

Healing the Wounds

The Addiction Cycle

There has been a recent shift amongst the Christian community, and especially the secular community, in using the word “addiction” to describe a repeated unwanted behavior that leads to deterioration, whether it be physical, emotional, spiritual, social, or some combination of each. In Christian circles, historically, “sin” has been the word used to describe the same thing; we know that sin causes, in everyone, spiritual degradation because it is our sin that separates us from God, however, it can also cause harm in other areas of our life. Jay Stringer, in his book *Unwanted*, advocates not for one or the other, but for a unification of both. Using “addiction” helps us acknowledge the physiological barriers that have us trapped, while using “sin” helps us to acknowledge the spiritual barriers. Therefore, true healing, true freedom, comes when we find a model that integrates both sin and addiction, a model that acknowledges that they aren’t against each other, but they are in fact working close together. How many times have we heard the phrase “pray more” or “read the Bible more” in response to unwanted sexual behavior, only to find out that this isn’t enough to find true, lasting freedom? Could it be that we have focused too long on the spiritual aspect without integrating the physiological or vice versa?

Our first step to recovery is to understand our cycle of addiction and where it stems from. All unwanted sexual behavior can be traced back to wounds received in our childhood from the dynamics of our family relationships. Jay Stringer does an excellent job at tackling this in his book *Unwanted*, making this resource vital to read and understand. His research and experience give us the blueprints to understanding our desires and navigating the roadmaps that our desires present. If you haven’t already, you can purchase his book [here](#).

We start by looking at the cycle below on figure 1; immediately we notice that it is specific wounds that get us into the cycle. Of course, we do not speak of physical wounds, but emotional, spiritual, or psychological wounds that bring shame into our lives. Whether it's abuse in the family, or family dynamics that introduce specific wounds, the enemy uses these vulnerable areas in our lives to exploit for his purpose. He does so by shaming us. Shame is such a powerful force if we let it be. It cripples, enslaves, and overwhelms us, not allowing individuals to get the help they so desperately need, even though they know they need it. It is from this foundation that we seek to medicate ourselves with our choice of addiction. In this document, we will focus on unwanted sexual behaviors, but I have found that the principles can be extrapolated and applied to different types of addictions.

Then comes triggers. Triggers are words, phrases, images, sounds, smells, relationships, or memories that take us back to our moments where we were wounded. Now, that can either be replaying the specific abusive experience we lived, thereby reinforcing the shame we feel about that, or it can unlock a desire in our heart that needs to be filled because we either lacked it growing up, or it was distorted early on. Whatever the case, all triggers, when left unchecked, lead us into fantasizing/obsessing. Our thoughts become consumed with desires to indulge ourselves with our choice of sexual addiction. This can be known as the “temptation” phase. We are tempted, but not

necessarily acting out on our desires. The danger with being here is if we don't hold our thoughts captive, recognizing both the warfare going on and the triggers that lead us here, we will develop a hunger for lust strong enough that we will inevitably reach the ritual phase.

The ritual phase can be anywhere from a couple of minutes to hours, days, or weeks. This may vary depending on where you are, what's available around you, and our "inner strength." In this phase, we consciously or unconsciously begin to practice the steps that lead us into acting out. This can look like isolating yourself to be alone, you begin pushing the boundaries of what you search for on your phone or computer device, begin looking for opportunities to act out, etc. Basically, you begin to re-enact the moment that wounded you, searching for a place to "fill" the void you feel inside. In cases of sexual abuse, it is remarkable how closely we begin to unconsciously re-enact the moments that led to our abuse. This finally leads us to acting out. The moment where we open our devices and search for porn, we have the one-night stand, illicit sex for money, etc. we lose the battle within and give into our desires. We both sin and reinforce the addiction cycle in our hearts. Immediately after, the feelings of shame and condemnation are reinforced. What we used to remove the feelings of shame, condemnation, or despair, become the very tools that add to the negative feelings we have. Because of that, we enter the despair phase where we frantically commit to quitting. We commit to praying more, reading the bible more, trying harder, maybe even repenting before God and our accountability. We tighten our site-blocking software, go on a fast, and other attempts to grasp for freedom, not realizing that it is all futile as long as we never address the root issues.

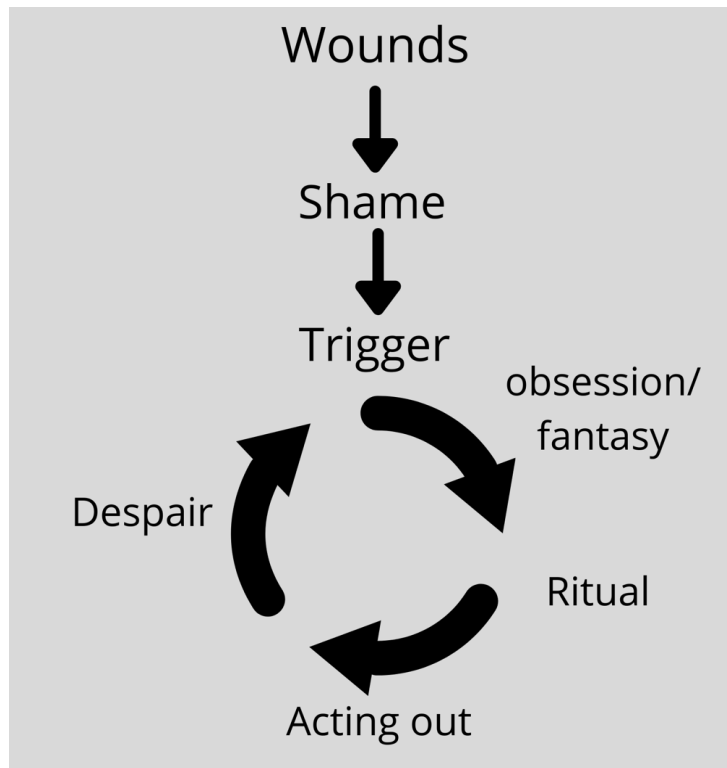


Figure 1

That is why true freedom comes from addressing the wounds of our hearts to understand what we are missing, why we are hurting, and what we desire. The most freeing statement that I came across was “pay attention to your lusts, because they reveal a Holy longing in your heart that desires to be filled.” This is true in abuse as it is true in the development of porn and other sexual addictions. In every unwanted behavior, there lies a desire that is completely normal, holy even! When a person acts out because of shame (they seek a way to disconnect through porn) what they really want is freedom from the shame that oppresses them! When a lonely person acts out because of the deep loneliness they feel, what they truly desire is authentic relationships with others! Often this isn’t even sexual in nature, but a desire to be known beyond their name, to be vulnerable, to be loved, to feel like they are portraying an authentic representation of themselves. When that is neglected, the enemy manipulates and warps their desires to shame them. It’s no wonder why he is called the accuser.

Men Fight, Boys Run Away

How many of us have asked God to help us understand our lust? Fantasies are roadmaps, they do not need to be condemned. You may not like the roadmap that you were given, nevertheless you will need to travel through it to experience freedom. This is where the Holy Spirit and trusted mentors come into the picture. A “SOZO” journey is required. SOZO is Greek for ‘saved, healed, delivered’, it implies a deep surgical treatment in your soul that concludes with freedom!

Up until this point, you have fought hard to get rid of your lusts. You may have even prayed to God “Lord take these filthy desires away from me.” You may have prayed more, read the bible more, installed more accountability, to name a few. Why then does the problem persist? Simple, all of this is avoidance of the root problem: you’re wounded.

Think about the absurdity of a prayer like the one above. If you had a food eating disorder, you would never pray to God “Lord just take away the desire for me to eat altogether”. If you received what you prayed for, you’d be dead quickly. Why? Because food is necessary to sustain life! Sex is the same! Quite literally if men and women didn’t have sex and procreate our race would die out. But in a more applicable sense, sex is designed by God for our enjoyment. It is a spiritual act, as well as physical, that engages all our senses! Sex is a great thing! A Holy thing, a God thing. That is why He gets to define it. Unlike a drug and alcohol addiction, God cannot simply “take away” your sex drive without taking away your humanity. That is why, just like in eating disorders, the journey to freedom is discovering how to control your urges, and finding ways to celebrate your sex drive! And this begins with addressing your wounds.

Addressing Wounds

When I first started this process, I began by recalling and discussing my family dynamics, my upbringing, my relationship with my parents, both growing up and now, with a trusted guide, which for me was a counselor. I focused on my relationship with

my mother, and how she treated me growing up. Were we close? Was she nurturing? Did I feel loved by her, or was she emotionally distant? Did she ever confide in me problems that she was having with my father in her marriage? Did I feel like I can be myself around her? Was there anything from this specific relationship that wounded me growing up? How do I interact with her now? I repeated this process with my father. Was he emotionally present, did he give me affirmation, affection, and attention? Who did I feel I had more attention from? Did my father teach me anything? How was conflict resolved in the family? Was there ever shouting or abuse involved? Just to name a few. Then I moved on to the dynamics with my siblings and how our parental relationships affected how I interacted with my siblings. Were my parents strict or relaxed? How did that affect how I and our siblings grew up? Is there evidence of one of my siblings or myself becoming a golden child? A black sheep?

To provide an example, when I finished this exercise, I realized that I had an emotionally distant mother, one that I wish I could talk to more but since she is a woman of few words, I have never really gotten to know her. I realized that I had a much better emotional connection with my dad, but one that crossed boundaries as he confided in me several times about marriage difficulties. My father was strict, to the point where I felt like I couldn't express my true feelings for fear of being scolded for my feelings/opinions/taste. Because of his strictness, I developed a golden child syndrome where I fought hard to preserve the image/illusion of everything going well even if I was having difficulties in school/emotionally/physically/ or in general life.

When I began to take a closer and in-depth view of my upbringing, what I had, what I missed, how I was treated, and compared it to the research and the concepts I found in *Unwanted*, I began to peel back the curtain of my unwanted sexual behaviors. I looked at myself not just as a prisoner that needed to be set free, but more importantly, a hurting man that was looking to be healed. I then tackled my fantasies and obsessions head on with my counselor. I recognize that many will not have the financial means to seek out a counselor, so I recommend walking through this with a friend that has overcome sexual brokenness, a pastor, or a mentor. I also recognize that many are unfamiliar with the process I am explaining here and it may prove difficult to find someone that you can trust that will be qualified to bring you through this. However, I strongly encourage you to allow the Holy Spirit to guide you through this process. Though a friend can be helpful, it is ultimately the Holy Spirit that guides and heals, and you have access to him 24/7! That, along with the concepts I've laid out here, and the book *Unwanted*, will get you moving in the right direction towards sexual freedom and healing.

Once again, I advocate the book *Unwanted*, by Jay Stringer simply because he does all the heavy lifting already. In it you'll find one, if not multiple, wounds that resonate with you (as I have) and the manner of which you received them, and how to address them and heal.

I end this section by saying that the longer we avoid what we truly lust after, our fantasies, the longer we remain in bondage. There is a freedom in understanding our brokenness and having compassion with ourselves. The very pull of lust is diminished when we pull back the curtain and find out what we truly desire. With that being said,

neglect your desires no longer, study your lusts, dive into your past with the Holy Spirit. He is faithful to show you where you were hurt, and what you need to do to heal!

Sanctification is Instantaneous and Continuous

What happens when we've gone through the painful and slow process of addressing our wounds, but we still see moments of acting out? This is a normal part of the process in sanctification. The reality is that we learn to live in freedom as we embrace healing daily, however there is still another layer to think through: the physiological aspect. Most individuals spend years battling with sexual addictions, so it is only fair to assume that our process of complete healing will not come overnight. Now, I am not saying that God cannot in a single moment bring healing and with it remove forever the urge to watch porn or pursue a sexual addiction, He is sovereign and can move in that way. In fact, I know of some with this precise testimony. What I am saying is that it is equally as powerful when the Lord brings us through a process of freedom, healing, reconciliation, and self-control. I say self-control because at the end, what keeps us stumbling is not a matter of temptation, or spiritual warfare, but a lack of self-control. A lack of ability to process our emotions effectively and healthily. Below is a list of common "triggers" that most will feel any given day. Most of the time, they act on us, meaning they come without our control. So, the key is to learn how to process these emotional triggers in a way that is compassionate with self and seeks to understand what you truly desire. Notice that it is an acronym "HALTS" for easy memorization

Triggers

- Hungry
- Angry
- Lonely
- Tired
- Sad/stressed/sick/shame

Most of the time, we are being "triggered" by one or more of these negative emotions. When we are immature in dealing with our emotions, we use unwanted sexual behavior to unplug, momentarily, from the present negative feelings. The problem with this is that not only does it reinforce the shame in our lives as shown in figure 1, but it fails to deal with the underlying issue, the root issue: why are we feeling this way?

Take for instance, stress. Whenever we feel stress, our tendency is to avoid the stressful feelings by over-indulging ourselves in dissociative behaviors that leave us feeling empty when our response should be to pursue healthy ways to deal with the stress we are feeling. Or perhaps loneliness? Nobody likes to feel lonely, and we rush to our method of unwanted sexual behavior to unplug, but what if we looked carefully into our loneliness? What if we realized that maybe, our loneliness is the product of not allowing ourselves to pursue healthy and whole

relationships with peers. That our loneliness is a product of hiding behind a mask of “I have it all together” that impedes us from authentic connection. It’s no wonder why we feel lonely when we don’t give others the opportunity to be with our true selves. Vulnerability is what we long for, not pornography. The goal is to learn to do this with every negative emotion. In everything, there is always a healthy response and an unwanted unhealthy response. **We get to choose what we pursue** (Galatians 5:16-17). Now, it is far more time consuming, and often taxing, to pursue the healthy response, that is why we turn to the unhealthy because of its “quick fix”. However, it is imperative that we do the hard work of recovery in learning how to respond in a positive way to the negative stimulus. The more we open ourselves to doing this, the easier it becomes to dig into ourselves with the Holy Spirit and find true and lasting freedom!

When you’re tempted, stop, and say “what am I feeling right now” what’s happening in me right now that’s making me want to act out. Pausing is one of the greatest steps you can take in your recovery! When addicted, our impulse takes over, and doing what we do not want to do becomes easy. However, if we can pause for a moment, we can begin to train ourselves to overcome the cycle of addiction! Ask the Lord to help you in these moments, that you would remember to just pause for a moment and dialogue with the Holy Spirit about what is going on. (Psalms 46:10)

Writing a New Sexual Story

Much more can be said about this process, and in fact it has all been laid plain in Jay Stringer’s *Unwanted*. I recommend that you not only read this book, but that you study it. That you apply the lessons and suggestions to the best of your ability. That you take extensive notes that you can come back to. When I read it the second time around I did so slowly, taking extensive notes so that I could not only find greater levels of freedom, but that I can lead others to a freedom only found in Christ Jesus!

The end goal is not to just cease our unwanted sexual behaviors, but to discover the beauty, complexity, and blessing in our own sex drive. To know the heart of God, to understand ourselves by understanding our Creator, end generational curses and soul ties, to reclaim our bodies, to worship our Loving God with our sexuality!

The problem isn’t that we are too sexual, the problem is that we are not sexual
enough!

-Unwanted

Other helpful ideas

I want to conclude this by briefly sharing different spiritual disciplines I embraced that I feel contributed to my sexual healing and freedom. I remember it began with prayer, a deep realization that I needed God's help to heal and find freedom from unwanted sexual behaviors. From there I downloaded the app "Fortify" which became a game changer for me. This wasn't an accountability software that restricted my web pages, rather it was an app where I could track the days without a setback, as well as go through informational videos about the reality and dangers of porn. These 3-5 minute videos daily were not only insightful, but they became a daily renewing of my mind, an act of surrender, and also milestones that I completed that helped me grow. Lastly, with the daily input of victories or setbacks I had, I began to look at the data that was compiling and noticing trends in my temptations. I then used those trends to strategically plan fasting that was designed to overcome my temptations. For example, I began to notice that every three months I would get tempted to relapse. So I began to fast for a week every three months. This also became an act of surrender where in my weakness, God can be strong. (2 Corinthians 12:10)

Healing comes when we recognize what we lack, and how that contributes to our addiction. Then, we allow God, our Father, to Father us.

Resources:

- Unwanted, Jay Stringer
- Fathered by God, John Eldredge