

“How Can I Prepare for My Husband’s Next Porn Relapse?”

ONCE UPON A TIME, I WAS BLISSFULLY HAPPY. No, my life wasn’t perfect or easy. Instead, it was real. Messy, but meaningful. I lived and worked passionately within the world of pornography addiction and betrayal trauma recovery, with a job I adored and the marriage I’d always wanted.

And then, without warning, it all came crashing down.

MY STORY IS A BIT UNUSUAL. The incident I’m describing didn’t occur at the start of our recovery from my husband’s porn addiction, it happened after nearly a decade of intensive “his, hers, and ours” recovery work.

I’d thought that, surely, the worst was behind us. I believed I was one of a lucky few whose husband grasped the make-or-break importance of staying sexually sober, who understood the imperative of gut-level honesty. I trusted my husband deeply (not entirely, but significantly), and I thanked God every day for giving me the most empathetic pornography addict I’d ever met.

And then, out of the blue, my husband disclosed a porn relapse that knocked me to my knees.

There I sat. Unknowing. Unraveled. Disbelieving. Disoriented. I felt an entire dictionary of adverbs and adjectives, dizzy with a cyclone of fractured vocabulary. And yet, despite that flood of emotion and experience, I can identify, with razor precision, the one single word that embodies that horrific day: unprepared.

RELAPSE PREPAREDNESS VS RELAPSE PREVENTION

As a coach with Betrayal Trauma Recovery (btr.org), I work with women whose husbands struggle with compulsive, addictive, and problematic sexual behavior. Instead of focusing on relapse prevention, I coach these women to explore the value of relapse preparedness, relapse recovery, and relapse resilience.



I do believe (emphatically) that relapse prevention matters. But as I don’t possess the formula for making it happen, I lobby instead for the next best thing: I work to ensure that my clients are well prepared for the possibility of their loved ones’ relapse, no matter how large or small.

HOW DO YOU PREPARE FOR WHAT YOU HOPE WILL NEVER HAPPEN?

Preparedness doesn’t necessarily mean bracing for an event that’s inevitable. Sometimes, preparedness simply means taking proactive steps to protect oneself just in case an event may (or may not ever) happen. ▶▶▶

Originally Published by Covenant Eyes, April 2016 • ©GAELYN RAE EMERSON www.womeneverafter.com

I’M GAELYN RAE EMERSON (APSATS-CPC, ICF-ACC, CPLC, CCRC, CDRC) I’m professionally trained and certified as a Life, Couples Relationship and Divorce Recovery Coach, with advanced credentials from the International Coach Federation and the Association of Partners of Sex Addicts Trauma Specialists (apsats.org). I practice a trauma-sensitive model for coaching and recovery, providing specialized support for women affected by their partners’ infidelity, pornography, secrets and/or sex addiction. I’m committed to support my clients within and/or beyond their presenting relationships—and that’s precisely why I’ve named my coaching practice Women Ever After. I’m keenly aware that relationships typically don’t conclude with fairytale endings. But that doesn’t mean we give in, give up and go home. No matter how our individual stories unfold, we exist within a greater, kick-ass community of empowered women. Within this community, we don’t give up on each other—because we don’t give up on ourselves. In addition to work through my private practice, I provide client coaching and consultation via CORE Relationship Recovery Center (corebhc.com) in West Palm Beach, Florida and Betrayal Trauma Recovery (btr.org).

Here's an easy example of preparedness: As a child, I lived in the Midwest, where tornadoes could flatten small cities within minutes. I later lived in the Middle East, where bus bombs, gas masks, and air-raid sirens were everyday encounters. I currently live in Southern California—home to earthquakes, wildfires, and an occasional mini-tsunami. In other words, I've never lived anywhere that isn't highly susceptible to crisis or disaster.

In situations like these, preparedness doesn't mean waiting, worrying, or wishing against bad outcomes. Preparedness means knowing how to navigate and survive a crisis, should one occur despite all available safety measures and preventative precautions.

PREPARE—OR GO CRAZY

If your husband is addicted to porn, I'm guessing you can recite this conversation in your sleep:

(ME): It's been a long time since he's looked at porn.

(MYSELF): Well, that we know about, anyway.

(I): Can't you two relax already? If he's using porn, don't you think we'd know?

(ME): I knew you'd say that. But you said that last time, and look how that turned out.

(MYSELF): But this time feels different, doesn't it? And besides, our therapist says our intuition is getting stronger.

(I): Either that, or he's got us all fooled. Addicts can do that, can't they?

(ME): Whose side are you on, anyway? Can't we give him a chance? He's doing everything the book says to do.

(MYSELF): I suppose it's not fair to assume the worst. Maybe we're overreacting.

(I): No, I don't think so. You're right. This is our life now. We can't let our guard down, no matter what.

(ME): So what then? We just wait for the other shoe to drop?

(MYSELF): I don't know what other choice we have. It's either that or divorce, isn't it?

(I): There's gotta be some kind of middle ground here, ladies.

(ME): I don't know. Like I said, it has been a long time since he looked at porn.

Conversations like these do one of two things: They give a girl nightmares or they keep her up all night.

In a perfect world, our husbands stop looking, lusting, and lying—allowing us to stop wondering, worrying, and guarding old wounds.

But when that doesn't happen, it's time to switch gears, switching from reactive mode to proactive mode. It's time to launch a strategy of soul-intervention and self-preservation, calling an immediate halt to those tortured, circular conversations.

Because if we don't? Conversations like these will cost us our sanity.

WHY DOES RELAPSE PREPAREDNESS WORK?

I could list a dozen reasons, but here are my two immediate favorites:

- 1) Incidents of betrayal trauma hijack our "executive brain"—the part that makes intentional, organized and prioritized decisions. Trauma diminishes our ability to act within our best interests, reducing our capacity to act responsively and responsibly. With relapse preparedness, we compensate for this anticipated interruption, assigning a virtual "executive assistant" to step in when we need reinforcement.
- 2) Relapse preparedness empowers us to "stare down" one of our deepest, most painful, most paralyzing fears. By investing ourselves into relapse preparedness (ideally as part of a strategic, long-term plan for personal healing), we're able to live more fully and freely, without constant worry about the imminent "drop" of that infamous "other shoe."

SO, WHAT MAKES A GOOD RELAPSE PREPAREDNESS PLAN?

There is no one-size-fits-all script for relapse preparedness. However, having coached women through this process, I've identified two primary features that **MUST** be present for any relapse preparedness plan (RPP) to do its job effectively:

- 1) An RPP must begin and end with you. It must feature independent actions that you alone can take, to help yourself through the crux of your emotional crisis. Taking ownership is the fastest way you'll develop an effective sense of relapse resilience, reclaiming your powers of choice, personal agency and emotional autonomy.
- 2) An RPP must be strategically designed, strong enough to support the weight of emotional trauma, yet flexible enough to accommodate unexpected twists of circumstance. In my relapse preparedness planning workshops, I recommend an S.O.S. approach:

S = Support: Without support, RPPs are vulnerable to individual blind spots. Success relies upon soliciting the support of others—precisely when you're feeling injured, abandoned or estranged from your spouse.

O = Options: Without options, RPPs become impractical and ineffective. A plan that leaves you "trapped" can deepen your sense of vulnerability. Like trauma resolution, the power of choice is what fuels relapse resilience. By incorporating a broad spectrum of options, your RPP is likely to fulfill its intended purpose.

S = Safety and Stability: During a relapse, safety and stability are compromised, damaged, or even decimated. Creating and restoring safety becomes top-priority. Under the training of Dr. Barbara Steffens, author of *Your Sexually Addicted Spouse*, I've learned that safety and stability are crucial bedrocks of trauma recovery, making them the primary cornerstones of relapse resilience. ▶▶▶

A FEW MORE TIPS FOR RELAPSE PREPAREDNESS

- **Curate the RIGHT Support Team.**
Finding just the right support is more important than securing any available support. This is true during all phases of recovery from sexual betrayal, but it's essential during that brutally raw, post-relapse period. Hint: Do yourself a favor, and don't assume that a close friend is able and willing to support you through a potential relapse. Get gutsy, get proactive, get verbal, and just ask. You'll thank yourself later.
- **Set Aside Some Money.**
Money may seem superficial by contrast, but a dedicated "relapse preparedness fund" can provide material means to an emotional end. This isn't your "I feel like buying a new dress this week" money. This is your "Life feels like it's unraveling, and I need to buy myself time and space to plan my next steps" money. Hint: Has your husband asked how he might "make amends" for the harm he's caused in your relationship? Consider suggesting this "relapse preparedness fund" as a purposeful way for him to do that.
- **Prepare a List of Self-Care and Self-Comfort**
Eating broccoli is self-care. Eating Ben & Jerry's is self-comfort. In the aftermath of a relapse, self-care equals self-survival. Though different, self-comfort is equally crucial to relapse recovery, involving actions that soothe your senses, calm your central nervous system, and bring your "executive brain" back online. Hint: In her book, *DBT Skills Training Handouts and Worksheets*, Dr. Marsha M. Linehan compiles an impressive collection of lists for sensory awareness, distress tolerance, and emotional regulation.
- **Prepare an "Absence Excuse."**
Relapses happen at inopportune times (Murphy's Law, anyone?), so you'll want an honest excuse or two to utilize on the fly, should you need a "timeout" from social, occupational, and family obligations. You'll likely need to tweak the details, but it helps to prepare a copy-and-paste starting place. Hint: Don't be afraid to claim a sick day! (And yes, betrayal trauma counts as a legitimate illness.)
- **Plan What You'll Tell Your Children.**
As a mom, your kiddos likely come first, even during your own emotional breakdown. Draft a simple, age-appropriate explanation, to help your children understand the fact that you're struggling. Hint: This becomes particularly important if you or your husband is leaving your home.
- **Channel Your Anger.**
Sometimes, in the aftermath of a relapse, hurt and anger fuel us to make stuff happen—and more often than not, it's the stuff we wouldn't have the means, motivation, or chutzpah to initiate otherwise. In her book *The Journey from Abandonment to Healing*, author Susan Anderson describes rage as an expression of grief, a psychological response to relational or sexual abandonment: "Rage insists upon righting the injustice and restoring [our] sense

of self-worth. Despite its turbulence, feeling and expressing rage are necessary parts of recovery. It is an active protest against injury that demands change. It helps us to start functioning again." Hint: Anger can be powerful, either helping or harming your efforts toward relapse resiliency. While recovering from a relapse, exercise sensitivity toward your own thresholds for expressing anger in healthy (versus harmful) ways—and lean upon your support team to help you recognize the difference.

OCCASIONAL RELAPSE VS. CHRONIC RELAPSE

As long-time member of twelve step communities, I've been schooled in the wisdom of "just for today," and "one day at a time." But a few years ago, I was struck with an awareness that shifted my perspective:

At what point does "one day at a time" serialize into a lifetime? At what point do we look back upon our sequence of individual days in succession, only to realize we've spent a cumulative lifetime without addressing the impact of those daily decisions?

What I'm about to say next might lose me a few friends, but I believe in speaking truth, so I'm going to say it anyway: One relapse on one occasion—or even several relapses on a several occasions—is VERY different than chronic daily, weekly, or monthly relapses.

Perhaps it's unrealistic to expect that a porn addict will never relapse. (Depending upon whom you ask, that remains a heated topic for debate). And though I'm not qualified to speak firsthand about the experience of being a porn addict, I'm unequivocally qualified, both personally and professionally, to speak about the experience of being married to one.

It's impossible for a human being to heal from old wounds (for example, the trauma she suffered during her initial discovery or early recovery) when chronic relapses rip open those wounds, time after time, with no end in sight.

As the wife of a porn addict, I wish I didn't know the difference between occasional and chronic relapse. And as a betrayal trauma recovery coach, I wish I didn't know the precarious impact of chronic relapse upon families and communities. In spite of that knowledge, I'll spare you the gory details and leave you with this comparison:

Once upon a time, I lived through a relatively minor, one-time relapse, sandwiched between two long periods of my husband's solid sexual sobriety. It caught me off guard, and yes, it hurt horribly. But to my surprise, I healed in record time (less time than I'd ever imagined possible), with minimal damage to my long-term wellbeing.

Once upon a *different* time, I lived through a comparatively major, years-long relapse, sandwiched between sporadic periods of my husband's tenuous sexual sobriety. The hurt from that relentless experience went immeasurably, irrevocably deeper. And if I'm gonna be really, really, really honest? I'm only half certain I'll ever fully recover from the damage I sustained from that series of betrayals. ▶▶▶

I'm writing this article because I truly believe in relapse preparedness, recovery, and resilience. It's inspiring stuff, and I'm proud to engage with forums like Covenant Eyes and Betrayal Trauma Recovery—communities that facilitate these significant and soulful conversations. But just like an earthquake preparedness plan won't rescue anyone from a flash flood or wildfire, neither will a relapse preparedness plan insulate anyone from the trauma of chronic relapse. The premise of relapse preparedness is that it works as an emergency contingency—it's designed to carry someone through an occasional crisis, not to alleviate the trauma inflicted by a breathless succession of relapses.

IDENTIFY PROACTIVE (VS. REACTIVE) RELAPSE RESILIENCE GOALS

Remember, relapse preparedness is about reclaiming our power of choice within our own lives. That is why proactive goal-setting belongs within a solid RPP. After a relapse, 90% of the process involves responding to stuff that has already happened. But within that remaining 10% margin, the work of self-reclamation can flourish like never before.

If you take away only one point from this article, let it be this one: Sexual betrayal steals so much from us—but as women who are developing relapse resilience, we don't need to shut up, shut down, back off, or let porn have the last laugh.

Sometimes, an event we can't prevent (unwanted, unthinkable, unbearable, or unacceptable), reminds us of our deepest priorities, prompting us to draw that line in the sand, saying, "Sorry porn, but your game stops here. You're done playing fast and loose with my sanity." Healing may surprisingly eclipse our pain, with larger-than-life passion and not-of-this-world purpose, saying, "Not so fast, porn. This time, the joke's on you."

Has healing from your husband's porn addiction interrupted a dream you once cherished, before the bulk of your life began to revolve around this exhausting battle? Perhaps today's the day you pick up that dream, hold it close to your heart for a moment, then weave it back into your plans for the future.

IN CLOSING...

We don't live in a fantasy world, so here's the black and white truth of the matter: Even with a perfect relapse preparedness plan, if that day comes, it's gonna hurt. Your heart's gonna bleed all over everything, and your eyes are gonna flood with grief you hoped was gone for good.

But guess what, sister? You may have forgotten this, but I haven't: Your life is so much bigger than porn!

You may have lost faith in this, but God hasn't: You are so much deeper, more beautiful, and more victorious than this addiction.

In the case of a relapse, porn wins the battle. But you, beautiful girl, can still win this war. ■

"HOW CAN I PREPARE FOR MY HUSBAND'S NEXT PORN RELAPSE" Written by Gaelyn Rae Emerson | ©2017 | All Rights Reserved.

Please respect my copyright protection for this article and all related material. Thank you!

Special Thanks to BETRAYAL TRAUMA RECOVERY (btr.org) and COVENANT EYES (covenanteyes.com)



For more writings by Gaelyn Rae Emerson, visit WomenEverAfter.com
phone: 310-415-3614 * email: gaelynrae@womeneverafter.com