

"Dannah Gresh does not whitewash the pain. She does not offer an 'easy fix,' but she does offer hope. She writes, not from an ivory tower, but as one who has experienced the pain and found redemption."

– Gary Chapman, PhD, author of *The 5 Love Languages*®

# Happily Even After

Let God Redeem  
Your Marriage



DANNAH GRESH

FOREWORD BY BOB GRESH

## Praise for *Happily Even After*

Few things hurt a wife more deeply than discovering that her husband has been sexually unfaithful. Pornography or any other extramarital sexual activity strikes at the heart of marital intimacy. **Dannah Gresh does not whitewash the pain. She does not offer an “easy fix,” but she does offer hope. She writes, not from an ivory tower, but as one who has experienced the pain and found redemption.** If you are walking this road, you will find *Happily Even After* a welcome companion. I highly recommend this book to wives who are struggling and those who want to help them.

**GARY D. CHAPMAN, PHD**, author of *The 5 Love Languages*

You’ve picked up this book because you feel lost and hopeless. Friend, you are neither. The God of the universe is with you, inviting you to open your heart to His healing and wisdom. This book will not fix your broken marriage, but it will show you a path to spiritual maturity and life from a godly woman who has walked every step of this road. When Joseph confronted his brothers who had sold him into slavery, he said, “you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.” I can’t help but think of this verse as I read through *Happily Even After*. Through the evil of betrayal and sexual sin, God has created a story of redemption to preserve the lives of many.

**DR. JULI SLATTERY**, bestselling author; cofounder, Authentic Intimacy

Dannah is no dry-land sailor. Her marriage has been pummeled at times with waves of disappointment, failure, and shame. But over the course of years, I have watched her and Bob find a lighthouse in the gospel, an anchor in the Scripture, a harbor in the covenant-keeping love of God. **Through their tears and fears, these dear friends of mine have found in Christ the mercy, grace, and hope to press on—together.** Out of the messiness and damage caused by the storms they have been through, God has created something of great beauty and enduring value. *Happily Even After* will show you how He can do the same in any life, any marriage, that will dare to cling to Him and take Him at His Word.

**NANCY DEMOSS WOLGEMUTH**, author; founder and Bible teacher of Revive Our Hearts

At last! A book that clears a pathway through the mess of exposed sexual secrets. In *Happily Even After*, noted author Dannah Gresh provides both the biblical truth and clinical evidence needed to win back the trust lost during the trauma of marital betrayal. This book is an invaluable resource, written from personal experience, for any who have lived through deception and disloyalty in their marriage, as well as for all those who long to offer hope to others hurting in this way. **Every pastor and counselor—indeed, every spouse—will benefit from Dannah’s timely and tender book. Buy it. Keep it on hand. And use it to offer the miracle of redemption to those who feel abandoned and unlovable but who, through Christ, can once again hope to live happily—even after.**

**JANI ORTLUND**, Renewal Ministries

**This is not your average marriage book.** Equal parts honorable honesty and timeless Truth, *Happily Even After* will help you face the reality of your marriage—namely that you are a sinner married to a sinner—and an even greater reality, that Jesus is a God who redeems. Your marriage doesn’t need the fairy tale. It needs the faith that God is willing and able to restore broken things.

**ERIN DAVIS**, author of *Fasting & Feasting* and longtime friend

One of our greatest fears as humans is the fear of exposure. *What will people do with me if they find out who I really am, what I’ve done, what I struggle with?* This fear is especially powerful when it involves the dark world of sexual sin. So **it is remarkable that the Greshes have written with such candor about their own struggles with sexual sin in their marriage. This book will provide great encouragement for those who have felt hopeless.** God still promises to redeem our life from destruction!

**PETE KUIPER**, LCSW, Crossroads Counseling of the Rockies

**Pure truth . . . rigorous and radical honesty that leads to the ultimate healing of redemption!** *Happily Even After* is ongoing and available. Take the journey!

**MIKE BIVENS**, MA Christian Counseling

I have known Bob and Dannah for over thirty-five years and can tell you that what you’re about to read is true. I have watched them fight for their marriage like no other couple I know. You may think that no one understands what you are going through with your husband, but Dannah knows. Her experience, compassion, courage, wisdom, insight, and faith to believe that you can live *Happily Even After* are evident on every page. She understands the thoughts you’re thinking

and the betrayal you feel. Her ability to walk you down this hard road of hurt will make your journey less scary and bolster your strength for next steps. **A wiser and more trusted voice for reassuring faith and hope in your relationship with your husband would be hard to find.**

**DONNA VANLIERE**, *New York Times* bestselling author and longtime friend

Bob and Dannah Gresh offer a key that can unlock men and marriages from the prison of sexual sin and shame. This is a struggle that a large percentage of men are dealing with worldwide, and yet there are precious few resources to guide us. The shame and fear of disappointing our wives is overwhelming and gives shame power. Dannah's writing isn't just for women. It gives men a glimpse into the real hurt and pain that this sin causes, but also provides a lifeline of hope that redemption is possible. **This book has the real possibility of becoming a timeless tool that will save marriages for decades to come.**

**DARREN TYLER**, pastor, Conduit Church

Every marriage experiences pain, disappointment, and the overall effects of brokenness. It is a school for learning to live out biblical love and forgiveness. With raw vulnerability and transparency, Dannah invites the reader into her own journey and helps women navigate through difficult seasons on their way to restoration. **A must-read that points to the grace, hope, and redemption we can only find in Christ.**

**LAURA GONZALEZ DE CHAVEZ**, director, Aviva Nuestros Corazones

*Happily Even After* is a true story. My husband and I have been friends with Bob and Dannah for twenty years. We've seen them walk through hard things. We've seen them trust God with impossible prayers. We've seen God faithfully restore their marriage. But that's not how I know this book is a true story. I know it's a true story because, twenty years ago, Bob and Dannah shared this hope—these Bible verses, these tools, these insights—with us during our own marriage crisis. I know firsthand that God can hold two people together when the chasm appears too vast to breach. I know for myself that God can change hearts and minds and habits when they appear unchangeable. I know personally that sometimes, you just need to know there's hope. Let *Happily Even After* be a voice of hope for you.

**LAURA BOOZ**, author, *Expect Something Beautiful: Finding God's Good Gifts in Motherhood*

I highly recommend *Happily Even After* because of its raw honesty and transparency coming from a place of real brokenness and yet healing. The story of Bob and Dannah Gresh is a testimony to the forgiveness of Christ that overcomes sin and brings restoration. The studies, references, and biblical foundation give hope that you too can find happiness even after the pain of betrayal and sexual sin. As a former pornography addict and sexual sinner myself, I can affirm the claims of this book that through Christ real repentance and change is possible.

**LAURA PERRY SMALTS**, author

This book has truly touched my heart and I feel incredibly blessed to have read it. For those of us who know this hurt, Dannah has carefully, thoughtfully, and lovingly articulated her and Bob's story, maintaining throughout that we strengthen ourselves in the Lord. It's written primarily for wives, however, you might have a daughter, sister, or friend and this may be their story—I would encourage all women to read this book to expand their understanding and insight. Thank you, Dannah and Bob, for faithfully surrendering your story to honor and glorify the Lord.

**NICOLA SMITH**, a reader from Scotland

I've been a pastor's wife since I was twenty years old. I have listened to and prayed for many women who chose to fight for their marriage despite their husband's immorality. **This is the book I would have shared with them if it had been in print!** In this book, Dannah and Bob have chosen to share their journey, and Dannah has created a path that feels like she is walking just ahead of women courageous enough to pursue healing for their hearts. I am asking the Lord to use this tool to redeem and restore many who need to hear the truth from someone who can say, "This is the way, walk ye in it!"

**HOLLY ELLIFF**, pastor's wife and women's ministry leader

**Raw. Honest. Wise.** Dannah speaks gospel help and hope to every heart wounded by betrayal trauma. Not only are these pages packed with solid advice, they portray a vision for covenant marriage that will inspire hurting women to walk the redemptive path with conviction and courage.

**MARY A. KASSIAN**, author, *The Right Kind of Strong*

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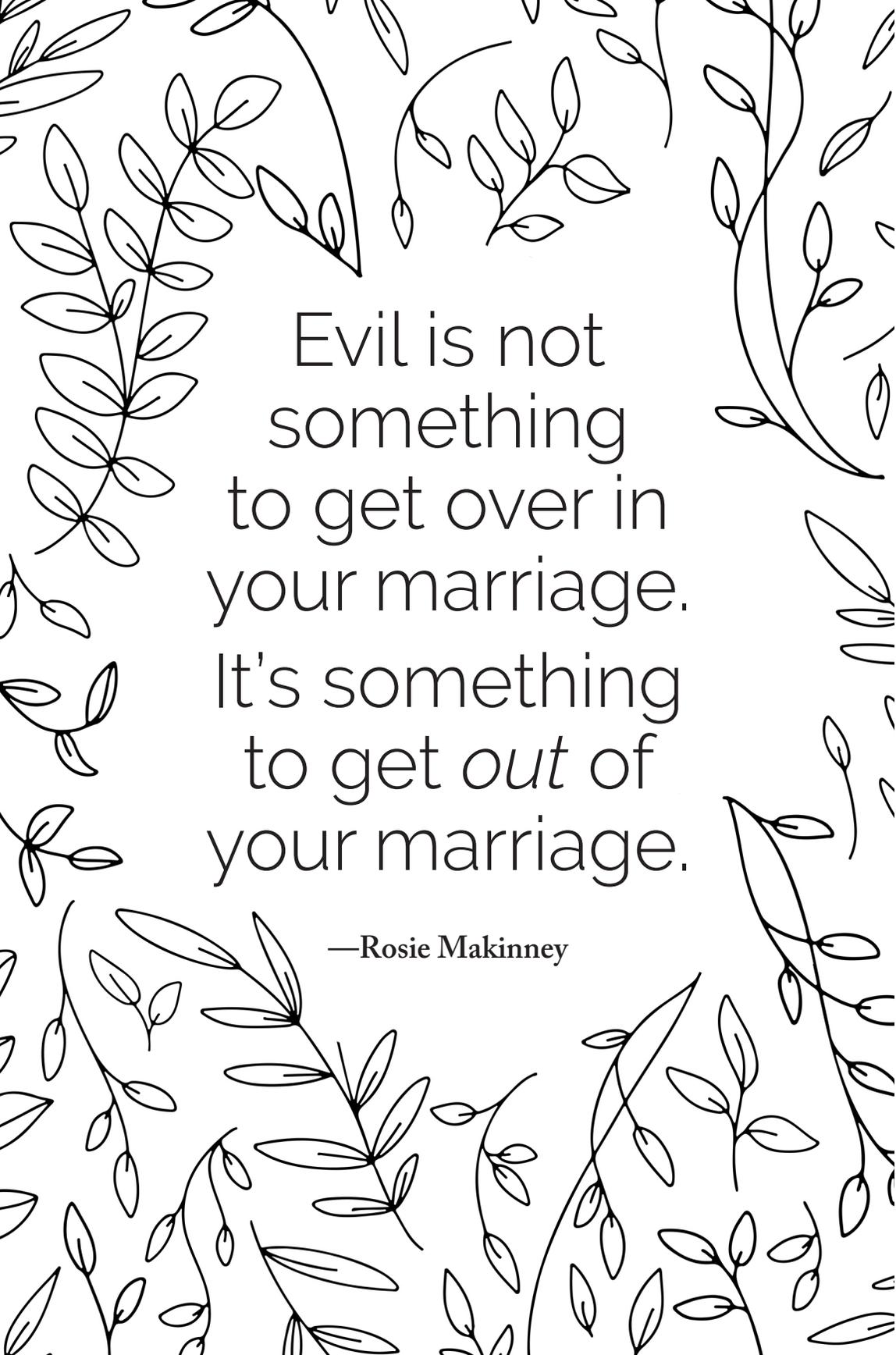
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Evil is not  
something  
to get over in  
your marriage.  
It's something  
to get *out* of  
your marriage.

—Rosie Makinney



## chapter three

# This Is His Brain (and Sadly Yours) on Sin

### ***“Read books on codependency.”***

So many people told me that. One even gave me a specific book to order.

I ordered it. *Maybe it will be the key to unlock my brain from this prison of confusion.*

With a warm cup of tea in one hand and the codependency book in the other, I began reading, eager for understanding.

As I digested the content, I could see that the symptoms and signs described almost everyone I knew to some degree or another, including myself. And after many years of working with my own therapist, I was pretty confident the diagnosis did not fit me.

I couldn't help but wonder, though: *Am I in denial?*

Instead of gaining clarity, I began to feel more confused than before.



So many of the women I've met whose husbands are caught up in sexual sin tell me they feel confused.

Well, lean in, because I'm about to start giving you your brain back! In the process, I hope to convince you *why* you need a *professional Christian counselor or support group that integrates both a solid clinical understanding of how the brain works and a healthy respect for God's Word.*

Sound overwhelming? Give me a chance to explain. There are three reasons you need (and deserve) this help.

## **Reason #1: Getting to the Truth Can Be Complicated—and Confusing**

I'm glad you are reading this book. Books can be helpful.

They can also end up being super confusing. At least some of them were for me.

The same is true of the so-called recovery movement. Although many of the practices utilized by recovery programs and groups can be helpful, even lifesaving, others bring confusion, especially for the partners of those with a problem.

Case in point: the addiction model for sexual sin.

You've likely heard the term "sex addiction." In 1983, Dr. Patrick Carnes theorized that "out of control" sexual behavior resembled the pattern of alcoholics and that many of them are actually addicted to sex. Thirty years later, though sex addiction is not included as a diagnosis in the American Psychological Association's most recent *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5-TR), the term is widely used today for those who are compulsively using pornography or acting out sexually and seemingly have no ability to quit.

The language surrounding this diagnosis is about as unified as Republicans and Democrats on Super Tuesday. But many people who have faced ferocious battles with sexual temptation do use the term

*addiction*. They feel it adequately describes their harrowing experience of trying to stop and being sucked back into their compulsive behavior.

I, personally, approach the term *addiction* cautiously. I do not deny that the addiction model can apply to sexual issues. I've been through too much to think otherwise. But I still have a handful of concerns. And one of them, as I've mentioned, is that proponents of the addiction model traditionally assume that a woman who is married to a sex addict is by definition *codependent* or a *coaddict*.

While that may be true of some women, I do not believe it is true of all women. And I believe this knee-jerk diagnosis can bring unnecessary confusion, guilt, and shame to those who are mislabeled. It can also prevent these women from receiving the specific help they need.

I have support for this belief from a subset of clinicians who recognize strength, intelligence, and maturity—along with suffering—in those who are married to addicts. Some of these clinicians have begun to speak out against the automatic codependent label. A growing number of professionals have started referring to the wives of sex addicts as *partners* instead of *coaddicts*. This has paved the way for important research. There is now strong evidence that the majority of *partners* (maybe as many as 70 percent) actually have symptoms of post-traumatic stress. That's not to say they will be diagnosed with full-blown PTSD, but they experience something similar.<sup>1</sup>

We'll look at some symptoms when we get to Part Two of this book so you can take inventory. For now, I just want to validate that what you have been experiencing is agonizing and also to let you know something important:

***Your husband's battle with sin doesn't necessarily make you a coaddict or a codependent woman.***

Here are a few things you deserve to hear:

1. **It is not your fault.** You have no responsibility for your husband's sin. None.
2. **You are experiencing collateral damage.** One of the best things you can work on right now is your own healing.
3. **You can heal and grow in any area.** Let God gently use this testing to reveal any areas of your life where He wants to mature you.

I urge you to enter into the future with a willingness for God to use your experience. It may be that any of the terms I've mentioned—"codependency," "coaddiction," or "betrayal trauma"—*could* accurately describe your experience. Maybe all three of them do. But never let someone place a label onto you automatically, without really getting to know you and your situation.

You need support that is *both* biblically based and clinically informed because you have experienced something traumatic and the advice you receive could be confusing. You should not try to deal with the inconsistency on your own, because your brain may not be operating as well as it usually does.

## **Reason #2: Your Brain May Be Stuck in Alarm Mode**

When Ashley Jameson's husband first disclosed his sin, she found herself responding in ways she would have never predicted. Looking back, she describes herself as "irrational." She was even shocked to discover herself throwing things. When she went to someone in her church for help, she told them about both her husband's disclosure and her hotheaded response. She was told, "Lots of women go through this. You just need to forgive."<sup>2</sup>

Telling a woman who experiences betrayal in her marriage to “just forgive” is about as helpful as telling her not to scream when she’s dilated to ten centimeters and on the verge of delivering an eight-pound baby. Our bodies do not, thankfully, bring babies into the world every day. But they were designed to go through the painful process now and then.

Your brain is kind of like that. It is designed to worship the Lord, enjoy creation, solve math problems, read books, communicate with friends, and lots of other everyday things. But your noggin was also designed to keep you safe on the rare occasion that it senses imminent danger. When this happens, your brain goes into a unique alarm mode, during which many physiological changes occur. Your brain uses all its energy to protect you.

Within one twentieth of a second<sup>3</sup> a little structure in the brain called the amygdala has taken over, and the prefrontal cortex, which is like the CEO of your self-control, is essentially bypassed. (This explains why you might feel irrational and more prone to yell and throw things.) The amygdala sends signals to the glands that release adrenaline and cortisol, and these in turn affect your heart rate, breathing, vision, ears, blood, skin, and muscles. Everything in you is being readied to fight, run, or play dead.

In most cases the danger passes, and both your brain and body calm down in about a half hour. But that’s not always the case with trauma. Instead, your brain may go into a state of vigilance *that doesn’t always turn off*.

Don’t panic, though. It is possible for individuals with these issues to make strong comebacks.<sup>4</sup> But you do need the help of individuals who have clinical understanding. Your average godly friend at church may be gifted at helping marriages where couples fight about who takes out the trash. That same person will be in over her head when it comes to the impact of your husband’s sexual sin on your heart and your body.

A well-trained Christian counselor or clinically informed support group will understand that very important work, like forgiveness, may need to wait. First you need to be stabilized. Otherwise, the important work for your marriage could be premature and incomplete, inevitably creating more confusion and possibly an ongoing trauma response.

If your trauma is new, if you find yourself repeatedly reliving the pain of what has happened to you, or if you are at the point where you fear you can't trust your own judgment, now is not the time for you to worry about "getting past" your pain. Instead, you need some nurturing—mentally, emotionally, and also spiritually. That's why I designed Part Two of this book to help you focus on your own heart and your own brain. But that's also why I urge you to seek help from someone specifically trained to handle the complications of a marriage like yours. Or mine.

Let's look at Ashley's situation. Did she need to forgive her husband? Yes. Did she need to do that while her brain was actively in alarm mode? No.

Thankfully, she got help for her brain and her soul and *then* forgave her husband. Today she guides other women toward healing as director of Pure Desire's biblically based and clinically informed women's groups.

The second reason you need a biblically based, clinically informed support system is that your brain may need some extra care right now. But yours is not the only cranium that's riding the struggle bus.

### **Reason #3: Your Husband's Brain Is Hijacked**

If you look at a single-photon emission computerized tomography (SPECT) brain scan of a healthy brain, you'll see that the surface of it will be smooth. But scan a man who is compulsively using pornography or misusing God's gift of sex over and over, and you'll get a completely different picture. The surface looks almost like Swiss cheese—full of

holes. It's similar to that of someone who uses heroin,<sup>5</sup> one of the most dangerous and addictive substances known to mankind.

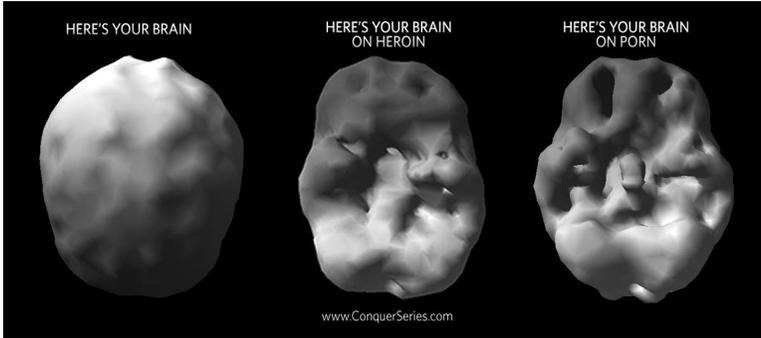


Image Courtesy of Lawrence V. Tucker, M.D., PLLC, Diplomate, American Board of Psychiatry & Neurology and Appearing in the Conquer Series.

The cratering you see in these scans happens because the brain is malleable. This simply means it can be changed and shaped by both physical impact (like a concussion) *or* function (like learning something). Researchers call that quality *neuroplasticity*.<sup>6</sup>

Neuroplasticity means the brain can actually reshape itself to accommodate how we want or need to use it. This is what enables stroke victims to recover and grandmas to strengthen their brains with Sudoku. (Just think about how beautiful that is!)

Neuroplasticity also enables us to keep learning new things. In fact, you can actually see physiological changes when we strengthen a certain area of the brain. For example, one study revealed that taxi drivers in London have larger-than-average *hippocampi*, the part of the brain that helps them memorize and access maps.<sup>7</sup> Kinda cool, huh?

Unfortunately, neuroplasticity also exposes the brain to detrimental changes as a result of experiences like drug use or pornography addiction. Just as heroin or a car accident can destroy the structure and function of a brain, so do the chemicals rushing through a man's head when he is overstimulated by pornography or other forms of compulsive

sex. The high comes from *dopamine*, a neurochemical that rewards the brain when we do something that is enjoyable or potentially useful for survival. If you eat a good Krispy Kreme donut? Dopamine! Run a half hour on the treadmill? Dopamine!

Neurochemicals are values-neutral, so the dopamine does its job whether the pleasure comes from something that's good for you—like sex with a spouse—or something that's bad for you—like bingeing on porn.<sup>8</sup> But the way the body produces this reward chemical is different when the form of stimulation is not *intimate* sex, say with a spouse. Neuroscientist Rachel Anne Barr specifies that “porn scenes, like addictive substances, are hyper-stimulating triggers that lead to unnaturally high levels of dopamine secretion. This can damage the dopamine reward system and leave it unresponsive to natural sources of pleasure.”<sup>9</sup>

In other words, your husband's brain is chemically hijacked.

***What began as a moral problem  
is now also a brain problem.***

Porn also produces phenylethylamine (PEA) and adrenaline. “Fused together, these two chemicals forge an intoxicating sensation which overpowers” the kind of pleasure that can even be experienced with real sex.<sup>10</sup>

So porn acts as a *supernormal stimulus* that can wreak havoc in human lives.

The term *supernormal stimulus* refers to “a stimulus that produces a more vigorous response than the normal stimulus eliciting that particular response.”<sup>11</sup> The concept first emerged in the 1950s and 1960s when a prominent biologist discovered he could create artificial stimuli that would override the natural instincts of animals. For instance, he could present an extra-large artificial egg to a bird whose instinct to

incubate was triggered by the presence of an egg. The bird would ignore her normal small eggs and incubate the big, artificial one.<sup>12</sup>

Decades later, this discovery enabled a strategy to slow the spread of one of the most destructive insects in the eastern United States. First introduced in the late 1900s to bolster the American silk industry, the gypsy moth attacked our hardwood forests instead,<sup>13</sup> defoliating more than 95 million acres over the next hundred years! But scientists fought back, employing many strategies to combat the problem. One of the most interesting is mating disruption, which involves saturating a specific area with concentrated, artificially produced gypsy moth sex pheromones. Male gypsy moths in these areas become so obsessed with finding the “extra sexy” smelling (but nonexistent) females that they insanely flutter right past actual female insects.<sup>14</sup>

That’s what porn will do to a marriage.

I first heard this comparison from Dr. Judith Reisman, a well-respected researcher and opponent of pornography.<sup>15</sup> I became more convinced of the connection when I read an article in *New York Magazine*. The author, concerned over something he observed in his own life, interviewed many men to see if their desire to have sex with their partners and wives was dying because they were using porn.

Turns out he was onto something.

“Over the last decade,” reports *Relevant* magazine, “the percentage of American men between the ages of 18 and 30 who reported not having sex in the preceding year exploded from 10 percent to 28 percent.”<sup>16</sup> These men are at their sexual peak but don’t have any desire for real intimacy—just the *supernormal stimulus*.

And here’s the scary thing: it’s been predicted that just in the next few years, virtual reality (VR) porn will be a billion-dollar business.<sup>17</sup> When that happens, individuals will be able to interface with a *supernormal stimulus* in a 3D experience that will feel very real. We have no comprehension of the devastation this will cause to individuals and families.

When I said porn acts as a supernormal stimulus that wreaks havoc on lives, I meant it!

Are you beginning to understand that your husband's brain has been radically compromised? He needs help! Don't let him convince you otherwise.

And there you have the third reason you need biblically based, clinically informed support. Your husband needs help from people who understand the complex physiological brain trauma he has brought upon himself through his own sin.



## find help

I hope this chapter prompts you to seek out a biblically based, clinically informed counselor, but you may wonder how to find one you can afford. Or you could still have questions about why you need one. Either way, I encourage you to read question #2 in the back of this book: **"Why do I need a counselor (and how can I find a good one)?"** I wrote it to help you avoid some of the mistakes Bob and I made looking for professional help.

## Redeeming Our Understanding of Addiction

So far, all I've really proven in this chapter is that you need individuals with clinical understanding to guide you through the technical terminology and rich resources of the behavioral sciences. What I haven't yet mentioned is anything that would require your support system to be Christ-centered.

So let's revisit something I said earlier about the term "sex addiction"—that I use it *cautiously*. One reason for my caution was the tendency to automatically label the traumatized partner of the one who acts out as codependent or coaddicted. But my main concern is that a preoccupation with addiction can erase a healthy understanding of sin.

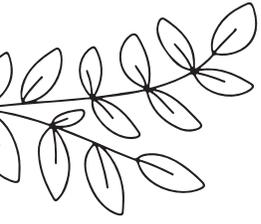
In the last chapter, we looked at how the language of psychology has partially eclipsed the language of sin. Jay Stringer, author of *Unwanted: How Brokenness Reveals Our Way to Healing*, observes that the same could be said about the language of addiction.

One of the growing realities in our culture is that we use the word *sin* less and less to describe problematic sexual behavior. The preferred word, if we recognize any disorder at all, is now *addiction*. . . . This shift is [good in that it forces] us to exchange our intellectual laziness for a more curious engagement with the origins of brokenness. What I'm discouraged by, however, is that Scripture uses the most beautiful and wise words I have ever read to talk about sin.

I believe we need a model that integrates sin *and* addiction. I've found that the more I understand what the Bible says about sin, the more I understand the nature of addiction, and the more I understand what science reveals about addiction, the more I understand the nature of sin.<sup>18</sup>

I couldn't agree more.

Addicts often describe feeling powerless against their behavioral sin. They feel as if they are in bondage to their appetites. Well, I think Jesus would agree with that. In fact, He said exactly that to a group of His Jewish followers who questioned whether they were in any kind of bondage:



**Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.”**

**—JOHN 8:34**

Do I have to remind you that we have all practiced sin? (In fact, I’ve gotten very good at it.) Essentially we have no ability whatsoever to achieve our own freedom from it (Romans 5:6).

The reality is that all of us who have accepted Christ are in recovery from our enslavement to sin. Some are recovering from substance abuse, some from workaholism, some from pride, some from porn, some from gossip, some from slothfulness, some from greed, some from fundamental selfishness. Look around. People in your church are in recovery from a thousand different kinds of enslavement to sin. And at the end of the day, these people are responsible for their behavioral sins, no matter what they call them.

Your husband can call himself anything he wants. You can call him what you want. He is still responsible for his choices and actions. (And by the way, you don’t get a hall pass from responsibility if you throw things at your husband.)

The only thing sufficient to buy your husband back from the enemy’s grip is the redemptive power of Jesus Christ.

Please do not amputate the work of the Holy Spirit from your box of recovery tools. Satan, the one responsible for our enslavement to sin, is a formidable enemy. You need help from Christian people who are wise about the spiritual disciplines that enable you to access the power of God’s Spirit. These are the most important resources you’ll put in your toolbox as you and your husband work on your marriage together.

## Find Your Team

I am so honored to be a part of your team. But I hope I'm not your only support. After walking through this with my own husband, I am convinced of these four things:

- You and your husband cannot work through what you are walking through alone.
- You need biblical help.
- You need clinically informed help.
- You also need a community of people who love you and are willing to support you (more on that in a future chapter).

**the truth  
you need**



*You need a professional counselor or support group that integrates both a solid understanding of how the brain works and a healthy respect for God's Word.*

I urge you to build a biblically based, clinically informed support team as you work through this book. If at all possible, try to find a biblically grounded, clinically informed Christian counselor to work with. I realize the process can be expensive, but what's your marriage worth?

The very fact that you're holding this book tells me you value your marriage. And I'm going to assume that you have—at the very least—a bent toward the Truth of God's Word. That means you've got a head start on handling the hardship you're facing now. In the next part of this book, I'll share how to use tools that are most likely already in your hands.

But before you turn the page—you've probably noticed that I like to start a chapter with a short narrative from my own story. I've compiled

these from memory using my prayer journal to maintain accuracy as much as possible. That's because I believe radical vulnerability is such an important quality for a thriving community of believers.

Beginning in the next chapter, I'll go back in time a bit to some troubling symptoms I was experiencing before Bob confessed his sin to me. I'm hoping it might help you make sense of some of what you may be or have been experiencing.



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