

What to do when YOUR PARTNER is into PORN

So you've discovered your husband likes pornography but have no idea how to deal with it. Bonnie Vaughan seeks expert advice

When Pamela discovered her husband Adam had been watching hardcore porn on his iPad when she wasn't around, she was horrified. She'd had no idea he was into this. Didn't he find her attractive anymore? Wasn't she good enough in bed? How could he watch this nasty stuff? And worst of all, she thought, had their whole relationship been a massive lie?

Increasingly, couples are struggling with issues around pornography. It's hardly surprising. Pornography is more instantly accessible than it's ever been. Unlike pre-millennial times, when you needed a television screen connected to a VCR or DVD player to watch X-rated videos, you can now stream them anywhere, anytime. And whether it's

accessed by desktop, tablet or smartphone, the worldwide web is heaving with content: 12 per cent of all websites are pornographic; 25 per cent of all search engine requests are pornography related; and 35 per cent of all downloads are of the adult variety. And what's proliferating online now is so-called 'gonzo' porn – no-frills, no-budget clips that have scrapped any pretence of a storyline to focus on extreme, close-up action – and it is absolutely free.

About 80 per cent of porn consumers are men. Not all of them though are up-front with their partners about their predilection for X-rated content. So what do you do when you find out your partner is into porn? We consult three of Australia's top sex and relationship therapists to find out.

TAKE A DEEP BREATH

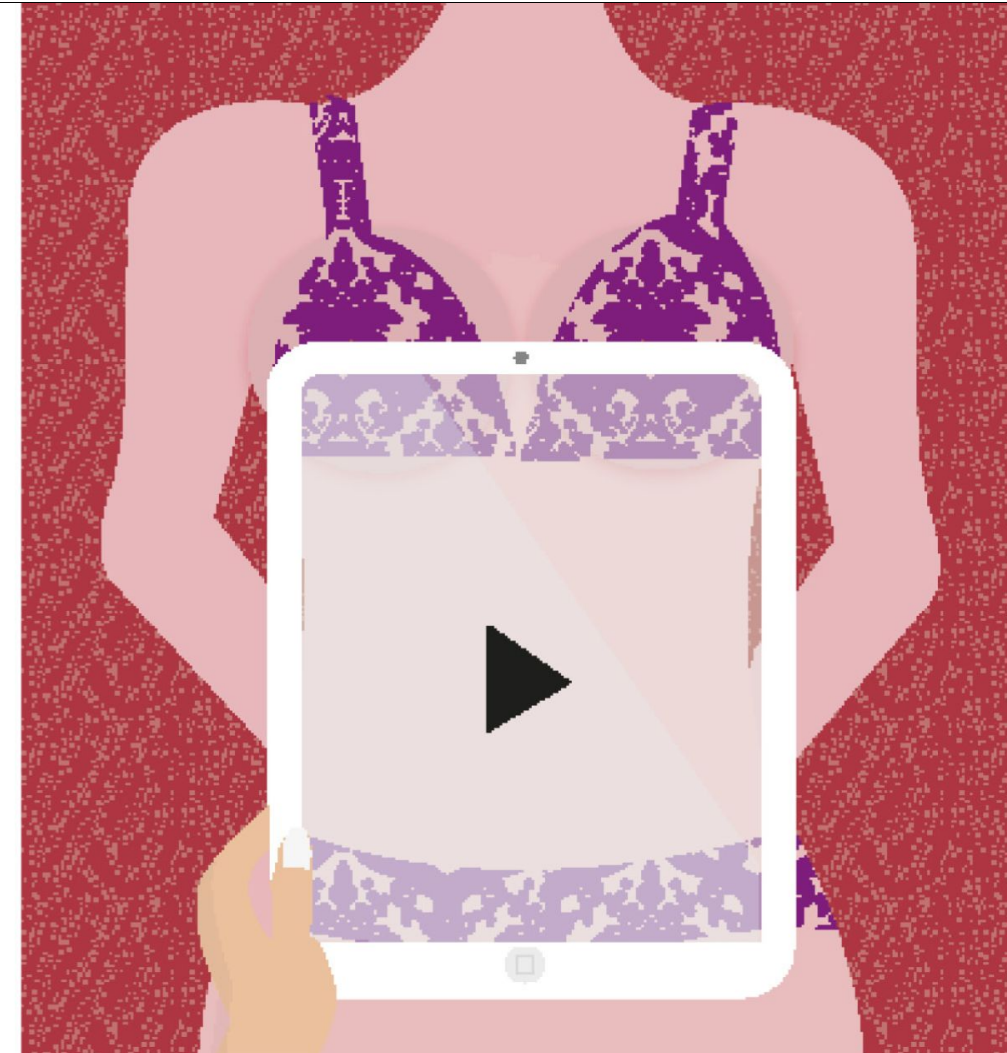
You may be overwhelmed by a potent cocktail of emotions – shock, hurt, anger, betrayal, disgust and more – all at once. This entire range of reactions is perfectly valid, so acknowledge your feelings, take ownership of them, and above all try to stay calm. "Don't jump to conclusions and start thinking, 'He's doing it because of me; he's not happy in the relationship; I'm not enough for him,'" advises Professor Raj Sitharthan from the University of Sydney's department of psychiatry. "Try not to let your initial emotional response hijack your thinking."

UNDERSTAND THAT IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU

"The first thing you need to tell yourself is that it's not personal," insists relationship counsellor Clinton Power. "For many men, looking at porn is just part of their sexuality – most have been doing it since the age of 11."

The reasons that men watch porn are varied: it offers variety, it's an escape, it provides instant gratification, it's non-judgmental. What it doesn't mean is that you've been wrong all these years about your compatibility in bed. "You can have a partner who looks at porn and still have a good sex life," says Power. "It's not one or the other."

For most people, watching porn is about fantasy, not reality. "It's often assumed that using pornography is about wanting to actually do the things that are happening on screen," says sex therapist Heide McConkey. "But pornographers 'steal' human fantasies about sexuality that our brain normally likes to be able to climax and put it into stories." And fantasy, many experts say, is a normal part of human sexuality. "Masturbation is a very healthy activity and a human expression of sexuality for men and women," says Power. "For men, parts of their brain are



more stimulated visually than for women and that's why more men are drawn to porn."

EXAMINE YOUR ATTITUDE TOWARDS PORN

You may have issues with pornography from a feminist's perspective or perhaps the very thought of it stirs up issues you've had in the past. You may object to porn for religious reasons. Try to work through your feelings before attempting to discuss the issue.

Talk to your partner but consider your approach first. Pick a time when neither of you is stressed or tired and make sure children are well out of earshot. "Don't walk up to him and bellow, 'You've been watching porn behind my back!'" says Power. "Going on the attack can be very shaming for a partner."

Power also suggests using 'I' statements, such as, "I was on the computer, I came across this..." and then share any feelings that come up for you. "Then give your partner a chance to respond," he says. "Suspend your assumptions and be curious about what it means. It's a good opportunity to understand more about why your partner likes certain types of porn – and that can lead to a deeper understanding between you."

SHOULD YOU GET INTO IT, TOO?

While sharing porn certainly spices up some couples' sex lives, it's not for everybody. "I generally never recommend that partners should try watching porn together because it can be very upsetting," says Power. "One

partner may not like it and that may cause more problems. Also, for some people, watching porn is a very private activity and it doesn't need to be shared. Most partners don't disclose to each other when they masturbate and that's not secrecy, that's more an issue of privacy. It's okay to be in a relationship and have privacy."

TRY TO MAKE PEACE WITH PORN

"I think couples these days should talk about the role of porn because it's out there," says McConkey. "You need to make sure it doesn't become your enemy; it could be an extension of a healthy sex life. More couples should talk about it and come to an agreement: what is acceptable, what is not acceptable. True intimacy isn't just what

happens between the sheets: it's a level of trust."

WHEN PORN USE IS A SERIOUS PROBLEM

Although most men consider watching porn a bit of harmless fun, there are instances in which it's anything but. Here's when you should consider seeking professional help.

➡ Your partner has developed a porn addiction.

There's a huge difference between casual porn use and a porn obsession. It's been estimated that around 10 per cent of regular users become addicted, and studies show that porn addiction is on the rise. If you discover your partner has been watching porn when he's told you he's been doing something else, or he's been missing work and avoiding time with the family in order to indulge a porn habit, seek counselling. "Look at how this behaviour is causing you distress and collaboratively tackle the issue," suggests Professor Sitharthan.

➡ Your sex life is in the doldrums. If your partner has been disinterested in having sex with you but getting busy on a screen in the next room, Professor Sitharthan says you're facing bigger questions in your relationship.

➡ Your partner's behaviour changes dramatically.

"When you've been with someone for a long time and all of a sudden your partner is moody, secretive, demanding things sexually that you don't want to do and getting aggressive if he can't get it, you may be dealing with a serious issue," says McConkey. ➡