

## Adult pornography

### Objectives

This module will help you explore and understand:

- your use of legal pornography, which we will call adult pornography
- why you look at adult pornography
- whether your use of adult pornography is a problem
- techniques to reduce or stop using adult pornography

### Adult pornography

If you are viewing legal adult pornography then this is your choice and we are not here to shame you for using it or to tell you to stop.

This self-help section will encourage you to think about whether viewing legal adult pornography is harmful for you.

Some people we work with connect viewing legal adult pornography to their illegal online sexual behaviour. Some of the reasons for this may become evident as you work through this module, particularly when you look at the section on drivers.

### What is pornography?

Pornography is sexual content designed to sexually excite people. It can be pictures, videos, written stories, or other forms. It often shows sexual body parts, people having sex, foreplay, or masturbation.

Legal pornography can show one or more adults (aged 18 or older) having sex or engaging in other sexual behaviours. The adults must consent to these sexual behaviours, to being filmed or photographed, and to the videos or pictures being distributed.

### Is it OK to view adult pornography?

In Australia, if you are aged 18 or over you can legally view adult pornographic material.

Before the internet, people might have gone to a shop or a cinema to pay for adult pornography. But now it is easily and freely available online. This reduces any social embarrassment, inhibition, or shame that may have been felt when buying adult pornography face-to-face. As a result, the amount of people viewing adult pornography and the amount of pornography they view has grown. Some people view hours of adult pornography before they notice how much time has passed.

### Is adult pornography good or bad?

Lots of men who we work with talk about pornography being good or bad and think that viewing mainstream pornography is OK because it is legal. But they also talk about feelings of shame after viewing it due to the graphic content viewed, the hours spent viewing it or due to watching adult pornography over other important events (e.g., a family gathering).

Adult pornography can be harmful to some of the people shown in it. Some adult pornography actors (porn stars) will have thought about their decision to be involved and given consent, performing in an environment they feel safe and looked after.

But others might have thought there was no other option, been unwilling, forced, threatened, or even been through sex trafficking. With amateur footage, you might be viewing people who give consent to show themselves sexually online, but you could also be watching something that wasn't supposed to be shared, such as revenge porn. It is impossible to guarantee the people you are watching have given consent.

## **When does viewing adult pornography become a problem?**

People who think that the way they look at adult pornography is out of their control might say it is like an addiction to alcohol or drugs. They might have some of the same problems, for example:

- feeling preoccupied with adult pornography itself or thinking about searching for it
- experiencing withdrawal, craving the adult pornography, or finding it difficult to stop thinking about it
- unable to stop or reduce time spend viewing adult pornography, eventually spending more time viewing it, searching for it, or thinking about it
- becoming desensitised and needing to view more, or more extreme adult pornography over time to experience the same effects
- continuing even though there are negative consequences, including for relationships or mental health, or when you begin breaking the law by viewing extreme or abusive imagery.

## **The impact of adult pornography on your life**

Everybody is different. Some people can view adult pornography without experiencing any problems or negative effects.

But for many people, adult pornography can have a negative impact on their real-world life.

For example, it can:

- affect relationships by creating distance between people. You might find it easier to spend time alone online
- breakdown an intimate, sexual relationship with a partner. Adult pornography can lead users towards an easier way of getting regular sexual pleasure
- dull a person's senses to real-world experiences. Some people might put pressure on their partner to copy what they've seen online, creating tension and resentment
- lead to pornography-induced erectile dysfunction, which is when it is no longer possible to be aroused by the person in front of you
- affect your attitudes about what sexual behaviour between adults you think is acceptable in the real world
- impact your wellbeing and mental health. Some people end up prioritising time with pornography at the expense other aspects of their wellbeing (e.g., sleep, exercise, hobbies, socialising), which can affect day-to-day functioning at work or in your family life, and lead to feelings of anxiety and depression.

## Exercise 1: Is adult pornography affecting your real world?

These questions will help you work out whether your adult pornography use is affecting your real world.

- In what ways might have/has adult pornography changed the way you view yourself?
- How has it impacted your relationships (both sexual and non-sexual)?
- How has it affected your work, sleep, and ability to look after yourself?
- How might adult pornography have impacted your view of the world and other people?
- Has your use of adult pornography contributed to you being in trouble with the law?
- Is your use of adult pornography changing the way you deal with life problems?
- What effect does it have on other areas of your life that are important to you?

## Why do I use adult pornography?

To work out whether use of adult pornography is a problem for you, it can be helpful to consider what motivates and triggers you to use it. Some reasons for using pornography are:

- For sexual gratification
- Exposure to new things
- To explore sexuality
- To escape the real world
- As a sexual outlet or to reduce sexual tension
- To stop feeling bored
- To feel better

Think about your circumstances and why you look at adult pornography.

## What triggers pornography use?

A trigger is also called a cue, prompt or call to action. Triggers are what come before thoughts, feelings and behaviour and can lead to a response or change in emotion and behaviour. Immediate triggers to access pornography can be internal (e.g., feelings or thoughts) or external (e.g., environmental cues or situations).

Some triggers are:

- Emotions themselves, for example, feeling bored, or living with a constant feeling of stress or anxiety.
- Caused by something that happens, for example, having a bad day at work or an argument with a partner.
- Come from situations, for example, sitting in the room where you'd usually look at adult pornography.
- Come from habits, for example, viewing adult pornography at the same time of day.

Some triggers are pleasant (e.g., seeing an attractive adult and feeling aroused), others are less pleasant (e.g., stress, sadness, loneliness, frustration, anger, boredom) and others more neutral (e.g., sitting in room where you'd usually use pornography).

How these triggers impact pornography use will be different for different people. For some people, unpleasant feelings can trigger some people to go online and view sexual content to make themselves feel better or help them cope. They try to replace the unpleasant feelings with more pleasant feelings of excitement, arousal, and adventure.

This might feel like it helps in the short term, but using pornography in this way is a bit like a sticking plaster – it is only a temporary fix and the issues behind your negative feelings might still be there.

It is important to remember that we are in control of our own behaviour, even if it sometimes doesn't feel like it. Even if something has triggered you to have a strong emotional reaction, you still have a choice of how to make yourself feel better. You have a choice whether to go online and view pornography, or whether you [manage your feelings in a different way](#).

## Drivers

Many people have problems with limiting the amount of time they spend viewing adult pornography or how often they view it.

This might be because of drivers. Drivers are psychological factors in your mind that make it harder to control behaviour.

When viewing pornography online, you could see hundreds of different images and videos within minutes. This has a powerful impact on your brain and can make it very difficult for you to control your online behaviour. They affect the way you view adult pornography and your feelings while you are viewing it.

Here are a few examples of how your brain can be affected.

## Needing new and different things

Your brain loves new things. Over time your brain can get bored if you keep viewing the same type of adult pornography. It doesn't have the same effect because it isn't new. To get the same level of sexual arousal, you might need to keep viewing new things.

For people who have viewed a lot of adult pornography, this often means they start pushing boundaries and view things that they might have found too extreme, odd or distasteful before. Seeing or thinking about new and arousing pornography releases a chemical called dopamine into your body, which makes you feel happy and rewarded.

This is because all species, including humans, evolved to try to reproduce so that they don't go extinct. So your modern brain is linking pornography with its aim to reproduce – ejaculating as many times as possible to impregnate as many females as possible.

## The bikini effect

Research shows that when men feel sexually aroused they make more impulsive decisions, behave recklessly and look for short-term rewards rather than thinking about long-term consequences. This is sometimes called the bikini effect. It can have a bigger effect on people who are unhappy because they have less to lose or more to escape. There is less research into the effect on women.

This means that when you are online and feeling sexually aroused, you might be more likely to take risks, push boundaries and think more about the immediate rewards than the long-term consequences of your online viewing. You might be less likely to think about the negative impact your viewing habits could be having on your life.

Sexual arousal also reduces your ability to think about other people (you have less empathy) so you might be more able to watch films with violence or abuse without feeling uncomfortable or concerned about the people in them.

Advertisers know this, which is why they sometimes use suggestive or sexual pictures when selling things to men.

### The slot machine effect

Slot machines offer random rewards. A gambler will keep gambling even if they rarely or never win because the joy is in the anticipation of winning.

Thinking about pornography, the pleasure might eventually be less from what you see and more from what you hope to see. You might be rewarded from time to time with a particularly arousing image or film, but for the most part, you may be spending hours online in a state of expectation, and keep searching because you think that there must be something better out there.

### Flow Theory

When viewing and collecting pornography you might find that time flows more quickly and you don't focus on your usual worries. You might lose awareness of what else is going on in life and feel like you're in a bubble. After you stop viewing pornography, you might not have any clear idea of what you thought or felt while you were online.

This is sometimes called a state of flow. There is something that feels good about doing activities that hold your attention. Dopamine is released when your brain is active and focused on a rewarding task. This can help understand why the behaviour continues and you might be drawn to it in the future to escape from life's stresses.

### How do drivers affect you?

- Do you view more extreme material, for longer, without having knowing why you were doing so once you stop being online?
- Do you feel as if you were acting out of character or feel ashamed or numb about what you viewed, but still look for it next time you are online?
- Do you feel that the 'online you' is very different from the 'offline you'?

Most people don't know or think about drivers. But the people who make pornography do.

This is why pornography sometimes contains violence, coercion and unusual acts because the makers need to find new things to keep their audience.

**But, remember, you do have control over your behaviour - recognising your drivers is important in helping you understand what makes controlling some behaviours more challenging. Identifying your drivers and effective strategies to manage these will make controlling your behaviour easier.**

### Exercise 2: Thinking about your own behaviour

Below are some questions to help you think about your pornography use.

- What type of pornography do you view now?
- Have your opinions changed about it?
- Would you have viewed that type of pornography a few years ago?

- Which drivers do you relate to?
- How does this help you to understand how your pornography use has changed?
- What can you do differently now that you are aware of your behaviour and triggers?

The next section will consider ways that you can manage your pornography use.

## **Managing your adult pornography use**

### **Practical changes**

If you decide it would be helpful for you to reduce your use of adult pornography, or stop looking at it completely, then here are some changes you can make to help.

- If you live with other people, only go online or use your phone, tablet or computer in a shared space, for example the kitchen or living room. Knowing that other people can see your screen can reduce how likely you are to look at adult pornography.
- If you usually use your phone, tablet or laptop late at night, don't take it to bed with you or charge it in the bedroom.
- Set restrictions or activate parental controls on your internet connection. This can stop you from being able to connect to websites with adult pornography (e.g., Net Nanny, or Remojo).
- If someone knows you are trying to reduce your adult pornography use, ask them to help. Some apps allow a trusted friend or family member to see your internet history, which can motivate you to avoid adult pornography (e.g., accountable2u, covenant eyes)

There are a range of techniques to help reduce or stop use of pornography, if this is a problem for you. Check out our information on [fantasy management](#).

### **Relaxation techniques**

Using mindfulness, meditation and guided visualisation can help manage emotional triggers to online pornography use. Use a technique that works for you, which you can plan and rehearse in advance. [Find out more about relaxation techniques](#).

### **Exercise 3: Keep an online use diary**

Over the next week, we encourage you to keep a diary, completing the diary each time you go online. You can have more than one diary entry each day.

Sometimes it can be difficult to know what triggered your feelings before you went online. It can help to think about what you were doing or whether something specific happened before you went online. You might need to spend some time reflecting on this.

See website for downloadable template.

- Are there any patterns between how you were feeling before, during, and after you were viewing adult pornography online?
- Are there any patterns between your feelings and the length of time you spent online, or what you did online?
- What triggers can I identify?
- What are some things I could do instead of watching pornography?
- What have you learned from completing this exercise?

If you want to understand more about why you use pornography to solve problems, you may find it helpful to visit our [understanding problems module](#).

## **Self-care and tips to view less adult pornography**

Feeling negative effects when you give up pornography is normal. When you view adult pornography, dopamine makes you feel good, so you might feel the opposite to this when you give up.

When you first give up, it might be very tempting to view just a bit of pornography. Don't test yourself. If you give in to these temptations, you might find that you view more and more and the habit has reformed.

- Try your best to power through. The part of your brain that responds strongly to pornography also responds to other things that make you feel good, for example talking with friends, playing a sport. Those dopamine hits might not be as strong and quick, but eventually, they will be more satisfying and less harmful.
- Try to fill your time with other things. If you feel bored, you might be more likely to give in to your urges to view adult pornography. Try to fill your time away from the internet, maybe with a new hobby.
- Write a list of the people and things that are important to you. Put this list next to your computer as a way to put you off viewing adult pornography.
- Learn new ways to manage unpleasant feelings. When you are feeling stressed or low, you are more likely to give in to urges.
- Be honest about what you lose out on when you stop viewing pornography. Are there other ways to make up for these losses?
- Eat well and sleep. Eating processed foods and lack of sleep can impact our mood, our resilience, and how we process information, which affects how well we can cope with situations.
- Exercise. It is a good distraction and makes you feel better, and also releases dopamine.
- Be kind to yourself. Most people don't get it right the first time and lapses are very common. The importance is on not giving up and entering a full relapse, but to learn from those experiences.
- Think of some statements that will help you tap into your motivation to continue to reduce/stop this behaviour. These could be connected to your personal values or how stopping the behaviour will benefit you and others. For example, "I want to be a loving and present partner to my significant other."

*Please return to the website and complete the **Reflection** questions at the end of this module.*