

0.1 Chapter 3: relationships: Sex

0.2 Sex

1 On Porn Addiction

It could seem like a strange topic to be discussing. It doesn't come up much in polite company.

Yet we know that as many as 35 per cent of US and UK males under 50 will be struggling with it to a degree they themselves find somewhat dispiriting in reflexive moments. In its most extreme form, using up hour after hour, it starts to sap relationships, motivation and sheer well-being.



The first move is to insist that the problem is neither ridiculous nor unfathomable. It starts with a simple design flaw in our brains: brains that evolved to respond powerfully to stimuli like sexual attraction or sugar in conditions where these were very scarce indeed.

These brains just never acquired a capacity for self-control commensurate with the temptations offered by the modern, technologically enhanced world. Levels of discipline that were at one point entirely adequate to deal with sexual opportunities in the small villages of the East African grasslands just can't cope with galleries filled with images of millions of highly fertile well-proportioned digitised naked people. Why ever do anything other than look?



The problem we have around porn is identical to that we can develop around food: brains that were geared to take quick advantage of the occasional presence of something pleasurable are now defenceless before the boundless artificial sweeteners turned out by our remorseless technologies.

People don't spend hours looking at pornography on the screen because they are bad, but because the porn is so very good, that is devilishly well-adapted to breaking down all arguments against it.



Crucially in all cases of addiction, its never that we are simply greedy or lusty or depraved...

The real reason is always more poignant and more worthy of sympathy: we get addicted because were sad.

The business of living is so desperately hard, relationships are so challenging, work often so unfulfilling or boring, family dynamics so tricky and the capacity for honest, kindly conversation so restricted, we may through no particular fault of our own fall into despondency of a kind that leaves us extremely vulnerable to the sudden intense highs offered by short films about lesbians trying anal or plate after plate of iced buns.



What we call addiction invariably has the same structure: a difficult life + a very intense diversionary pleasure + a technologically-induced way of increasing that pleasure to a pitch which breaks our minds natural muscles of self control. The cause of porn addiction isnt, therefore, porn: its careers that are fraught and relationships where we cant get our point across and essays that are devilishly tricky to author.

The real cure to addiction is hence simple in structure: to find something nicer to pursue than the thing were addicted to.



But of course, that's going to be very hard, for comparable highs are not widely to hand. Yet, a chief immediate enemy is shame, which reinforces the feeling of low-self worth that helps inspire the addiction in the first place. It's therefore helpful to insist on a few points:

that addiction is normal

that it's not our fault: it's that of a brain that wasn't made to cope with the temptations before us.

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that there's no need for self-disgust: the addicted are almost in the majority, though we'd never know it.

that we should draw courage from the confessions of others.

that we should acknowledge the sadness in our lives.

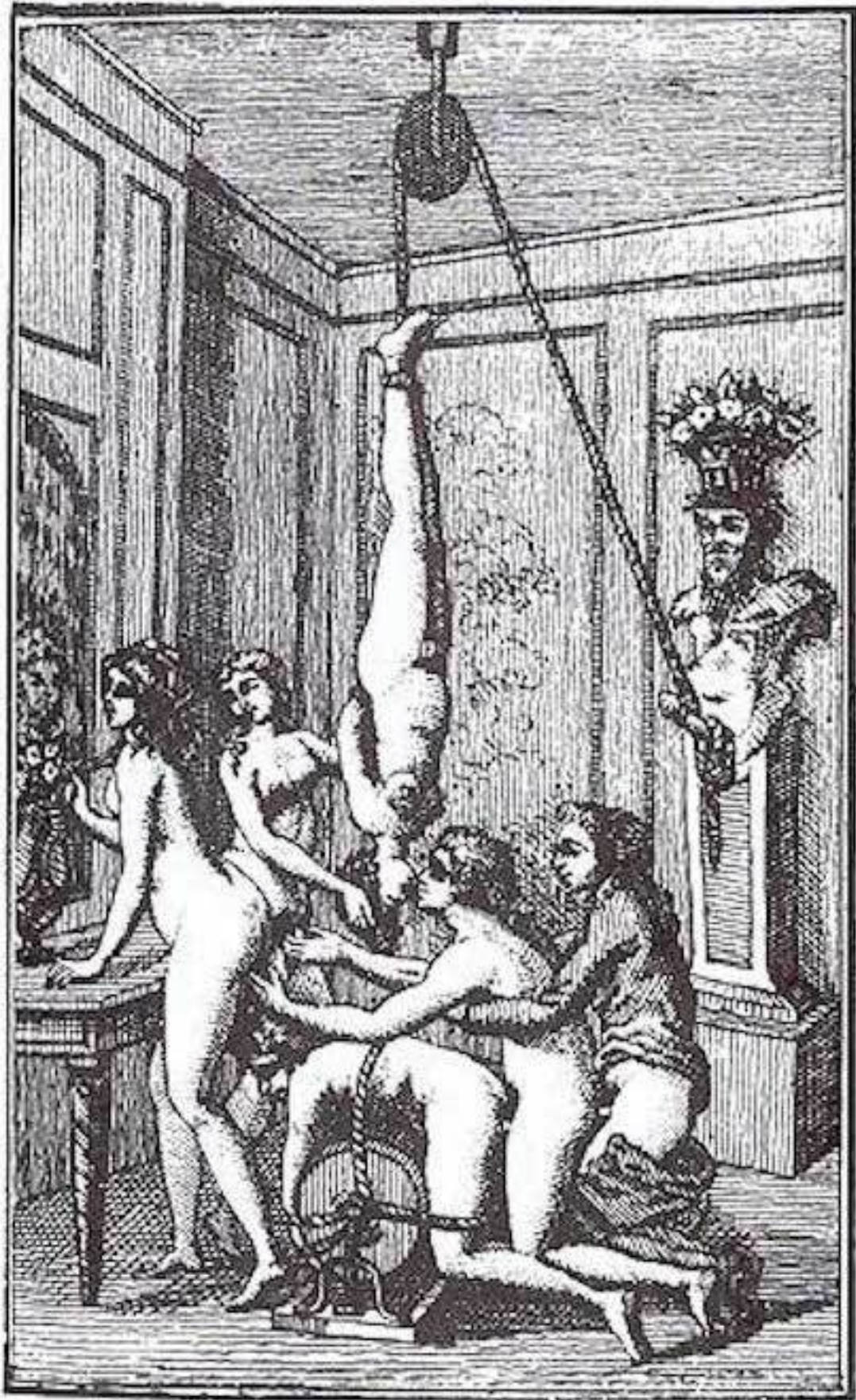
that we should interpret it with the necessary dignity; holding the pain and incompleteness in mind without fleeing it.

that we should use it to power something more relevant to our talents. Reroot the manic energy. Try to heal someone else's pain, swap this addiction for another slightly less fruitless one: become compulsive elsewhere. **** *



And then, a banal but critical point: we should try never to be left alone with the computer when we are in a vulnerable state. Let the rational parts of us structure life so that we will be less at risk in moments of sadness. **** *

It is simply the ultimate cruel tease that the machine we have to do all our work on also happens to host the magic door to a play land more phantasmagorical than anything the Marquis de Sade could have dreamt up.



Secular modern people often automatically assume that sexuality cant exert a momentous power over our minds. Theyre being too sanguine, and therefore unwittingly rather mean. Online porn has an unparalleled power to get in the way of almost every other rather important and precious thing around starting with the rest of our lives.**** ****

We should forgive ourselves for being so drawn to these intense often rather harmful highs in a world that is mostly grey and arduous. But then, with all the will we can muster, we should try very hard to switch off.

