



Naked *and* Unashamed: A Conversation with Amy Taylor (LMHC)

by SETH TAYLOR

There is nothing simple about porn addiction. Those that try to sum up the issue and those who suffer from it with a simple theological phrase like, “sin is sin” or “We’ve all fallen short” are doing this from a defensive posture – though they might not be aware of it. The thing is, porn is just another type of medication for repressed pain we hold deep in our bodies. We all carry it and have since we were very young. And though not everyone medicates that pain with porn, everyone medicates on something. Of course some medications are more socially acceptable than others. Some are less harmful than others. I have one friend who’s wife caught him looking at porn and of course became very hurt. And as I talked to my friend about the issue, I discovered that his real “go to” drug was actually chewing tobacco. He dropped porn very quickly and quite easily – but ask him to drop chew and the discussion would become something different entirely.

But she never saw chew as a problem. But when she confronted his use of porn, she felt justified in judging him and was honest in telling me that she felt it necessary that he feel guilty about what he was doing. How else would he change?

That stance is as natural as it gets – but is it the stance that walks closest to a truth that could set people free – for both the addict and the ones tasked with walking through that dark valley with them? My wife knows it as well as anyone: I kicked off our marriage in 2003 by diving straight into a porn addiction I had never before struggled with. Something about the difficulty of creating a bond in marriage triggered this in me. It was at least three years before she found out and four more until I came out of that place and since then, we have walked a winding road into a marriage with more love and truth and grace and beautiful sexuality than we ever thought possible.

A great deal of this healing is because of one major shift in our paradigm of addiction: we both adopted the idea that we were not bad people acting out of some animalistic sinful nature. When she discovered that she had her own non-sexual tendencies that were actually performing the same function for her, with some nuanced differences, that my porn addiction was for me, she and I finally came to the realization that we were medicating pain deep within us. It was clear that our individual addictions were pointing to specific wounds we carried. Her addiction was a pain-driven way of anesthetizing a deep unconscious fear that she would never have enough, never be okay. Mine was addressing my unconscious belief that I would never be enough. So, she began her own journey inward and I began mine. And we have witnessed each other’s journeys through all of the difficulty and pain as well as all of the beauty and transformation.

My wife Amy is a brilliant therapist and one of the more interesting aspects of her healing is how often she has run up against truth in a way that contradicts her training. I sat down with her the other day and asked her some questions about her experience being married to a porn addict and now to a free man and everything in between. Here's what she told me:

ST: In the conversations out there surrounding porn addiction, wives are often seen as the victims. There's a lot said about what it's like to live with a porn addict and how that should be approached. A few questions: Tell me what it was like for you, could you always tell, and how did you find out?

AT: When you first showed signs of porn addiction, I was pretty naïve and somewhat in denial. I was in grad school and learning about psychological pain, so I took a course on assessing and treating sex addiction just to understand your experience more, and probably to "help" you heal." This and other factors made it more difficult for me to ignore your addiction and I went through a period of time where I felt shocked, hurt, and angry. My response was reactive and lacked consciousness--I judged you, others like you, and the porn industry. Things gradually started to shift for me once I realized that porn was a medication aimed at controlling pain - like shopping, working, gambling, gaming, etc. is for others. How could I judge you when everyone, including me, suffers and everyone attempts to control his or her pain? It still impacted my experience in our relationship though. I struggled to trust how you spent your time, trust that you were truly with me during moments of intimacy, and trust your desire to be free.

Could I always tell you were a porn addict? Not necessarily, but I most definitely knew you were seeking other women's affirmation years before I actually knew you used porn. I knew I was never really enough for you. I always felt like you didn't truly desire me or see me.

ST: I am curious why you never left. Seven years is a long time to endure something like that. But I remember thinking you would never leave. I'm not sure why.

AT: I did consider it for sure. For years there was a line that I believed I could not tolerate being crossed. I wondered, how could I be true to myself and stay in a relationship where my partner knew he was hurting me? In my case that line was never crossed, but we got close a few times and I realized leaving was not the answer. It was a kind of fantasy I held onto so I could avoid facing the pain in me that was being triggered.

I was also aware that porn addiction was not the primary force driving my thoughts and emotions towards ending our relationship. Porn addiction was only a symptom of the greater struggles in you. When I mistakenly believed that our communication patterns, conflict management, and relationship dynamics were the real problem, things didn't improve. My clinical training told me to address these relationship issues rather than what was happening to me internally. What I discovered was that as you and I both healed ourselves, our relationship dynamics naturally shifted to what I had hoped they would be all along.

But I also grew to understand something new. I saw that your addiction was, in a way, my teacher. It was triggering pain in me I might not have ever discovered were it not for that specific issue. Your porn issues were yours for sure – not mine. And while it hurt me and impacted me, I didn't have to entangle myself in them. This, I think, is where so many wives get confused, because you don't want to enable your husband with graciousness either. I was worried that grace and acceptance were just words I used when what I was actually doing was ignoring the issue and hoping it would go away.

ST: I hear you talking about the complexity of guilt and shame and grace a lot. It seems that so many spouses expect and hope that their addicted partner will feel guilty – like that's the only way they can trust that anything will change. What are your thoughts on that?

AT: This one gets me a bit – it's so complex. My more conscious, wise self thinks that to feel guilty is useless and only holds us back. And yet I struggle with feeling guilty about not being good enough almost everyday. My prior clinical training differentiated between guilt and shame...guilt being tied to behavioral mistakes or hang ups and shame stemming from a deep core experience of being a bad person unworthy of love. Here's where cognitive dissonance played out: my clinical training was knocked off its pedestal by my experience as my spirit began to wake up. Whatever I was thinking was no match for what I was experiencing in my soul as I healed. I think that authenticity, honesty, repair, and love are crucial in a relationship on the mend but this has to begin with each individual directed at their own lives. In his book, Awareness, Anthony DeMello says, "The problem isn't in him, it's in you, you silly ass." It can seem like a backwards way of looking at the issues at hand, but therein lies the truth that has brought and continues to bring wholeness in you and me, and thus in our relationship. The marker for change is actual change. I don't need to see guilt to convince myself that things will change. I've learned that when your spouse steps onto this road, this pilgrimage as you call it, he will slip up but the real question is, what direction is he headed? It is truly one difficult step at a time – but is the step a step forward? Even "slip-ups" can be a step forward if a person is paying attention and living with curiosity as to what is happening inside. I eventually knew that I had to let go of any control I thought I could have regarding your journey and trust the spirit at work in your heart. Then your process spoke for itself. My trust grew as I gradually experienced a more whole version of you. It was a step of faith for me. And the more whole you became, I saw you medicate less – and need medication less. And I felt love grow between us. And I have to add that for love to grow between us, I began to recognize that it would be necessary for me to begin my own pilgrimage towards wholeness.

ST: A lot of wives aren't even sure of how to approach the conversation with their husbands about this issue. How do you think they should approach their husbands in conversation when they suspect or know that there is a porn addiction present?

AT: Yeah – it's much harder than you first think. I would say, first, be honest about your feelings with yourself. Write them down...get them out unfiltered. Then adopt this paradigm: he is medicating something, even though he may not understand it this way. Make an attempt to depersonalize it and see it from his point of view. Then spend some

time breathing, praying, and meditating so you can see it from a spiritual viewpoint. Don't approach him until you can do it from a centered, more connected place with yourself. When you get to that place, speak your truth. Don't ask a question that sets him up to lie to cover his shame (i.e. "So you think she's prettier than me?"). Say what you think and are experiencing, share how you feel about it, and tell him you see his pain. If the part of you that speaks is the part that wants to condemn him and make him feel awful and admit his wrongdoing, you aren't ready for the conversation. The point isn't to make him feel what you feel. He can't. Just like you can't feel what he feels. The goal is to be present and speak your truth with wisdom, creating space for him to be honest as he steps out of the shadows of shame. Porn isn't the enemy and neither is your spouse: shame is the enemy. And we all carry it. You can't see the issue clearly unless you look within yourself, which is such a difficult and painful thing to do.

A few things to keep in mind though as you approach this: Professional counseling is a very good thing for anyone, but especially when you run into this issue. And if you discover a sexual disorder that is beyond your ability to cope with, then professional help is a must. Especially some of the methods that address suppressed pain and the unconscious like psychodynamic based therapies.

I would also add: don't pry and try not to ask for every knitty gritty detail as it won't help you and it can also propel you into co-addictive behaviors. Also know that most people diminish the degree to which they are addicted (frequency, intensity, and duration) because they are ashamed and it's one of the major characteristics of addiction.

ST: Gratefully, I can ask you this next question: From your perspective, what changed for our marriage in this regard? What is your life like now in terms of sexual wholeness?

AT: Better than it has ever been. For me, when we are clear and centered, we truly see each other in our nakedness. And I'm not referring to physical nakedness, but more like a Garden of Eden type of nakedness. Genesis reads that before "the fall", the man and woman were naked and not ashamed. We are both on our own pilgrimages and the more ground we cover, the more whole we become, and the more freedom we have to live from the truth of what were intended to be at creation. When a person looks into their partner's eyes from that place, it's pure ecstasy. Isn't that what we truly desire from sex? To reveal the most vulnerable parts of ourselves and to be embraced by the person we love in our "nakedness" and then called good? To know, "I am love," to see in our partner that he or she knows the same thing, and to share in each other's bliss. That's powerful stuff.



Seth Taylor

The author of *Feels Like Redemption: The Pilgrimage to Health and Healing*, Seth is a dynamic new voice in the world of theological thought, addressing difficult topics such as belief, philosophy, mysticism and the roots of addiction. He holds a M.A. in Theology and Culture from the Seattle School of Theology and Psychology in Seattle, Washington, where he lives with his wife and two children.



Amy Taylor

Amy Taylor is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor and a Registered Play Therapist. She has worked in the field of psychology in some capacity for over a decade and now focuses those energies on mothering her two young children. She's passionate about all things pertaining to the healing of the soul and the bonds between human beings - as well as living out a life of transformation of herself and her world. She married Seth Taylor in 2003 and has been on this wild ride with him ever since.

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