

Sexual Fantasies by Jay Stringer

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What Your Sexual Fantasies (Might) Say About You

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For too long, the evangelical community has treated sexual fantasies and sexual struggles as something to condemn. Addressing sexual fantasies through the lens of abhorrent behavior intensifies shame and therefore deepens your involvement in the very behavior you wish to stop.

There is another approach. It begins by listening to your lust. Internet search bars and browser histories expose your sin, but far more, they reveal the unaddressed and therefore unresolved stories of your life. Sexual fantasies are roadmaps. They pinpoint the location of your past harm and highlight the current roadblocks that keep you from freedom.



Our Sexual Fantasies Are Not Random

This year I completed research on the key drivers of unwanted sexual behavior, be that pornography, an affair, buying sex, and the like. Over 3,600 men and women participated in the study. What I can tell you is that sexual struggles are not random or capricious. They

develop in the formative emotional and sexual soil of your childhood and flourish in the unaddressed dynamics of your present life.

It is my conviction that God is neither surprised nor ashamed of our sexual struggles, but understands them to be the very stage through which the work of redemption will be played out. The sooner we assume a posture of curiosity for our sexual fantasies, the more we will prepare our hearts for the redemptive work ahead.

A client named Ben entered therapy in an attempt to stop the debilitating anxiety he was experiencing at work. Ben's boss was emotionally abusive, even outright humiliating at times. Weekends offered no reprieve. Almost every Saturday morning an e-mail would arrive in Ben's inbox telling him to complete a report by Monday. Ben was working 55 hours a week in a mid-level job and felt like a helpless teenager. A few sessions into our work together, Ben revealed a secret struggle: pornography.

There is a glut of information that tells us that Ben's struggle with pornography is a common problem in our society. But this data tells us little about the 'why' behind our collective drive for pornography. **My research found that the type of pornography and sexual behavior you pursue can be predicted by the major themes and significant relationships that have marked your life.**

We will focus today on the 'why' behind two common sexual fantasies of men. In my next blog, I will explore the 'why' behind particular sexual fantasies of women. My bias is that pornography for men is less about lust, and far more about the issue of power. This frames the language I use to interpret the research findings.

What Your Sexual Fantasies Might Say About You

One of the most common sexual fantasies for men had to do with the desire for power over women. Other popular fantasies for men included: a desire for women to have power over them, a diverse choice in sexual partners, sex that was aggressive or violent, an affair, and buying sex.

Men who wanted power over women tended to pursue pornography where women were younger, had a smaller body type, and had a particular race or appearance that suggested (to them) subservience.

What predicted this type of sexual fantasy in men? There are three key drivers:

1. His level of shame
2. His sense of futility
3. Growing up with a strict father

Men with the highest levels of shame were those that wanted the most power over women. The writing on the wall is that men find power over women arousing precisely because it gives them an arena to find dominance amidst a life filled with shame and futility.

While some men found having power over women arousing, others in my research tended to want the woman in pornography to have the power. These men often fantasized about older women, attractive mother figures, or women in positions of authority who would pursue them.

What were the key predictors for this type of sexual fantasy?

1. A man's depression
2. A history of sexual abuse
3. A father who confided in his son about his personal life and marriage difficulties

Once you dive deeper into the 'why' of your sexual fantasies, you quickly enter the stories that await your engagement. Let's take a look at some of the stories that influenced Ben's sexual fantasies.

Our Sexual Fantasies Are Roadmaps

I asked Ben to tell me about the origins of his involvement with pornography. Ben's first exposure was in high school. Ben made his varsity baseball team as a freshman. The upperclassmen used his younger age as the context for emotional and sexual hazing. They ripped out images from porn magazines and scattered them throughout Ben's gym bag and locker. A week later, Ben would undergo his official initiation to the team in the locker room. He was pinned down and forced to breathe through another teammate's protective athletic cup as they stripped his shorts off and drizzled ICYHOT over his crotch. In the opening game of the season, Ben dropped what would have been the final out in left field, allowing the opposing team to win the game.

In my following session with Ben, I asked him about the particulars of his pornography searches. He looked down and then back up to me and said, "I have never thought about that. Why is that even important?"

I responded by telling him that everyone has an arousal cocktail—a mixture of thoughts, images, stories, and fantasies that influence the content we find arousing. In isolation or in toxic religious cultures, we believe sexual fantasies reveal our iniquity. In reality, sexual fantasies reveal our wounds and even the God-given desires we have for comfort, belonging, and risk. **If you want to outgrow your need for pornography, you need to gain a sense of what it symbolizes to you.**

Ben disclosed that he tends to scroll through pornography sites until he finds video stills with a younger woman's face or body in a posture of submission to the men in the video. Ben paused after he said this and shook his head with disgust. He intuitively knew that this type of pornography was not so much about lust, but really about power. He said to me, "I know this probably sounds disturbing. I wish it wasn't all true, but I really hate my life and I really love porn."

As you may have noticed, Ben's formative sexual experiences were marked by humiliation and powerlessness. The question must be asked—how could he expect his sexual struggles as an adult to be any different?

The evening Ben's team lost the game, he was dropped off by a teammate and walked into a dark home. He was angry his parents did not wait up to greet him after witnessing his devastating evening. He took a shower and then pulled out one of the pornographic images planted in his gym bag. Ben stood over the image and felt an immense arousal at the power and pleasure it gave him.

Baseball, teammates, and home were all brutal realities. In contrast, pornography was a magical symphony of reprieve, pleasure, and eroticized power. That evening, the foundation of Ben's sexual fantasy life was established. Pornography says to men, "Give me all your shame, humiliation, and futility and I will give you a world where it all goes away."

Listening to Your Lust and Fantasies

Attempting to address your sexual struggles without understanding the unique stories you bring to the altar of pornography will be an exercise in futility. **The irony of sexual fantasy is that it will be the most honest portion of your life until you begin to address your past wounds and the madness of your present life.**

Ben attempted to bury the pain of his past and minimize the humiliation of his work life. His anxiety and lust however would have none of that. They continued to cry out.

Sexual fantasies are messengers. You may not like the news they bring, but they will knock on the door of your life until you listen to what they need to tell you. One evening of deliberate curiosity about your sexual fantasies will take you further into transformation than a thousand nights of prayerful despair.

In therapy, I began to work with Ben on the concept of sexual fantasy as a roadmap rather than evidence of his abhorrent behavior. Ben noticed that his pornography desires involved the humiliation of women. He recognized that power over women was appealing precisely because of the lack of power he seemed to have in reality. Ben hated his boss, but felt powerless to do anything about it. This hatred had to be directed somewhere, and as is often the case with men, Ben aimed his anger at women.

Attempting to stop Ben's pornography use without addressing his humiliation or sexual abuse would never be effective. He had been involved with accountability partners in the past, but the focus remained solely on lust. The underlying factors that drove his pornography use were overlooked.

The particularities of Ben's pornography struggles were now opening the map of his life. He pinpointed story after story that cried out to be healed. Understanding his fantasy life reduced his shame and therefore reduced his need for pornography. As our first year of

therapy concluded, one thing was clear: Ben was far less seduced by power over women because he no longer abdicated his power to care for himself.

Kindness Changes the Human Heart

Father Richard Rohr notes, "If you do not transform your pain, you will always transmit it. Always someone else has to suffer because I don't know how to suffer; that is what it comes down to."

One of the profound masculine questions of our day is this: is violence and consumption of women the way we want to atone for our traumas? Pain is *transmitted* when men abdicate responsibility to own their pain. Pain is *transformed* when men own the harm they have done and vulnerably pursue comfort for the harm done against them. Turning to face our wounds is the first significant step we can take on our journey out of unwanted sexual behavior.

Our sexual fantasies are not evidence of abhorrent behavior; they are roadmaps inviting us into the journey of transformation. As such, they await your curiosity and invite your kindness.

Romans 2:4 is clear that the kindness of God is what leads to change. Kindness, not new strategies to combat lust, not new books to understand addiction, not software to block erotic content. Very often, it is our self-hatred that blinds us from seeing the kind face of God.

One thing that always surprises me about God is that He asks questions to those in distress. To Adam, God asks, "Where are you?" To Cain, God asks, "Why are you so angry, and why has your face fallen?" To Hagar, the angel of the Lord inquires, "Where do you come from and where are you going?"

If sexual struggles are not grounds for judgment, they become the very geography where we come to know the kindness of God.

Here are a few questions to consider:

- 1. What are the specific sexual fantasies or pornography searches that tend to arouse you the most? What might these sexual fantasies symbolize?**
- 2. What age were these sexual fantasies established? What was going on in your life at the time?**
- 3. Was there a time in the last six months when you used pornography or sexual fantasy to give you power in a time of futility or anger?**