

# Is Masturbation Harmful?

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | November 20, 2009



*I [did] not see a topic on your site about “self abuse” or masturbation as we call it. Many [Christian] men [and women] still practice this habitually today, even while married.*

*In today’s society, it is seen as harmless and so many practice this without a thought, even while imagining some sensual figure to increase their pleasure. Can you please address this from your professional and spiritual point of view. Also, please address the damage this practice does to marital relationships, and well as the children.*

*I know EG White has written extensively on it about the harm it does to brain/nerves. She goes as far as saying:*

*“Some who make a high profession do not understand the sin of self-abuse and its sure results. Long-established habit has blinded their understanding. They do not realize the exceeding sinfulness of this degrading sin, which is enervating the system and destroying their brain nerve power. Moral principle is exceedingly weak when it conflicts with established habit. Solemn messages from heaven cannot forcibly impress the heart is not fortified against the indulgence of this degrading vice. The sensitive nerve of the brain have lost their healthy tone by morbid excitation to gratify an unnatural desire for sensual indulgence. The brain nerves which*

*communicate with the entire system are the only medium through which Heaven can communicate to man and affect his inmost life. Whatever disturbs the circulation of the electric currents in the nervous system lessens the strength of the vital powers, and the resulting is a deadening of the sensibilities of the mind.” CH 616*

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*I have been struggling with the topic of masturbation for a long time. Though masturbation per se has not been a hindrance in my relationships with family and friends, nor has it interfered with my education and career goals, it has been a big divider and such a great stumbling block in my relationship with God. I believe it is wrong, yet I continue to do it. To make matters worse, a few years ago in an attempt to have a prayer answered, I promised God that if he answered my prayer, I would stop masturbating. The prayer was answered, but I have not kept my promise. This has ridden me with more guilt since, though God has been so merciful to me in the past, and continues to bless me, I have not been able to keep the promise I have made to Him. Masturbation is an external manifestation of lustful desires that I have been harboring in my mind. I know that neurophysiologically, my brain is probably wired now in such a way that would make stopping harder every time I do the act. “By beholding we are changed.” If its true that my brain (the seat of the mind) has changed its neural circuitry to desire and feel the effects of masturbation and lustful indulgences, is it really possible to reverse it? I have tried so many times, and continue to fail. I not only desire to stop the act of masturbation and keep my promise to God, but I want to have a “clean heart”, to be “transformed by the renewing of [my] mind.” I would really appreciate your advice. Thank you.*

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The proverbial elephant in the room, the difficult question that no one wants to talk about. First let’s review data found in the scientific literature and then what the Bible says.

**The Science:** According to multiple surveys in the US and Europe over 90% of men and 70% of women have masturbated at some time in their life. Recent surveys of adolescents reveal that 94% of males and 70% of females reported masturbating.

To date there has been no credible scientific evidence that masturbation causes any health problems, physical, mental or emotional. There has been some evidence indicating potential benefits, such as increased likelihood of achieving pregnancy following masturbation as older and less motile sperm are cleared out of the way for younger healthier sperm. Achieving orgasm, whether by intercourse or masturbation, results in lowered blood pressure – however the effect was greater with intercourse. A 2003 Australian study found that males who masturbated frequently had lower risk of prostate cancer later in life – however no direct causal relationship could be established.

**The Bible:** The Bible is silent on the issue of masturbation. Some scriptures have been misconstrued and wrongly applied to the question of masturbation. These include:

1. Leviticus 15 – the Levitical law which required a person who experienced a “discharge” of semen to be ceremonially unclean until evening. This scripture passage is not speaking about masturbation but about nocturnal emissions.
2. Genesis 38:1-10 – Onan’s discharge of his “seed” onto the ground and his subsequent death. Onan

was practicing *coitus interruptus* not masturbation and his sin was that of greed not lust as he selfishly refused to consummate his marriage to his deceased brother's wife, which would have resulted in a child and the splitting of his inheritance with her offspring.

No Scripture deals directly with the subject of masturbation. But one Christian book that handles the subject quite nicely is *Soul Virgins* by Doug Rosenau and Michael Todd Wilson, published by Baker Books. For anyone struggling with questions of a sexual nature I recommend you read this book.

In their book they rightly conclude that the issue is one of heart renewal and unity with God. In their words:

*We could endlessly debate the subject of masturbation. But here's the place we must start: each believer must go deeper to seek and discern God's heart from the inside out.*

*How do we synchronize our hearts with God's, applying heart-directed motivation to produce godly behavior? Whether considering masturbation, fantasy, or any other sexual concern, we'd like to suggest a three-step process that may help you develop an appropriate heart attitude from God's heart in Scripture:*

*Step One: If scriptural guidelines exist that directly address the topic of interest, seek to understand them and fully and obediently apply them to your heart, mind, and behaviors. Heart-directed morality always begins with obedience to clear teaching.*

*Step Two: If direct scriptural guidelines do not exist, seek to understand and obediently apply passages that indirectly address the behavior or that support any guidelines you found from step one.*

*Step Three: For topics that are still unclear after applying steps one and two, each believer should prayerfully determine his or her own heart about the issue. God has a sexual economy that works, and he will help you discover his will—however, you must act on what you already know as you build your godly attitudes and behaviors.*

While there is no Scripture which directly addresses the issue of masturbation, here are a few that indirectly apply and from which we can gain principles that apply:

**Matthew 5:27-28:** *"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."*

Is the behavior lustful? Are there sexual fantasies of someone who is not your spouse underpinning the behavior? If so it is unhealthy to your mind.

**1Corinthians 6:12:** *"Someone will say, 'I am allowed to do anything.' Yes; but not everything is good for you. I could say that I am allowed to do anything, but I am not going to let anything make me its slave."*

Are you becoming enslaved or addicted to the behavior? If so it is harmful. In fact this is where modern medicine and the Ellen White quote cited in the question above agree. Ellen White appears to be speaking about an "established habit" or compulsive behavior to which the person has become addicted. Modern medicine recognizes such compulsive masturbation as unhealthy and an evidence of

psychological, or rarely, neurological, problems.

Addictions of any kind, whether substance (alcohol, drugs, food) or behavioral (sex, gambling, shopping) have a destructive effect upon the brain. The reward pathways are artificially over excited and result in diminished ability of the prefrontal cortex to self-govern. The brain responds to this excess stimulation by reducing the number of receptors that respond to the brain chemical that triggers the reward feeling. This means, addictions reduce the intensity of pleasure from the same stimuli and therefore greater indulgence is needed to experience the same satisfaction. The judgment is impaired, spiritual discernment is eroded and impulsivity is increased. The good news is that our brains are pliable or changeable. As we, through God's grace, exercise healthy neural pathways of self-control and leave dormant the addictive pathways our brains will rewire in healthy ways!

**Philippians 2:4:** *"Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."*

Are you thinking about the welfare of others? Is your behavior damaging or disrespectful to your spouse or future spouse? Is it self-centered and selfishly motivated? If so it is inappropriate and inflames the anxiety centers and results in damage to brain and body.

**Romans 14:14:** *"But if a person believes something is wrong, that thing is wrong for him."*

Do you believe in your heart the behavior is wrong? If so then you are being damaged by engaging in the behavior. How? By experiencing guilt, internal tension, worry, uneasiness, and loss of peace all of which cause a cascade of destructive inflammatory factors which damage brain and body.

What conclusions do we draw from all of this? That God created us in His image to be self-governed sexual beings operating on the principle of other-centered love. Any activity which damages pre-frontal cortex (where we experience other-centered love, judgment and exercise self-control) and strengthens limbic system (reward pathways) ultimately results in self-destruction. The brain becomes imbalanced by all addictive processes and if not reversed ultimately results in self-destruction. As with all addictions, as we experience greater loss of self-control time is diverted to the addiction, relationships are strained, guilt is experienced, secrecy is practiced and tensions arise. Thus a toll is taken on family as well as self when addictive behaviors are not overcome.

For those struggling with a "habit" pattern of masturbation, for which you are powerless to overcome, I would suggest this may be an addiction. Consider joining a 12 step program for compulsive sexual disorders (Sexual Compulsives Anonymous website is <https://www.sca-recovery.org/> ). The first step is admitting that we are powerless to change ourselves and we need a power higher than ourselves to restore us to wholeness. This is the prayer of all sinners. It is only in a heart relationship with Jesus Christ that true healing occurs. It is in union with God that we experience restoration to His original intent and experience the full joy of our sexuality as He intended it to be! And this transformation is not only in character and behavior but in brain circuitry as well!