

Sex and Young America:
Ministering to Sexually Addicted Youth

by Shannon Ethridge

If someone asked me when I was twelve if I wanted to remain a virgin until marriage, I would have said, “Of course I do!”

At thirteen, I would have said, “I think so.”

By fourteen, I would have replied, “Maybe.”

At age fifteen, my response would have been, “I don’t see how that is possible.” Indeed, my innocence became just a memory that year. Sex soon became a routine part of my dating relationships—the price that I felt I must pay for the attention and affection that I craved. It wasn’t until I was in my twenties before I understood that I was a sex and love *addict*.

As dysfunctional as my private life was, my spiritual life appeared quite functional. I was raised in the church and president of my youth group. I headed many fundraisers for worthy causes and attended Christian concerts -- The Imperials, Resurrection Band, Amy Grant. Even with all of these Christian activities and influences I don’t recall feeling much guilt or remorse over the double life I was living. Back then Christians didn’t seem to be talking much about sexual issues. We didn’t ask, and we didn’t tell. What I didn’t know didn’t bring conviction.

However, things have changed drastically since I was a sexually addicted teen in the 1980s. Churches and youth groups *are* talking about sexual issues. Musicians such as Rebecca St. James, Jump 5, and By the Tree make sexual purity look and sound pretty cool. The *True Love Waits* movement has swept across our nation with great force. So have the sexual practices of young people changed? According to a survey of nearly 600 teens, 61 percent of those who had taken abstinence pledges had broken them within a year. Of the 39 percent who said they had not broken their pledges, more than half disclosed they’d engaged in oral sex.”¹ Why are more and more young Christians are living double lives? And more importantly, what can we as pastors, youth leaders, and concerned adults do to help them have victory in their battle against sexually addictive behaviors?

Accepting Our Call to Leadership

The church *is* learning to speak more openly and honestly about these issues, which is absolutely vital. But we are sometimes challenged by certain individuals not to talk about S-E-X around their kids. Don’t let fear of offending a few stand in the way of educating the others. Many times I’ve kindly informed parents that we would be talking openly about sexual issues and that I would respect their decision not to send their kids that evening or on that weekend retreat. However, parents have to respect the fact that we’ve been called by God to lead a generation to embrace His standards for living, which certainly includes sexual purity.

If you do encounter resistance in your church as you attempt to bring sexual issues to the forefront, I recommend taking an informal, anonymous poll of the teens and young adults in your church. Ask them to write down on an index card what they are seeing and hearing in the culture about sex and what kind of questions they would like for the church to respond to. Compile a list of those comments and questions and present them to the

parents and other leaders of the church. Pose the question that if they can't get rock-solid answers and biblical truth about sexuality in their local congregation, where are they going to get it? In their schools? From their peers? Over the internet? Surely it would be a travesty for the church, God's mouthpiece, to remain silent on these matters while the media wallpapers our world with sexually stimulating images.

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- In 2002, it was estimated that 3.2 million teens under the age of 15 were living with HIV.²
- Of the 19 million new cases of STDs occurring in 2000, 9.1 million (48%) were among young people ages 15-24.³
- 21% of ninth-graders have slept with 4 or more partners.⁴
- 55 percent of teens ages 13-19 admitted to engaging in oral sex.⁵

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Where is the Victory?

Statistics prove that while Christian youth are being told by the church to embrace a lifestyle of purity, we're obviously not doing an effective job of teaching *how* to do that. Over the past fifteen years of youth ministry and six years of teaching at Teen Mania Ministries, if I had a dime for every young Christian who confessed that they were merely "technical virgins," or had even fallen into the "friendships with privileges" pit, I'd be a rich woman.

In case these terms are new to you, the technical virgin is one who accepts that pre-marital intercourse is a forbidden activity, but engages in doing everything else such as mutual masturbation, oral sex, etc. While I hate to rain on these young people's purity parade, we have to speak the truth in love to them and say that although they may be virgins (medically speaking), they are *not* sexually pure. One can be a physical virgin but a mental, emotional, and spiritual prostitute.

Of course, once a young person has done everything except intercourse, it doesn't take much effort to kill their conscience and go that one step farther. Once virginity is lost, sexual standards usually plummet. The "friendships with privileges" craze among young people is a perfect example. Rather than sex being a loving expression between two caring partners in a committed relationship (marriage), today's generation often rejects the idea of romance and holds no expectation of any serious dating relationship after a sexual encounter. It's understood that both partners are only in it for the sex, and once that's over, it's over. Perhaps this behavior isn't too far from the "one night stands" of past generations, but what is startling is how socially acceptable it has become in today's youth culture. Yale University student Natalie Krinsky wrote in her *Yale Daily News* column called "Sex and the (Elm) City":

Women know within the first five minutes of meeting a man whether they are going to hook up with him or not. But...women don't want the guy to know he'll be hooking up until he's actually doing it.... Post hookup is when guys tend to get ambiguous [they ignore you]. It's their payback. Do they want to hook up again? Dunno. Do they want to date? Dunno. Are they straight? Dunno. Name? Dunno.⁶

According to a recent MSNBC article, a survey of 555 undergrads revealed that 78% of students had hooked up (had sex with someone they didn't have a romantic relationship with) and the average student accumulates 10.8 hookup partners during college. If you asked these students if they were addicted to sex, most would tell you exactly what I would have said as an addicted teen -- "Of course not. I can stop any time."

Developing a Stronger Line of Defense

So how can we help young people guard themselves against sexual compromise? As much emphasis as we have placed on physical virginity and saving sexual intercourse until marriage, I propose that we look at the bigger picture. I believe that we've tried so diligently to teach young people how to guard the door against the temptation to get physical with one another. However, we've often failed to recognize that there's more than one door that leads to sexual compromise. There's actually four doors.

To understand this concept, imagine that an attacker is coming at you full force and you are looking for a place of refuge. You see a vacant four-door car on the side of the street so you get in to take cover. What's the first thing you'll do to prevent that attacker from coming in after you? Right -- lock the doors. How many will you lock? Only one? Of course not. Unless you lock all four doors, is there any sense in locking any of them? There will always be a vulnerable point of entry until you lock every door.

The same is true with sexual integrity. Our sexuality isn't *what we do* with our bodies, it's *who we are* -- mind, body, heart, and soul. Unless we're carefully guarding not just our body, but also our mind, heart, and spirit, we're vulnerable to sexual temptations. Christians don't just decide one day to commit sexual sin with their bodies or to become sex addicts. Sin begins in our minds when we allow the world's messages to infect our thinking and blur our spiritual vision. Those thoughts flow down to our heart and distorted thinking evolves into distorted beliefs. Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks, and we find ourselves enjoying a fun game of "innocent flirting" with someone of the opposite sex (or same sex in the case of homosexuality). As the fascination with this other person intensifies, we begin to see them as the fulfillment of our longings, which is spiritual idolatry as we place them on a pedestal higher than God's. Then we're like a moth drawn to a flame, enamored by its brilliance but ignorant of its destructive potential. This is exactly how I went from wanting to remain sexually pure at age 12 to being a sex addict at 15. Because I didn't know how to guard my mind, heart, and spirit against inappropriate relationships, my body soon became a casualty of my own private war for sexual integrity.

Guarding Our Minds

In the e-mails that Stephen Arterburn, Fred Stoeker and I receive from teens in response to our books, *Every Young Man's Battle* and *Every Young Woman's Battle*, it's evident that Satan is attacking young minds with great fervency. As teens re-trace their steps to tell us how their battle began, it usually leads back to early adolescence when they were in pursuit of answers to their innocent and age-appropriate questions about sex. Because today's teens often fear that adults will panic over or make false assumptions about their sexual curiosities, they take their inquiring minds to internet search engines for answers. Unfortunately, the answers they get in cyberspace don't quench the flame of sexual curiosities. Instead, the flame is fueled as their curiosities are awakened to an even greater extent. Consider these statistics:

- The average age of first internet exposure to pornography is 11 years old
- The largest consumer of Internet pornography is the 12-17 year-old age group
- 90% of 8-16 year olds have viewed porn online
- 80% of 15-17 year olds have had multiple hard-core exposures
- 35% of all peer-to-peer downloads (1.5 billion per month) are pornographic
- 89% of sexual solicitations of teens occur in internet chat rooms
- 20% of all youth have received a sexual solicitation over the internet⁷

Of course, internet pornography and chat rooms aren't the only way young minds are being attacked. We must also warn them of the dangers of television shows, movies, music, magazines, romance novels, and other media which turns their minds away from sexual purity and toward lustful desires. If we can stop sexual temptations at the door to our minds, we wouldn't have to worry about our hearts, spirits, and bodies falling prey to temptation as well. But if we aren't successful in keeping our minds pure, our battle intensifies...

Guarding Our Hearts

We've probably all preached Proverbs 4:23 several times -- "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." But most young people can't fathom what that means. As a matter of fact, it's a tough one for many adults to wrap their brains around and consistently apply as well. Guarding our heart seems to be such a "gray" issue -- no black or white formula to go by. Therefore, we've "colorized" the issue in *Every Young Woman's Battle* using a traffic-light model which illustrates three different levels of emotional connection. Using this model, we can know where it's okay to allow our hearts GO (the green-light levels), when we need to SLOW down and take caution (the yellow-light levels), and when we need to STOP (the red-light levels).

The green-light levels of emotional connection consist of *Attention* and *Attraction*. Because God created us as sexual beings, it's only natural that certain people are going to get our attention and cause us to feel attracted once we get to know them. When teens experience this, they falsely assume that they must be "in love," or they worry that they are guilty of lusting after that person. To prevent Satan from tormenting them with false guilt, they need to understand that being attracted to someone is very natural and normal, even after you get married to someone else. The day we stop feeling attracted to other people isn't the day we fast and pray for 24 hours straight, or the day we put a wedding band on our finger. We stop feeling attracted to others the day that we die. Feeling attracted to others is just part of the human experience -- a part that can't control us unless we allow it.

The yellow-light levels of emotional connection consist of *Affection*, *Arousal*, and *Attachment* for a young person or single adult. If they are attracted to someone as a potential mate, they will feel compelled to express affection. There are healthy ways to express affection (such as a kind word, a pat on the back, an act of service, etc.) and there are unhealthy ways (such as a flirtatious comment, a suggestive look, or inappropriate touch). Helping teens discern appropriate from inappropriate expressions of affection will help them have healthy friendships and avoid becoming sexual for lack of a better way to express their affinity for one another. Once two young people are involved in a romantic relationship, it's

only normal for them to feel emotionally *aroused* by one another and eventually emotionally *attached* to one another as their relationship continues to solidify. Encouraging accountability relationships with responsible adults and teaching safe physical boundaries in relationships will help young people keep emotions in check rather than allowing passions to burn so hot that their relationship becomes sexual. My practical advice about where the line should be drawn in a relationship is this: Don't engage in any physical activity together that you wouldn't feel comfortable doing in front of your parents.

The red-light levels of emotional connection are *Affairs* and *Addictions*. An emotional affair begins when one pursues a more intimate, exclusive relationship with someone they should resist romantic involvement with (for example, a married person or someone in authority over them such as a pastor, teacher, or much older person). Often these relationships surface as "crushes" and leaders have a tendency to dismiss them as no big deal. However, these inappropriate longings must be nipped in the bud. If not brought under control, such cravings can quickly lead to emotional addictions as they feel they can't control who they "love" or become sexually involved with.

Guarding Our Spirits

Strip away the external behaviors of a sex or love addict and you'll find an idolatrous spirit living at the core. This idolatrous spirit deceives us into believing that our fulfillment can surely be found in the next earthly relationship or the next. After several years of marriage, I cried to Greg, "You just don't meet my emotional needs!" I was contemplating leaving in pursuit of the "love" I felt entitled to. But Greg saw beyond my weaknesses to my needs and spoke the truth in love. He said, "Shannon, you have a *Grand Canyon* of emotional needs. Until you look to God to satisfy you, there is nothing that I nor any other man on the planet can do to satisfy you."

Ouch! Although the truth hurt, I couldn't deny it. Through years of promiscuity, no man had ever been able to satisfy me. But could God? After six months of personal counseling and intense prayer and bible study, I was able to truly repent of my addictive relational patterns. I recognized that Jesus wasn't just my personal Savior, but also the Lover of my soul, and I was finally able to submit to Him as the true Lord of my life.

Encourage young people to read the book of Hosea. Sex and love addicts recognize ourselves in the character of Gomer. As unfaithful as we have been in the past, our Lord God remains ever so faithful, bringing us to the end of ourselves and our pitiful relational pursuits so that He can betroth us to Himself in righteousness, justice, love, compassion, and faithfulness (Hosea 2:19-20). Embracing the truth of who Jesus is, understanding how precious we are to Him, and recognizing that no one else can take His rightful place on the throne of our hearts is the best remedy for any enslaving addiction.

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Practical Strategies for Instilling Sexual Values

- Differentiate between virginity (a medical condition) and sexual purity (a condition of mind, body, heart, and soul). Use the four-door car analogy to help them understand this concept. Talk about practical ways to guard not just our bodies, but our minds, hearts, and spirits as well. *Every Young Woman's Battle*, *Every Young Man's Battle*, and their accompanying workbooks will truly challenge their thinking on this,

equip them to pursue sexual purity from every possible angle, and help them embrace God's sexual standards as their own rather than assume that physical virginity is good enough.

- Challenge young people to pursue an intimate relationship with Christ (through prayer, bible study, quiet time, worship, service, etc.) more avidly than they pursue a boyfriend or girlfriend. Of course, it's okay for them to desire a romantic relationship, but according to Psalm 37:4, God gives us the desires of our heart when we delight in Him first and foremost.
- Establish yourself as an askable adult. Give young people permission to ask you any question about sexual issues, and tell them they can use whatever words they need to in order to ask it. Teens often assume that they can't ask an adult about sexual issues because they would get in trouble for using "those kind of words." Many do not have an appropriate vocabulary for speaking of sexual matters and can only repeat what they've heard others say. Tell them they can use slang in asking their questions and that you are willing to teach them proper medical terms so that they can develop confidence in discussing sexual issues with adults.
- Frequently discuss current events and studies that relate to sexual issues. For example, the RAND Corporation recently issued a study revealing that teenagers who watch a lot of television with sexual content are twice as likely to engage in intercourse than those who watch few such programs.⁸ Let them know that youth group, Sunday school, or church is a safe forum for Christians to talk openly about these issues. Remind them that God is the author of sex and that the church is the most appropriate and safe place to talk about it.
- Be relatively open (to an appropriate extent) about your own personal pursuit of sexual purity and the stumbling blocks that have come into your path along the way. Share your strategies for victory in the battle for sexual integrity. But remember, they don't just need to hear about your successes. Sometimes they need to hear about your failures and what you learned from them. Kids don't need adults to be "rocks" as much as they need us to be "real." This gives them the freedom to be "real" with us, too.

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¹ Mary Meehan, "Abstinence Pledges Not Very Effective," *Knight Ridder*, November 8, 2003, life section.

² AIDS, Sex & Teens. www.avert.org.

³ Sexually Transmitted Diseases Among American Youth: Incidence and Prevalence Estimates, 2000, Hillard Weinstock, Stuart Berman and Willard Cates, Jr. Allen Guttmacher Institute, 2004.

⁴ The Secret Sex Lives of Kids, Lisa Collier Cool. Ladies' Home Journal, 2001.

⁵ *Seventeen*, "National survey conducted by *Seventeen* finds that more than half of teens ages 15–19 have engaged in oral sex," news release, February 28, 2000.

⁶Natalie Krinsky, quoted in Mary Beth Marklein, "Casual Sex in Newsprint," *USA Today*, November 14, 2002.

⁷www.internetfilterreview.com/internet-pornography-statistics.html.

⁸ www.cnn.com/2004/HEALTH/09/07/tv.teen.sex.reut/index.html. 7 September 2004.