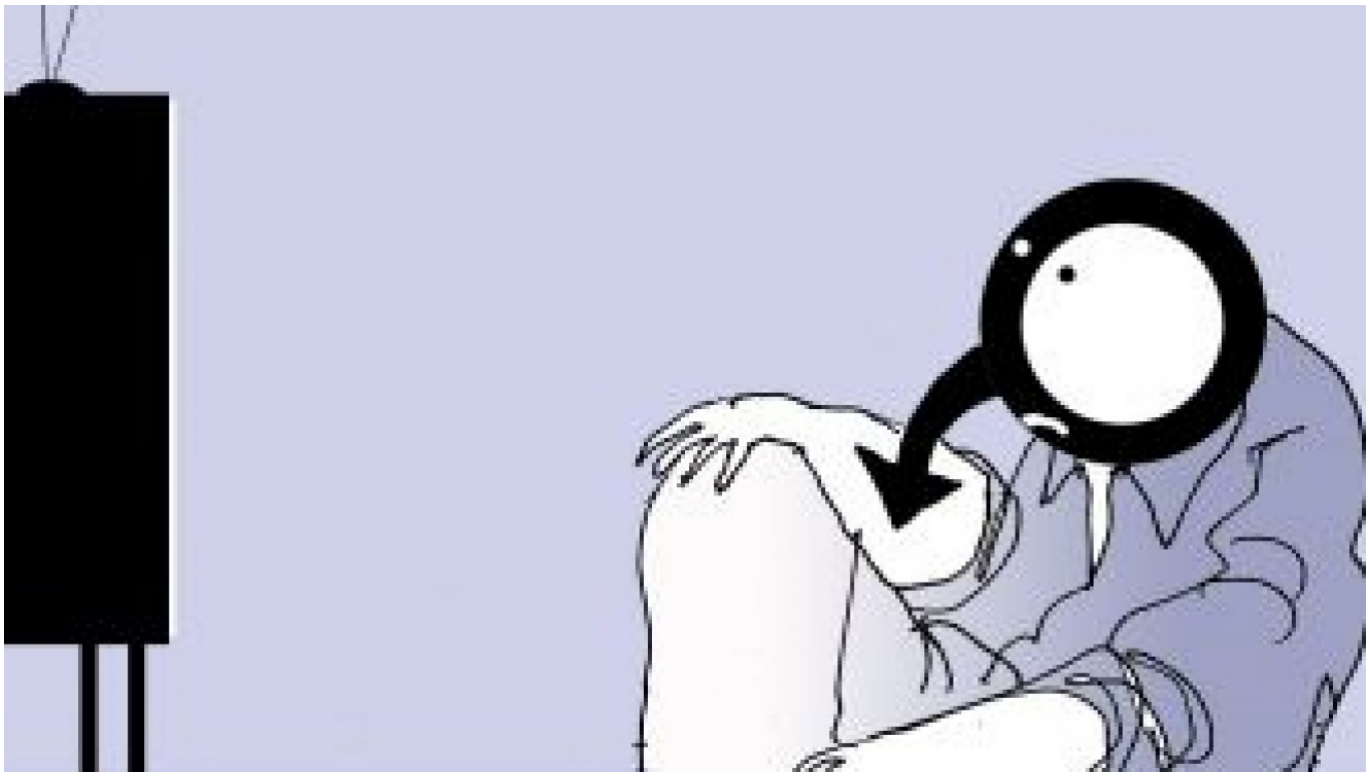
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The Porn Myth

By Naomi Wolf

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It is hard to ignore how many highly visible men in recent years (indeed, months) have behaved in sexually self-destructive ways. Some powerful men have long been sexually voracious. Unlike today, though, they were far more discreet and generally used much better judgment in order to cover their tracks.

Of course, the heightened technological ability nowadays to expose private behavior is part of the reason for this change. But that is precisely the point. So many of the men caught up in sex-tinged scandals of late have exposed themselves — sometimes literally — through their own willing embrace of text messages, Twitter and other indiscreet media.

What is driving this weirdly uninhibited decision making? Could the widespread availability and consumption of pornography in recent years actually be rewiring the male brain, affecting men's judgment about sex and causing them to have more difficulty controlling their impulses?

There is an increasing body of scientific evidence to support this idea. Six years ago, I wrote an essay called "The Porn Myth," which pointed out that therapists and sexual counselors were

anecdotally connecting the rise in pornography consumption among young men with an increase in impotence among the same population. These were healthy young men who had no organic or psychological pathology that would disrupt normal sexual function.

The hypothesis among the experts was that pornography was progressively desensitizing these men sexually. Indeed, hardcore pornography's effectiveness in achieving rapid desensitization in subjects has led to its frequent use in training doctors and military teams to deal with very shocking or sensitive situations.

Given the desensitization effect on most male subjects, researchers found that they quickly required higher levels of stimulation to achieve the same level of arousal. The experts I interviewed at the time were speculating that porn use was desensitizing healthy young men to the erotic appeal of their own partners.

Since then, a great deal of data on the brain's reward system has accumulated to explain this rewiring more concretely. We now know that porn delivers rewards to the male brain in the form of a short-term dopamine boost, which, for an hour or two afterward, lifts men's mood and makes them feel good in general. The neural circuitry is identical to that for other addictive triggers, such as gambling or cocaine.

The addictive potential is also identical: just as gamblers and cocaine users can become compulsive, needing to gamble or snort more and more to get the same dopamine boost, so can men consuming pornography become hooked. As with these other reward triggers, after the dopamine burst wears off, the consumer feels a letdown — irritable, anxious and longing for the next fix.

This dopamine effect explains why pornography tends to become more and more extreme over time. Ordinary sexual images eventually lose their power, leading consumers to need images that break other taboos in other kinds of ways, in order to feel as good. Moreover, some men (and women) have a "dopamine hole" — their brains' reward systems are less efficient, making them more likely to become addicted to more extreme porn more easily.

As with any addiction, it is very difficult, for neurochemical reasons, for an addict to stop doing things — even very self-destructive things — that enable him to get that next hit of dopamine. Could this be why men who in the past could take time-delayed steps to conduct affairs behind closed doors now can't resist the impulse to send a self-incriminating text message? If so, such men might not be demons or moral ciphers but rather addicts who are no longer entirely in control of themselves.

This is not to say that they are not responsible for their behavior. But I would argue that it is a different kind of responsibility — the responsibility to understand the powerfully addictive potential of pornography use and to seek counseling and medication if the addiction starts to affect one's spouse, family, professional life or judgment.

By now, there is an effective and detailed model for weaning porn-addicted men and restoring them to a more balanced mental state, one less at the mercy of their compulsions. Understanding how pornography affects the brain and wreaks havoc on male virility permits people to make better-informed choices in a world that has become more and more

addictively hardcore.

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