

CYBERSEX

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THIS IS ONE WOMAN'S STORY
AS TOLD TO JOURNALIST SUSAN McCLELLAND
PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDWARD POND



What Is Cybersex?

Cybersex encompasses online photos, audio, video, live sexual acts on request and exchanging sexual fantasies in chat rooms, says psychologist Patrick Carnes, coauthor of *In the Shadows of the Net: Breaking Free of Compulsive Online Sexual Behaviour* (Hazelden, 2001).

About six per cent of North American Internet users are compulsive consumers of cybersex, says Carnes, and spend up to nine hours a day engaging in it. And 70 per cent of Internet porn is consumed during the nine-to-five workday, a study conducted by HealthyMind.com found.

Susan Burns Cone, a marriage and family therapist with the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba in Winnipeg, says that cybersex is easier to hide from a partner than pornographic magazines and videos. "The volume and frequency can be a hundred times greater and kept a secret for much longer."

Burns Cone and Carnes consider compulsive cybersex an addiction, but the medical community is still debating whether sex addiction is a bona fide psychological impairment.

Some Internet pornography requires credit-card payment up front. Internet Filter Review, an online research group, says this generates \$2.5 billion US a year. As one woman says, "I actually never knew how much money my husband spent – we kept our accounts separate – but he's in debt, and perhaps his habit is the reason why."

– S.M.

It was like finding out my husband had had a thousand affairs with other women. I had come home from work and he was making dinner, so I decided to buy a pair of sandals online. Since my laptop was slow, I used his PC. After I accidentally lost my shopping site, I clicked onto History to pick it up and that's when I found out about my husband's hidden life. He had visited 16 pornographic sites earlier that day. Some showed women masturbating. Parts of their bodies were blocked out – the viewer had to pay to see more or to ask the woman to perform a specific act.

I turned the computer off and sat there stunned, my heart pounding. I thought, This has to be a mistake. I went to him in the kitchen. "Were you on the computer this morning after I went to work?" I asked. When he nodded his head, I said, "Well you'll never believe what I found. Porn sites. Do you know about this?"

"Yeah," he replied, a little nervously.

"Were you visiting these sites?"
"Yeah," he replied timidly.

The earth stopped. I couldn't say a thing. The idea of my husband being into cybersex was too much to think about. I will deal with this tomorrow, I said to myself. Later I took several sleeping pills, but I still couldn't sleep. My mind kept running over every detail of our seven years together.

My husband is an established professional. He is easygoing and relaxed. He makes me laugh and feel at ease. We share a love of music, concerts and long walks at dusk. He and my three daughters, ranging from 14 to 18 years old when we got married, have a great relationship. I thought we all did. How had I missed this? Then I

remembered an incident when we were dating. During one of his visits, my then-15-year-old had found pornography on the family PC in the living room. She showed me and we were both baffled.

A few days after our conversation in the kitchen, my husband and I stayed up until 4 a.m. talking. I learned that he went online for several hours almost every day when I wasn't home and masturbated, visualizing having sex with the women on the screen or with other women from his past. I felt so betrayed and completely undesirable. I asked myself, Was he ever making love to me, or was he thinking of these pictures when we had sex? I felt that the cybersex was his way of telling me: "You don't turn me on.

I'm going to go and look at something else."

I could no longer make love to him. Every time we tried I had to stop. We used to have great sex, but now I felt I was with a stranger. My husband's cybersex made me feel ashamed and embarrassed, but

he didn't think it was a problem. He was angry that I was upset and wanted him out of the house. "All guys," he told me, "look at porn."

I sought out several counsellors for help. One told me that cybersex wasn't that bad, I just had to change my opinion about it. Another said I had to look at what was wrong with me that I would attract someone like this into my life. When my husband went back to the websites after saying he would stop, I finally told a friend. Her response was, "I'm sure my husband does it, too; I just don't want to know about it."

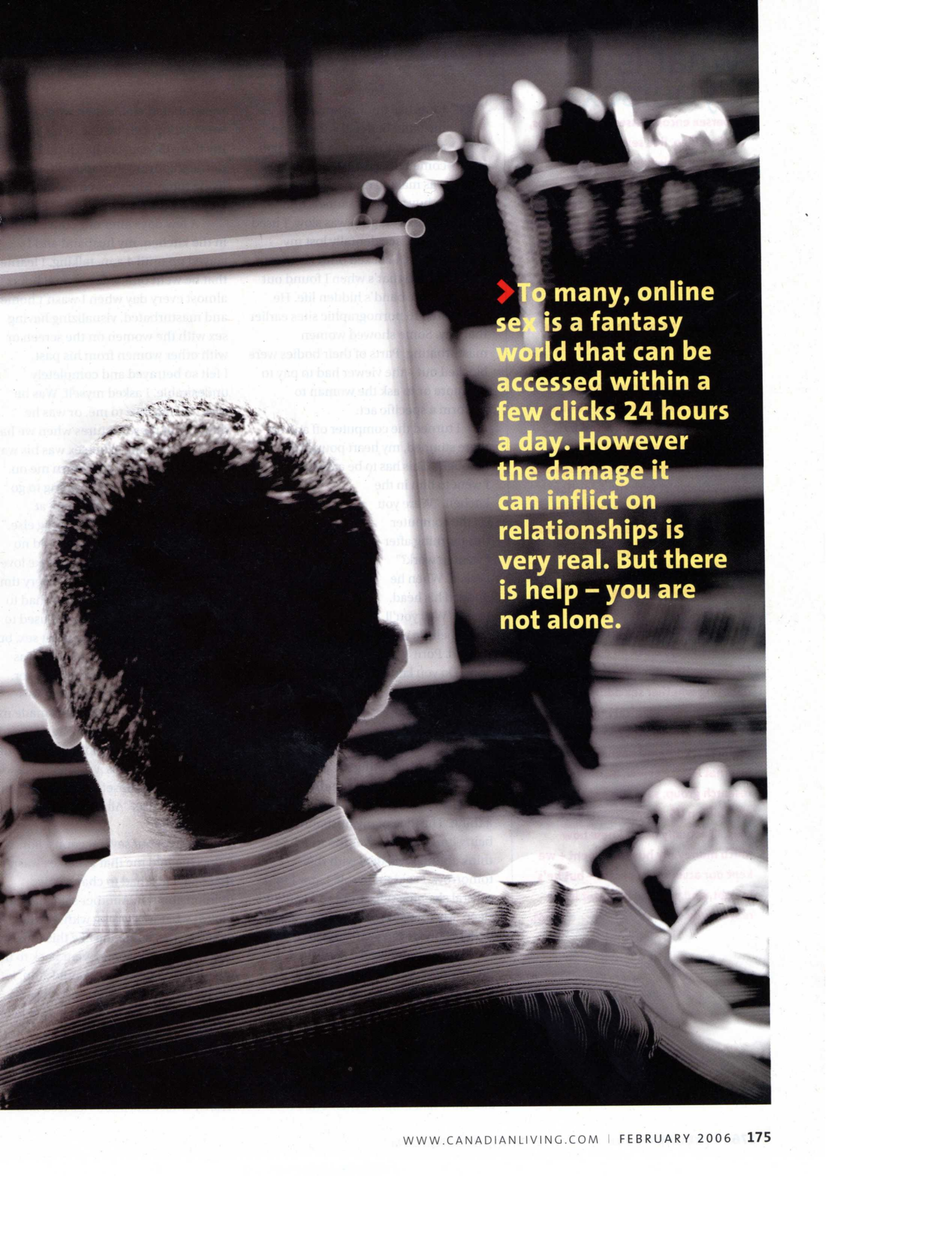
I felt so alone. Through an online support group that I still find helpful, I hooked up with a woman who lives nearby whose husband was also into

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► **To many, online sex is a fantasy world that can be accessed within a few clicks 24 hours a day. However the damage it can inflict on relationships is very real. But there is help – you are not alone.**

