

THE ARTERBURN WELLNESS SERIES

# UNDERSTANDING AND LOVING A PERSON WITH

SEXUAL  
ADDICTION

*Biblical and Practical Wisdom  
to Build Empathy, Preserve Boundaries,  
and Show Compassion*

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AND JASON B. MARTINKUS M.A.  
AND SHELLEY S. MARTINKUS**

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*transforming lives together*

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## CHAPTER ONE

# Shared Experiences

If you find yourself living in the aftermath of the disclosure or discovery of sexual betrayal, I am so sorry. The pain, confusion, and hopelessness are real and overwhelming. The roller coaster of emotions can feel almost unbearable—one day you may feel seemingly normal and the next like it's nearly impossible to get out of bed. There are moments in the day when you feel grounded and calm, followed by hours poring over memories, conversations, and situations, trying to figure out how this all happened. This is normal. You are not alone. Let me share a couple of stories with you of people who've been through similar struggles. I want you to know that there is hope and that redemption is possible.

### **John and Jenny**

John and Jenny were in their early forties and had been married for twenty years. They had two kids in elementary school. Life seemed to be what it should. They were involved in their church, navigating careers, and trying to do the best they could. As the story often goes, John had grown increasingly close to a coworker. In the close quarters of the work environment, once seemingly innocuous conversations became insidious. The subject matter moved

from professional to personal and then to intimate. Oddly, yet not uncommonly, they connected primarily over their faith journeys. After all, they were both in ministry at a church. Along the path of life, John's faith journey had taken twists and turns, the way all such journeys do, and he had become disenchanted with God. It was the same story for the coworker. She got it. She could relate. They had talked about it often and at length. In stark contrast, his wife, Jenny, really didn't want to hear it anymore. It's not that she didn't have compassion for John or that she didn't want him to find peace with it. She just wanted to enjoy the moment and not worry about deep things.

Eventually, there was a hug. Then there was a kiss. The secrecy intensified to cover the frequency of conversations, texts, and meetings. And finally, there was sexual intimacy. John was instantly paralyzed with fear, guilt, and shame. He ended the affair on the spot. He didn't want to leave Jenny or his kids. He didn't really want to be in this adulterous relationship in the first place, but it had inundated him when he was at work every day and intoxicated him once he was in her presence. I'm not excusing it; I'm simply explaining it. He concluded that he would find a new job, work hard to make things better at home, and take the secret to his grave. If things improved and he and Jenny got on the same page, there would be no further damage done. Or so he thought.

After a couple years, things weren't better, and John and Jenny landed in my office. John had told Jenny the truth, and they were dealing with the fallout. Unlike most spouses hit by a grenade like this, Jenny wasn't devastated. She wasn't raging angry. She was mostly calm, barely tearful. She dismissed it with "these

things happen.” Sometimes she would make accusations about him—about the way he tried to love her or handle their relationship. He didn’t want to seem defensive and hurt her, so he wouldn’t say anything about it. Eventually, he called me outside of sessions to say, in a heartfelt and tender way, that what she was saying made no sense. He couldn’t even imagine where she was stretching to come up with some of the stories; even the language was foreign to him. She described their conversations with words he didn’t even have in his vocabulary! In a twilight-zone kind of way, he felt guilty and ashamed of his actions, yet he was also confused because it seemed as though, at times, she described a life and reality other than their own.

Through our sessions working on grieving, restoring trust, and creating a deeper intimacy in light of the affair, we kept hitting a wall. Jenny wouldn’t let her guard down. She just wouldn’t let herself receive his love. It was like she wanted desperately to be intimate and deeply connected but kept hanging on to an immature idea of adulthood and a fairy-tale concept of love and relationships. Then the truth came out.

Jenny was sexually addicted. She had, for the better part of the last decade, been sexting, chatting with and exchanging pictures with men, and watching pornography. She had purchased attire to wear for other men and had an emotional affair with a member of the family. She broke down in tears and shame as she told the story. No wonder she wouldn’t engage John’s faith journey; she was off the rails of her own. She couldn’t receive his love because she was living within her own shame and guilt. She felt like a monster. In fact, some of what she described as their reality was actually

that of her online relationships. Her worlds were colliding at times without her even realizing it. For John, the dots finally connected.

Now, I don't want to gloss over the difficulty of the restoration process, but Jenny and John ultimately landed in a healing and intimate place. Today, they enjoy each other's company, are navigating parenting and faith together, and, having been through the trenches, retain a confidence in what their relationship can withstand.

Sometimes the story doesn't have a shocking reveal. I've walked with numerous couples who had no deep dark secrets. They didn't land at some point in life where a bomb went off and they had to cull through the shrapnel and destruction of their relationship. Instead, they experienced death by a thousand cuts.

In one of those situations, the husband's disclosures began during dating. Right from the get-go, he wanted to be honest, so he told her about his pornography addiction. He admitted the severity, was open about getting help, and was genuinely well-intentioned about it all. Feeling thankful for his openness and transparency, she concluded that he would willingly talk about it if necessary, so she didn't need to ask about it. Through their engagement, he would periodically confess, through generic code, that he had violated their relationship with porn. "I struggled" was one phrase. "I looked at pictures" was another one. "I had a hard day with temptation and lust" was more spiritual sounding. Each time, she found comfort in his honesty and obvious commitment to keep fighting.

They married, and over the first four or five years, he continued the pattern. A couple times a year, he would confess. At this point, it had become casual. He would throw it in with dinner table talk: “I went to the office, worked on spreadsheets, had meetings, then left the office and stopped at the grocery store for milk, and also looked at pictures today.” The nonchalant way he would weave it into conversations again gave his wife some security. She didn’t like that he still struggled with it, but she figured it must be fairly under control since he wasn’t making a big deal about it.

Over the next decade, it was the same story, different day. Only something changed for her: she decided to start asking questions. She began asking what he was actually looking at, in detail, and how often. She asked if he was masturbating as well. And she asked who or what he was thinking about when he did. And how often. It turned out that his struggle was weekly, and it was with same-sex pornography and bondage pornography. Further, he was fantasizing about people she knew—both men and women. She tried again to roll with it. He described it with a tone of normalcy, and she accepted it. She was committed to praying for him and considered it his journey, not something for her to involve herself in much.

Fast-forward twenty years. When he would casually confess, she began feeling more violated. She started to read up on the subject and concluded that it was a much bigger deal than he had let on—even more than he wanted to believe for himself. She began to see the patterns of how it affected their intimacy and relationship. She saw connections to his depression and changes in mood. She started asking more frequently how he was doing. She would



use code too: “How’s the struggle today?” or “Did you have a *good* day?” He would answer honestly every time, but it was almost always an answer of defeat.

She loved him deeply and wanted the best for him, so she finally insisted he get help. He balked for years. She distanced herself, protecting her heart. She stopped asking; he stopped confessing. They both knew it was more than just a “struggle,” and the end result was the erosion of their relationship. By the time the kids were out of the house, they were roommates at best.

When they came to see me, they were individually hopeless. He couldn’t picture a life without acting out again. Her presence was perfunctory; she was just there because I asked her to be, not because she had any inclination their marriage could be restored. Death by a thousand cuts.

But their story doesn’t end there. After attending an Every Man’s Battle workshop and connecting with a group in his local church, he finally decided enough was enough. Perhaps more accurately, he finally caught a glimpse of hope that his acting out wasn’t inevitable. A year into counseling, he was living with integrity. Her trust was beginning to return, and she actually began to find her voice again. When they stopped coming to my office, they weren’t fixed, and the process wasn’t final, but they were looking toward a future date to renew their vows.

## **Jason and Shelley**

Since we’re talking stories, I also want you to know ours. Again, while it may not be a one-for-one fit, I hope you’ll find connection points to your experience.

Shelley grew up in a Christian home with fairly strict ground rules about sex and sexuality. She survived her teenage years with no promiscuity or even experimentation. She prayed for her future husband (me) to have done the same. Shelley did it “right.” When we met, I was really interested in her. Enjoying my pursuit and attention, she lowered her bar. I had a past: a few sexual experiences and a “struggle” with pornography that was mostly over with—at least, that is how I told the story. She made the exception, and we fell in love.

We graduated from college, got married in a big Texas wedding, and started to ride off into the sunset together. That lasted about three months until I was unfaithful to her. I was back into porn and chat rooms, and I had an affair. She had no clue. It happened sixteen more times over the next several years. Between emotional and physical affairs, I would binge on pornography and masturbate. When I wasn’t acting out and I had a streak going, I was actually fun to be around and loving toward her. We had really good moments and enjoyed parts of our life together. But when I was sucked into the shame vortex after having acted out in some way, I was a jerk. I was lazy and uninvolved. I withheld love from Shelley and treated her with disdain—unless she was having sex with me. I pressured her a lot for that. Sometimes I would even use biblical language to guilt her into the act.

She thought she was crazy.

How in the world could the guy she fell in love with be this way after “I do”? It was a tale of two worlds, and she never knew which version of Jason she was going to get. Shelley was too embarrassed to say anything to friends or family. It would prove she wasn’t

perfect—which was a core vow she had made to herself: to always be perfect. Instead of getting help, she just pondered in the confines of her own mind whether this was how life and marriage were supposed to be. Perhaps it was all a big lie, and everyone who was married had the same experience. On stage, in public, life was good and exciting and the way it should be. But behind the curtain were bitterness, resentment, disappointment, and increasing discontent. Shelley knew something was wrong. In moments of clarity, she would center herself and hold on to the fact that she knew things weren't right. She would ask me if everything was okay and usually get a "Yeah, things are fine. Why?" response. On occasion, I would blame and criticize her. Lacking any true self-awareness, I would take her question as an opportunity to assuage my guilt and shame by shifting the responsibility for my marital dissatisfaction onto her—never mind that I hadn't kept up my end of the agreement.

Shelley could never quite make sense of the things happening to me either. She's not a techie person, so when my computers had frequent viruses, she just naively took my word that I had to reinstall the operating system over and over. I lost my job because of my acting out, but my cover story was plausible enough. She was confused but, like any well-intentioned wife who wants desperately to trust her husband, convinced herself to ignore the contradictions in my explanation.

I often tell the story of throwing a company-owned laptop in a dumpster, thinking it would cure my addiction, then lying to Shelley (and my employer) about how it had "gotten stolen." She kept going through the scenario, asking questions about how it all

happened, as if she were on *CSI* or something. I just kept stringing out the story with more nonsense. She genuinely wanted to understand, but I kept confounding the story. She finally had to let it go because she couldn't keep feeling crazy.

Our whole situation began to reach a boiling point when my behavior got more unpredictable, more suspicious, erratic, and unexplainable. Shelley suspected an affair. When she approached the subject, I denied it. I minimized her concerns, shut down her inquiries, and slammed the door on any ongoing conversations about it. Eventually, I admitted there was almost an affair (a total lie), but I blamed it all on her. I feel an ache in my bones even writing this now. I hate how I treated her.

For the better part of the following year, I retreated further into myself and she moved further away from herself. She lost herself. She changed her hair, her makeup, her wardrobe. She booked trips for us to places she thought would make me happy and make me love her. She tried to be more sexual, taking more initiative and ultimately feeling more like an object than my wife. It still didn't fix things. Shelley finally called my affair partner and found out the truth. She confronted me about it. I lied all the way through it and tried to make her feel like she was making it all up. But she wasn't. And she knew it this time.

When the truth finally did come out, it was incredibly validating for her. It was painful, horrible, and devastating, but it also connected so many dots. It proved she really wasn't crazy—naive, but not crazy. The explanation—sexual addiction—was not comforting. In fact, she felt it was dismissive. You can't just chalk up all

this devious, sinful behavior to an illness. And she was right—you can't. There is way more to it than that.

With that, our healing began, both individually and collectively. We entered into a sanctification process at that point. God wanted to change me from the inside out. We began counseling and focused on my character issues, accountability, and reengaging faith. It was hard. *So* hard. Here in Colorado, they do these big ice sculptures during the winter. They'll take a huge square block of ice and create a masterfully carved and detailed piece of art. The tools they use to finish the sculpture are small, narrow, fine-edged chisels. *But they start with chainsaws.* That's kind of how our process began. I was a big block of ice (a fitting metaphor), and God was taking off huge chunks with His chainsaw; pieces of ice were flying everywhere! Shelley kept her distance, watching and waiting to see the final form. She made the decision to stay in the marriage. She rode out the transition from chainsaws to chisels.

We began telling our story, ministering to other people. I felt called out of corporate and into ministry. Fast-forward through ups and downs, setbacks and leaps forward, and thirteen years later, here we are. Shelley helps wives around the globe; I have the privilege of helping men and marriages, teaching workshops, and being a part of this book.

Granted, I skipped a lot of stuff to get to the end of the story! Both pain and beauty are built into that process. We'll talk more about that as we go through the chapters that follow. What I want to do is give you a little picture of hope and redemption. We're not special. We're no more qualified or capable or usable than anyone else. God does miraculous work, over the long run, in the lives of

willing people. That's what He's done with us. That's what He can do with you. Regardless of the severity of addiction or struggle, regardless of how far gone it feels like things are, there is hope. Things can be different. Our hope is that this book will serve as a white paper. While geared toward wives who are trying to navigate the journey with a struggling husband, nearly all the principles can be applied inversely. Also, at the end of the book, we've included a chapter to help you know what steps to take if the person struggling is a child or young adult in your house. We want to give you guidelines that are adaptable to your situation so you can experience the best God has for you and the people you love who are struggling.