

## Chapter 3

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# THE UNIVERSAL TIE THAT BINDS

**O**nce I had found freedom from my own porn addiction, my marriage radically changed. The trust level was higher. Our intimacy increased. And to be honest, I just became far less selfish with how I approached my wife and her needs.

But one thing that did not change for some time, as it turned out, was the shame my wife carried around with her because of my porn use.

Truthfully speaking, the idea of her feeling shame over my poor choices seemed a little crazy to me.

After all...

*It was I who had wasted untold hours in front of computers trolling the internet for porn (usually with my pants unzipped).*

*It was I who had often settled for masturbating to a computer image rather than pursuing intimacy and healthy sex with my wife.*

*It was I who had consistently lied about my distasteful behavior.*

*It was I who had failed in my attempts to quit over and over and over again.*

How was any of that on her? Why in the world would she need to find freedom from her own shame when I was the one to blame for everything? What I didn't realize at the time was that my choices communicated to her a message of dissatisfaction.

Dissatisfaction with her.

Dissatisfaction with her body.

Dissatisfaction with our marriage.

Dissatisfaction with our sex life.

And so my perceived dissatisfaction triggered a deep sense of shame within her, fueled by the lies she had told herself growing up concerning her worth, beauty, and value.

**The reality is the reason I chased porn had nothing to do with her at all.**

Good wife, bad wife, great marriage, bad marriage, good sex, terrible sex ... none of it mattered because my attachment to porn and the escape it promised had been something I had sought for over a decade, well before we ever met.

*But she didn't know that.*

And even if I had taken the time to explain everything to her, it all would have fallen on deaf ears as long as I had continued to indulge my addictive behaviors.

Understand that shame is often experienced through a two-way exchange, because “hurt” people inevitably hurt other people.

The shame I had once sought to numb through my porn use led to choices that consequently hurt my wife and tapped into her own shame reservoirs. Given enough time and lack of healing, chances are she would have eventually and unintentionally passed that shame along to someone else because that’s what shame does—it spreads like wildfire.

### **The Monsters We Make**

There’s no getting around it: shame is a real beast. It’s an everyday Goliath we must all face at one time or another in our lives.

***But here’s the crazy thing. It’s a beast we birth and feed.***

Don’t get me wrong—the source(s) of our shame comes from experiences outside our control such as interactions with parents, teachers, extended family, clergy, friends, or professionals who have expressed some level of contempt for and/or disapproval of us.<sup>7</sup>

As the Harvard Business Review notes,

*From a psychological developmental point of view, shame can be seen as a complex emotional response that humans acquire during early child rearing. ... It is a very basic emotion: Children seek to live up to their parent’s expectations, and failing to do so, experience shame. ... This kind of shame is very*

*difficult to overcome. The formative wounds of childhood—scars from being teased, bullied, or ostracized by parents, peers, and others—can become fixed in our identity.<sup>8</sup>*

But the emotional response and feelings we face as a result of these formative experiences are internally created. And unfortunately, this is a natural phenomenon.

Understand that emotions are both biological and unavoidable responses to external stimuli. So when you experience any sort of stressor or change in your environment, there will always be some sort of emotional response that accompanies that event. It's inevitable and completely natural.

But the emotion that's evoked is going to vary from person to person based on one's life experiences and circumstances.

*For instance...*

Two children get their school report cards. Both receive a "B" for a math grade.

Student A comes from a nurturing home where the focus is on effort, not results. His parents often encourage, affirm, and applaud him, and when the effort is lackluster, they take the time to ask him questions and understand the potential reasons he didn't feel compelled to try harder.

There's a lot of good back and forth in this home. When the child is challenged, it is done in a loving manner, never resorting to guilt or condemnation. This boy, however, does tend to struggle with math, so for him, a "B" is a real

accomplishment. Understandably, when he gets his report card, he experiences joy, surprise, and possibly anticipation (looking forward to his parent's reactions).

Student B is a different story, though.

His parents are very rigid and demanding. Nothing ever seems good enough, and they always focus on the child's results, damning anything else. His older sister is a real genius and has a history of academic accomplishments, so the expectation is that her younger brother should deliver the same stellar results.

When he doesn't, the parents predictably express strong feelings of disappointment, shame, and even disgust, most likely because of their own unresolved shame issues.

This boy is accustomed to getting A's in math—after all, that's the expectation. So when he gets a B, his emotional reaction is very different from the first boy. Rather than experiencing joy or surprise, he senses overwhelming fear, sadness, disgust, and of course, shame.

Two different boys.

Same external stimuli.

Two dramatically different emotional responses.

The reality is what student B experienced was entirely predictable. In fact, you might say it was a scientific certainty that student B would feel overwhelming shame in light of his less than perfect grade and home environment.

As Dr. Candice Feiring notes in her article “Emotional development, shame, and adaptation to child maltreatment”:

*Parental behaviors that arouse fears of abandonment and use love withdrawal as a discipline strategy are believed to play a role in the development of a shameprone style in children (M. Lewis, 1992; Potter-Efron, 1989). The use of verbal disapproval, hostility, contempt, and physical abuse convey the message that the child’s core self is a disappointment and unlovable because she or he has failed to live up to expectations.<sup>9</sup>*

Again, the experience of emotion is natural, unavoidable, and by design. After all, if humans went around making decisions and judgment solely on facts and figures, void of any emotional consideration, we wouldn’t be human—we’d be robots.

But the emotional response is internally created by the individual. Likewise, the way we process those emotions (feelings) is also of our own making. Ergo, when we struggle with an avalanche of shame, we have to look no further than in the mirror for the originator of that crushing landslide.

Shame is, again, a monster. But it’s a monster we create in our own mental laboratories.

### **The Perfect Storm**

Looking back, I can now identify the seeds of shame in my life and how those events contributed in many ways to my long-term porn usage.