all types of sexual addicts incorporate the use of pornography as co-occurring with their other addictions (Carnes, 1991) placing pornography almost in a “marijuana-like” role as far as paving the way for further sexual acting out. This analogy finds some empirical support when realizing that participants in adultery and paid sex are, respectively, 3 and 4 times as likely to use cyberporn than the general populous (Stack, Wasserman, and Kern, 2004).

### Assessment and Hypothesis

Fred and Carol are caught in a “complainant / distancer” dynamic that is exacerbating Fred’s existing withdrawal into an alternative fantasy world of pornography. The discovery of Fred’s pornography use has left Carol feeling very betrayed and distrusting and in a state that is probably most comparable to someone first learning about their spouse’s actual physical infidelity with another person. Referencing Schneider’s 2000 study of 94 couples, Manning (2006) found regular pornography use resulted in 68% of the couples experiencing a decrease in sexual intimacy with 52% of the users (as well as 18% of the partners) losing all interest in relational sex. In a review of 100 letters by spouses and partners of heavy porn users, Bergner and Bridges (2002) found the 3 main

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impacts of pornography to be direct damage to the relationship, devaluing of the worth and desirability of the non-participating spouse, and a significantly lowered view of the user's character in the eyes of both the user and their partner.

Bergner and Bridges (2002) found that instead of functioning as a sexual catalyst or "spark" (or even as an educational tool) porn use consistently and systematically eroded the 8 aspects of romantic love between couples: 1) **exclusivity** (spouses interpreted heavy porn use much like an affair and used words like "cheated", "betrayal", and "infidelity" to frame their feelings) 2) **sexual desire** (spouses felt unable to compete with fantasy women and now felt they were seen as sexual objects and that their partners were no longer "making love" but were instead "using them") 3) **well being** (spouses felt they were not good enough to hold their partner's desire and their children were in some cases endangered) 4) **respect** (spouses felt "ugly", "fat", and "degraded") 5) **intimacy** (spouses felt marginalized and excluded by their partner's porn obsession) 6) **commitment** (according to 350 marital lawyers pornography and other internet activities played a role in over 62% of all divorces they handled in the last year, Manning, 2006) 7) **understanding** (partners repeatedly voiced that their porn user "didn't get it" or seem to "have a clue" regarding the effect pornography was having on the relationship) 8) **admiration** (in some cases spouses now viewed the user as a "pervert", a "degenerate", a "liar", "selfish", "addicted", and "deceitful").

### Theoretical Approach and Treatment Plan

I would approach Fred and Carol's marital challenge from a systems posture realizing that while both are making ineffective choices in the relationship (and should take personal responsibility for those), most marital and sexual dysfunctions don't occur in a

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vacuum but instead are triggered by status quo family reactions and responses that serve to actually entrench existing patterns. The family histories of both Fred and Carol have placed a considerable amount of expectation on Fred to perform at the highest levels in his life, career, and the marital relationship. Fred is investing in the ritual of pornography for more than just casual release and is instead immersing himself in a fantasy role-play that is simultaneously a secretive attempt at validation as well as self-punishment.

Building on Carne's work that "sexual acting out is often more pronounced after a significant blow to self-esteem", Bergner and Bridges (2002) hypothesize that pornography obsession that involves Fred's form of alter-ego can be better understood using in a 3-phase adventure metaphor. In phase (1) the user has received some external rejection or humiliation (often from childhood degradations, faulty self-images, or faulty sexuality "scripts" in the surrounding culture) which in turn initiates a self-imposed relational isolation. During phase (2) the user retreats into their selected alternative "preferred scenario" (pornography) as a substitute "validation ceremony" to find or reclaim fulfillment and validation (or in other cases as an attempt to assuage or repair their momentary or past woundedness). In the final and third phase the accreditation effort proves unsuccessful and instead of being uplifted or made whole the user feels even more degraded and shamed from the experience. Thus, a self-perpetuating cycle is launched with a built-in component of "self-punishment" overtaking or paralleling the sexual reward as the user simultaneously seeks out yet attempts to avoid voyeuristic opportunities.

While Carol's emotional and suspicion-laden reactions to Fred's pornography are understandable (and are not unrealistic or illogical) they are maladaptive. She has

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chosen to react out of her emotions and her own assumed idyllic “preferred scenario” of imagined husband traits (rather than the flesh and blood reality in front of her). So her threats to expose Fred’s porno habit to friends and family combined with her use of hyperbole, personal attacks, and a willingness to lump Fred in with all former spouses (and perhaps males in general) reveal her level of pain but also result in a milieu of ineffective helplessness and entrenched inaction.

These factors taken together point towards adopting a treatment plan that will address the distance between this couple, one caused in part by the use of pornography but also by how they are “bouncing off of each other” and choosing to communicate to and through the therapist rather than directly with each other. Gottman (1999) identifies the dynamic in a distanced couple as a “turning away” such that everyday “bids” for attention, concurrence, acknowledgement, support, etc. are being ignored, rebuffed, or evaded by the other person. The “fondness and admiration system” essential in a functioning couple must be recreated using everyday opportunities to “turn towards” the spouse and make new deposits in their emotional bank account until a threshold is reached where positive sentiment can begin to over-ride shortcomings again. Therefore, this distancing hypothesis should be tested throughout their therapy by watching and noting the frequency, quantity, and “positivity” of the communication happening between them, first via the therapist’s instruction during the session, and then later outside of the session as they experience structured, topical spouse-initiated conversations (as homework) and then eventually more spontaneous dialogue.

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### Initial Interventions and Contracting

Fred needs to hear how his wife has experienced the revelation of his pornography use in the context and controlled pace of couple's therapy (so that he is not completely overwhelmed) but the therapist must also assure that Carol's feelings aren't artificially passed over or "band-aided" during this process. His initial presentation reflects a preoccupation with his reputation among family or coworkers over and above a concern for (or even an acknowledgement of) Carol's feelings. Because Fred's pornography use is a longstanding and entrenched behavior he may need some initial psycho-educational instruction to help tie Carol's (and his own) woundedness directly to the detrimental effects of pornography and the erosion of romantic love. He must cease thinking of pornography as just some nominal threat to his reputation.

Fred needs to "come clean" regarding at least some of the details of his pornography use in order to give Carol a sense that he is "owning" his behavior and taking responsibility for his actions. Although discretion should be made as to the extent and type of details disclosed, Fred needs to reassure Carol regarding his posture towards her and alleviate many of the fears and questions she may have regarding the extent of his secret life.

Because this couple has had an active and fulfilling love life in an earlier stage of marriage it is important to explore if pornography use increased during, before, or after times of relational decline (i.e. if it was a contributor or a resultant) and whether it remained constant over the marriage. In order to screen for other circumstances that have contributed to relationship decline as well as pornography I would administer one or more of Gottman's (1999) Sound Marital House Questionnaires to surface conflict



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management styles, levels of emotional disengagement, repair attempts, gridlock, etc. I would schedule at least one solo session for both the husband and wife to outline sexual history, discuss any present or past abuse, and foster greater confidentiality for any lingering marital secrets to be divulged. Thus, other related sexual behaviors such as phone sex, affairs, online sex chat rooms, and cyber-affairs must be thoroughly inventoried as well.

A successful therapy for this couple must address the pornography head-on but not ignore other facets of relational health and growth. Initially, this couple may require the contracting of a short target duration of marital celibacy to help build back marital friendship without the pressure and confusion of sexual relations on top of the inherent emotional, relational, and trust uncertainty that are unavoidable at this juncture. While contracting the elimination of pornography “cold turkey” might prove more challenging this could be initiated in a “phase-out plan” starting first with a voluntary censoring of home electronics and media including computers, cable tv, videos, and magazines: the most immediate and threatening sources of relapse for Fred and those probably most disturbing to Carol.

Realizing the daunting proposition of overcoming sexual addiction I would refer Fred to a males-only sexual recovery group that would be congruent with his values (and faith-based if compatible and appropriate) where he could receive empathy, peer-motivated accountability, and additional educational and therapeutic resources. While Fred certainly needs accountability Carol must be immediately “relieved of duty” from policing and co-dependently managing his pornography habit. Helping her to understand the above “accreditation ceremony” metaphor and something of the nature and origin of

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Fred's challenge will serve to reinforce the truth that Fred's addiction is "not about her" and give her the freedom to contemplate and determine her own choices and boundaries and diminish her degradation of herself and her spouse. She can start to focus her energies on communicating her needs and hopes in the relationship. She also needs some tools to avoid repeating her past tendency to "jump ship" in a relationship, solely blaming her spouses failures for the demise of her relationships.

### Intermediate Interventions and Homework

Assuming both Fred and Carol initially "buy in" and agree to work on the marriage while simultaneously restricting pornography (and other inhibiting dynamics to trust and mutuality in the relationship) this couple should start to build regular (weekly?) non-sexual intimacy sessions into their routine with homework assignments designed around shared meaning in life and togetherness. They also need concrete practice in emotional "repair and smoothing" such as writing letters to each other. An ideal opportunity would be a "victim empathy" letter from Fred acknowledging the effect and impact his pornography use had made on Carol. Carol could in turn write a letter of response or a preemptive letter reaffirming her respect for Fred (valuing his positive attributes in the relationship apart from his sexual recovery).

Gottman (2004) recommends using an "interviewer/interviewee" role-play to help couples dealing with sexual distrust start to learn to probe and verbalize their unspoken and often dormant needs and desires. They should also learn to practice "meta-communication" or statements and observations about how they experience the process of communicating with their spouse by inquiring what the history or feelings are behind the comments being made. Rather than trying to reconstruct a makeshift "marital house"

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to resemble something from the past Gottman (2004) advocates brand new ways of relating based on new “love maps” and “emotional bank account” investments that require fresh contributions not rehashed, over-used, and empty “sound bites” of affection.

### Closure

Termination of therapy with this couple need not be prolonged until they exhibit an ideal marriage. Rather, when Fred and Carol can begin to repair a marital argument on their own (even if this occurs later after the argument is truncated) then they are tracking towards the “sound marital house”. Gottman suggests termination when markers indicate the couple is dealing effectively with “solvable problems”, dialoguing regarding their long-term issues (versus experiencing gridlock), and have the tools to deal with relapse in a non-destructive way (e.g pornography use and the increasing founded or unfounded suspicion that could ensue). Termination criteria should also include some practical, proactive steps that embody positive and measurable indicators and outcomes (in addition to purely preventative criteria that measure the subsiding of troubles). For example, the couple needs to exhibit some reachable standards for shared time together that go beyond minimal survival levels. This could be a set number of dates over a given time period with the real underlying goal being that dating has become a renewed part of the marital fiber not just a checkmark on a therapist-directed “to do” list.

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