

Creating a happy marriage is possible and this site is dedicated to providing resources to help couples who want to stay together. By providing information about qualified marriage counseling, we hope to encourage couples to get the help they need. The site also features articles, other websites, books, and workshops which offer the tools needed to create happy, lasting marriages.



## Is Pornography Destroying Your Marriage?

*This is Episode number 54 of Stay Happily Married, "Is Pornography Destroying Your Marriage?"*

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I'm here by telephone with Dr. Nicole Imbraguglio. Nicole, how are you?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Good. How are you?

Lee Rosen: I am so glad you could be here with us today. You practice with Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina and you work with, I know, adults and with kids on, gosh, a whole range of issues. And I know that you do counseling for individuals, groups, couples, families with problems; everything from mood disorders to substance abuse to life transitions; and that you have a master's degree in community and clinical psychology and a doctorate in clinical psychology.

Now, we're talking about pornography today. And first of all I've got to know, is this a problem that you're seeing a lot of in your practice?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, you know, there are certainly more common problems that couples come in with but pornography is not an infrequent problem that I see, especially given the availability of it. Now that the Internet is everywhere -- I mean, you can get it on your phone now. So the availability of pornography is increasing. So with that we're seeing a bit more of it in couples therapy.

Lee Rosen: Well, it used to be that I guess if you were interested in finding pornography you had to go to like the adult book store --

Nicole Imbraguglio: Yeah. You had to leave the house. You had to go to a specialty store, maybe.

Lee Rosen: Well, and there would be a whole stigma I think attached to doing that.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: And yeah, it is, it's so easy today.

Nicole Imbraguglio: You had to face the man at the counter who was checking you out.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Nicole Imbraguglio: And that's a lot more effort and energy than -- putting into it than what you have to put into it now in order to have access to pornography.

Lee Rosen: Well, I would assume that couples that are seeing a counselor are having difficulty communicating anyway, but this has got to be a really tough issue to talk about.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Absolutely. I think there are some couples who would normally not have problems communicating but for this kind of ups the ante a little bit so they find that they do have problems talking about it, for sure.

Lee Rosen: It's hard for me to know where to go with this, but I'm wondering are people that are upset about pornography, were they generally -- was one spouse keeping it a secret from the other one? Or was this something that everybody knows is going on? Or how does it come out? What's going on?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Yeah, that's really typical for couples dealing with this issue is that one spouse was hiding it. Another pattern that's really typical is that it's usually the husband -- in a married couple it's usually the husband who is viewing the pornography and the wife who has the problem with it. I would say 99 times out of 100 that's what we're dealing with. But a lot of times, yes, the husband was hiding it.

Lee Rosen: What is the problem that -- okay. It is sort of one of those victimless crimes, I guess. Not even crime; I mean, that's

overstating it. So husband is really into pornography and he's watching these things on his phone or on the Internet. So what? Why is that a problem for wife?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, you know, that's where it's really wife-specific. And I think what you're talking about as far as -- like, some wives don't have a problem with it at all and don't see it as a threat to them or the relationship; whereas other wives consider it infidelity. They consider it to be very hurtful and a breach of trust in the relationship. So that's something that's very -- it's different per couple and it kind of is on a continuum where some wives are a little more bothered by it than other wives. But some wives I've seen consider it an act of infidelity.

Lee Rosen: So she sees it just like if he were running around with some girlfriend.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Yes, absolutely.

Lee Rosen: And is flipping out about it and coming to see you.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: Okay.

Nicole Imbraguglio: And I think the flipping out part is what causes such a problem for the husband because -- I mean, I deal with that a lot in couples therapy, that husbands do everything they can to make sure their wives don't flip out. And a lot of times that means that they're going to hide the pornography. So instead of not using the pornography anymore, what they do is just get better at hiding it. And inevitably the wife finds out anyway and then she's just even more upset.

Lee Rosen: So it's like the cover up is worse than the crime.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Sometimes, yeah.

Lee Rosen: Interesting. Now, when you've got husbands looking at pornography, well, why don't they just stop looking at pornography? Are they addicted to it?

Nicole Imbraguglio: You can look at pornography and not be addicted to it, but you can also be addicted to pornography. And that's a really controversial topic in the psychology realm. But it's true that some people do develop sort of an addiction and that part of an addiction -- I mean, one of the hallmarks of an addiction is that

you feel like you can't stop, that you have this loss of control over whether or not you're going to participate in a certain activity or not. So that's one of the hallmarks of addiction.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Nicole Imbraguglio: But you could certainly use pornography and not be addicted to it. If you feel like it's a problem in your relationship and your wife asks you to stop using pornography, and you can very easily, then most likely you're not addicted to it.

Lee Rosen: What do husbands say about why they're looking at the pornography in the first place?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, that varies a lot too. One of them is it just feels good. And that's not something that wives typically accept as a reasonable answer, but some of it just feels good. A lot of husbands don't see it as related to their wife at all. You know, it's like you said; it's a victimless crime. Like, what does it really hurt? And I think when husbands kind of take that stance, which is very true to how they're experiencing it, they also need to be understanding of how their wife is experiencing it as well.

Lee Rosen: Right. So do you get a lot of really, I guess, both spouses seeing this from just totally opposing perspectives?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Oh, absolutely. Yeah.

Lee Rosen: No one really understands where the other one is coming from, I guess.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Yes. And then they're so busy defending their own position that they're not trying to see where the other person's coming from, when really that could do -- that does so much more help than just kind of staking your ground.

Lee Rosen: Have you had a lot of husbands who say, "Okay. Okay. Okay. I'll stop," and they do just become -- like you said, they're more sophisticated at hiding it? Is that a fairly common scenario where they really are just not going to stop?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, it's hard for me because if they're lying to their wife, mostly likely they're lying to me too.

Lee Rosen: Sure.

Nicole Imbraguglio: So I don't know. I mean, it's possible that people have said that they would stop and then actually haven't, which is really unfortunate because when I'm doing couples therapy I always make sure that the couple understands that any issue in their marriage is being contributed to by both parties and that they each have a job that they can do.

So when I'm working with a couple dealing with pornography and the wife does have these huge reactions to it, that's her responsibility to make sure that she tones down her reactions and makes it easier for her husband to come to her to tell her, "Okay, look, I'm still having a problem with this. I said that I would stop but it's really hard for me to stop and I'm going to need some extra help." So her responsibility is to kind of tone down that reaction so he feels safer to come to her to talk about it.

Lee Rosen: Right. I'm just curious, but how are the wives finding out that their husbands are looking at the pornography?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Oh, good question. Okay. So we have --

Lee Rosen: Because I want to help the guys.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Oh, no. So if there are magazines, they find the magazines, right? Like, maybe you think you're being really coy about where you're hiding the magazines, but if your wife is doing most of the cleaning then she probably knows all the hiding spots in the house anyway. But then also looking at the history in the Internet, your history.

Lee Rosen: So she's really got to be suspicious in the first place.

Nicole Imbraguglio: No. Because you know sometimes when you're typing in another website other websites pop up --

Lee Rosen: Oh, yeah.

Nicole Imbraguglio: -- you know, in the history. So sometimes like that. And sometimes she walks in and catches him or -- I mean, it's just -- there's a bunch of different ways that they can be caught. But ideally, no matter what's going on in your life that you're able to talk about it openly with your spouse, ideally.

Lee Rosen: Ideally. Yeah. I can see why that would not be the favorite topic of a lot of husbands, though.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Sure.

Lee Rosen: "By the way, honey, let me tell you what I just watched." Have you ever been involved in -- and you may not be able to answer this, but have you ever been involved in a case or a situation where it was the wife that was very into the pornography and the husband was not?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Never.

Lee Rosen: It's always the other way around.

Nicole Imbraguglio: So far. I mean, it certainly has happened. Not in my experience, but there are women who are addicted to pornography. So I know that does happen but I haven't seen it so far in couples therapy.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Have you had people who's marriages have come to an end because of the pornography?

Nicole Imbraguglio: No. So far not. I mean, so far they've come in in time where they've been able to work on their relationship to save it.

Lee Rosen: Right. I would think -- like, we talked about this whole idea of it being an addiction, but I would think that if you have to be addicted to something -- if my spouse is addicted to drugs or alcohol or something, that's got to be a lot worse than a pornography addiction in the grand scheme of things.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, it can have really devastating effects, depending on the severity of it, because a lot of the porn sites, you know, you have to pay for. So someone could really suffer financial consequences from buying pornography if you are participating in it so much that you're really taking yourself out of your social network or time away from your wife, or even withdrawing from your wife sexually. I mean, those are devastating consequences of this addiction.

Lee Rosen: Have you seen -- does that happen? Do people that are really into pornography not want to be involved sexually with their spouse?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Sometimes. And that makes it a hundred times worse because now, not only is the wife upset about the pornography, but it just really intensifies the feelings of rejection and loneliness that can go along sometimes with your partner really being into pornography.

Lee Rosen: I mean, I'm no psychologist, by a long shot, but that doesn't make any sense to me that you'd really be into the pornography and not be interested in having sexual relations with your spouse.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, if you think about it, pornography really appeals to the part of the brain that seeks novelty, that you can log on and see hundreds of different women. And that when you really kind of get used to the idea of you can see whatever kind of woman that you want, and then over time you may become a little more disappointed in your wife because she never changes.

Lee Rosen: Right. Same woman once again.

Nicole Imbraguglio: So that part of your brain that seeks novelty isn't rewarded like it is in pornography. And then also, the women's bodies on pornography are -- how can average women really compete with that? Because they have airbrushing, they have editing, they have plastic surgery-enhanced body parts. So sometimes what happens is that over time men get kind of disappointed with an average woman's body.

And then also think about the -- I mean, pornography does a horrible thing to -- I mean, it really portrays unrealistic expectations of a woman's sexual response cycle, right? I mean, in pornography a lot of times they look at each other and they're ready to go; there's like no foreplay. And then she reaches orgasm within a couple of minutes.

And that can be really devastating to both partners in a relationship because then the woman starts to feel like, "Why am I not climaxing that quickly?" And then the man feels badly because he's not able to really help her reach orgasm that quickly either.

Lee Rosen: Did you ever think you'd become an expert on pornography?

Nicole Imbraguglio: No.

Lee Rosen: Right. "Here's what I do for a living." Let me ask you this. What do you see people doing when they -- like, wife is -- are some people trying to work this out without your help? What are they doing and how are they trying?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, I mean, typically what people are trying is just pointing out from their point of view, just saying why they're upset and just telling the person to stop. Maybe trying to make them feel bad about what they're doing, like calling them a pervert or

something. But usually what that does, just like we said before, they get really just kind of -- it helps the husband figure out a better way to hide it. So there's not a lot getting solved there.

Lee Rosen: Right. It goes nowhere and we just repeat the cycle over and over again, I guess.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Right. Exactly.

Lee Rosen: So what brings them to you? Are they just reaching the breaking point before they come and see you?

Nicole Imbraguglio: I think they realize that what they've been doing hasn't been working and they are feeling like they need to try something different maybe to really kind of get them out of the rut that they're in.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So what do you do with them? And I guess what I'm really sort of -- my threshold question is, do you end up sending people away sometimes, problem solved, husband still looking at pornography and wife is no longer upset about it?

Nicole Imbraguglio: That can be one of the -- sure, that can be one of the solutions that we end up from therapy. I mean, it just depends. Every couple's different. It's all on a continuum. I mean, some couples aren't resolved until the husband isn't looking at pornography at all anymore. But sure, they're different.

Just like I said before, for every issue in a marriage there are two different -- you each have a responsibility. And sometimes that responsibility is the wife feeling a little bit better about it. Sometimes. It depends for every couple, though.

Lee Rosen: Well, if I'm the porn-watching husband and I'm about to come for a meeting with you and I'm wondering what the odds are that I'm going to get to keep watching the pornography --

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, you know, it depends on --

Lee Rosen: -- I especially want to know that before I write the check for the session.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, it's not going to be something like we're going to figure that out in one session. But what we will do is really listen to your wife's point of view about why she's upset about it and listen to your point of view about what you find so rewarding about it and really kind of explore those issues and see -- and just practice

being in the other person's shoes and really understanding where the other person's coming from, and then reaching a decision together about what's going to be best for your relationship.

Lee Rosen: Right. And so we just never know at the outset where we're going to end up, what everybody's going to be doing when it's all over with.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Yeah. Sometimes. I mean, there are other women who -- I mean, I think another part that we haven't talked about yet about pornography is that it can be a very serious breach of religious beliefs as well.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Nicole Imbraguglio: And where some couples both -- like, both of the partners feel like, "Hey, this is not something that we want to be happening in the relationship, but I'm feeling like it's hard for me to stop." So that the husband -- the porn-watching husband -- is feeling guilty about that as well. So then in that relationship, then the outcome will be that the husband stops watching pornography because that's what he wants too.

Lee Rosen: Right. Boy, that really gets complicated then when you've got -- then you've got a lot of psychological stuff, I guess, to sort out.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: Wow. It's not an easy job you do.

Nicole Imbraguglio: It's not. But it's rewarding.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. So any sense of -- if I'm coming to you because this is the problem in our marriage, are we looking at, on average, a few months to get this straightened out, a few years to get this straightened out? How does it usually play out?

Nicole Imbraguglio: I would say -- I mean, again it depends on how long the problem has been going on, all the different levels of where the problem is affecting the person and the relationship. I mean, it can be done, certainly, in a few months. I've actually worked with couples that it has worked out in a few months.

Lee Rosen: And I'm kind of going backwards but I wanted to ask you this. Do you find -- you mentioned how long it goes on. Are there people have know this was a problem for a very long time who just

ignore it and ignore it until it finally does explore where one of them just can't stand it anymore?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Absolutely. Absolutely. That happens with so many different problems in marriages.

Lee Rosen: The reason I ask is we have been involved in divorce cases where the first time that it -- really, it explodes in the divorce case, that it's never -- that wife has been aware of it but never really done or said anything about it until she finally just says, "I'm out of here. I can't stand this anymore." And she hasn't really done much to address it with the husband prior to that.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Right. And that's where -- I mean, so the longer that someone just kind of swallows that feeling that, "Hey, this isn't okay with me," then the longer it is going to take to work it out in therapy. And that's one thing that I really stress to my couples is that it's okay to bring things up as soon as they come to you as feeling wrong in the relationship. That's okay, because the longer you wait, the worse it's going to be to deal with.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, I think it's very encouraging that you said that of all the situations with pornography that you've been involved in that the relationships have been able to continue. So it sounds to me like this is a pretty solvable problem if you go and get the help that you need.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Absolutely. And sometimes what that means is that the porn-watching husband does do a little bit of individual work as well. We have a couple psychologists here in Lepage Associates who do specialize in addiction, so that they are working with an individual therapist while we're doing couples work.

Lee Rosen: Perfect. So you get everything straightened out, taken care of, and get yourself back on track. And it sounds like if the solution is going to be that the husband doesn't look at the pornography anymore, but he ends up being in a place where that doesn't bother him that he's not looking at it anymore, so everybody feels good about it, then it's perfect.

Well, listen, it's a sensitive topic and I'm really pleased that you were able to take the time to talk with us about it. And I think it doesn't sound as horrible to deal with as some of the issues we've talked about in the past. I mean, it sounds a lot more manageable than I might have thought it would be when we first started this conversation, so I appreciate you giving us your insight into it.

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Nicole Imbraguglio: Yeah. No problem.

Lee Rosen: Well, listen, if you want to learn more about this issue, visit the Lepage Associates' website. They have a lot of good information about their practice and about a lot of the issues that come up in difficulties in marriages. The website is at [LepageAssociates.com](http://LepageAssociates.com). That's L-e-p-a-g-e Associates.com. You can also call Nicole at (919) 572-0000. Great information about a tough topic I think for a lot of people. Harder to talk about than a lot of things that come up in marriages.

Thank you so much for listening today. I hope that you will come back and join us again next week. We really appreciate all the comments that we get from you about these shows and I would appreciate it if you would keep giving us your feedback. We really find your ideas about upcoming episodes and feedback about shows we've already done to be very helpful as we move forward. So give us a call at our comment line at (919) 256-3083 or shoot us an e-mail at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com).

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

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