

Tears and Teshuvah: My Addiction Recovery Journey

Posted by jmyers99 - 20 Aug 2024 10:16

This post is a reflection on my addiction. I'm calling it an addiction specifically here because the first step to solving a problem is admitting I have one. This is probably the most embarrassing challenges I could possibly deal with... but here we are.

I've had a taste of sobriety before. I went almost 2 months without watching or spilling seed. I've had several multi-month periods without hiccups... but so far, I always have a slip up that has me regress back to the starting point. It's probably not a fall back to square one, but sometimes it feels that way.

The last several months have been particularly difficult compared to the previous 24 months, and I'm not totally sure why. After a long upswing, I started falling back into the screen, and training my brain again on the super strong dopamine and serotonin hits. I've also had more stress added to my life that hasn't helped...

The good news is, through the ups and downs, I've learned a lot about myself, and I'm continuing to learn/grow through the process. I have more hope for recovery now than ever.

I'm determined to heal from this addiction. I've come too far - and have so much more potential to go - for this to stop me.

This document primarily focuses on the challenges of this habit in this world. I'm analyzing the habit more from an emotional and psychological perspective than a spiritual perspective.

Disclaimer: As you may be able to tell from some of the stories in this doc, I'm a BT. I grew up totally reform and have been a BT for almost four years now, BH. I'm 24 years old, almost 25. The journey started when I was ~20 years old.

Why This Needs To Stop This is bad for me now and bad for my future.

Bad for me now

My future family is a huge motivating factor to get sober, but the pain in the present is also a huge contributor.

I always feel depressed after. I'm too ashamed to wake up early and sleep in, usually missing Shacharit. For several days after I feel guilty and ashamed while walking around. I'm not myself... I can feel the difference. Being around women at all within a week or so of a hiccup is also uncomfortable. I feel guilty and as if I'm living a double life. It even impacts me in shiur when I'm supposed to be learning... I start thinking to myself "I can't believe I did xyz..." and I have trouble looking rebbeim I respect in the eye.

I'm taking myself out of this world instead of experiencing life. Rather than feeling my pain, stress, anxiety, learning from it and using it as an opportunity to connect with Hashem, I'm

numbing the pain immediately and escaping from reality.

I'm teaching myself to inject artificial dopamine in an unhealthy way. If I can't control myself here, how am I supposed to deal with other challenges life throws my way - whether in marriage or otherwise - in a healthy way? How am I supposed to learn and grow?

I grew up in a secular environment where numbing pain is normal. Weed, booze, girls, video games, TV, social media, etc. are all normal aspects of life. I've eliminated all of those distractions over the last four years BH - and this is the last one, but the strongest and most destructive of all.

Living with fear, shame, guilt, sadness, etc. is no way to live. I'm killing myself every time I do this. I'm putting so much schmutz over my neshama that only wants to connect with Hashem. I'm just looking for that connection in the wrong place. Every yid really wants to connect, but sometimes we find that connection in the wrong place.

I didn't have free will as a child - I was hurting and stumbled upon this substance by accident, not knowing how dangerous it was. But now as an adult, I do have free will, and it's time to choose good over evil.

For more on how I stumbled upon this substance, see my [Thank you and goodbye letter](#). I acknowledge what the addiction has done for me over the years, thank it, and let it go.

In summary, when I fall, I experience the following negative consequences:

- Immediate feeling of regret, hopelessness, guilt, shame, fear, sadness, loneliness, and isolation. While the feelings' intensity subsides over the next few days, it's still definitely there lingering beneath the surface
- Isolation from friends and family - I tend to avoid social interaction after as I feel guilty and don't want to be around other people
- Miss davening - I feel guilty, like Hashem doesn't want to see me or talk to me, and I can't show my face in shul to see him or others after what I've done. I know in my head Hashem really loves me and still wants to hear from me, but it's hard to feel that in my heart after this
- Delay my marriage - I don't want to start dating until I feel this is under control, as this is a big problem for marriage, and as I'll outline later, it is indicative of deeper problems that are likely even worse for marriage if left unresolved
- Hurt my marriage - even when I do heal and stop using, I cannot undo the damage of all the images burned into my mind. I'm terrified of how this will impact my relationship with my wife. And G-d forbid I fall during marriage. That would distance me so much from my wife, not to mention if she catches me. It'd change the marriage forever...
 - My therapist and some rebbeim have told me I'm being too extreme on this point re my wife. That most women today unfortunately somewhat expect their husband has watched and/or sometimes falls with porn because it's so prevalent, the battle of our generation... but I don't want to be in this camp.
- Feed into the habit further - every time I fall, I'm reinforcing the pathways contributing to

this disease. Getting farther from my goal.

- Lower my self esteem - even though I shouldn't beat myself up so much for this, I do... and it hurts my self esteem. People always tell me things like "you're so outgoing and positive" or "you're so popular" or "everyone likes you" or "why aren't you dating" or "you're so successful in business and learning" etc. but every time I hear a compliment, I think to myself "if you knew about this one thing, you wouldn't be saying that..."

I don't want to go on like this anymore. I'm tired and exhausted of feeling this way and behaving this way. I want to choose good over evil, and set myself up for success, such that I'm able to make the right choice when my yetzer hara tries to take me down.

Bad for My Future

I believe this is the most important thing I need to focus on solving over the next 3-6 months before I start the dating process.

I don't want to disclose this during the dating process or marriage - not because I'm trying to hide something, but rather because there's nothing to hide. If it's far enough in the rear view mirror, I can move on and my wife doesn't have to know. It will do nothing but damage her, our relationship and my connection to Hashem.

This problem can cause problems for my wife and I directly, whether or not she finds out about it explicitly.

- If she finds out explicitly, this sickness has the power to destroy my marriage. Even if it's just "here and there" - one hiccup could severely damage the relationship.
- If she doesn't know explicitly, it will still impact the marriage. It could impact my mood, drive, and overall emotional state.

- Relying on cheap dopamine hits to self-soothe also shows I lack full emotional control and clarity, which is important for a healthy marriage

Damaging my relationship with my wife will also negatively impact my children is the last thing I want to do...

I initially began walking the BT path to forge a brighter future for myself, my wife, and my kids. Ultimately, I wanted to have a healthy home.

My mom has had four divorces which was hard for me growing up. I don't want to pass that pain down to my children. If I don't solve this issue, the odds of me damaging my wife/kids are pretty high.

If I want to stay true to myself, mission, vision, and values, this needs to stop.

Giving Myself Some Credit

I've been beating myself up a lot above... but I do want to stop and give myself some credit.

I addressed some of this in my [Thank you and goodbye letter](#) but I didn't go into as much detail as I'm going to below.

The nikuda I want to bring out is as follows:

1. I didn't have free will when I found porn. I was a 10 year old kid in a lot of pain from my parents' marriage falling apart in front of me. I went from being home schooled and showered with love and connection by my mother to her becoming totally unavailable, seemingly overnight, both physically and emotionally. At the same time, I found a pornographic website, because I had access to an unfiltered computer and iPod Touch a young boy, which is a disaster nowadays. I didn't know any better and got sucked into something that took the pain away without me knowing it, in a society that normalized it. How was I supposed to know any better? That boy inside is just doing what he's always done to feel safe and secure... even though it's destructive. Rather than being angry at him, I must be compassionate towards him.
2. Even though pornography is evil and destructive, it did "benefit" me over the last 14 years since I found it at age 10. Every time I was lonely, stressed, anxious, bored, etc. it gave me a hit of dopamine and serotonin to *temporarily* feel better. Denying that it's been serving me in the past - and still to this day - would be a lie. YY Jacobson talks about this. Addiction is not the problem, it's the solution to a deeper problem.

By reflecting on my past, I can bring out some of the hidden trauma I faced and hopefully have compassion on myself, which is important to stop the shame cycle... for when we feel shame and anger, we want to use again to stop feeling that way, which creates more shame and anger, etc.

Divorce

I'm writing this block after finishing the "Divorce" section. Writing the story below brought tears to my eyes. I eventually began to sob thinking about a few parts of the story. Reading it again makes me tear up. When I seriously think about these memories, I'm almost instantly feeling sad. There's definitely still pain deep down that I haven't worked through yet. I'm glad I wrote this though. It felt good to cry. It was cut short by a chavrusa though, so I had to pull it together and walk out the door. I wish I had more time to sit in the pain though. Maybe next time.

Before I discuss actually stumbling onto this stuff, I want to reflect on what was happening at that time.

My parents moved to a small town out west to pocket some cash from the sale of their old house. I was a happy young seven year old boy at this point.

Shortly thereafter, the fighting started breaking out. I started hearing my parents screaming almost every night. I could hear it going on downstairs from my room. I was 8 and my sister was 4. I didn't know what to do, but I remember being scared. I used to go into my sister's room and sleep in the bed with her to keep me company because I felt all alone and scared. I used to do this every night.

I remember one night I wrote a note on a piece of paper asking my parents not to get a divorce and I slid it under their door. I must've known things weren't looking good...

Before the divorce, I was home schooled and my mom and I were close. She used to take me out to museums and home schooling groups. We used to cook together, read together, etc. We also baked challah for shabbat, lit candles, had family dinners, etc. We had "mommy and Jacob time" which was always awesome.

When the marriage went downhill, so did my mom's attention span. She moved into the attic, out of my parents' shared bedroom, and stopped coming around as much. As I got older, I learned she was going out to meet other men.

I remember she used to tuck me in every night. One night, she didn't come up. I waited all night for her to come up and tuck me in. This was well into the fighting, so I must've known something was going on. I waited and waited. It felt like hours had passed by. I don't know exactly how much time passed.

I started screaming "mommy! come tuck me in!" over and over. "mommy where are you?" but she didn't come.

My dad walked in and sat down on the floor of my room, leaning his head against the wall.

"Your mother isn't coming home tonight. She went out dancing."

My mom was out late that night at a salsa dancing club with her new boyfriend. At this point the divorce was under way and it was the first time my dad was breaking the news to me.

I remember feeling devastated, as if my whole world was falling apart. My dad started to tell me it wasn't my fault. We stayed up talking about what was going on, and how my life was going to change. I don't remember the details of the conversation, but I do remember my dad stayed up with me to comfort me.

The next day I was playing with my neighbors in the alley behind our house, as usual. Their parents would often invite me over for dinner as well. They were a nice family.

That afternoon when I sat down for dinner at my friends' house, their mom noticed the trouble on my face. She asked me what was wrong. I told her my mom was divorcing my dad and started crying. I hadn't cried like that in a long time.

She came over to hug me and I sobbed in her arms for a long time. I remember wondering why my friend's mom was comforting me instead of my own... which only added fuel to the fire.

I was closer to my mom growing up, since she took care of me and home schooled me while he was working. But after the divorce, he was always the more stable and reliable parent. I started to become closer to him than my mom. I remember my mom moved out of my parents' room and into the finished attic. At this point I believe she was seeing other men and started house hunting.

Shortly thereafter, I was told I was going to public school, because my mom had to get a job to support herself after the divorce. I went from a comfortable childhood, home schooled, waking up without an alarm, to waking up super early and driving to my baby sitter's house in the freezing cold at 5 am before elementary school so my mom could go to work. I hated waking up so early and shlepping to a baby sitter's house. I grew to like the baby sitter and the family, but I still resented going there, especially early on.

My mom purchased a "fixer upper" house a few blocks away from my dad's house, where I'd spend the rest of my days until high school graduation. My mom always liked "fixer upper" projects. Whether it was a boyfriend or a house, she always needed a project to work on.

I hated the new house as a kid. It was old and falling apart. It needed tons of work. It smelled weird. My room wasn't finished or ready to live in, so my mom, my sister and I all slept in her room on an inflatable mattress for a month or two while work was being done on the other rooms.

I remember it being hot and uncomfortable there without AC. I was so angry at my mom for doing this to us. I blamed her for the divorce. I'm sure my dad wasn't perfect, but at the end of the day, my mom initiated the divorce, and considering she's had 4 divorces and many other challenges in life (like alienating herself from her entire family), it seems like she has a pattern of severing ties.

The first night after moving in, we were all laying on the air mattress trying to sleep. I must've been around the age of 10 at that point. I remember being so angry that night. I was asking mom "why did you do this? I want to go back home! Why are we sleeping on an air mattress? Why can't we go back to our old house?"

I was angry and confused. I remember crying that night. My mom was also crying and hugging me, apologizing for what happened. I think she felt guilty. We went from a fine home to a horrid living situation, not to mention breaking the family apart.

I was recently driving with my sister, who must've been 6 when this story took place. I don't know how it came up, but she mentioned she remembers how angry I was when mom divorced dad, quoting the night on the air mattress when I was angry at mom. If even she remembers this as a 6 year old, I must've been pretty upset that night...

My mom asked me if I wanted to go to therapy on the way to school one day. I said "no way, I'm fine". I wasn't able to admit I was hurting even back then, at 10 years old. It took me over 10 more years before I could admit that I wasn't "fine".

Life went on from there... I grew up in the public school system, with a typical upbringing in a

small town of 4,000 people, in the mountains, on The Potomac River.

Growing Up After The Divorce

In this section, I highlight what life was like after the divorce, to add more context to what was going on behind the scenes of the habit.

The common thread is tons of artificial dopamine pumping in from all over the place to numb the pain I didn't know I had.

Grandparents House

After the divorce, my dad took us weekly to my grandparents house in Annapolis, MD. They were great. I spent a lot of time there growing up before the divorce. My grandpa had an awesome wood and metal working shop in the basement where we'd build things together. He also had a sailboat, and a rowboat we made together. Lastly, grandpa and I enjoyed going to the range to go shooting together.

My grandparents house was always a place of stability and comfort. When things were getting turbulent during and after the divorce, my dad wanted to do as much as possible to give us a sense of "normalcy", so he took us there every week on Saturdays. Going there was probably the highlight of my week.

My sister and I argued the entire way in the car, but she was sleeping on the way back, so my dad and I had alone time to talk.

I remember asking him about the divorce and my mom, what happened, why she divorced him, etc.

He did a great job of avoiding slander. He knew she was still my mom, and did his best to paint the best picture he could. "Even your parents are human, nobody is perfect, etc".

He explained to me where he felt my mom faced challenges in life, but only when I asked, and he did so delicately. I still appreciate those car rides.

Video Games

Long before my parents were divorced, and before we even moved, I had a friend who lived next to me with an Xbox gaming console. I loved going over to play video games. I always asked for my own but my parents said no... until my mom divorced my dad and purchased an Xbox for me out of guilt. I suppose she wanted to distract me from the pain... it worked.

I became a huge gamer, playing Xbox with all of my spare time. I came home after school every day to play video games. When I went to my grandparents' house, I brought my Xbox. I eventually got into PC gaming and built a small business out of it, but that's a story for another day.

The point is, from the age of about 10 until I was 15 or 16, when I wasn't in school, or

occassionally hanging out with friends, I was playing video games.

From the age of 16-18, I still played a lot of games, but this was intertwined with girls, weed, and drunken escapades.

The point is, video games largely distracted me from feeling my emotions, a trend you're about to see continue.

Marijuana

A boy in my town named Troy went to elementary school, middle and high school with me. He came from a broken home without a father in the picture, and his mom seemed pretty weird as well, considering my friend's older brother lived in a room that looked like a crack den without any crack. Covered in dirty dip bottles, bongs, trash everywhere, it smelled, etc. They'd sit up there, rip the bong, play video games and watch TV. It was gross...

We played video games together quite often online. He began smoking weed in middle school. I thought he was insane, as I grew up being told smoking was bad for you. I never joined him... until I did.

One day after the end of freshman year, I tried weed with him. I felt guilty at first of course, but it eventually caught on. That summer I only smoked a few more times.

The following year, my larger friend group started catching on, and we began smoking together a few times per month.

By Junior year of high school, we were all out pot heads. We were smoking basically every day. At one point I was smoking before school with my friends, sneaking out of the building during the school day to smoke, after school, before bed, etc. I was a walking zombie. Pretty insane...

I took 6 months off in high school while dating a specific girl, but the trend is more or less lots of marijuana from the age of 15 - 21.

It's a miracle I didn't totally fry my brain after that...

PS I haven't smoked marijuana in over 3 years despite it still being around me. Thank G-d.

Girls

Like most secular young men, I made chasing women my goal in life. I became a hustler. I practiced "Day game" which is essentially walking up to random girls in broad daylight and hitting on them. At one point I did it every day for a month straight to "hone my craft."

Eventually I realized this was stupid obviously, but at the time, I thought I was the man for being so bold.

I had plenty of experiences with girls throughout high school and college. Depending on the age, it started with a hug and a kiss here and there.

I lost my virginity at age 15. Looking back, I honestly have no idea how I did that at 15 years old. When I see 15 year olds now, I always wonder how I was up to such shenanigans at a young age. The crazy thing is all of my friends were doing the same thing, so I didn't think I was weird or a bad kid. I thought I was "cool" for doing this.

By age 16 I picked up a "steady" girlfriend for 2 years. We slept together pretty often. After high school, I was a "free agent" in college and while traveling.

It's a major miracle I didn't get anyone pregnant or contract a disease to be honest...

I came back home from my travels - which included several one night stands - having decided I want to stop messing around and "get serious" with a girl I could see myself marrying.

I got back together with a high school girlfriend. We got along well, and I felt better about being with her because it was a "stable relationship".

Side note, obviously now as a frum person, I don't condone touching before marriage, and think the idea of a "girlfriend" itself is ridiculous. It's basically marriage without commitment, but that's a topic for another day.

After six months, COVID hit, and I stopped seeing her in person. When we stopped sleeping together, I somewhat lost interest in talking to her, which obviously upset her. We broke up, and I realized our relationship was based on us smoking weed, sleeping together and going hiking/to concerts. It was fun, but we had no common values. She was into Black Lives Matter, had gay friends (thinking that was normal/cool), tattoos, etc. none of which I supported. I was always conservative in values, but I wasn't thinking straight when blinded by lust.

After this, I realized I had to stop talking to women until I figured out my values and healed my emotional problems. I thought religion was a value I should probably investigate before I get married, and that's how I started on the BT journey.

I've eliminated all of the above since then BH, but porn is the last straw.

Porn

And now for the main act... just kidding. Thought I'd lighten this up a bit with a joke. Okay, back to being serious.

I found this by accident like most young boys. I believe I was leaving the 5th grade and entering 6th grade. Around 10 or 11 years old. I remember talking about it with the kids in class on the first day of 6th grade, so I must've been familiar enough with it already by that point to talk about it.

When I see young 11 year old boys now, I feel pretty sick, as I can't believe that's how young I was when I started. It's also painful to think about my home falling apart at such a young age. I see many young boys my age at shabbos meals. I can only imagine how hard it would be for them if their home fell apart the way mine did.

Anyway, I started using my bris as an amusement park pretty innocently as a kid. In the secular world, there's not much shame. There's a slight bit of shame, as a person obviously goes into a private room and closes the door, trying not to get caught... so from the fact they don't want anyone to see or know in the act, there's shame involved... but as soon as it's over, people move on as if nothing happened. Almost like going to the bathroom.

I started talking with friends at school about it as if it was a fun after school activity like football. Most of the boys in my grade were on this stuff by 6th or 7th grade. It was discussed all the time, so I never felt like I was doing something so bad. People would show each other videos etc. in the school cafeteria as if it was normal. This is in public school btw, not a yeshiva environment.

The habit became a daily ritual for years. Some days I'd go without entirely, other days several times a day, but it probably averaged out to daily. I'm ashamed to say that this went on for about a decade, but frankly, I didn't know it was a bad thing. I had no concept of right from wrong, and this seemed pretty normal to me.

The point is, I was hardwiring this garbage into my brain for about a decade, starting from a young age, and associated with trauma.

It's a perfect storm to totally screw up my brain, which is why I'm so worried about this now and desperately want to implement a recovery plan to heal.

Realizing I Had a Problem

I didn't realize I had a problem until 2020. I remember a summer night during COVID on a rooftop with my cousin (Jordan's younger brother) and my other friend. This is probably right around the time Judaism piqued my interest.

Somehow the topic of explicit image viewing came up in conversation with my friends. We were discussing whether or not it was bad for you, and whether or not we had a problem with it.

At this point, I'd started coming to terms with the fact that porn was probably not a good thing for me, but I didn't realize I had an outright problem with it.

My cousin said "try to go 30 days clean. if you can't, it means you have a problem".

I tried - and 17 days in, I fell. That's when I realized I indeed had a problem. That's when my journey to quit began.

I didn't take it so seriously though, until I arrived at my BT yeshiva. Being exposed to the orthodox community and being around orthodox women definitely accelerated my desire to solve this problem. I felt much worse being in the orthodox community with this habit. I think the community and the new environment helped a ton.

Early Momentum At The BT Yeshiva

I was at the BT Yeshiva for 3 years now. I'd say serious progress on this issue began after the first year there, after I'd successfully cut out marijuana and other distractions. Until those substances were eliminated, it was impossible to make meaningful progress on the explicit image viewing issue. Both because my decision making was heavily impaired while under the influence, I was craving more cheap dopamine hits after indulging with pot, and I was overall out of touch with my emotions.

I also met a few friends there who were also struggling but serious about recovery. We began meeting regularly, discussing the issue, and we became each other's sponsors. They were on my Covenant Eyes software as accountability partners, etc. This was super helpful.

I also confessed the issue to a rabbi I was close with there. Just doing that was super helpful, as I didn't want to continue coming back to him telling him I had the issue. It helped me overcome. In fact, after confessing to him, I went months without an issue, which was great.

Progress Thus Far

Below are some highlights on the cheap dopamine I've eliminated:

- No marijuana for 3+ years
- Haven't been with a woman or pursued them for 4+ years
 - Side note - if my 15-20 year old self knew I'd be proud of not being with a woman for this long, he definitely wouldn't believe it... I'm grateful to Hashem that I even have the awareness of right from wrong that I do now compared to growing up.
- Explicit screen use down from daily to 1-2 week intervals on average, with several multi-month long periods of sobriety from the screen
- Got rid of iPhone and all social media. I have a flip phone now
- Don't play video games, watch TV, etc.
- No more heavy alcohol consumption etc.

I've also made tremendous progress on understanding myself:

- Wrote 30k words with Jordan Peterson's past authoring program to better understand my trauma/past (highly recommend, it's how I've been able to write this with such clarity and understanding of myself)
- Much less stress / fear at work
- More in touch w/ my emotions and what makes me tick
- Significantly repaired relationship with my mom, though more to go
- Lots of reflection and inner work, therapy, etc.
- More positive and healthy habits

That said, there's still much more to go, as outlined below.

Use Over Last 12-24 Months

Starting about 2ish years ago, my use dropped significantly from what used to be daily. I went

down to weekly, bi-weekly, etc.

Eventually, I built up the courage to tell a rabbi here. I then went on a 2 or 3 month clean "streak". This meant no spilling seed or watching. It was great.

Unfortunately, I don't remember why, but I fell. This triggered a series of rises and falls over the last 2ish years.

I think I had one more 50ish day streak without spilling seed or watching anything explicit.

Other than that, I'd go 1-3 months without watching, but I still regularly spilled seed, sometimes once a week, sometimes once every two weeks, sometimes several times per week, etc.

In my head, I figured it was "too hard" to quit cold turkey, and I always felt it was better to "waine off" than go cold turkey and fall.

In truth, I always felt much much worse about myself after watching than only spilling seed by itself. The screen feels 10x more potent and makes me feel disgusting.

Whether or not to split up these two issues or view them as one in the same is a big question on my mind.

Historically, I told myself it was "fine" and "much better than the alternative", as if I had no other option. In truth, I wish I didn't do this at all, but at the end of the day, I felt much better than after consuming the screen.

However...

This option also has several problems.

First of all, even though I wasn't watching anything, I was recalling explicit images from the screen in my mind, along with women I've been with in the past. I justified this to myself because it was far less potent than watching on a screen. While this is probably true, I've realized it's not a fair excuse. At the end of the day, I'm still hardwiring this bad path in my brain. I'm guessing it'll make quitting hard, and I'm also nervous about these paths existing while I'm married. I don't want to deal with these thoughts during marriage, especially when I'm with my wife. Historically, I generally didn't have an issue thinking about explicit images while with actual women, so it didn't progress that badly... but I still am weary of this becoming an issue.

Second, sometimes this habit would lead me to "soft" (for lack of a better term) explicit image consumption. I have an AI filter on my computer that blocks explicit sites and also captures images on my screen. It uses AI to detect any explicit images and notifies my accountability partner. The crazy thing is, the secular world considers lots of immodest dress "normal" which means some things can get past the AI, on YouTube for example.

This isn't "technically" considered explicit image viewing by the world, but at the end of the day, it surely is from the Torah's perspective. Even psychologically speaking, a less exposed brain looking at these "softer" images is probably equivalent to a heavily exposed brain looking at

completely explicit images, so all in all I classify it as the same thing... a "soft" fall at best.

It's not good, and unfortunately I was still falling in this "softer" aspect once every month or two over the last year.

Losing My Allies

My allies all got married last summer, and afterwards, our regular conversations stopped. I didn't want to bring it up with them, as they now had a wife, and I didn't feel it as appropriate to bring these issues up. I imagine they're still struggling unfortunately, but at this point, it's not really my business. I also didn't want to contribute further to their struggles by bringing up the topic.

Unfortunately, struggling in silence is one of the biggest challenges of this addiction. Most other addictions I can think of are far less taboo or embarrassing. Even though this is probably the most common issue most men in my generation struggle with, it's also usually the least discussed.

This makes it easy to struggle in silence, without a peer feedback loop to hold you accountable or motivate change.

That being said, losing my allies definitely had an impact on me. I started falling a bit more often since last summer.

Bringing this issue into the light is a large reason why I'm publishing this here on the forum. I want to bring my struggles out into the open, albeit anonymously...

I've since opened up about this problem to a new rav in my new yeshiva, along with a few new friends that I trust, so I do have a support network, BH.

Usage Over The Last 6 Months

The last 6 months have actually been the worst since I started making solid progress I arrived at the BT Yeshiva. I'm not really sure what happened or why in the beginning. however, upon further reflection, I think I've loaded too much stress on my plate. I started a business with full-time employees that's doing well BH, but that does add on extra stress. I've also been pushing myself very hard for the last few years. As a BT, I felt like I had so much lacking in Torah, that I had to gas my torah super hard along with parnussa so I can get married. I basically stopped doing the things I used to enjoy on a regular basis like hiking and shooting, frisbee, etc. and replaced them with work and learning. My day was spent either working or learning, with a few breaks here and there to squeeze in food, davening, and perhaps exercise. Of course once every few months I'd do something fun, but few and far between.

More on this later, but I believe this super intense schedule is contributing to my relapses, as I need a "release" to calm my system down... and this intense schedule perhaps comes from a deeper issue, that's also the underlying cause of the porn. More on that in a bit.

Challenges

The following series of episodes is what prompted me to reach back out for professional support. I realized after something like this, I definitely need to admit I have a problem and seek professional help. This has been plaguing my mind over the last few months, contemplating how I fell this low, and hoping I can climb back out for good.

I contemplated whether or not to include this section for about a week, since it's pretty embarrassing and it makes me feel ashamed. I decided it was for that very reason that I should indeed include this section.

There's no shame in the secular world around this topic, which is one reason why I became such a heavy user. We learned in musser that busha is valuable when used appropriately, and indeed we should feel ashamed of our bad actions in a healthy way.

My hope is that this uncomfortable conversation will make me feel "good shame".

In early January 2024, one evening I was bored, lonely, stressed, tired, etc. and I had an insane craving. I've never done this before, but for some reason, something came over me...

I ordered a tablet delivered to my house so I could have unfiltered access without my accountability partner finding out.

I immediately smashed it and threw it away after...

2 weeks later, the same thing happened.

Then 2 weeks later, a friend recommended a better filter that supposedly blocks images from showing up at all, as opposed to mine that only notifies a friend. I installed it, quickly found a way around the filter, fell, and then confessed to my friend, re-installed covenant eyes, and have been good since then. I've found having screen accountability is the most important thing for me.

I haven't told anyone about the extent of this fall, as it's the most extreme I've ever had. Never before was I so overtaken that I literally bought a tablet to do this. I also had a good 30 minutes where I could have changed my mind but I didn't.

It's pretty frightening to me and embarrassing to write this down, especially knowing someone is going to read this.

However, I decided I'd rather face my embarrassment now and do teshuva, rather than my wife, or The King of Kings without ever having worked on this issue because I was too ashamed.

I haven't gone out to purchase a device again. I realized if I kept doing this, it'd be especially bad because I'd hardwire a new path in my brain to associate any department store with this garbage, which is not good.

I think once I fell, an old neural pathway was fired up which caused a bunch of successive falls. This happens when I've gone a while without a fall.

However, I noticed after this, when I drove by a target, I got a slight hit of dopamine in my head and a craving that I had to immediately disregard. I try to look away now when I pass... which is kind of ridiculous but the situation I'm in. I recently had an episode where I walked past a tech store and had intense desire to buy a device, but I didn't go in, BH... it's unfortunate that I have this problem now, but I think I can overcome it (I haven't done this in many months.)

Anyway... now that everything is on the table, I'm going to spend the rest of this document analyzing the types of falls, common triggers, my vision for a brighter future, goals, and a game plan based on things that have worked well in the past.

Fall Types Spilling Seed, No Screen

This is the most common type over the last several years. I had the perspective of "just stop watching, this is much better". Sometimes weeks without, sometimes several times a week, just depends.

I've noticed that if I go totally cold turkey, desire builds up to the point where I'm more likely to have a more severe fall with one of the categories below.

Spilling Seed, "Soft" Screen

Once every month or two, I'd spill seed while looking at a girl on a site like YouTube. It's not an explicit website per say, but there are definitely non-modest women on the site that an AI wouldn't even detect.

On the one hand, this seems less detrimental than binging on an explicit website. On the other hand, it's serving the same purpose, and is in many ways equally as bad. For example, my wife certainly wouldn't appreciate this...

Spilling Seed, XXX

In 2023, I estimate this happened once every 2-4 months on average. I once went five months, had two three month streaks, and then a month streak.

Again, these streaks are not including the two categories above. That said, during these periods, I generally felt much better and seemed to be headed in the right direction.

Unfortunately, I've never gone more than this amount of time without a fall. I want to have this problem well in the rear view before I start the dating process, which means I need to be strong for probably 3-6+ months before I'd consider starting to date.

Part of me wonders if the "can't date until this is solved" mindset is doing more harm than good, as it puts a lot of pressure on me, but the reality is I just can't see myself getting marreid with this problem.

In 2024, things have gotten worse starting in January when I bought those tablets. I think I've fallen 1-3 times a month every month for the last 6-8 months with XXX... and the more I use, the stronger the desire is to use again. I'm really working to reboot my brain and cut myself off from

this.

The good news is I've identified this as my primary focus/mission to serve Hashem and grow at the moment, and I'm devoting more resources to this battle, in terms of time, headspace, and finances. Therapy, more journaling, more guardrails, etc.

See the plan below for more.

Common Triggers

Below is a summary of my common stressors.

I've found this happens most often when I'm very tired, feeling lots of pressure at work, nervous about a tough meeting or conversation coming up, or anxious in general. Having more than a few drinks of alcohol a day or two before also definitely correlates with a fall, as I'm still seeking cheap dopamine hits.

After Shabbat

Saturday night is a common issue. I think after shabbat ends, I'm feeling low going back into the week. Historically, I'd have a few drinks on shabbat, which would mess up my emotional regulation as I felt hungover, tired, etc. I haven't had any alcohol for 3ish weeks now and it's been great. I plan to keep this going. That said, Saturday nights were hard.

Sundays/Mondays

I also struggle on Sundays/Mondays, because I have to prepare for the work week and all the stress that comes with it. The pressure of all my responsibilities sometimes gets to me. This is especially the case if I anticipate a meeting with an unhappy client, or things aren't going well. The fear of failure and not being approved of by others really gets to me. This is a deeper issue I'm working through in therapy.

Staying Up Late

Staying up late and working is also a culprit. I often get tired and lay down on the couch or something with my laptop on my stomach while I'm working. At this point, I'm feeling the pressure of finishing something, while being tired, and laying down, with a computer. It's kind of a recipe for disaster.

Visiting Home

Going home is also usually a big issue. I've gone home in the past and made a gameplan to avoid falls which worked well. I left my computer in public areas at all times and was generally removed enough from the habit at that point that I made it. However, before building myself up, and recently after falling, it's become an issue. There's an unfiltered device that I have easy access to there. The environment is all too familiar with this habit and old stressors come up. It's basically game over. Next time I go home, I'll need to plan ahead like I used to so I don't fall again.

Working in Private

My office space is totally private room with a key, which is a recipe for disaster. I've realized I should only go in there when I have a meeting, and leave immediately after. It should be used as a quiet space for calls, not a permanent setup. I've otherwise been using my laptop in public as of late, including while typing this.

Brighter Future

I'm planning for a brighter future.

There are three primary categories in which I'm focusing on recovery.

1. **Abstinence:** This means avoiding a fall at all costs. Trying to make it as painful as possible to fall, and setting up as many blockers as possible.
2. **Boundaries:** These are the guardrails I put in place for myself. Not just technological guardrails like filters, but also behavioral guardrails like bed time, work location, etc.
3. **Self-care:** This means a healthy schedule, exercise, hobbies, relationships with others, journaling, meditation, therapy, etc.

I'm going to dive into each one below.

Abstinence

- Pivot plan
 - Immediately get up from my seat the moment a small craving thought kicks in. Do not sit thinking I can fight it. IMMEDIATELY get up and leave the room, no matter what. Go for a walk.
 - Try to call 3+ people to have a conversation and "reconnect"
 - Talk to Hashem and journal
 - Eat some candy or something as a treat and reward for the positive behavior

Boundaries

- Only go into private room with computer for meeting duration and leave immediately after. Much less likely to have thoughts in public, and won't fall in public.
- Do not work past 11 pm
- Accountability and filtering software locked on computer without ability to remove.

Self-Care & Self-Love

- Easier schedule: Instead of learning two sedarim a day and running my business, reduce afternoon seder and work in afternoon, learn a night seder to prep for tomorrow's morning shiur. Get to bed at a normal hour, with more time for exercise, prayer, and not needing to be "always on"
- Leisure activities
 - Schvitz: I love going to the schvitz. It's so relaxing and lets off so much stress. I need to go more often.
 - Hiking: Hiking is also one of my favorite activities. I need to get out more.
 - Walking: Even just going for a walk to clear my head is beneficial
 - Going out with friends to a restaurant etc.
- Support group: meet with a sponsor at least once a week to talk about the struggle and engage daily in GYE forums
- Therapy: see a therapist weekly to explore my past traumas and develop healthier coping mechanisms/habits
- Exercise: run or lift every day so I'm active and releasing "negative" emotions in a healthy way
- Self-love: journal about my positive qualities, try to meditate on my positive traits, and be compassionate towards myself

Healing

As I mentioned briefly above, I think porn is really a symptom of a deeper problem.

In my case, it's a symptom of being overley stressed, anxious, etc.

Being overly stressed, anxious, etc. is a symptom of me overworking myself with my schedule.

Overworking myself is a symptom of needing to be distracted from my deeper challenges, and deriving my own self-worth from my achievements and others' praise, rather than sourcing it from within, regardless of the boxes I check.

This is my main avodah over the next few months. In therapy, we're going to dive into this further and work on self love. My goal is to really truly love myself from within, at which point I won't need to fill that void with other things that are unhealthy for me.

Conclusion

iyH, all of this self-work will help me heal and recover from this disease. I also hope some of my words here can inspire others to look within and grow from their struggles.

=====
=====