

Guiding Romantic Desire: Wisdom in the Sexual Ethics of Islam

By Justin Parrott (Abu Amina Elias)

Table of Contents

- [Introduction](#)
- [Advising, not condemning](#)
- [Reason and law vs. whim and passion](#)
- [Sexual ethics in the Qur'an and Sunnah](#)
- [Is there hope for those struggling with sin?](#)
- [Conclusion](#)

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to several of my colleagues who reviewed this paper and suggested substantial corrections and improvements.

Abstract

This paper discusses traditional sexual ethics in Islam with a focus on its applicability to the present age. The paradigm within which this discussion takes place is one of goodwill and sincere advice, not issuing condemnation. Traditional sexual ethics is understood to be rooted in the classical dichotomy of reason and law versus passion and whim. Reason requires us to do what is best for ourselves and others over the long term at the expense of instant gratification. Our best interest is clearly conveyed to us in the wisdom of the divine law, and as such we should submit to it. Then, the major areas of this topic are explored with reference to the Qur'an and Sunnah: love and mercy in marriage, family stability, child-rearing, modest clothing, lowering the gaze, seclusion, cross-sex friendships, and extramarital sex. Special attention is given to modern temptations such as cohabitation and pornography, with reference to sociological and medical studies to further show the wisdom of divine law.

Introduction

Young Muslims, especially in the West, have to endure a lot of temptation and pressure from hyper-sexualized media, the “hook-up” and “pick-up

artist” cultures, raging debates over gender identities, and the breakdown of traditional norms surrounding sex. It is not an easy or enviable position to be in, as Islamic sexual ethics become increasingly viewed as old-fashioned or even oppressive. The modern discourse might leave some young people wondering: Why should I not have a boyfriend or a girlfriend? What harm is there in consensual sex between two young adults? What is wrong with watching a little porn?

One of the main objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*) is to protect the integrity of human lineage and family stability, as well as the physical and mental health of individuals, which is why the destructive acts of adultery, casual sex, and their preceding actions are strictly forbidden. The rules about sex in the Qur'an and Sunnah were revealed by our All-Knowing Creator, who knows us better than we know ourselves and who warns us of harm that might not be readily apparent to us. Islam provides practical guidance in all matters of life, including sex and romance, giving us a healthy balance in conformity with human nature between the two extremes of complete celibacy and ‘sexual liberation.’ Sex is not necessarily a taboo topic for Muslims either, although it must operate within reasonable limits as directed by divine revelation. The rules are meant to keep us safe, individually and collectively, not to stifle or suffocate us. This paper will discuss some of the wisdom that can be inferred from traditional Islamic sexual ethics as they relate to the contemporary struggles of young Muslims in challenging environments, supported by evidence from social science literature.

Advising, not condemning

At the outset, we need to make clear that in presenting these rules, we are sincerely *advising* our brothers and sisters. We are not *condemning* Muslims who break the rules, even though we reject such acts of disobedience to Allah. The motivation for advising our brothers and sisters in Islam should be genuine concern for their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being, in this life and in the Hereafter. It should also be for the welfare and protection of the community as a whole, for the rules of Islam consider societal well-being before they consider individual benefit.

The Prophet ﷺ said, “Religion is sincere good will.” The companions said, “To whom?” The Prophet said, “To Allah, His Book, His Messenger, the

leaders of the Muslims, and their common people.”¹ Ibn Daqīq explains that good will towards Muslims means “to take care of them with beautiful preaching, to abandon ill will and envy toward them, to love for them the good that he loves for himself, and to hate for them the evil that he hates for himself.”²

Our advice to others should always come from a place of compassion. Correcting others’ behavior is intended to benefit them, not humiliate or disgrace them. Any act of “enjoining good and forbidding evil” (*al-amr bil-ma’rūf wal-nahy ‘an al-munkar*) should be done with gentleness and humility instead of harshness and arrogance. Imam Aḥmad used to say, “One should enjoin good with gentleness and humility. If they make him hear what he dislikes, he should not get angry such that he wants to avenge himself.”³ Using vulgar, ugly, or offensive language needlessly makes people angry and closed-off to the advice, thus defeating the purpose of enjoining good in the first place.

We can see this wisdom in how the Prophet ﷺ reasoned with a man who came to him for permission to engage in extramarital sex. The young man said to him, “O Messenger of Allah, allow me to fornicate.” The Prophet ﷺ said, “Would you like that for your mother?” The man said, “No, by Allah, may I be sacrificed for you. People would not like it for their mothers.” The Prophet ﷺ kept asking him questions like this until he finally put his hand on the young man’s heart and prayed, “O Allah, forgive his sins, purify his heart, and guard his chastity.” His supplication was answered and the man went forth determined never to sin again.⁴ In another narration, the Prophet ﷺ told him, “Then hate what Allah has hated and love for your brother what you love for yourself.”⁵ The Prophet ﷺ reasoned with him and appealed to his natural empathy and sense of chivalry instead of condemning him outright, despite the fact that his initial request for permission to sin was outrageous.

¹ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* ([Bayrūt]: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabīyah, 1955), 1:74 #55.

² Ibn Daqīq al-‘Īd and al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ al-Arba‘īn al-Nawawīyah* (Bayrūt: Mu’assasat al-Rayyān, 2003), 1:52.

³ Al-Khallāl, *Al-Amr bil-Ma’rūf lil-Khallāl*, (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīyah, 2003), 28.

⁴ Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal*, (Bayrūt: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 2001), 36:545 #22211; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Shu’ayb al-Arnā’ūt in the commentary.

⁵ Al-Bayhaqī, *Al-Sunan al-Kubrā*, (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīyah, 2003), 9:271 #18507.

A helpful parable for how a believer should relate to those struggling with a sin was given by the great companion Abū al-Dardā'. It is reported that he passed by a man who was being beaten because of his sin and they were cursing him. Abū al-Dardā' said, "What do you think if he had fallen into a well? Would you not try to rescue him?" They said yes. Abū al-Dardā' said, "Then do not abuse your brother, and praise Allah who has protected you from sin." They said, "Do you not hate him?" Abū al-Dardā' said, "Verily, I only hate his sinful deed but if he leaves it, then he is still my brother."⁶ Those who struggle with a habitual sin are people who need help and guidance rather than bullying. Interestingly, this text does not even mention the sin for which the man was being cursed and beaten because it is irrelevant.

It sounds cliché, and it truly is, but Islam teaches us to love the sinner and hate the sin. That is, to *love good* for the sinner and to hate the sin that is harming them. This is not some made-up teaching imported into Islam by sellers of feel-good religion. Rather, this is what the righteous predecessors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*) inferred from the Qur'an and Sunnah. Ibn Rajab writes:

Some of the righteous predecessors said: The people who love Allah see by the light of Allah and they are compassionate with those who disobey Allah. They hate their actions but show mercy to them so that through their admonitions they might leave their actions. They are afraid that the Hellfire will consume their bodies. The believer will not truly be a believer until he is pleased for people to have what he is pleased for himself.⁷

So when we talk about sexual ethics in Islam, our aim is to guide people away from behaviors that harm themselves and others, behaviors that have been prohibited by Al-Ḥakīm (the All-Wise), and have been documented by scholars and professionals in the East and West as contributors to physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual damage.

The last thing we want to do is come across as self-righteous or arrogant. Indeed, some people claim to "enjoin good and forbid evil" while their real intention (and Allah knows best the secrets inside His servants) is motivated

⁶ Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā' wa Ṭabaqāt al-Aṣfiyā'*, (Miṣr: Maṭba'at al-Sa'ādah, 1974), 1:225.

⁷ Ibn Rajab, *Jāmi' al-'Ulūm wal-Ḥikam*, (Bayrūt: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2001), 1:308 #13.

by their own egos or something else. The Prophet ﷺ said, “If a man says the people are ruined, he is the most ruined of them.”⁸ Someone who goes around condemning people all the time has a spiritual problem. Al-Nawawī says the prohibition here is not the wording per se, but rather refers to one who says this “in contempt for people, to denigrate them, to claim themselves superior to them, and to accuse them of evil intentions, for he does not know the secrets of Allah in His creation.”⁹ In modern parlance this is known as *virtue signaling*, or building yourself up by tearing down others. It is a very destructive habit that must be avoided by anyone who speaks on behalf of the Truth.

We are all sinners, as the Prophet ﷺ said, “All of the children of Adam are sinners, and the best sinners are those who repent.”¹⁰ Everyone who advises sinners to stop sinning is not free of sin himself. Even if Allah protected us from a sexual sin, we certainly have indulged in other sins. One who calls others to Allah must remember his or her own sins first, so as not to allow any hint of arrogance to enter their hearts or show in their words.

Reason and law vs. whim and passion

Understanding sexual ethics in Islam begins with the theological premise that Allah is Al-Ḥakīm (the All-Wise). Allah has revealed rules (*aḥkam*) to us that are based upon His infinite knowledge and perfect wisdom (*ḥikmah*). Notice how these terms are all linguistically related to the root *ḥa-ka-ma*, meaning to judge. This is why the Qur’an describes itself as “the Wise Book.”¹¹ The Qur’an also describes the Sunnah, or prophetic practice, as “the Wisdom.”¹² The rules were revealed by our Creator to benefit us and keep us safe from the harm that is caused to individuals and societies by acting upon our base impulses rather than considering the healthiest course of action. Allah said, “Perhaps you like something and it is bad for you.”¹³ The harms of some activities might not be readily apparent to us at first, such as one who enjoys a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship in the moment

⁸ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:2024 #2623.

⁹ Al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ al-Nawawī ‘alá Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, (Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1972), 16:175 #2623.

¹⁰ Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ġarb al-Islāmī, 1998), 4:240 #2499; declared fair (*hasan*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaḥīḥ* ([Dimashq]: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1969), 2:831 #4515.

¹¹ Sūrat Yūnus 10:1.

¹² Sūrat al-Jumu’ah 62:2.

¹³ Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:216.

but later comes to taste the bitter fruit of a lack of firm commitment, rejection, or abandonment. One might think, “I’m not hurting anybody,” but part of faith is to trust in the knowledge and wisdom of our Creator, who cautions us about harms we cannot foresee, even if those harms are primarily spiritual in essence.

The philosophical basis from which to understand this topic is the classic dichotomy between reason (*'aql*) and passion (*hawā'*). The capacity to reason is what separates human beings from animals, according to Ibn al-Jawzī, “Indeed, humans are only favored over beastly animals by their minds, which order them to restrain their passions.”¹⁴ Using reason is to carefully consider evidence, priorities, and logical arguments in pursuit of the best possible course of action, while passion is to follow one’s base impulses and whims in pursuit of material pleasure. Reason, in the Islamic view, looks to maximize physical, mental, and spiritual benefits over time; passion looks for instant gratification of one’s desires. Allah revealed this matter early in the Meccan period, “As for one who feared to stand before his Lord and restrained his soul from its whims, Paradise will be his refuge.”¹⁵

As such, adhering to the rulings of Islam often involves sacrificing a momentary pleasure for a greater long-term benefit, or as put by Ibn al-Jawzī, “...leaving the immediate for the deferred,” (*tark al-’ājil lil-ājil*).¹⁶ In psychology, this is called delayed or deferred gratification. Patience in this manner is part of the essence of the Shari’ah, which stands in contrast to lowly desires. Allah said:

Thus, We have ordained for you a path (*sharī’ah*) in the matter, so follow it and do not follow the whims of those who know not.¹⁷

Sexual pleasure is one of the most enticing of all physical sensations and also one of the most harmful when indulged outside of a lawful marriage. Promiscuity in society can lead to the proliferation of sexually-transmitted diseases; pornography can lead to addiction and decreases one’s ability to

¹⁴ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Al-Ṭibb al-Rūḥānī*, (al-Qāhirah: Maktabat al-Thaqāfah al-Dīmiyah, 1986), 8.

¹⁵ Sūrat al-Nāzi’āt 79:40-41.

¹⁶ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Al-Ṭibb al-Rūḥānī*, 7.

¹⁷ Sūrat al-Jāthiyah 45:18.

form a normal, healthy sexual relationship; cohabitation in the form of boyfriend-girlfriend relationships can lead to out-of-wedlock births, single-parenting, and other psychological and emotional traumas; all of these prohibited activities in Islam displace sex from its rightful place and impose burdens on individuals and society. Hence, the law prescribes what is in the collective best interests of all people in this life and in the next at the expense of purely momentary pleasure.

The wisdom behind these rules is rationally accessible as well. It can be understood by the sound minds of those with sound hearts and uncorrupted natures. Ibn al-Qayyim make this point clear with an anecdote about a man who became Muslim in the latter generations:

It was said to one of the Bedouins who embraced Islam, when he recognized the call of the Prophet ﷺ, ‘What made you become a Muslim? What did you see in him that told you he is the Messenger of Allah?’ The Bedouin said, ‘The Prophet did not command anything that my reason said should be prohibited. He did not prohibit anything that my reason said should be commanded. He did not allow anything that my reason said should be forbidden. And he did not forbid anything that my reason said should be allowed.’

Ibn al-Qayyim then commented, “Look at this Bedouin, his sound mind and his instincts, the strength of his faith, and his conclusion that the authenticity of the Prophet’s call is due to its correspondence with everything the mind knows is good.”¹⁸ We know that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ was really sent by Allah because, among other signs, his commands and prohibitions agree with our God-given reason when we see the bigger picture.

When considering the faculties of reason and rationality that Allah has bestowed upon us, it is important to note that societal standards for what is “reasonable” can shift over time. Islam allows for accommodating benign cultural changes, as long as they do not offend its timeless and universal values, ethics, and practices. But it is also possible that human nature can become corrupted, such that people use their reason to rationalize their whims. Psychologists call this process *motivated reasoning*, in which reason

¹⁸ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *Madārij al-Sālikīn Bayna Manāzil Īyāka Na’budu wa Īyāka Nasta’in*, (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Arabī, 1996), 1:250.

is used to justify desired outcomes instead of objectively analyzing the evidence. A century ago, the detrimental effects of sexual gratification outside of marriage would not have required an extended explanation. However, Western society's current level of hypersexualization in media, movies, advertising, the internet, and many other facets of daily life makes it necessary for us to issue a strong rebuttal. The musings of the elite from their ivory tower, however couched they are in 'scientific' and 'enlightened' rhetoric, cannot replace the wisdom of divine revelation passed down through centuries of Islamic scholarship. The proper approach to reason and revelation in Islam is a middle way between unguided rationalism and unsophisticated literalism. According to Al-Ghazalī, the correct attitude is as follows:

The fifth group is the group in the middle that combines the inquiry into what is mandated by reason (*al-ma'qūl*) and what is mandated by revelation (*al-manqūl*) and says that each one of the two is an important foundation (*aṣl muhim*). They deny a contradiction between reason and revelation (*shar'*) and that there would be any truth in such a position. Whoever says that reason (*'aql*) is not true also says that revelation is not true because it is only through reason that the truth of revelation (*ṣidq al-shar'*) is known.¹⁹

Thus, reason and divine revelation go hand-in-hand. Unrestrained rationalism, without the guidance of revelation, has dangerous implications because reason is by nature flawed and subjective. Someone can easily rationalize their misbehavior against the objectives of their Creator; many atrocities throughout history were committed by entire movements who fancied themselves scientific and enlightened. The best historical examples are the mass killings perpetrated by the 20th-century's Nazis and Communists, who considered themselves to be at the cutting-edge of science and human evolution. Reason alone could not save them from becoming monsters.

Rejecting reason in favor of one's whims and base desires is a means of physical, mental, and spiritual ruin. The Prophet ﷺ said, "Verily, among

¹⁹ Frank Griffel, "Ibn Taymiyya and His Ash'arite Opponents on Reason and Revelation: Similarities, Differences, and a Vicious Circle," *The Muslim World*, v. 108 n. 1 (January 2018): 11-39, 24.

what I fear most for you are seductive temptations in your stomachs and passions, and the misguidance of whims.”²⁰ When it comes to sex, living a promiscuous lifestyle puts one at risk for sexually-transmitted diseases and infections, the psychological trauma of casual sexual relationships, and the spiritual debasement caused by disobeying Allah and submitting to one’s lowly desires. Even the ostensibly monogamous ‘stable’ boyfriend-girlfriend relationship carries risks of unwanted pregnancy, lack of commitment, emotional upheaval, and potential for abandonment. Those who give free reign to their whims are not in fact free, even though they might view themselves as paragons of freedom; rather, they are slaves to their impulses and temptations. As the Prophet ﷺ warned us, “Miserable is the slave of gold, silver, fine clothes, and garments. If he is given he is pleased, but if he is not given he is displeased.”²¹ Someone who lives for the sake of their sexual desires will never be satisfied because there will always be another physical pleasure just out of reach.

Basing our happiness on material things and fleeting sensations is a recipe for misery because we all know these things will eventually fade away. Surrendering ourselves to our whims also reveals our own internal weakness of spirit, a clear failure to live up to our best selves. Ibn al-Jawzī remarks:

Know that when the human being agrees with his whims, even if they do not (physically) hurt him, he will feel humiliation within himself because he has been defeated. If he overpowers his whims, he will feel honor within himself because he has been victorious. Thus, you see when people witness an ascetic, they are amazed by him and kiss his hand for what he has done, as he has been strong to abandon that over which they were weak, which is opposing his whims.

To make his point, he adds some lines of classical poetry, “How much satisfaction that provoked happiness, ended by revealing sorrow and sadness?”²² Even today, we admire folks who had the willpower to lose excess weight, lower their cholesterol, drop a smoking or drinking habit, and so on. We know that it takes strength to do so—to oppose desire for the sake

²⁰ Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal*, 33:18-19 #19772; the narrators are reliable (*thiqāt*) according to Shu’ayb al-Arnā’ūtī in the commentary.

²¹ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, (Bayrūt: Dār Ṭawq al-Najjāh, 2002), 4:34 #2886.

²² Ibn al-Jawzī, *Al-Ṭibb al-Rūḥānī*, 10.

of a reasonable benefit—and it is the fulfillment of this strength that is supremely satisfying and is the sure route to happiness. Giving in to the desire, the habit, or the addiction we recognize as weakness, which surely leads to crushing anguish in time. As Muslims, our goal is higher than this world. We aspire to the strength of faith needed to fulfill our faith despite the difficulties it might entail. Such principled integrity results in happiness in this life and, more importantly, for eternity in the Hereafter.

One important point that needs to be made before we proceed is that *experiencing* temptations, desires, whims, and passion is totally normal and benign when our reaction to them is controlled. It is part of what makes us human and these things are healthy when channeled into positive outlets by the guidance of Islam. Even when we have involuntary thoughts about fulfilling our desires beyond what is allowed, no one is sinful unless they act on them. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Verily, Allah has pardoned my nation for what occurs within themselves, as long as they do not speak of it or act upon it.”²³ It is not thoughts and feelings that are blameworthy, but rather *to act* upon them in a negative manner or to entertain them within oneself. The divine law is concerned with and regulates willful internal and external actions, not our involuntary feelings or sensations. Even so, we are responsible for our reaction to our thoughts and we cannot simply let them run wild within us. Ibn al-Qayyim mentions that our first line of defense in maintaining integrity (*al-istiqāmah*) is “to guard thoughts and protect them, and to beware of neglecting them and indulging with them.”²⁴ This is why thinking in a pornographic way, deliberately and voluntarily, is a sin of the heart and mind, whereas passively experiencing pornographic thoughts in passing, but not acting upon them, is blameless.

It is a duty upon the believer to ask Allah for the willpower to sacrifice some of their pleasures in the world for the sake of the greater good: safety on earth and eternal happiness in the Hereafter. This is done by exercising self-control when exposed to stimuli (fasting helps us cultivate this skill) as well as avoiding situations of temptation to begin with. From this theological foundation, the wisdom of various rules in Islam related to sexual behavior can be recognized by reason.

²³ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:135 #6664.

²⁴ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *Ṭarīq al-Hijratayn wa Bāb al-Sa’ādatayn*, (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Salafīyah, 1979), 1:175.

Sexual ethics in the Qur'an and Sunnah

The basis of sexual ethics in Islam is the sanctity of the institution of marriage. Marriage is a relationship based upon love, mercy, tranquility, and faith; it is a contractual arrangement for the purpose of securing mutual legal rights and a spiritual partnership in which both spouses agree to help each other succeed in this life and in the Hereafter. This partnership, in fact, is one of the signs of Allah in creation.

Allah said:

Among His signs is that He created mates from yourselves that you may find rest in them, and He has placed love and mercy between you. Verily, in that are signs for those who reflect.²⁵

Marriage is an essential component of the prophetic practice, along with guidelines for proper courtship (*khiṭbah*) and selection of suitable spouses to avoid the pitfalls of unrestricted dating. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Marriage is part of my Sunnah. Whoever does not act upon my Sunnah is not part of me.”²⁶ He disowned himself from anyone who denies that marriage is part of the religion at all. Scholars hold it to be a confirmed and highly emphasized Sunnah (*sunnah mu'akkadah*), although they delineated some exceptions in which it might be obligatory (such as fearing one will otherwise commit adultery), discouraged or forbidden (if the relationship will be harmful), or merely permissible.²⁷ Certainly, people can still live productive and meaningful lives without getting married, just like many great male and female scholars of Islam such as Ibn Taymīyah, Al-Nawawī, and Karīmah bint Aḥmad al-Marwazīyah, but one should also keep in mind the statement of the Prophet ﷺ, “Whoever Allah provides with a righteous wife, Allah has assisted him in half of his religion. Let him fear Allah regarding the second half.”²⁸

²⁵ Sūrat al-Rūm 30:21.

²⁶ Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, (Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1975), 1:592 #1846; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in the commentary.

²⁷ Wizārat al-Awqāf wal-Shu'ūn al-Islāmīyah, *Al-Mawsū'at al-Fiḥḥīyah al-Kuwayṭīyah*, (al-Kuwayt: Wizārat al-Awqāf wal-Shu'ūn al-Islāmīyah, 1992), 41:210.

²⁸ Al-Ṭabarānī, *Al-Mu'jam al-Awsaṭ*, (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ḥaramayn, 1995), 1:294 #972; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Suyūṭī as cited in *Al-Tanwīr Sharḥ al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ* (al-Riyād: Muḥammad Ishāq Muḥammad Ibrāhīm, 2011), 10:235 #8685.

People marry for all kinds of reasons, some worldly and some spiritual. In Islam, the most important factor in marriage is the mutual suitability of the spouses' religious commitment. The Prophet ﷺ said, "A woman is married for four reasons: her property, her status, her beauty, and her religion. Thus, give precedence to one with religion."²⁹ The other important factor is mutual love and compatibility, as the Prophet ﷺ said, "We do not see for those who love one another anything like marriage."³⁰ In one instance, the Prophet ﷺ gave permission for one of his companions to look at a prospective marriage candidate because "it is the best way to make lasting affection between you."³¹ Thereafter, this companion married her and he used to mention how well they got along.³² As mentioned in the verse previously, Islamic marriage is based on love (*mawaddah*) and mercy (*rahmah*); love is when things are going great for us in the relationship, and mercy is when we encounter the inevitable difficulties of living together. While love is greatly important in a relationship, it is not the *only* factor that makes a marriage successful. In this regard, marriage in Islam is meant to comprehensively satisfy the needs of human beings: physically, emotionally, and spiritually, in good times and tough times.

The natural romantic desires of people are best fulfilled in marriage, as opposed to the 'one-night stand' or 'hook-up' encounter that leaves people devoid of any genuine emotional connection to their partner. A multiethnic research study of college students has suggested that casual sex increases the risk of negative psychological outcomes.³³ Even monogamous couples who cohabit, which is to live together and engage in sex without committing to marriage, are less stable and more vulnerable than their married counterparts. In fact, a 17-nation study conducted by social scientists at Wayne State University found that married couples demonstrated greater levels of happiness, greater financial stability, and better health outcomes as compared to unmarried cohabiting couples.³⁴ Another study found positive correlations between marital status and emotional intelligence, happiness,

²⁹ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:8 #5090.

³⁰ Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, 1:593 #1847; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in the commentary.

³¹ Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 2:388 #1087; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by Al-Tirmidhī in the commentary.

³² Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, 1:599 #1865; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in the commentary.

³³ Melina M. Bersamin et al, "Risky Business: Is There an Association between Casual Sex and Mental Health among Emerging Adults?" *Journal of Sex Research*, 51, no. 1, (2014): 43-51

³⁴ Steven Stack and J. R. Eshleman, "Marital Status and Happiness: a 17-Nation Study," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 60.2 (1998): 534.

and optimism.³⁵ Women, in particular, are more likely to enjoy sex in a committed emotional relationship rather than in a “hookup.”³⁶ Women who engaged in casual sex often cited that they did so for interpersonal reasons, hoping that engaging in physical intimacy would increase the likelihood of a long-term relationship.³⁷ Authentic personal connection is what many people want, but casual sex will most likely not achieve their goal of finding a committed partner. Emotional distress is inevitable when the long-term relationship does not pan out.

Stable marriage provides the emotional fulfillment that many women and men crave. If couples cohabit without marrying, it is as if they lack commitment to their partner, as if they want to retain the option of just walking away whenever they feel like it. The cohabitation lifestyle is associated with other problems as well. Those who have multiple sexual partners on the unmarried cohabitation model are more likely to suffer from substance dependence disorder, that is, a drug addiction, than those who are married or have only one partner.³⁸ People who get addicted to drugs or alcohol severely harm their bodies and often do so to fill some emotional void in their lives or to cope with some pain; the same can be true of casual sexual encounters as well. While we all experience struggles with negative emotions, our attempts to fill a void or cope with pain through unhealthy behaviors must be directly addressed and healed to allow us to lead fulfilling lives. Once we attain a greater awareness of our motivations or ‘triggers’ for engaging in choices that may be immediately gratifying but damaging in the long-term, we can work towards replacing these bad habits with healthy alternatives.

Marriage is the legal institution through which our desires are channeled into positive outcomes, both in this life and in the Hereafter. For this reason, the Prophet ﷺ recommended that young men get married at the earliest

³⁵ Siamak Khodarahimi, “The Role of Marital Status in Emotional Intelligence, Happiness, Optimism and Hope,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 46.3 (2015): 364.

³⁶ Elizabeth A. Armstrong, Paula England, A. A. Elizabeth, and Alison C. K. Fogarty, “Accounting for Women’s Orgasm and Sexual Enjoyment in College Hookups and Relationships,” *American Sociological Review*, 77.3 (2012): 435.

³⁷ Pamela C. Regan and Carla S. Dreyer, “Lust? Love? Status? Young Adults’ Motives for Engaging in Casual Sex,” *Journal of Psychology & Human Sexuality*, 11:1 (1999), 1-24.

³⁸ S. C. Ramrakha, Paul M. L. Bell, N. Dickson, T. E. Moffitt, and A. Caspi, “The Relationship between Multiple Sex Partners and Anxiety, Depression, and Substance Dependence Disorders: a Cohort Study,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 42.5 (2013): 863.

reasonable opportunity, “O young men, if you are able to support a wife, get married. Verily, it lowers the gaze and guards chastity. Whoever is not able to do so, he must fast as it will restrain his passions.”³⁹ Believers who marry protect themselves from committing the sin of fornication and the detrimental physical, mental, social, and spiritual consequences associated with it. If one cannot marry, the Prophet ﷺ encouraged people to make fasting a habit in order to curb their natural desires until they can get married. In addition, there are other good habits we can adopt to help control our natural lusts: keeping good company with righteous Muslim friends, enjoying wholesome entertainment like sports, avoiding negative influences, and practicing mindfulness exercises. As a rule, one should busy themselves with activities that either facilitate self-control or set up barriers to temptation. Although the scientific study of mindfulness on addictive behaviors, which can include pornography addiction and other unwanted desires, is rather new, there is promising evidence to suggest that it could help provide some relief.⁴⁰ It is recommended for any Muslim who is interested in benefitting from mindfulness and positive psychology to do so within an Islamic framework.⁴¹

Extramarital sex is a major sin in Islam because it fails to channel our natural impulses into a positive outlet, wherein the potential harms to individuals, families, and society can be contained. Adultery is even worse, as it is a betrayal of the marriage pact that should be based on love, trust, and loyalty; it shatters the bonds of family, and often traumatizes one or both of the spouses and their children. The integrity of the domestic family unit is paramount in Islam, as it is for all civilization. In his 1947 seminal work *Family and Civilization*, Harvard sociologist Carle Zimmerman documents family types throughout Western history as they correlate to social decline, noting that the “disintegration of the family into contractual and non-institutional forms is so devastating to high cultural society that these atypical forms can last only a short while and will in time have to be corrected.”⁴² Islam, too, recognizes the importance of intact, loving,

³⁹ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 7:3 #5060.

⁴⁰ Eric L. Garland and Matthew O. Howard, “Mindfulness-based treatment of addiction: current state of the field and envisioning the next wave of research,” *Addiction Science & Clinical Practice*, 13:14 (2018).

⁴¹ For more information on this topic, please see: Justin Parrott, “How to be a Mindful Muslim: An Exercise in Islamic Meditation,” *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research*. 21 November 21 2017. <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/justin-parrott/how-to-be-a-mindful-muslim-an-exercise-in-islamic-meditation>

⁴² Carle C. Zimmerman and James Kurth (ed.), *Family and Civilization*, (ISI Books, 2007), 19.

balanced, and stable families to the flourishing of humankind. Indeed, one of the primary goals of Satan in misleading the children of Adam is to break families apart through adultery or any other means at his disposal, as the Prophet ﷺ said:

Verily, Satan places his throne over the water and he sends out his troops. The closest to him in rank are the greatest at causing turmoil. One of them says: I have done such and such. Satan says: You have done nothing. Another one says: I did not leave this man alone until I separated him from his wife. Satan embraces him and he says: You have done well!⁴³

Even divorce, while certainly warranted in some cases, is not at all ideal, nor should it be taken lightly. The Prophet ﷺ said, “The most hateful of lawful matters to Allah is divorce.”⁴⁴ Divorce will almost certainly cause some emotional harm and could even reduce the likelihood of passing on Muslim identity to the children.⁴⁵ Still, it is allowed in Islam because at times it is the lesser of two evils. It may even be desirable if one of the spouses in the marriage is toxic and abusive.

Family instability resulting from adultery or the transience of parental figures negatively affects the upbringing of children. According to researchers at Johns Hopkins University, “A growing body of literature suggests that children who experience multiple transitions in family structure may fare worse developmentally than children raised in stable two-parent families and perhaps even than children raised in stable, single-parent families.”⁴⁶ This correlation between transitions in family structure and negative outcomes for children is known to researchers as the *instability hypothesis*. Family instability is associated with poor health in children,⁴⁷

⁴³ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:2167 #2813.

⁴⁴ Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, (Ṣaydā, Lubnān: al-Maktabah al-Aṣrīyah, 1980), 2:255 #2178; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Suyūṭī as cited in *Al-Tanwīr Sharḥ al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, 1:236 #53.

⁴⁵ Leora E. Lawton and Regina Bures, “Parental Divorce and the ‘Switching’ of Religious Identity,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40, no. 1 (2001): 99–111; as cited by Osman Umarji, “Will My Children Be Muslim? The Development of Religious Identity in Young People,” *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research*, January 16, 2020.

yaqeeninstitute.org/osman-umarji/will-my-children-be-muslim-the-development-of-religious-identity-in-young-people

⁴⁶ Paula Fomby and Andrew J. Cherlin, “Family Instability and Child Well-Being,” *American Sociological Review*, 72.2 (2007): 181.

⁴⁷ S. H. Bzostek and A. N. Beck, “Familial Instability and Young Children’s Physical Health,” *Social Science & Medicine*, 73.2 (2011): 282.

lower verbal ability and behavioral problems in school,⁴⁸ anti-social behavior,⁴⁹ aggressive, anxious, and depressive behavior,⁵⁰ harsher parenting tactics and reduced cognitive test scores,⁵¹ educational disadvantage,⁵² poorer academic achievement,⁵³ and poorer socioeconomic development.⁵⁴ On the other hand, children raised by their biological parents tend to get better jobs and are more likely to get married themselves.⁵⁵ The economic situation is also a key variable here, as poor and working-class families are more likely to suffer from family instability, due to a possible combination of lacking resources and opportunities, enduring more stress, or other factors that disincentivize marriage for them.⁵⁶ The stable, married, biological two-parent household is not a guarantee of success, of course, yet it is still the best institution in which to raise the next generation. It must also be said that single-parent households by circumstance are not to blame, nor should their real struggles be belittled.

Social scientists have found evidence that links religion to greater family stability, greater levels of marital happiness, and lower divorce rates.⁵⁷ In contrast, premarital sexual intercourse during adolescence is associated with an increased risk of marital dissolution or instability later in life.⁵⁸ Flirting in

⁴⁸ Carey E. Cooper, Cynthia A. Osborne, Audrey N. Beck, and Sara S. McLanahan, "Partnership Instability, School Readiness, and Gender Disparities," *Sociology of Education*, 84.3 (2011): 257.

⁴⁹ Colter Mitchell, Sara McLanahan, John Hobcraft, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Irwin Garfinkel, and Dan Notterman, "Family Structure Instability, Genetic Sensitivity and Child Wellbeing," *American Journal of Sociology*, (2015): 1195-1225.

⁵⁰ Cynthia Osborne and Sara McLanahan, "Partnership Instability and Child Well-Being," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69.4 (2007): 1065.

⁵¹ "Fragile Families and Child Well-Being: Fact Sheet," *Princeton University*. Retrieved 14 October 2019. https://fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/sites/fragilefamilies/files/ff_fact_sheet.pdf

⁵² Yuko Nonoyama-Tarumi, "Educational Achievement of Children from Single-Mother and Single-Father Families: the Case of Japan," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 79.4 (2017): 915.

⁵³ Yongmin Sun and Yuanzhang Li, "Effects of Family Structure Type and Stability on Children's Academic Performance Trajectories," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 73.3 (2011): 541.

⁵⁴ Dohoon Lee and Sara McLanahan, "Family Structure Transitions and Child Development: Instability, Selection, and Population Heterogeneity," *American Sociological Review*, 80.4 (2015): 738.

⁵⁵ Robert I. Lerman, Joseph Price, and W. Bradford Wilcox, "Family Structure and Economic Success Across the Life Course," *Marriage & Family Review*, 53:8 (2017), 744.

⁵⁶ W. Bradford Wilcox and Wendy Wang, "The Marriage Divide: How and Why Working-Class Families Are More Fragile Today," Institute for Family Studies, September 25, 2017. ifstudies.org/blog/the-marriage-divide-how-and-why-working-class-families-are-more-fragile-today

⁵⁷ Philip R. Kunz and Stan L. A. "Religion, Marital Happiness, and Divorce," *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*, 7.2 (1977): 230.

⁵⁸ Anthony Paik, "Adolescent Sexuality and the Risk of Marital Dissolution," *Journal of Marriage and Family Minneapolis*, 73.2 (2011): 472-485.

the workplace is also associated with higher rates of divorce.⁵⁹ Obviously, more sexual temptation in the workplace will lead to more cases of infidelity, promiscuity, and their negative consequences. Unmarried men and women will unavoidably have working relationships with each other but boundaries should be respected and casual flirting, touching, or seclusion should be off limits. Hence, following the precepts of the religion in regards to sexual ethics—basing marriage on spiritual principles, restricting sexual intercourse to marriage, lowering the gaze, dressing modestly, and avoiding flirtation with the opposite sex—all of these are conducive to a society in which children are raised in the best possible environment.

Adultery, or extramarital sex, is the pinnacle of sexual immorality because of the dangerous instability it produces in individuals and societies, in addition to damaging the integrity of family lineage and spreading sexually transmitted diseases. For this reason, several ancillary rules in Islam—like the woman’s *hijab*, lowering one’s gaze, and the avoidance of flirtation—are intended to prevent the steps that would eventually lead to adultery. Allah said, “Do not come close to fornication for it is immoral and an evil path.”⁶⁰ That is, do not even come near to anything associated with adultery or sexual immorality. And Allah said, “Do not follow the footsteps of Satan, for he is your clear enemy. He only orders you to commit evil and immorality and to say about Allah what you do not know.”⁶¹ Satan tries to lure people into sins using small steps that lead to greater and greater sins. As believers, we should try to prevent taking any steps in his direction, so Islam prohibits some things that might be seemingly insignificant at first glance. This important principle of the Shari’ah is known as “blocking the means [to evil]” (*sadd al-dharā’i’*).

Ibn al-Qayyim explains how this principle fits into the religion:

Blocking the means is one of four types of responsibility in regards to commands and prohibitions. Commands are two types: first what is an objective in itself and second what is a means to an objective. Prohibitions are two types: first what is prohibited as harmful in itself and second what is prohibited as

⁵⁹ Caroline Uggla and Gunnar Andersson, “Higher Divorce Risk When Mates Are Plentiful? Evidence from Denmark,” *Biology Letters*, 14.9 (2018).

⁶⁰ Sūrat al-’Isrā’ 17:32.

⁶¹ Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:168-169.

a means to harm. Thus, the principle of blocking the means leading to unlawful deeds is one of four categories in the religion.⁶²

In other words, some things like adultery are *ḥarām* in themselves, while other things like unrestricted mixing are *ḥarām* because they can lead to greater harms. Perhaps the best example of blocking the means to adultery are the commands for women to veil and for men to lower their gaze. We typically associate veiling with women and lowering the gaze with men, but in actuality it is an obligation upon both men and women to dress modestly and to avoid looking at scenes that might trigger lustful passions.

Allah said:

Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and guard their chastity. That is more pure for them. Verily, Allah knows what they are doing. And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their chastity and not expose their beauty, except what ordinarily appears of it.⁶³

Ibn al-Qayyim cites the command to lower the gaze as an example of blocking the means “even if he only does so to look at the beauty of a creation and reflect upon what Allah has made. It blocks the means of desire and impulsive lust toward what is disallowed.”⁶⁴ Even if a man wanted to look at a woman’s beauty for a ‘good’ reason like marveling at the creation of Allah, it is still prohibited regardless of his intention.

In a corresponding command, Allah tells the believing women to observe the *ḥijāb*. According to Ibn Kathīr, the majority of scholars explained the verse “what ordinarily appears of it” refers to a woman’s face and hands. This was narrated from many of the early Muslims including Ibn ‘Abbās, Ibn ‘Umar, ‘Atā’, ‘Ikrāmah, Sa’d ibn Jubayr, Al-Daḥḥāk, and Ibrahim al-Nakhā’i.⁶⁵ These clothes are not meant to burden women, but to reduce sexual temptation all around. It is not simply a matter of male self-control either, because scantily-clad women by nature provoke a strong neurological

⁶² Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *I’lām al-Muwaqqi’īn ‘an Rabb al-‘Ālamīn*, (Bayrut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyah, 1991), 3:126.

⁶³ Sūrat al-Nūr 24:30-31.

⁶⁴ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *I’lām al-Muwaqqi’īn ‘an Rabb al-‘Ālamīn*, 3:112.

⁶⁵ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Aẓīm*, (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīyah, 1998), 6:24, verse 24:31.

response in men.⁶⁶ Hence, the man has a duty to lower his gaze, meaning not to stare or ogle at women, while women have a duty to cover their beauty in public. Both men and women, of course, should dress modestly so as to not tempt or sexually frustrate the opposite sex, or fall into vanity themselves. As the Prophet ﷺ said, “Modesty does not bring anything but goodness.”⁶⁷ It should be obvious to everyone that women who do not adhere to the traditional standards of *hijāb* must not be harassed. Rather, men have a duty to simply look away. Each gender needs to be able to control their own sexual impulses regardless of what other people are wearing but, at the same time, they must also not make it more difficult for each other to do so.

The first step towards adultery is merely looking at the opposite sex for pleasure. Everyone will do this at some point in their lives but it is an inclination we must resist. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Verily, Allah has written for the son of Adam his portion of adultery which he will inevitably commit: the adultery of the eyes is a lustful look, the adultery of the tongue is lustful speech. The soul craves and yearns; the passions will affirm or deny.”⁶⁸ As such, the Prophet ﷺ advised his companions to turn their faces away from pretty women on several occasions. Al-Faḍl was riding with the Prophet ﷺ and a woman from Khash’am came. Al-Faḍl began to stare at her and she stared back at him, but the Prophet ﷺ turned Al-Faḍl’s face in the other direction.⁶⁹ Jarīr said, “I asked the Messenger of Allah ﷺ about accidentally glancing at a woman. He ordered me to look the other way.”⁷⁰ There is no sin in accidentally looking at a woman or doing so for a legitimate purpose but an accidental glance should not be followed by deliberate staring, as the Prophet ﷺ said, “Do not follow one glance at a woman with another. Verily, you have the first one and not the second.”⁷¹ In fact, part of the measure of a Muslim man’s strength and will power is his ability to lower his gaze from these temptations. Sufyān al-Thawrī said, “A woman will pass by a man and he cannot restrain himself from looking at her lustfully although there is no

⁶⁶ Mina Cikara, Jennifer L. Eberhardt, and Susan T. Fiske, “From Agents to Objects: Sexist Attitudes and Neural Responses to Sexualized Targets,” *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 23.3 (2011): 540-551.

⁶⁷ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1:63 #37.

⁶⁸ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:54 #6243.

⁶⁹ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 2:132 #1513.

⁷⁰ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 3:1699 #2159.

⁷¹ Al-Tirmidhī, Sunan al-Tirmidhī, 4:398 #2777; declared fair (*hasan*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, 2:1316 #7953.

benefit in it. What could be weaker than this?”⁷² Muslim men who struggle to apply this rule in their lives have a shortcoming they need to work on, while those who refuse to apply it at all—by ogling women in public—are stubbornly sinning.

The rules of modesty also apply to nakedness between individuals of the same sex, as the Prophet ﷺ said:

A man should not look at the nakedness of another man and a woman should not look at the nakedness of another woman. A man should not lie with another man under a single blanket and a woman should not lie with another woman under a single blanket.⁷³

Some scholars even included the prohibition of men looking at young boys. Al-Nawawī commented on this tradition, writing, “Likewise, it is forbidden for a man to look at a beardless youth if he has a handsome appearance, whether he looks with passion or not, whether he is safe from temptation or he fears it. This is the correct and preferred opinion of credible scholars, as transmitted from Al-Shāfi’ī.”⁷⁴ While some might consider this prohibition a little extreme, many other scholars said it only applies to a situation in which one feels lust (*shahwah*).⁷⁵ There are indeed some people who are plagued by sexual attractions to underage boys and girls. They have an Islamic duty to resist those attractions; the first step of resistance is not staring at any child who might induce sexual arousal in themselves.

From all this it goes without saying, then, that pornography is strictly forbidden in Islam, since it is the deliberate gaze at another person, to whom one is not married, for sexual pleasure. Even if one imagines they are not harming anyone by using porn, they are still contributing via clicks to this pernicious industry and its exploitative practices that degrade human dignity, especially the dignity of women. Porn is toxic to relationships, it causes body-shaming, it actually makes people enjoy actual sex less, it dehumanizes people as mere objects for self-pleasure, and it is an extremely lucrative industry rife with exploitation and horrifying practices. Women

⁷² Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilyat Al-Awliyā’*, 7:68.

⁷³ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1:266 #338.

⁷⁴ Al-Nawawī and Muslim, *Sharḥ al-Nawawī ‘alā Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, (Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1972), 4:31.

⁷⁵ Wizārat al-Awqāf wal-Shu‘ūn al-Islāmīyah, *Al-Mawsū‘at al-Fiqhīyah al-Kuwaytīyah*, 6:253.

report more negative consequences of viewing porn, including a lowered body image, a partner who is critical of their body, increased pressure to perform acts seen in pornography, and less actual sex, while men report being more critical of their partner's body and less interested in actual sex.⁷⁶ A top psychosexual therapist for the British National Health Service (NHS), Angela Gregory, warns that young men addicted to porn are damaging their libido and are at greater risk of suffering from erectile dysfunction, to the extent that they find normal sexual relationships difficult or impossible; the good news is that quitting the habit for good can restore ordinary functions.⁷⁷ A Cambridge study also found through MRI scans that pornography can produce effects similar to drug addiction and that this effect is more pronounced in younger subjects.⁷⁸

Gail Dines, a professor of sociology, summarizes the real-world impact that porn has had on girls and young women:

This hypersexualization has put pressure on women to look and act like they just tumbled out of the pages of *Maxim* or *Cosmopolitan*... While such a shift is toasted by mainstream magazines, the porn industry, and some feminists as an indicator of society becoming more sexually free, many female students I speak to aren't joining in the celebration. Men they hook up with expect porn sex: anonymous, disconnected, and devoid of intimacy, and if they don't get it, then they move on. And even if the women deliver, the men still move on because in a porn culture, one woman is much the same as the next, as long as she meets, to some degree, the conventional standards of 'hotness.'⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Julie M. Albright, "Sex in America Online: an Exploration of Sex, Marital Status, and Sexual Identity in Internet Sex Seeking and Its Impacts," *The Journal of Sex Research*, 45.2 (2008): 175.

⁷⁷ Simon Mundie, "Easy access to online porn is 'damaging' men's health, says NHS therapist," *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*, 15 August 2016. Retrieved 14 October 2019. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/37058019/easy-access-to-online-porn-is-damaging-mens-health-says-nhs-therapist>

⁷⁸ "Brain activity in sex addiction mirrors that of drug addiction," *University of Cambridge*. Retrieved 14 October 2019.

<https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/brain-activity-in-sex-addiction-mirrors-that-of-drug-addiction>

⁷⁹ Gail Dines, *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality*, (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 2014), xii-xiii.

In short, we know that porn can affect young people’s brains like drugs, that it damages healthy sexual relationships, it degrades human beings as objects, especially women, and promotes violence and aggression against women. It is undoubtedly *harām* in Islam, it is a burden on society, and one only looks at it to their own peril.

What about non-visual types of arousing sexual desire, such as sexting or hotlines? The Prophet ﷺ said, “A woman should not touch another woman and then describe her figure to her husband as if he were looking at her.”⁸⁰ Verbal description of sexual features between unmarried couples leads one to visualize these pornographic scenes in their minds, which is a type of looking; it is prohibited by analogy to actual looking. Social media adds a whole new layer of challenge to young Muslims, who must studiously avoid online flirting, picture-sharing, “sliding into the DMs” of the opposite sex, and other activities that precede more sinful behaviors. Even between married couples, one should caution against the use of electronic devices to transmit sexual imagery or conversations. Such devices can be hacked and the information stolen, or couples who have a falling-out might use the information against each other later. This is a modern phenomenon called “revenge porn,” which is *legally defined* in the United Kingdom as “the sharing of private sexual materials, either photos or videos, of another person without their consent and with the purpose of causing embarrassment or distress.”⁸¹ As such, even if electronic communication devices are used to transmit sexual messages between married couples, it is risky to do so and therefore should be avoided completely.

Masturbation (*istimnā’*) is an uncomfortable and embarrassing topic; nonetheless, Muslims need some guidance provided by our scholars here, especially those struggling in the prime of their early adulthood without a spouse. Sexual self-pleasure is a fact of life for many people, especially men, and we should not be shy in regards to what our religion says about it. Many scholars believe that masturbating simply to satisfy one’s lusts is forbidden in general due to the command to remain chaste, while some among the Hanafis, Shafi’is, and Hanbalis considered it discouraged (*makrūh tanzīhan*)

⁸⁰ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 7:38 #5240.

⁸¹ “REVENGE PORN: The Facts,” *GOV.UK*. Retrieved 17 October 2019.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/405286/revenge-porn-factsheet.pdf

in limited conditions. However, the matter is more nuanced than these general rulings. In the case that one feels overpowered by lust and fears he or she will fornicate or commit adultery, some scholars granted a concession to masturbate and some even went so far as to obligate it on the basis of dire necessity (*darūrah*), as the lesser of two evils.⁸² It is similar to the permission to eat pork or drink alcohol if no other sustenance is available. As such, some Hanafis and Hanbalis allow masturbation only to the extent that it calms one's lusts (*al-taskīn al-shahwah*) and prevents fornication. It should not be done excessively or with additional components such as pornography or sensual imagery. Indeed, overindulgence in masturbation can make it even more difficult to control our passions, can diminish sexual gratification in marriage, and can lead to an addiction itself. It is a limited last resort to avoid a great sin and, obviously, control measures such as fasting and abstinence must be given precedence if possible. In general, to be safe, masturbation should be considered forbidden in ordinary circumstances.

After the step of looking or indulging in masturbation is taken, the next step towards adultery is inappropriate socialization or flirtation between men and women, specifically the seclusion of two unmarried, unrelated people of the opposite sex. The Prophet ﷺ said, "Whoever has faith in Allah and the Last Day, let him not be alone with an unrelated woman without her guardian. Verily, the third of them is Satan."⁸³ This regulation is for the protection of both men and women. It aims to ensure men and women cannot be sexually harassed and abused in a private space, while it also prevents men and women from being falsely accused of such abuse. Being alone with the opposite sex, in a business setting or otherwise, can easily result in unwanted and sometimes severe consequences, such as when the Prophet Yūsuf ﷺ was falsely accused by his master's wife through no fault of his own. It is wise to avoid such situations.

Muslims have traditionally taken a moderate course in separating the genders, as there are plenty of examples among the companions of men and women interacting in beneficial ways. Masrūq reported that the learned

⁸² Wizārat al-Awqāf wal-Shu'ūn al-Islāmīyah, *Al-Mawsū'at al-Fiqhīyah al-Kuwaytīyah*, 4:98-99.

⁸³ Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal*, 19:23 #14651; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Ghāyat al-Marām Fī Takhrīj Ahādīth al-Ḥalāl wal-Ḥarām* (Bayrūt: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1994), 1:131 #180.

elders among the companions would go to ‘Ā’ishah for religious knowledge.⁸⁴ The point is that our interactions with the opposite sex should have a legitimate purpose. Relationships that are purely for leisure, known as “cross-sex friendships,” are problematic because the element of sexual attraction can never be removed, especially from the men. One study found that men are generally more attracted to women in cross-sex friendships, women who were attracted to a male friend reported less satisfaction in their current romantic relationship, and both men and women considered their attraction to their friend of the opposite sex as a cost to them, not a benefit.⁸⁵ Research indicates that these types of relationships are very likely to produce sexual tension and many times lead to sexual activity.⁸⁶ In that regard, unmarried men and women should not have a platonic relationship because of its potential to cause distress and lead to extramarital sex.

After one indulges in looking, casual friendships, and seclusion, the next step is to engage in extramarital sexual activity or intercourse outside of marriage. Such informal sexual relationships are a burden upon society because of their natural tendency to proliferate sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). These are diseases that spread specifically by casual sex, as the Prophet ﷺ informed, “Promiscuity never becomes widespread among people but that they will be afflicted by plagues and diseases that were unknown to their forefathers.”⁸⁷ The culture of casual sex in the United States has resulted in a full-blown epidemic with massive increases in documented cases:

⁸⁴ Ibn Abī Shaybah, *Al-Muṣannaḥ*, (al-Riyādh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 2004), 6:239 #31037.

⁸⁵ April Bleske-Rechek et al, “Benefit or Burden? Attraction in Cross-Sex Friendship,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 29.5 (2012): 569.

⁸⁶ Walid A. Afifi and Sandra L. Faulkner, “On Being ‘just Friends’: the Frequency and Impact of Sexual Activity in Crosssex Friendships,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 17.2 (2000): 205.


⁸⁷ Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, 2:1332 #4019; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, 2:1321 #7978.

STD DIAGNOSES AMONG KEY U.S. POPULATIONS, FIVE-YEAR TRENDS

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Chlamydia	1,441,789	1,526,658	1,598,354	1,708,569	1,758,668
Among young women (aged 15 to 24)	709,170	724,709	735,027	771,340	779,367
Gonorrhea	350,062	395,216	468,514	555,608	583,405
Among women	162,608	173,514	197,499	232,587	241,074
Among men	186,943	221,070	270,033	322,169	341,401
Syphilis	63,454	74,707	88,053	101,584	115,045
Primary & secondary syphilis	19,999	23,872	27,814	30,644	35,063
Among MSM*	12,226	14,229	16,149	17,736	18,760
Combined cases	1,855,305	1,996,581	2,154,921	2,365,761	2,457,118

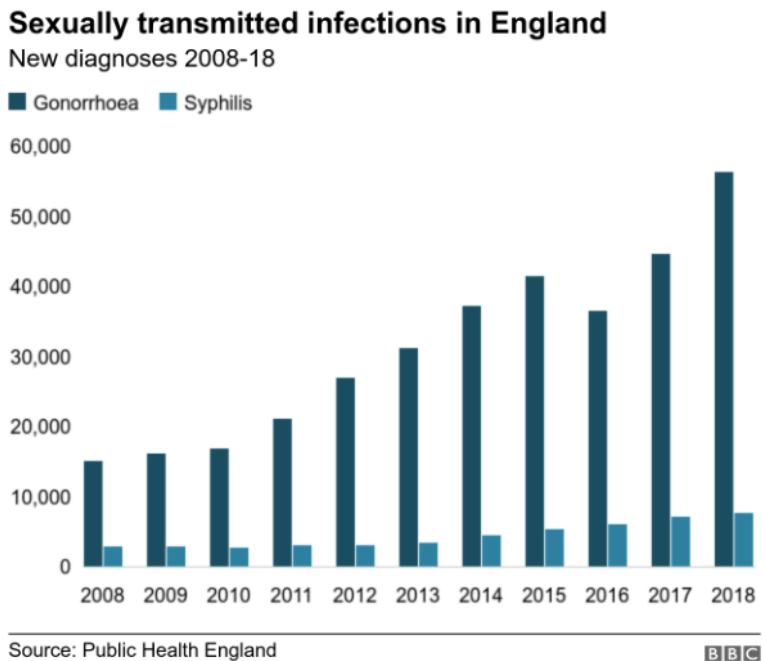
*Primary & secondary syphilis among men who have sex with men

For more information, visit cdc.gov/nchhstp/newsroom



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Among the nearly 20 million new cases of STDs reported each year in the United States, half of them occur among individuals aged 15–24 years. It is further estimated that 1 out of 4 sexually active adolescent females have an STD, most commonly Chlamydia trachomatis (CT) infection and human papillomavirus (HPV) infection.⁸⁸ STDs are also on the rise in England:



⁸⁸ Chelsea L. Shannon and Jeffrey D. Klausner, “The Growing Epidemic of Sexually Transmitted Infections in Adolescents: a Neglected Population,” *Current Opinion in Pediatrics*, 30.1 (2018): 137.

Even more alarming is the fact that these diseases are evolving faster than antibiotic medicines can be produced to treat them. Some medical doctors warn that “super-gonorrhoea” and other new proto-diseases might become “untreatable.”⁸⁹ Consider that one who engages in casual sex is at a very high risk of contracting a debilitating, or even life-threatening, infection, in addition to the threat this poses to the general public.

Aside from direct physiological harm caused by casual sex, this lifestyle is also strongly associated with alcohol consumption and drug use; young people, especially women, who engage in this behavior are more likely to report symptoms of depression.⁹⁰ It is estimated that as many as half of all cases of sexual assault and rape in the United States take place when the perpetrator, victim, or both are intoxicated.⁹¹ In another study, women who had casual sex (defined as having sex with a partner only once or someone they have known for less than a day) were far more likely to express regret than not.⁹² The hookups and the one-night-stands not only can physically and criminally harm people, but emotionally and psychologically as well.

Professor Lisa Wade studied the ‘hookup culture’ and its impact on American college students. She found that the pressure to ‘hook up’ was widespread and ubiquitous, ultimately emotionally unfulfilling and potentially dangerous for a variety of reasons. “Hookup culture is an occupying force, coercive and omnipresent. For those who love it, it’s all sunshine, but it isn’t for everyone else. Deep in the fog, students often feel dreary, confused, helpless. Many behave in ways they don’t like, hurt other people unwillingly, and consent to sexual activity they don’t desire. Campuses of all kinds are in this fog.”⁹³ Sure, some people who participate in this culture might perceive benefit in it but Wade asserts, based on her interviews and studies, that the majority of students are harmed by it and dislike it. It should also be noted that this type of sexually libertine culture is

⁸⁹ Kay Devlin, “Super gonorrhoea: Why your STI could become untreatable,” *BBC’s Newsnight*, 15 Feb 2019. Retrieved 17 October 2019.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/health-47247186/super-gonorrhoea-why-your-sti-could-become-untreatable>

⁹⁰ Catherine M. Grello, and M. S. Harper, “No Strings Attached: the Nature of Casual Sex in College Students,” *Journal of Sex Research*, 43.3 (2006): 255.

⁹¹ Antonia Abbey et al, “Alcohol and Sexual Assault,” *Alcohol Research & Health*, 2001; 25(1): 43.

⁹² Elaine M. Eshbaugh and Gary Gute, “Hookups and Sexual Regret Among College Women,” *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 148.1 (2008): 81.

⁹³ Lisa Wade, *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017), 19.

fairly recent in human history, only within the last two generations at most. In Britain, for instance, data indicates that prior to 1954 very few people (less than 6%) reported engaging in intercourse before marriage,⁹⁴ whereas by 1983 about 42% of British citizens considered premarital sex “not wrong at all” and by 2012 that number was 65%.⁹⁵

We are witnessing a fast-moving paradigm shift in Western society’s views of sexual ethics, a massive social experiment with tremendous influence over the culture and especially young people; the fallout of this revolution will last for generations to come and we have not even seen the worst of it yet. According to Oxford social anthropologist Joseph Daniel Unwin in his massive historical study *Sex and Culture*, it takes “at least three generations for an extension or a limitation of sexual opportunity to have its full cultural effect.”⁹⁶ Unwin was also confident enough to classify as a natural “law” his observation that three generations of “prenuptial sexual freedom” will cause a society to downgrade to the “zoistic cultural condition,”⁹⁷ i.e., the least developed form of civilization in his view. We should expect our global popular culture to continue debasing itself as long as these traditional life-enhancing sexual norms are discarded, resulting in the ongoing epidemics of STDs, anti-social behavior, and mental disorders. On the contrary, if we want ourselves and our families to remain safe from these influences, we must patiently adhere to the time-tested values of Islam.

Is there hope for those struggling with sin?

We have seen that sexual ethics in Islam is built upon layers of protection that are ultimately designed to avoid the worst sexual sin and its fallout: adultery. Nevertheless, let’s be real; many people in our community are falling into sexual sins: cohabitation, extramarital sex, pornography, unrestrained masturbation, and so on. Rather than condemn them, the approach here has been to advise them. For those who are struggling with

⁹⁴ N. Buck and J. Scott, “Household and family change,” in N. Buck, J. Gershuny, D. Rose and J. Scott (eds), *Changing Households: The British Household Panel Survey 1990-1992*, (ESRC Research Centre on Micro-Social Change: Colchester, 1994), 79.

⁹⁵ “Marriage matters?” *British Social Attitudes 30*, National Center for Social Research. Retrieved 22 October 2019.

<https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-30/personal-relationships/marriage-matters.aspx>

⁹⁶ J. D. Unwin, *Sex and Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1934), 371.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 347.

this, it is important for them to know that these sins do not expel them from the community. They are still Muslims and their good deeds and virtues are still appreciated but, like all of us, they need to make the intention to improve themselves and get away from the sin that has a hold over their lives. This includes adopting a regimen of good habits like voluntary worship and fasting, keeping good company, enjoying wholesome entertainment like sports, avoiding negative influences, and practicing mindfulness exercises, all while taking consistent steps towards an improved way of living for the sake of Allah.

Being a sinful Muslim is not anything out of the ordinary, though it is a major cause of concern and must be addressed with an action plan of repentance. We should not try to *justify* our sins just because we do not have the strength of faith and willpower to overcome them now. It is one matter to humbly sin due to weakness, but quite another to arrogantly sin by outright defiance of the Creator. We do not have a right to change the rules or make sinful things lawful (*istihlāl*) just because we find them too difficult right now; indeed, such religious innovations might become tantamount to unbelief. That being the case, a sinful Muslim who intends to overcome their compulsive sinful habits must do their best to keep them private. Bilāl ibn Sa'd said, "Verily, if sinful disobedience is committed in private, it only harms the one who did it. If it is committed in public and is not rectified, it will harm everyone."⁹⁸ Any sin is bad, private or not, but bringing sins, especially sexual offenses, into the public space is no longer a 'victimless' crime. It broadcasts one's rejection of Islam's family values to the rest of the community. This is why, for instance, the punishment for adultery in classical Islamic law is harsh, but it requires four public witnesses of repute, an almost impossibly high standard of evidence. The law ensures that the sin will remain private, where it cannot openly challenge the values of the community, while the sinner in private is given a reprieve for their eventual repentance.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*, (Bayrūt: Dār al-Fikr, 1995), 10:490.

⁹⁹ For more information on the Hudud punishments in classical Islamic law, please see Dr. Johnathan Brown's essay, "Stoning and Hand Cutting—Understanding the Hudud and the Shariah in Islam," *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research*, 12 January 2017. <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/jonathan-brown/stoning-and-hand-cutting-understanding-the-hudud-and-the-shariah-in-islam/>

That said, the door of repentance is always open to the believers. Those who worshipped Allah alone, sincerely in their hearts, will eventually enter Paradise even if they have to go through some time in Hell. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Gabriel, upon him be peace, came to give me the good news that anyone from my nation who dies without associating partners with Allah will enter Paradise.” Abu Dharr said, “Even if he commits adultery and theft?” The Prophet ﷺ said, “Even if he commits adultery and theft.”¹⁰⁰ Thus, those who have committed adultery, or any other sexual sin, certainly have hope that they can clean their records and make amends for what they have done.

Conclusion

When discussing sexual ethics in Islam, it is important to do so in a spirit of compassion and good will, in the form of sincere advice to others rather than condemnation. This is particularly relevant to the Western context, in which many people hold various sexual lifestyles as forms of human rights. The underlying theological concept in this discussion should be the classic dichotomy between reason and law versus whim and passion. The proper role of sexual intercourse must be subject to rational examination in the best interests of individuals, families, and civilization itself, the prescriptions for which are found in the divine law, known by reason, and supported by human experience. Society cannot sustain itself upon an ideology of unrestrained whims and instant gratification because these behaviors lead to the weakening of the family unit through which civilization is maintained.

Hence, Allah has revealed the institution of marriage as the appropriate channel for the fulfillment of our natural sexual and romantic desires. Adultery, by contrast, is a major sin in Islam exactly because it militates against marriage and family stability. Layers of prohibition inhibit the believers from approaching the principal sin of adultery: lowering the gaze and wearing modest clothing, as well as avoidance of seclusion with the opposite sex and casual cross-sex friendships. Following these rules will protect the believers from the myriad of physical, emotional, and social harms that these behaviors can cause, all of which have been well documented in sociological and medical literature. There is indeed hope in Islam for people who are struggling with one or another of these sins, since

¹⁰⁰ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 9:142 #7487.

Allah is Merciful and continues to keep the door of repentance open; but it is spiritually dangerous to *justify* our sins simply because we lack the strength to overcome them at this time.

Success comes from Allah, and Allah knows best.