CONQUERING MASTURBATION/SEXUALLY ADDICTIVE BEHAVIORS

Masturbation, the use of pornography, and sexually acting out, are in some respects as psychologically and physiologically intoxicating and addicting as the use of some types of drugs. There is a myth that only “bad” people become involved in these kinds of behaviors. The irony is that even the best people who try as hard to be good as anyone, find it challenging to be free from these habits once they are established.

Many “experiment” with these kinds of sexual behaviors around the beginning of puberty. Some continue until a “habit” is formed. A certain number further continue until “addictive” patterns are present. For those who merely experiment, simple spiritual and behavioral interventions seem to work well. However, for those who develop habitual or addictive patterns, further interventions are necessary. These will be discussed in more detail later.

Most people desperately wish that there would be a “quick fix” or an “easy solution.” However, there are some emotional and spiritual keys that must be understood and applied before a long-term healing of this problem will happen. The following ideas and concepts are to help a person win the struggle with these habitual or even addictive patterns.

EMOTIONAL KEYS

Real vs. Counterfeit Intimacy

Each of us has a strong desire to enjoy deep intimacy with people around us. Some wrongly assume that intimacy is defined as mere sexual expression. True intimacy is much more than such a fragmented view. Intimacy (meaning: deep closeness and true connection) includes emotional intimacy, social intimacy, spiritual intimacy, physical intimacy, as well as sexual intimacy. All of these elements form a whole package of true intimacy.

Intimacy is also a “two way street.” It includes the sharing of these various dimensions of intimacy between people. It is not merely one person opening his heart and soul to another with no reciprocation.

Unfortunately, there are people who begin to use counterfeit forms of intimacy, e.g. masturbation, pornography use, or other types of sexual acting out, in an attempt to fill that deep need inside. These counterfeits never meet this need yet are so addictive in their nature that they are hard to resist. These types of stimuli to our brain develop strong and deep “pathways” which are challenging, though possible to change.

The core of this addiction problem is often an intimacy deficit. It is not just a “sexual problem.” A key part of the solution to overcoming these sexually addictive behaviors is to further develop the capacity to have truly intimate relationships with others. Some people avoid intimacy with others, and spend long hours using computers or playing computer games rather than meeting their needs through fulfilling real relationships.

This intimacy issue tends to be a blind spot for some who assume that because they have friends or acquaintances that they are adequate in this area. Often those around these people see these deficits much more clearly than the person them self.
SOLUTIONS

False Solution: Hold Your Breath Model
Most people make a very focused effort to overcome these sexually compulsive behaviors. Willpower becomes the sole tool in trying to combat these deeply rooted patterns. For example, a young man might say to himself: “Ok, that’s it! I’m simply not going to masturbate (or look at pornography) anymore.” They determine to be more disciplined; to try harder! It is as though they vow to hold their breathe so that they will never “inhale” any of these damaging behaviors ever again. They take a big gulp of air, and hold it as long as they can. But all the willpower in the world may not prevent them from eventually “gasping” for air again (slipping back into a compulsive behavior). This can be discouraging to the person because he has tried with all of his might to stop the behavior. He may wonder why it is that he could give his very best effort only to fall short. He may assume that he is truly broken, perverted, evil, bad, or a hopeless case.

True Solution: The BEST-BELT Model
A true solution to overcoming these compulsive patterns in a persons life would be to learn to understand the role of “triggers.” Every time a person masturbates or accesses pornography, there were some triggers that set it in motion before the sexual acting out event occurred. In most cases, acting out has more to do with triggers than other false notions such as “I am just a bad or perverted person.”

When a person can become acutely aware of these triggers at the moment it happens, he can then take himself off of “cruise control” and reclaim his agency to choose emotionally and spiritually healthy behaviors.

To illustrate this concept regarding triggers, a person must realize that there are times of vulnerability. The more aware you are of these times, the better job you will do to make conscious decisions that will help you. You will no longer be on “cruise control” when it comes to these addictive behaviors.

Two acronym’s might help you remember these vulnerable times and triggers. First, the acronym BEST. This stands for Body Care, strong Emotions, Stress, and Tired. The second acronym is BELT. This stands for Bored, low Esteem, Loneliness, or Trials.

Let me summarize these concepts. When you are not taking care of your body the way you should with food or exercise or you may be physically ill, you may be more vulnerable. Likewise, when you find yourself with penned up emotions like anger, sadness, or frustration, and are not doing well at expressing them in a healthy way, you are more at risk to slip. When you are facing extra stress in your life, or when you are staying up too late at night or sleeping away the day, it may result in you feeling run down which would increase your vulnerability.

Likewise, when you might be bored, have low self esteem, feel alone or are having relationship troubles, or are experiencing trials that are wearing you down, you may want to be acutely aware of the fact that these are vulnerable times when these habitual and addictive patterns tend to resurface.

3 Step Intervention
Here is how you use this trigger model. Instead of going into “cruise control” and almost unconsciously slipping into a sexually compulsive behavior, there are 3 simple steps to change this process. We will utilize another acronym to aid you in remembering: ATM

STEP ONE: (ADMIT) what you are feeling. Right in the moment of feeling the urge to act
out, it must literally be verbalized. In other words, you should say out loud to yourself if you are in a place to do so (or at least verbalize it in your mind), something like, “I’m feeling like masturbating right now.” The urge has now been taken from an unconscious to a conscious awareness. Now you can “act and not be acted upon.”

STEP TWO: (TRIGGERS) Next, a person should ask himself, “What is triggering this feeling?” You then go through the BEST BELT triggers with a fine tooth comb to see which one, or combination of triggers, is setting all this in motion. This means that you must have these triggers memorized for instantaneous recall and use.

STEP THREE: (MEET THE NEEDS) You then should ask yourself, “What can I do about my stress (or which ever trigger you have identified as the culprit) right now. Find a healthy way to meet the need. You now have a choice regarding your action, instead of feeling like you “just ended up doing it.” You are at a “decision point” in which you can choose your behaviors instead of being on auto pilot.

Part of meeting these normal needs may be to learn to tolerate some degree of distress. It is unrealistic to expect that there is no stress, boredom, pain or turmoil in your life. Learn to deal with it!

**The Compulsive Cycle**

The concepts that you are about to learn are critical insights into your problem and go hand in hand with the important concepts about “Triggers.” A “Compulsive cycle” might be defined as a “self-reinforcing cycle of feelings and actions.” The compulsive cycle that likely pertains to your situation has four steps.

The compulsive cycle begins with what we call “Feelings of Isolation.” You might have feelings of loneliness, differentness, a sense of being abandoned, or a belief that you are unworthy or incapable of being loved. It feels like an emptiness that needs to be filled.

You may have stumbled across some activity that in reality did not fill this void, yet for a time produced physical or emotional sensations strong enough to block your awareness of emotional isolation such as masturbation or the use of pornography. Because these actions involve the gratification of some immediate appetite at the expense of your long-term well-being, we have labeled them “Actions of Self-indulgence.”

The increasing loss of self-control and the deterioration of life-style that will begin to accompany this growing behavioral addiction leads into the next step on the compulsive cycle: “Feelings of Self-hatred.” After the action of self-indulgence, you likely experience an intense emotional let-down, characterized by regret, sadness, discouragement, guilt, and intense shame.

Feelings of self-hatred move you to the next step in the cycle, that of “Actions of Self-concealment.” The reaction to shame is almost always a life-style of deception designed to hide the addiction. More and more lies are required to disguise the compulsive cycle as it progresses. After a point, you may have developed a kind of double identity: a “good” self and a “bad” self. The bad self is often seen by you as the “real” self.

The very real emotional and spiritual isolation caused by your self-concealment adds to the original conditions that made you feel alone and isolated, and the cycle begins again. Sharing this problem openly with your bishop, a parent, or a close friend, often feels completely overwhelming.

In review, 1) Feelings of isolation are followed by 2) Actions of self-indulgence, which feed into 3) Feelings of self-hatred, which promote 4) Actions of self-concealment, which lead into 1) Feelings of further isolation. The cycle goes on and on.

Changing this cycle is critical. However, merely trying to just stop feeling isolated or doing acts of indulgence, usually does not permanently stop the cycle. You must replace each feeling or
action step in the cycle with an emotionally and spiritually healthy feeling or action, thus creating a new cycle that promotes 1) **emotional connection** with others, 2) actions of **selflessness**, 3) feelings of **self-worth**, and 4) actions of **disclosure**. You will notice that this new healthy cycle is filled with **intimacy** with others. You can’t do this alone.

**BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS**

**Visual Reminders**

It may be helpful to use visual reminders to help you keep various interventions in the forefront of your mind. For example, some find it helpful to use a yellow post it note with the acronyms ATM and BEST BELT on them, and to place it in the center of your computer screen. Each time you turn on the computer, you will see the note and have to move it to the bottom of the monitor before continuing. This immediately reminds you of your goals.

Likewise, posting other statements or reminders in other area’s of your home or workplace might be helpful to keep you from slipping back into cruise control.

**Common Sense**

It becomes very important to identify the feelings and circumstances that might “trigger” an urge to masturbate or use pornography. We have already discussed BEST and BELT. It is also important to evaluate where and when you are most tempted. Are you alone in your bathroom, taking a shower, getting home late at night from work, spending time alone on the Internet? Examine closely the places and times you are “triggered.” Use common sense to put in place a plan to minimize these kinds of experiences. Remember that you won’t have to overcome a temptation that you have avoided.

**Boundary List**

Set up boundaries (things you just should not do; lines you shouldn’t cross). Have a piece of paper, a 3 by 5 card, or a spot in your planner, that you can carry with you that will have your personal list of boundaries. The items on your list should include things to avoid, like: certain places, certain types of movies, certain tv shows, any pornographic sources, long showers, being alone at certain times, avoiding certain people, etc. Your list should be very specific.

**Temptation Plan**

Create a written plan for handling temptation. For example, you might write, “When temptation comes I will: 1) immediately say a prayer and ask the Lord for strength, 2) try to take it just 1 day at a time (only worry about today, even just getting through this hour), 3) call a friend, 4) get out of the house or apartment, 5) get busy on a task, etc. Your plan should be very specific and include people, places and support to help you.

**Visual Victories**

It is important to learn to use your ability to visualize or fantasize in a more appropriate and productive way. We are taught that, “As a man thinketh, so is he.” Therefore it becomes critical that you learn to visualize the enactment of your plans to overcome the habit of masturbation or other sexually addictive behaviors. You must learn to visualize your victories. You should practice seeing in your mind what you will do in various situations to be victorious. Play it over and over again in your mind. See every detail, every color, everything as it will be. You will need to rehearse many different scenarios to be prepared. Learn that there is always an option other than
giving in to a sexually addictive behavior or thought, a Plan B so to speak. There is a space in-between the stimulus (the trigger that sets your addictive pattern in motion) and the response (the behavior you do). This is a decision point for you. God calls it AGENCY. You can resist temptation, even if Satan has been successful in convincing you otherwise.

**Mentor**

It may help you to choose a friend who can support you with the boundaries and plan you are putting in place. A friend can help you as you “check in” when you are doing well, or if you are struggling. Their job is not to replace your conscience, or to be your only source of motivation, but rather to help you to be accountable and to feel supported in your efforts. Having a mentor helps you to break the tendency to “conceal” your actions. Disclosure is one of the keys to combating this problem.

**Attitude**

Maintaining progress can be easier if you maintain an optimistic attitude. For example, you’ll feel more positive if you say, “I was victorious 3 days this week!” This is much better than the pessimistic view of, “I blew it 4 days this week!” This is a journey much like a hike up a gradually sloped mountain. A slip is not good, but we don’t fall to the bottom of the mountain. We have merely slipped a few feet backwards. We need to hop up, dust ourselves off, and begin again up the mountain. You will truly get to the summit at some point.

**Discard Pornography**

What may trigger sexual feelings for one person may not do so for another. For example, it is obvious that pornographic magazines or videos should not be kept anywhere in your belongings. However, some other more subtle kinds of pornography may be tempting for you. Certain advertisements in newspapers or magazines, some posters, certain TV shows or movies, etc., all may “trigger” your old instincts to masturbate or sexually act out. Some of these may not be a temptation to others, but you may have a vulnerability to them and will need to avoid them. If you have anything that “triggers” you, destroy them immediately. Either get rid of the Internet, or use “filtering” systems to help. Move the computer into an area of high traffic so that you are not alone while you are on-line. If you need a mentor or friend to help, act now.

**SPIRITUAL KEYS**

**Spiritual Solutions**

It would be a mistake to take too limited of a view of what constitutes spiritual solutions. We are taught in the church to care for ourselves and our families on several levels including: spiritual, emotional, intellectual, social, physical, and temporal. All of these are included in the gospel and teachings are extensive in the scriptures about each of them. It is tempting to only use narrow spiritual interventions such as: “You simply need to read your scriptures more.” Or, “you need to pray more intently and frequently.” Though these and other spiritual interventions are part of a foundation upon which you can build, there are other realms of divine truth (intellectual, emotional, physical, and social) which must be included in the solution. It is often these other realms of spirituality that are neglected when a person tries to overcome these behaviors.

There are some traditional spiritual interventions that might be helpful. If possible and appropriate, spend time at the temple or on the temple grounds feeling of the Spirit of the Lord. Watch a church video or listen to uplifting music. Sing a hymn or read your scriptures. Devour the
Conference sermons from the leaders of the Church. Lose yourself in service to others. Be a wonderful home or visiting teacher. Be prayerful about specific questions and desires of your heart. Meditate or ponder about your life. Review your Patriarchal blessing. Counsel with your bishop and follow his counsel with faith. Receive priesthood blessings as needed.

Christ’s atonement applies to you just like anyone else. His atonement offers you both cleansing and strengthening powers. Persist in your efforts to put in place these spiritual and behavioral solutions. See this as a distance race and not a 100 meter sprint. God may be pleased with the direction you are headed, even if there are times when progress briefly slows down or slips back. Perfection is an eternal process.

**Conclusion**

Your Father in Heaven will not abandon you in this battle. You have the divine capacity to overcome these problems. In a powerful statement of doctrine, Elder Boyd K. Packer said, “It is contrary to the order of heaven for any soul to be locked into compulsive immoral behavior with no way out.” Do you understand that doctrine? You can change! It is possible, though it may not be easy. As long as we understand that we are truly the spirit children of a loving Father in Heaven, with all the divine capacities that affords us, we know with a certainty that we can become as He is.

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**Checklist of Possible Assignments**

___ Visual Reminders

___ Boundary List

___ Temptation List

___ Trigger List

___ Identify a Mentor/Friend

___ Discarded All Types of Pornography

___ Have practiced Visual Victory each day for a Week

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**BEST, BELT**

What can I do about taking care of my BODY instead of acting out?

1. 
2.
3.
4.
What can I do about my upsetting EMOTIONS instead of acting out?
1.
2.
3.
4.
What can I do about my STRESS instead of acting out?
1.
2.
3.
4.
What can I do to deal with my TIREDNESS instead of acting out?
1.
2.
3.
4.
What can I do to deal with my BOREDOM instead of acting out?
1.
2.
3.
4.
What can I do with my poor self-ESTEEM/self-worth instead of acting out?
1.
2.
3.
4.
What can I do about my LONELINESS instead of acting out?
1.
2.
3.
4.
What can I do to deal with my TRIALS instead of acting out?
1.
2.
3.
4.