

Partnered Sex is in Trouble

By

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Don't get me wrong. People are having plenty of sex – that will never stop.

But passionate, intimate sex is being diminished amongst younger generations growing up in an all-digital world where porn provides an easy, constant flow of self-gratification.

We, as sex therapists, are seeing more couples in their 20s and early 30's, in which the woman describes a lack of desire from her partner and the man expresses a lack of sexual interest in the woman and is perplexed by it.

This blog post will focus on a heterosexual millennial (AKA Generation Y) population and address the question "What is happening to these young men?" Let's look at it historically. This is the first generation that has been bombarded by Internet porn imagery from the moment they became curious about sex.

As teenagers they most likely had their own cell phones and computers in their room -- the access to Internet porn was readily available, and contained an endless variety of sexual scenarios. As independent adults, they had even more access. This unending exposure has likely shaped how they envision women acting in bed, what women want, how sex is performed, and how they need to behave as sex partners.

This Internet porn usage occurred at a critical developmental age. Couple that with suggestive and explicit music lyrics, sexting, webcamming, racy snap chat photos, and ubiquitous on-demand social media... all of which can produce a powerful dopamine high and deliver immediate gratification. This generation has found its drug of choice.

Now that these male millennials are in the 20's and early 30's, their experiences with porn consumption may have outnumbered their sexual experiences with partners. Upon questioning, many of these men admit a powerful attachment to Internet porn. Their partners, upon learning about the dominance and frequency of this behavior, often feel hurt and rejected. The irony is that these couples will commonly describe their relationship as being solid, with love and mutual caring.

Leonard Sax, a Maryland based family physician who authored the book "Boys Adrift," says he sees more and more young men in his office asking for Viagra and Cialis. His hypothesis is that constant access to porn has desensitized them - they

can't get it up or feel satisfied with live girls.

An article in New York Magazine last year described how young men have come to expect the "Porn Star Experience" from women, and find themselves turned off when the real thing proves less satisfactory than the video version. Many men prefer masturbation to "real" sex. As Naomi Wolf wrote in New York magazine (2015): "Porn is not making men into raving beasts. On the contrary, the onslaught of porn is responsible for deadening male libido in relation to real women and leading men to see fewer and fewer women as 'porn-worthy'."

Jean Twenge, author of "Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled- and More Miserable," teamed up with Ryne Sherman and Brooke Wills to study Millennial sexual behavior. They published their findings in the Archives of Sexual Behavior, concluding that this group is having significantly less partnered sex than Gen X'ers born in the 1960's. Why? They posit several theories such as fear of contracting sex-related diseases; delayed markers of adulthood (e.g., living in the parental home post-college - only 26% of Millennials aged 18-32 were married in 2014 compared to 36% of Gen X'ers in 1979 and 48% of Boomers); the influence of technology, in that they have moved their social lives online rather than face-to-face with peers.

Ramifications? Young men, privy to porn and endless dating apps, are often less driven to seek "in-person" sexual partners. For many, masturbation takes precedence, as does ambivalence about dating. Convenience and a cocoon of safety in front of the computer supersede mutuality, intimacy, and sexual comfort with a woman. Some men face erectile and ejaculatory problems as anxiety with a partner takes over. It is simply easier to "do it" alone rather than deal with the fear of letting a partner down or the worry about being "man enough" in bed.

"What is to be done? The sexual retraining process of gradually learning to give and receive pleasure can help a man gain confidence in his sexual performance. It also focuses on the capacity and desire for sexual intimacy with a partner. In order to facilitate that, the first step is to re-prioritize, diminish, or stop porn use. This is done, with the therapist's guidance, via gradual cessation of porn masturbation and introduction of both fantasy and focus on physical sensations of arousal as replacements. This intervention has the intent of resolving erectile concerns as well.

The next step is to transfer sexual energy to a partner-based relationship. Anxiety around attachment to and closeness with a female partner are initially explored. Treatment then focuses on increasing the man's comfort in expressing himself both verbally and physically in the presence of a partner, e.g., in discussions of mutual likes/dislikes in sexual play or the freedom to talk about sexual vulnerabilities ("will I be good enough for you?").

Sexual anxiety around performance and closeness with another is treated with a

variety of classic anxiety management techniques such as cognitive reframing of negative assumptions/beliefs, mindfulness, distraction, and use of soothing imagery. As stated earlier, helping the man learn to consistently focus on his bodily sensations and arousal is an especially useful tool.

Finally, use of language that stresses the man's perceived strengths, prowess, and potency (sexual and otherwise) is a powerful aphrodisiac!

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