

Pastors and cybersex addiction

MARK R. LAASER¹ & LOUIS J. GREGOIRE²

¹*Faithful and True Ministries and the Institute for Healthy Sexuality of the American Association of Christian Counsellors, Eden Prairie, Minnesota, USA,* ²*Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA*

ABSTRACT Clergy of all religious traditions are presenting in increasing numbers with addiction to Internet pornography. This article examines the characteristics of clergy who suffer from it. Clergy have been shown to be uneducated about healthy sexuality and boundaries in ministry. The nature of their role increases vulnerability to addiction and adds unique challenges to treatment. Treatment for clergy must be sensitive to these challenges particularly in assessing ability to remain in or return to the practice of ministry. An ongoing accountability plan will be essential in allowing church authorities to feel confident about the ministerial practice of those who suffer from Internet addiction.

Ken is a 44-year-old pastor of a church in one of the increasing number of 'non-denominational' churches. As such he is under no authority other than that of an all male board of 'elders,' that he personally selected. This is the governing authority of his church. His father emotionally and sexually abused Ken as a child. His mother died of cancer when he was 12. At that same age he discovered his father's massive collection of pornography in his closet. He regularly 'visited' this collection and discovered masturbation. This pattern continued off and on until he met and married his current wife, Leslie. Ken can now recall feelings of depression and loneliness dating back to the time of his mother's death but always felt he could deal with it on his own. He was somewhat of a loner, dated little in high school, and had few friends. Like many men he assumed that his pornography and masturbation habit would stop when regular sexual activity with his wife was available. This was the case for the first four years of his marriage even though his wife suffered from undiagnosed and untreated painful intercourse. This dysfunction contributed to issues of frequency about which Ken and Leslie argued.

After the first four years of his marriage, his father-in-law, who had been a surrogate father in a loving way to him, also died of cancer. At this time his pornography habit and masturbation returned again in an on-again, off-again pattern that remained undisclosed to his wife. Following the birth of two children, intercourse became less painful for Leslie, who worked very hard at

Correspondence to: Dr Mark Laaser, Faithful and True Ministries, 6542 Regency Lane, Eden Prairie, MN 55344, USA, Tel: +1 952 949-3478, Email: mlaaser@aol.com

ISSN 1468-1994 print/ISSN 1468-1479 online/03/030395-10

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DOI: 10.1080/1468199031000153982

being more sexually available. Despite her increased willingness, the old patterns persisted. Three years ago Ken obtained his first at-home computer with on-line access. Gradually, and in increasing amounts of time, Ken found himself coming back home to access pornography on the Internet. Time alone on the Internet was readily available because Leslie worked outside the home, the children were in school, and the demands of his ministry left Ken with lots of unstructured and unscheduled time. As his Internet usage increased, his ability to connect honestly with Leslie decreased. Ken also found that he began spending more time accessing the Net late at night after Leslie had gone to bed. He was surprised one night when Leslie came down into his study to find him looking at pornographic websites.

This couple will face many challenges in the days and weeks to come. It is possible that there will be an initial, short period of fear-based abstinence, but if left untreated, it is likely that Ken's addiction will continue to grow worse. Whether or not to tell the church will plague both of them. They know that doing so will probably result in Ken's immediate dismissal from ministry. This fear contributes to the ongoing silence about the problem that they have been experiencing for years.

Although Ken's case is fictitious, it is illustrative of hundreds of cases that are presenting themselves to therapists around the world. One survey of evangelical Protestant clergy in the United States found that 40% of the respondents struggled with pornography, largely obtained through the Internet (The Leadership Survey, 2001). In the same survey one-third of those said they had looked at Internet pornography in the last 30 days. Given the devastating professional and personal consequences that clergy suffer when their Internet usage is revealed, it seems imperative that we know how to assess and treat them for it. This article will not comment on the morality of looking at pornography. Even without addressing the moral or religious consequences, the destructive nature of this problem is evident and prompts further understanding of the problem and its treatment.

Assessment

Professionals in the medical and psychological communities debate about whether the problem of Internet pornography usage is a matter of addiction or compulsion. Whatever the outcome of these discussions may be, the emotional and spiritual extent of this problem far exceeds the fairly precise definition of compulsivity.

According to Carnes (1984), there are four characteristics of addiction that can be applied to clergy. First, the behaviour has become unmanageable. Unmanageability can best be defined as an intention to stop and an inability to do so. Motivation and true willingness to stop can be evaluated, but it is generally true that an addict at some level is desperate to stop a behaviour.

Second, addiction creates neuro-chemical tolerance. This describes the brain's ability to adapt to any substance absorbed by the brain and its demand for more. Neuro-chemical tolerance has been shown to be due primarily to desensitization of neuro-chemical receptor sites to neuro-chemical transmitters. Thinking about or performing

sex creates a heightened neuro-chemical response in various parts of the brain (Milkman & Sunderwirth, 1987). Over time the brain will become tolerant to the response.

Tolerance leads to the third characteristic, escalation. If more of the neuro-chemical is needed to achieve the same pleasure, sexual thought or activity will increase over time. Previously, it was believed that a pattern of escalation for at least 2 years was needed to make a diagnosis of sex addiction, but the Internet seems to have significantly speeded up the process of tolerance. A pattern of escalation of several months may indicate a serious problem with Internet addiction.

Neuro-chemical response also creates the fourth characteristic, medication of mood. Certain neuro-chemical transmitters, like dopamine, can elevate mood. Others, like the catecholamines, can relax mood (Milkman & Sunderwirth, 1987). It would not be uncommon for many Internet addicts to use various thoughts and activities to take themselves either up or down within the same day.

With this basic foundation of addiction in mind, it is also important to define some of the special considerations and characteristics of pastors who struggle with Internet addiction:

- (1) *Role*—Many pastors see their role as a matter of a prophetic ‘calling’ that is more clearly defined in light of a pastor’s personal faith and spirituality. In some cases, it seems that pastors who are more vulnerable to the Internet are those who, perhaps unconsciously, may be attracted to the role because it offers them a special status. The respect and admiration that the pastoral role generates may be appealing to those who are otherwise insecure and in need of approval. In a form of ‘pastoral co-dependency,’ pastors will totally sacrifice themselves for the sake of others without setting healthy boundaries. Service and sacrifice may thus be more of a search for approval than a response to genuine love for others. For many pastors with an Internet addiction, the appeal of the role is ‘a shame reduction strategy’ (Laaser, 1991) in that they love the admiration their role brings them (for example, being called ‘Reverend’ or ‘Father’).

The nature of the pastoral role also creates a special vulnerability to what Cooper (1998) has called the ‘Triple A Engine’ of Internet addiction. According to Cooper, the Internet is powerful because it is Accessible, Affordable, and Anonymous. Pastors typically have unstructured schedules and may have a lot of time alone. They do not punch a time clock. With this kind of freedom, pastors might have ample opportunity to ‘access’ the Internet. If their spouses work outside the home and if their children are in school, pastors who are addicted can easily take advantage of the chance to use the Internet, undisturbed, at home during the day.

Pastors traditionally do not make large salaries and the affordability of the Internet can be appealing. There are many sites to ‘cruise’ that may ask for credit card information to access some parts of the web page, but which also will display free materials. Pastors are less likely to spend money on prostitution, expensive pornography, or affairs because they simply do not have the ‘discretionary’ money that others might have.

Perhaps most powerfully, the anonymity of the Internet is an attraction to pastors who would be petrified to go into a bookstore or a red light area. Pastors are public figures and easily recognized. There is also the genuine feeling for some that they would not want to tarnish their reputation or injure other's faith. In this sense the Internet seems, at least, to be relatively safe and perhaps even innocuous.

- (2) *Vocational consequences*—The power of the pastoral role is only one factor inhibiting clergy from revealing an addiction to Internet pornography. While it may be hard for anyone to confess problems with sexual 'sins,' it can be particularly hard for pastors who are expected to uphold high moral standards and for whom the vocational consequences can be devastating. Fear of being dismissed or defrocked often leads pastors to move deeper into silence rather than reveal such a serious shortcoming as Internet addiction. Most religious bodies and individual congregants place high moral expectations on pastors, and so it is not surprising that looking at Internet pornography has caused hundreds of pastors to be removed from ministry.
- (3) *Isolation*—Pastors who become involved with Internet pornography are lonely and isolated. While they are public figures who may possess the skills necessary to function socially, they may have little, if any, ability to really connect with others. These pastors have no truly intimate friends and reveal themselves honestly to no one. They may spend a lot of time alone, which they explain by saying they are being 'contemplative,' or 'prayerful' or even that they are working hours upon hours on a sermon.

The need to be alone can often be the expression of a deep Intimacy Disorder that may result from development or attachment abuse. For pastors who have suffered abuse, it is much safer to have 'relationships' with imaginary and fantasy figures on the Internet than it is to develop healthy relationships with other people.

- (4) *Narcissism*—The same forms of abuse that can lead to an Intimacy Disorder, and particularly the abuse of abandonment and neglect, may also create narcissistic traits. Though not as pronounced as the narcissism of pastors who violate sexual boundaries with parishioners, it can be present in those who abuse Internet pornography. Characteristically, narcissism may come from growing up where they were not listened to, affirmed, praised, or told that they were desirable. Thus, in fulfilling their pastoral duties, they might often be very self-serving and grandiose. The sound of their own voice and the power and drama of their own 'performance' as pastor is very appealing. Strangely enough this can serve to make them rather 'charismatic'. One pastor who was addicted reported that when he preached he felt a rush of adrenaline, and when people would shake his hand at the end of a service and tell him how well he had done, it was a real 'high'. For these pastors the attraction of the Internet lies in sense of 'control' gained from being in charge of turning it on and off, and selecting

what they want to look at. They will gravitate towards the images of people who seem to be saying to them, 'I find you incredibly attractive and I would do anything for you'.

- (5) *Spiritual maturity*—Pastors who struggle with Internet pornography addiction present as being spiritually immature. This is not a judgment based on theological understandings, but on qualities of emotional and spiritual development. Spiritual immaturity is defined by several qualities. First, addicted pastors exercise black and white thinking. Their moral judgments are not based on personally held convictions, but rather on adolescent fear-based beliefs. Second, these pastors seem to blame others for their behaviours. In what might be called reaction formation, they often accuse others of doing behaviours that they themselves are guilty of. For example, a pastor might preach on the dangers of the 'pimps, pornographers, and prostitutes' while at the same time being involved with them. Third, these pastors may conceive a certain magical or unrealistic quality about their acting out. On the one hand they may believe that they will not get caught because of their special status with God. On the other hand, they may also believe in certain equations of justice in which doing good deeds cancels out the bad deed of using Internet pornography. These pastors' images of God may be as either a kind and benevolent Santa Claus type who gives them what they absolutely need, or as an angry and vindictive tyrant who will punish them for any misstep.

- (6) *Anger*—One of the most fascinating characteristics identifiable in these pastors is repressed anger, which exhibits itself in passive aggression. These pastors can be sarcastic, manipulative, judgmental, and discriminatory. In one church that experienced the loss of a pastor due to Internet addiction, many women reported that they often felt the pastor was angry with women. Although the pastor did not exhibit his anger in a dramatic fashion, it was evident in cruel, sexist jokes and remarks and, furthermore, through comments and attitudes apparent in some of his sermons.

These pastors may be angry with God. Because of their spiritual immaturity, they might believe that God can magically remove all sexual temptations from their lives and should have helped them in their struggles with lust. Anger might also be directed at God if the pastors believe they are being over-worked and under-paid. Sacrifices inherent to the role of pastor can be experienced as victimization; the underlying belief in this experience is, 'I do everything for everyone else and no one does anything for me'. Anger can reflect the level of abuse that these pastors may have experienced. Usually, it is clear that they have never learned how to express their anger in healthy ways.

- (7) *Accountability*—The levels of isolation, narcissism, dependency, and anger that are permitted to go unchecked in Internet addicted clergy suggest it is very unlikely that they submit to any authority. Prevention of the addiction therefore becomes more difficult because of a lack of supervision, when someone else

might notice the problem or at least insist upon a method of accountability. As one pastor described, 'I have a thousand bosses (his congregation) but no real authority supervises me'. Commonly, pastors dictate their own schedules, and no one is monitoring their time. Thus, they have plenty of opportunities to act out.

When asked how they are doing, pastors addicted to the Internet will usually respond that they are fine. The consequences of being honest about any problems make them afraid of being vulnerable. They have had limited instructions on how to be honest, and few religious bodies make it particularly safe for them to do so. Therefore, they may report at various church meetings that they are accountable to a particular individual, board, committee, or group but in reality they are still only under their own supervision, long ago having learned how to say and do the right thing. This leaves them incredibly vulnerable to authority figures who insist upon accountability.

(8) *Entitlement*—Even while knowing that looking at pornography is against religious teaching, pastors who are addicted have the ability to look past their own moral beliefs about sexuality and convince themselves they are not doing anything wrong. It is tempting to think that, by the nature of their profession, pastors should have a greater awareness of immoral behaviours, but this is simply not the case. If anything, the nature of the pastoral role may contribute to various forms of justification, the most common of which is entitlement. In a narcissistic way, they may believe they are above what God expects of everyone else because of their special status as pastors. They think they deserve to take care of themselves in whatever ways they can, and that God will not mind. Entitlement is also a feature of the anger that ultimately says, 'I am so angry at God that I don't really care what He thinks anyway'. Not caring what God thinks and not trusting Him, addicted clergy can succumb to their pride and arrogance by believing they are entitled to have their needs met, and that no one else but they themselves can satisfy those needs.

(9) *Relationship*—Pastors who have issues such as described are obviously going to struggle with relationships, and particularly with the marriage relationship. Given the role that pastors fill and the image of perfection that many people project onto them, it is not uncommon for the pastor and others around them to blame the spouse for the difficulties the pastor is experiencing. Pastors who look at Internet pornography may be trying to find the 'magic' person who will meet their needs because, they feel their spouse is not doing so.

Theological beliefs about gender roles can also contribute to the blame that might be placed on spouses for the pastors' addiction. In some religious systems it is not uncommon that women are expected to be subservient to the authority of their husbands and submit to any and all requests and demands, including sexual ones. In one instance a group of male church leaders, having found out that the pastor was looking at Internet pornography, presented the pastor's wife with a shopping bag full of sexually provocative female clothing

and told her that if she wore them her husband would not be tempted. Not only does this story illustrate the culpability that is placed upon innocent spouses, but it also points to a form of spiritual abuse in which the spouse is used as an excuse for the pastor's addiction. It is not troubled marriages that lead to Internet addiction, but Internet addiction that has negative effects on marriages.

- (10) *The presence of other addictions*—In a research study of approximately 2,000 sex addicts, Carnes showed that most addicts suffer from other addictions (Carnes, 1991). Fifty percent, for example, were also alcoholics. In a preliminary study, Delmonico and Laaser (2002) surveyed a small group of sexually addicted clergy for the presence of other addictions, and found a much lower number (19%) were addicted to alcohol, while nearly 38% were addicted to food. A far greater number, however, were addicted to work (88%). It is interesting that although most Christian traditions would teach that salvation is based not on works but on grace, these clergy (perhaps in their spiritual immaturity) do not really believe it. The high percentage of Internet-addicted clergy who were also addicted to work might be interpreted as an attempt to justify sexual behavior through overworking; they might be trying to counter-balance their 'bad' addicted behaviour by many 'good' behaviours. However, it is more likely that they are covering their inability to intimately connect with others by working.

Treatment

Much of the treatment concerns for all Internet addicts would also apply to clergy (Carnes, *et al.*, 2001). To treat them differently, as if they have some special status, can serve to fuel their narcissism. However, the dynamics and characteristics of clergy Internet addicts call for emphasis in some areas that can be addressed by the Healthy Sexuality Model (Laaser & Earle, 2001).

Physical dimension

Neuro-chemical tolerance that is a factor in Internet addiction can be reversed if the addict is willing and able to establish a period of total sexual abstinence. This can usually be achieved in 30–90 days, the first 14 of which will be the most difficult. Married clergy should be counselled to negotiate this with his or her spouse. The abstinence period achieves a noticeable detoxification effect. It also begins to reverse a core belief of addicts that sex is their most important need.

Medical concerns should be addressed. Chronic habits of masturbation can lead to medical consequences. In some cases, addicts masturbated so frequently that reparative genital surgery was required. If the Internet addiction escalated to involvement with sexual activity with partners, evaluations for STDs should also be conducted. The chronic fantasy and masturbatory habits associated with Internet addiction can also lead to sexual dysfunctions, for which married couples may need to be treated professionally.

Physical self-care is important for all addicts. Proper rest, nutrition, and exercise must be encouraged. Those who suffer from depression or anxiety may be more prone to Internet addiction and should a dual diagnosis be made, it should be medically treated. There is growing speculation that those who suffer from some forms of Attention Deficit Disorder may also be more vulnerable to sexual addiction and, therefore, the presence of this disorder should be evaluated and treated.

Many of those who turn to the anonymity of the Internet are sexually ignorant of the most basic information about normal sexual response. In the Delmonico and Laaser study (2002) of sexually addicted clergy, only 6% reported any training about healthy sexuality. Therefore, clergy should be directed to educational resources, such as seminars and books, that would address this need.

Behavioural dimension

A programme of accountability must be established for Internet addiction. This can involve traditional 12-step programs for sex addiction. In some areas there may be specific Christian based support group programs. There are a variety of groups and the most important consideration is that they provide daily accountability, encouragement for success, and the opportunity to be intimate with a number of people. Given that multiple addictions might be present in cases of Internet addiction, other programs for those specific addictions can be used. Whatever the support group structure or program is, the person must be supported in replacing negative behaviours with positive ones.

Emotional dimension

In most cases, clergy who are Internet addicts are the victims of some form of trauma and abandonment. They may have issues of emotional, physical, sexual, or spiritual invasion. Trauma leads to attachment or intimacy disorders, arrested development, and a variety of other psychological conditions. These must be treated with trauma-specific individual and group therapies.

Given their theological beliefs and training, clergy may be tempted to be too forgiving too early in the treatment process. Forgiveness is an essential part of the healing process, but it must come only after a time of recognition, emotional catharsis, including anger, and healthy boundary setting. One of the most powerful ways to heal trauma is to find meaning in suffering. Clergy who are able to utilize spiritual resources will be more likely to attach meaning to their experience with addiction.

Relational dimension

Clergy Internet addicts are lonely because they usually lack intimate connections to people who can support them. They, therefore, must be encouraged to develop a network of same-sex friends with whom they can learn how to participate in meaningful relationships. Support groups can be a safe place to meet others and often play a vital part in making connections with others.

Counselling, which encourages true vulnerability and teaches addicts how to express their feelings, is essential. Marriage counselling is also helpful for pastors who are married. Their spouses usually bring deep wounds from early life trauma, and counselling can provide an opportunity for recognizing past wounds and accepting their impact on the spouse's life rather than place a false blame on the Internet addiction. The marriages that have the most optimistic prognoses are those in which the spouse is willing to work equally hard on himself or herself and on the marriage.

Spiritual dimension

Clergy Internet addicts are spiritually immature, and will therefore benefit from spiritual guidance and direction. In many religious traditions, such as Roman Catholicism, individuals are trained to provide this guidance. Through spiritual direction, pastors can be coached to replace the Internet—a false substitute for love, nurturance, affirmation, and acceptance—with spiritual disciplines that promote healthy ways of finding connection with God and with others.

Finally, it is vital for clergy to discover their true calling and purpose in life. They may have entered the ministry out of psychological neediness and fear rather than spiritual dedication and devotion. Spiritual direction must encourage them to find their true talents, passion, and vision. If they decide that they are not meant to be clergy, or if the consequences of their sexual behaviours have resulted in an exclusion from ministry, they will need to seek vocational guidance.

Conclusion

One vital question remains: Are pastors who are or who have been addicted to Internet pornography safe to practice ministry? Since clergy are at the service of others, they must be assessed for the likelihood that they will cross others' boundaries in inappropriate or harmful ways. For some religious bodies, accessing Internet pornography is immediate grounds for dismissal from ministry. For these groups such behaviour indicates that a pastor is not 'fit' to be a moral leader or caregiver. In these situations, some religious bodies would be open to clergy returning to ministry after a period of rehabilitation. Because of current events related to sexual abuse in some churches, there is now some uneasiness about this possibility. Many of these offenders had sought what counselling and treatment were available 30 years or more ago.

Though unsubstantiated by prospective statistical research, Internet addicted clergy who are successfully treated in the ways briefly described in this article may be very safe to stay in or return to the practice of ministry. Successful treatment would indicate that they have demonstrated at least one year of sobriety from the addictive behaviour, have matured spiritually and emotionally, have begun the healing journey from trauma, have participated in ongoing accountability, and have demonstrated or can demonstrate an ability to participate in intimate community fellowship.

It would best serve religious bodies to require addicted clergy to submit to a system of authority that would be able to assess whether the above-listed criteria are met in a continuing way. Clergy who can do this will have gained skills to be tremendously

effective pastors. It is perhaps in the ability, as Jesus said, to love themselves that they will be better able to love others.

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