Dear Alice,

My boyfriend of two years and I are rarely having sex. About once a month, down from twice a week. I have discovered that he is very involved in reading porn mags and also looking at porn online. I confronted him, he said he would try to focus more on me, not porn. Then I found that nothing changed and he was still looking at porn. He told me that he believes that he is addicted to porn. He says that he keeps telling himself not to look at it, but always does. He threw all his porn in the garbage and told me to put a site blocker on his computer. My questions: Can he really be addicted to porn? Are the steps that we have taken to control this problem sufficient? I don't know where to go to get help with this and I am really torn apart. Please tell me where to go from here.

Signed,
focus on us

Answer

Dear focus on us,

Let's put aside the "can he really be addicted to porn" question for a brief moment. Let's focus on the two of you and what is known: First, you and your boyfriend are having much less frequent sex than in the past (and you are, presumably, disappointed about this). Second, your boyfriend told you he believes he is addicted to porn and, despite his best efforts, is finding it hard to abstain. When a person is compulsively doing anything, so much so that it causes her/him distress, interferes with relationships, or otherwise negatively impacts day-to-day life, it's important to consider reaching out for help. This is especially true when attempts to stop the undesired behavior are not successful. One option is for your boyfriend to seek out the expertise of a mental health professional, many of whom can assist with strategies to overcome compulsive behaviors. Alternatively, or in addition, both you and your boyfriend could try therapy together, in the form of couples counseling.

Have you talked with your boyfriend about what he enjoys about porn? How about what it does for him (feelings, emotions, thoughts, etc.) that he may feel like is not getting from other sources in his life? In some situations, compulsive behaviors are linked to other thoughts and needs in the person's life. If your boyfriend is unsure about these issues or not comfortable
discussing them with you directly, a mental health professional is likely a good next step.

Let’s get back to your question about whether your boyfriend could actually be addicted to porn. There’s quite a lot of debate in this area. The general consensus among researchers is that compulsive porn consumption isn’t a true addiction, at least as defined in the traditional clinical sense. This doesn’t mean that your boyfriend’s porn habits aren’t causing him troubles, just that many in the field don’t find it helpful or particularly appropriate to classify this as an addiction. Further, medical professionals seem conflicted on whether or not problematic consumption of pornography should be considered a disorder of its own or a symptom of other disorders; however, it has been generally documented that heavy and compulsive use of pornography occurs, has neurological effects, and can be treated through therapy (and, in some cases, medication). Regardless of an official diagnosis, compulsively viewing pornographic materials so often that it affects other areas of your life, such as your health, job, or relationships, can be a serious problem and something worth exploring.

Lastly, let’s focus on YOU for a few moments. Clarifying your feelings and thoughts about this situation may help you decide how to proceed. So, a few reflective questions for you to ponder: What would an ideal sex life with your boyfriend look like? How often would you like to be intimate? What are your general feelings toward pornography or erotica? If the decrease in sex is related to something else, not his use of porn, will you still view his porn usage negatively? All questions for you to consider as you think about next steps.

Wishing you the best,

Alice!

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Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside)
Mental Health Service (CUMC)

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