Husband into porn and masturbation, but not me

Dear Alice,

I have been married for 4 years now and my husband is very heavy into pornography. He masturbates on a daily basis and doesn't care to have sex with me. I have talked to him about it and he said that it's an addiction. I told him that it hurts me deeply and I have been tempted to cheat on him. In other words, find someone else. Anyway, what do you suggest? I have tried to interest him more by using sex toys, sexy clothing, oral sex, etc. I am an attractive person and a lot of men flirt with me but I just ignore them. I work out at the gym. I asked my husband if he was interested in someone else and he told me no. He works a lot but when he is at home he just wants to watch TV and sleep.

? Attractive but confused

Answer

Dear Attractive but confused,

It's clear that you're genuinely torn on how to move forward with your husband. Marriage, for any couple, has its ups and downs. Throw in sexual tension and lack of intimacy, and it may understandably become more difficult. From your question, it's hard to discern which of the behaviors you find more problematic and hurtful, or if you find both equally so. Regardless, it's clearly causing personal distress and straining your marriage. Unfortunately, there's no simple fix for improving your marriage, as every relationship is different. However, taking some time for further reflection may be in order to determine what you need from this relationship and what compromises you and your husband are willing to make. Additionally, you and your husband could consider individually speaking with mental health professionals, as well as seeking couples counseling (sometimes called marriage therapy?) to work through this issue together. If you find that after reflecting on your needs and going through therapy there isn't much change, you may want to consider whether you remain in this relationship or not.

It's worth mentioning that watching pornography (porn) and masturbating aren't inherently problematic. However, for some people, the way that they're done, rather than the behaviors themselves, can become problematic. In fact, many researchers and medical providers don't consider frequently watching porn or masturbating as addictions or disorders. Rather, they categorize these behaviors as compulsions, which are sometimes treated through counseling or medication. While that's not to say that your husband's behaviors aren't causing tension...
within your marriage, it might help you reframe the current situation. As you mentioned, some people may feel insecure that they’re not meeting their partner’s needs, which can may create a feeling of distance between partners and hinder intimacy even further. In fact, some research indicates that roughly one in ten porn viewers frequently watch videos in a way that interferes with their daily lives and relationships. For partners of those who compulsively watch porn, it’s common for them to report feelings of lower self-esteem [2], decreased relationship quality, less sexual satisfaction, and less overall intimacy. As for masturbation, though it can certainly be healthy [3], even when done very frequently, it’s possible for it to become compulsive and damage relationships by making one partner feel neglected, insufficient, or unwanted. With this information in mind and as you continue to navigate your current situation, some questions to consider (if you haven’t already) may include:

- What does your ideal intimate life with your husband look like?
- Putting your husband’s hurtful behaviors aside, how do you feel about your relationship with him?
- Are these behaviors deal breakers for your relationship? If so, what changes or compromises would you like or need to see in order to stay in the relationship?

It’s also evident that you feel deprived, frustrated, and angry that you aren’t having your intimacy needs met? despite the great deal of effort you’ve put into communicating with your partner and trying to reconnect with him. It’s common for couples to express different desires concerning frequency of sex and can experience lack of or lackluster love-making [4]. It may be particularly useful to ensure you’re not unintentionally shaming him for his behavior but still convey how his actions are hurting you. Some additional questions you can explore (perhaps on your own and then with your husband, if he’s willing) are:

- Was your sex life, his masturbation habits, and porn use ever any different?
- If they were different, what in particular do you think changed compared to the past?
- If they weren’t different, what in particular is causing your concern now compared to the past?

Given the emotional nature of this issue, you might find it helpful to speak with someone about your concerns, either individually or as a couple. In an individual session, you may have an opportunity to process your own complex emotions (such as fear, anger, frustration, and sadness) before sharing them with your husband. If both of you are interested in couples counseling, a trained professional could guide you through a process of communicating your respective expectations for the marriage, setting realistic goals, and making fair compromises for the future. If you want to attend couples counseling but are unsure of your husband’s thoughts about it, it could be helpful to talk with him about whether couples therapy is something he’d be open to try. You could start the conversation by calmly revisiting his behaviors, reminding him that you love him and these behaviors are hurting you and your marriage, and express a need to strengthen or rebuild your relationship. Then, you could mention that you’re interested in couples therapy and think it could help the two of you reconnect. During this process, it’s best that both you and your husband try to be understanding, caring, honest, and validating towards each other.

Since marriage is a partnership, it’ll take the cooperation of both partners to address concerns and move forward together. However, it’s crucial to keep in mind that neither of you can control the other’s actions or feelings. It sounds like you’ve already put forth a great deal of effort to start this process by communicating with your husband and trying to find some ways you can strengthen your marriage. But, if your husband resists or refuses to
compromise in a way that reduces the distress and neglect you’re feeling, you may consider if this marriage is still healthy, rewarding, and meeting your needs. While couples counseling is certainly an option, so too may be taking a break, separating, or seeking a divorce. It’s up for you to decide whether or not to stay with him.

Here’s to hoping that you find some comfort and peace of mind.

Alice!

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Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [14]
Mental Health Service (CUMC) [15]
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