

If Porn Made Us Healthy

... We would be healthy by now

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Dr. Layden wrote this statement for Morality in Media on the occasion of the so-called "Erotica USA" trade show which appeared at New York City's Jacob Javits Convention Center in April 1999.

Erotica USA arrives on April 15, 1999 and describes itself as "titillating but not nasty". As a psychotherapist, this description is confusing. This show promotes a number of psychiatric disorders and symptoms as if they are normal such as fetishes and sadomasochism. Are they trying to promote psychologically healthy relationships? Hardly! If pornography made us healthy, we would be healthy by now. If the sex industry made us healthy, then those in the sex industry would be the healthiest and have the healthiest relationships. The reality is far from that.

Damage to women which precedes working in the sex industry

Most strippers, as with other women who work in the sex industry, are adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Research indicates the number is between 60%-80%. One study found that 35% of strippers have Multiple Personality Disorder, 55% had Borderline Personality Disorder, and 60% had Major Depressive Episodes, These are severe psychiatric problems and many of them are connected to childhood sexual abuse. These are women who when they were little girls would get into their beds each night and roll themselves into a fetal position and every night he would come in and peel her open. The physical and visual invasion of little girl's bodies damages them psychologically and gives them a psychologically unhealthy view of sexuality. Often as adults they reenact their childhood trauma by working as strippers, Playboy models, and prostitutes. The men who, now as customers, physically and visually invade the adult women's bodies, reenact the role of the perpetrator. These women work in the sex industry because it feels like home.

Damage to women which comes from working in the sex industry

Among strippers, eating disorders are rampant. Many of the women starve, vomit, abuse exercise or laxatives to become the unnatural shape that is demanded of them. Plastic surgery is almost invariably required especially artificial breasts to produce unnaturally large breasts. This surgery is considered a necessity despite the evidence that artificial breasts interfere with mammograms, and are implicated in autoimmune deficiency disorders in the women, and digestive disorders in the babies of the women who have had the surgery.

Strippers are often substance abusers as well; one study found the number to be 40%. Sometimes this is because they have to numb themselves to be able to do the work they do. Often the consumption of alcohol is required on the job. Strippers who refuse to drink or who refuse to accept drinks from customers can be fired, coerced or threatened by bosses. Even strippers who have told their superiors that they are alcoholics who attend AA meetings are told that they have to drink on the job. Sometimes customers tip the strippers with cocaine. Cocaine addiction is common.

Their personal lives and relationships suffer as well. Women who work in the sex industry have only a 25% chance of making a marriage that will last as long as three years. If the sex industry and pornography made us sexually healthy and improved marriages, one would expect that those most involved would have the healthiest marriages but just the opposite is true. These women often hate men and disparage them. They believe that all men are capable of the attitudes and permission-giving beliefs that allow men to feel entitled to buy the physical and visual invasion of women's bodies. Many strippers say they would never date the men who go to strip clubs because they find these men disgusting. Often the only kind of "dates" that these women make with customers is for prostitution. The hatred of men by strippers is deep and widespread. They describe their inner dialogue while they are stripping and it is virulent hate speech against the customers they pretend to desire. The psychological demand to numb themselves or to cover their disgust for their customers exacts a terrible toll on the strippers.

The job that they do is fraught with dangers and unpleasantness. In one study 100% of the strippers reported some kind of physical or verbal abuse on their jobs. Verbal abuse by customers is extremely common with 91% reporting incidents. They were routinely called degrading names like c--t (52%), w---e (61%), and b---h (85%). Besides the verbal abuse, all endured some type of physical abuse on the job. Despite the fact that it is illegal to touch a stripper, strippers reported that customers grabbed them by the arm (88%), grabbed their breast (73%), or their buttock (91%). Customers at strip clubs often assault the women. Customers pulled their hair (27%), pinched them (58%), slapped them (24%), or bite them (36%). They are often attacked in the strip club in front of bodyguards and other audience members.

If men would do this to women in public, what would they do to women in private? Strippers are often raped. Strippers have reported that they have been followed home (70%) and have been stalked (42%). The fact that strippers work with bodyguards is evidence to the fact that their fears that this activity causes violence are realistic. Strippers may have bodyguards while they are at work but when they leave, they are as vulnerable as is the rest of the female population. Most women interact with these individuals without the benefit of a bodyguard. All women will have to interact with the strip club patrons who have permission-giving beliefs about the use of women's bodies. Strip club patrons do not apply their beliefs only to women who work in the sex industry. Strippers, having been damaged by their own sexual abuse, now go on to work in an industry that encourages the beliefs that will allow behavior that hurts all women. The unbroken chain of victim and victimizer continues.

Self-esteem damage is invariable in this profession but, because these are survivors of abuse, some of the strippers claim to feel better about themselves by stripping. This level of denial is typical of untreated survivors and addicts. They are so disempowered and so damaged by their early abuse that they have no concept of healthy self-esteem or of self-respect for the human body and spirit. This lack of self-esteem mixed with their unhealthy attitude about sexuality causes them to think that selling their bodies will make them feel better. Many strippers move on to become prostitutes. Much of their thinking and behavior is conceptually similar to the thinking and behavior of other addicts.

Damage to men which comes from involvement in the sex industry

For the man who becomes sex addicted there are an enormous host of problems that could be anticipated. Often the addict anticipates few of the outcomes; denial is a large part of the problem. Research indicates and my clinical practice supports that approximately 40% of sex addicted males will lose their spouse. Severe financial consequences will be suffered by about 59% with some losing all of their savings and earnings. In general, about 27% will either lose their jobs or be demoted. Among professionals who are sex addicted, as many as 40% will lose their professions due to their sexual acting out.

With high-risk sex being so frequent among this group, health concerns are typical. Sexually transmitted diseases range from those that are readily treatable to those that are deadly. The risk of receiving a disease is added to by the risk of transmission to others. In some cases, the disease may be transmitted to sex industry workers but many cases it is transmitted to the non-sex addicted spouse. Family life is frequently disrupted due to abandonment of the wife and children or severe friction if the family stays physically intact. Arrest is always a threat and also destabilizes the family. Suicide is not infrequent. The consequences and the pain caused by this disorder are severe and yet the addict does not stop. This is an indication of the strength of the pull. The life of the sex addict is filled with pain and shame as the downward spiral takes hold.

Substance abuse is common with alcohol, marijuana and cocaine being the most often drugs of choice of the sex addict. Steven Chambers, who treats drug addicts at the Coatesville Veterans' Administration hospital, has described the damage done to his clients by sex and pornography addiction. Those who have drug relapses most frequently relapse because of the sex/pornography addiction through cocaine prostitutes, addicted sex partners, etc.

Sex and pornography addiction has become such a wide spread problem that, with very little publicity, there are now 80 AA-type groups for sex and pornography addiction in the Delaware Valley. In my clinical practice I have found this addiction to be less likely to remit than cocaine addiction and more likely to relapse. Most traditional addiction treatment starts with detoxification to remove the substance (cocaine, alcohol, etc.) from the body. Sex addiction from pornography, whether it is print, video, or live pornography like stripping, produces mental imagery which is permanently implanted in the mind of the user and is scaled in by brain chemistry. This is the first addictive substance for which there is no hope for detoxification.

The minimal user of pornography also shows signs of significant negative impact. The damage to marriage of visual infidelity is massive. Sex addicts often have no conception of healthy sexuality and their partners often end up engaging in degrading behaviors. I often hear complaints from partners who feel degraded by a sex addict who watches pornography during the sex act with them and much worse. The partners of sex addicts are often depressed, low in self-esteem, have eating disorders, and sexual dysfunction brought on by body self consciousness or sexual numbing and who fake their orgasms. The damage caused by the addict is not just to the women with whom they are partners. The damage is also seen in the damage to the general respect of women, inability to be intimate in healthy ways, and inability to interact with women in a professional environment in respectful ways. This encourages sexual harassment on the job.

Pornography is also hate speech about men. The sex industry spreads the myth that male sexuality is viciously narcissistic, predatory and out of control. It is not just strippers who come to think of all men as sexual "pond-scum". This myth about men makes it difficult for women to give men the trust and respect that they are due and damages the image that men have of themselves and of male sexuality.

Damage to the society in general which comes from the sex industry

The level of sexual violence in the society is at epidemic proportions. We are experiencing a sexual holocaust. One in 8 women are raped, 50% of females will be sexually harassed on their jobs. By the time a female in this country is 18 years old, 38% have been sexually molested. We are the most sexually violent nation on earth.

Studies have shown a connection with rape both stranger rape and acquaintance rape. When normal college mates are shown pornography, 50-65% of them then say they would be willing to rape a woman if they thought they wouldn't get caught. Males who have committed acquaintance rape are more likely to be frequent readers of sex magazines like Playboy and Hustler. The more sex magazines sold within a state the higher the rape rate.

Studies have found significant changes in beliefs when subjects have been shown pornography. They come to believe that unusual sex behavior even psychiatrically disordered behavior is more common than they thought it was before. This includes behaviors such as having sex with animals and mixing sex with violence. They come to find damaging behavior as more acceptable such as showing pornography to children. They become less negative in their attitudes toward rape and believe that rapists should receive lighter sentences. They have a 50% reduction in their belief that women should be liberated. In one study done in Pennsylvania, Chiefs of Police were polled about the impact of strip clubs on their communities. A majority of police chiefs believed that strip clubs cause crime, that the community does not want them and that the quality of life would be better if they were illegal. In fact, when Oklahoma City closed down 150 porn shops, they had a 26% reduction in rapes.

In the last 12 years I have specialized in the treatment of sexual violence victims and perpetrators. I have not treated one case of sexual violence that did not include pornography. In every case of sibling incest that I have treated, the pornography involved has been sex magazines most often Playboy, Penthouse and Hustler.

Erotica USA wants to continue the cycle of violence and damage. They depend on our silence to continue to make money by hurting people. All of us need to stand up and tell them that they will never have the comfort of our silence again.

