

36. Lower vs. Higher Brain



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Sara Brewer

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You are listening to the *Overcome Pornography for Good* podcast episode 36, Lower vs. Higher Brain.

Welcome to the *Overcome Pornography For Good* podcast where we take a research-based, trauma informed and results focused approach to quitting porn. This approach has been revolutionary and changed thousands and thousands of lives. I'm your host, Sara Brewer.

Hey everyone, welcome to the podcast episode this week. I'm so glad you're here. Today we're going to continue our discussion from last week and we're going to keep talking about the brain, specifically the higher brain.

Last week we talked a lot about the lower brain and how the dopamine effects your lower brain and your reward system. And how your brain really looks for that dopamine, and it remembers how, when, and where you get that dopamine.

We're going to continue this discussion today, but first before we jump in, I wanted to share a review that one of you left me on the podcast. It says, "Regardless of your views on whether pornography is bad or not, this podcast has taught me how to overcome bad habits in general. Overeating, playing video games, even anger issues. This is internet gold. A lot of information costs these days and that makes sense, this is some of the greatest information you can get and it's free. Get it while it lasts."

I love that. That made me laugh, the get it while it lasts. Listen, my podcast isn't going anywhere, I'm going to keep giving you guys gold for free in this podcast. And then when you're ready to take it to the next level, if you want some extra one on one help, that's where my paid programs come in. But this podcast isn't going anywhere.

And I love that he says too, "Regardless of your views of whether pornography is bad or not, this is helpful." And that's been a big goal for me in my coaching and in this podcast, is to kind of keep from taking a stance on good or bad, or okay or not okay, and more just teaching you about your

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brain. And the reason for that is I notice that the more neutral we can make porn use, the less shame we feel and the easier it is to quit.

I mean we see this with all sorts of things, right? People who really demonize food and sugar have a very hard time quitting sugar or quitting overeating. Demonizing things gives it a lot more power. And if we want to change something, making it more neutral is really one of the best things you can do to be able to quit it.

So, let's continue talking about the brain. So again, last week we talked about this reward system in your lower brain that prioritizes getting dopamine and it's good and it's important. But our modern day man made substances have concentrated amounts of dopamine. They have tons of dopamine, and these things aren't necessarily necessary for survival.

So your brain has prioritized these things like sugar, porn, alcohol, just things with all this extra dopamine and it's creating a worse result in your life. And the big key take away last week was that your desire was learned, it's not involuntary, it's learned. And this is really great news because a lot of times we think that this is just an involuntary response that happens, and I can't control whether or not I look at porn or I can't control whether or not I have these strong desires for porn.

And this is great news because it teaches you that you taught your brain to desire porn. Which means that once we understand how this works, we don't have to be at the mercy of this lower brain and these urges anymore, we can unlearn this. We can unlearn this.

We also have a higher brain, a prefrontal cortex, your human brain. So when your lower brain, your animal brain, whatever you want to call it, it says, "We need this dopamine or we're going to die" your higher brain says, "I want to view porn less and I want to use this time doing something else. I want to use those emotions to create a real relationship with someone instead of running away from that with pornography."

And this is kind of the difference between the two, your lower brain really prioritizes dopamine and the reward system that we talked about last week.

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And your higher brain makes decisions, has goals, has dreams, has plans, wants to create.

Your human brain, your higher brain is newly evolved and your lower brain or your animal brain is just supposed to be very efficient. So this lower brain runs off of patterns. It learns things, like it learns desire and it does it over and over and over again and it enjoys being efficient.

Think about driving. So you learn how to drive, you create this pattern of driving. And the first year or so of driving you really have to focus, you have to make sure, if you're driving a stick shift you have to really focus on whether or not you have the clutch in or not. And then after a year or so your brain gets so used to this that it doesn't have to think about it anymore, it's very efficient.

Thank goodness for our lower brains that teach us how to be efficient in these things, it's so important. The thing is, it becomes efficient doing things that we don't really want as well. Like efficient at creating desire for pornography. Or efficient at other bad habits that you have. Because that's its main goal, your lower brain's main goal is to be efficient. It's not necessarily to create the life that you want, that's your higher brain's job.

Your higher brain's job is to dream and to create the life that you want and plan ahead. Your lower brain thinks in the moment, and it runs off of patterns. Your higher brain reminds you what you want from life and reminds you of your future.

This is a really important concept too for you to start playing with, is that you are never out of control. You're never out of control, you've just been listening to your lower brain.

Often, we want to put the blame of our decision to view pornography on something else, just on our urges or on our desire. Like, "I can't control the urges and the desire, so I don't have a choice." But you always make the decision to view pornography. You always make that decision.

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And it makes sense that you make that decision because that desire from your lower brain is strong because that's what it's been trained to want. But the beautiful thing is that your lower brain is nothing compared to your higher brain. No matter how efficient your lower brain is, no matter how well it's practiced or how often it's been rewarded, it's nothing compared to your higher brain.

There is nothing that the lower brain can do without the consent of the prefrontal cortex or of your higher brain. There's nothing that your lower brain can do without the consent of this higher brain. How cool is that? And so to quit pornography we need to learn how to use this higher brain more than we're using this lower brain and just responding to the urges and the reward system.

So I want to give you three tools today from your higher brain that you can use to start to override this lower brain. Tool number one is learning to allow the urge. Now, we've talked about this in depth in the podcast before and we really talk about it in depth in the program, in the program Overcome Pornography For Good, but I think it's really important for me to remind you of this concept through the example of Pavlov's dogs.

So if you've heard me talk about Pavlov's dogs before you know that this really relates to quitting pornography. So if you haven't heard of Pavlov and his dogs before he was a scientist and he did an experiment with some dogs.

He had some dogs in a cage and he would go and ring a bell and then give the dog a treat. Ring the bell, give the dog a treat, ring the bell, give the dog a treat, over and over and over again every day for multiple days, many, many times.

And eventually the dogs, when they heard the bell, they started to salivate even without seeing the treat or even without receiving the treat. And it's because they started to associate that sound of the bell with the treat.

This happens in The Office as well. I love this example because The Office is hilarious, and anyone who doesn't think that it is hasn't watched it

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enough times. But this happens when Jim dings his computer and then gives Dwight a mint.

Ding, mint, ding, mint, ding, mint. And then pretty soon, after a couple weeks he dings his computer and Dwight just sticks out his hand expecting a mint. And Jim is like, "What are you doing?" And Dwight says, "I don't know, sorry." And he goes, "Oh, my mouth, it tastes so dry all of a sudden. It feels so gross all of a sudden." It's kind of the same idea here.

Now, the really amazing part of this experiment that we don't often hear is that not only was Pavlov able to train his dogs to salivate at the sound of the bell, but he was able to decondition them or train them not to salivate at the sound of the bell as well.

And he did it the same way that he trained them to salivate. Very, very simple, he would ring the bell and not give them a treat. Ring the bell, not give them a treat, ring the bell, not give them a treat over and over and over again until eventually they heard this bell, and they didn't start to salivate, they didn't associate that sound of the bell with the treat.

Now, if Pavlov would have just stopped giving them the treat without ringing the bell, the dogs would still salivate at the sound of the bell, even if it had been a long time since having a treat. So he couldn't just take away the treat, he needed to ring the bell and not give them the treat.

If the dogs would have just been let loose in Hawaii for five years and then come back and heard the bell five years later without hearing a bell for five years, they still would have salivated because they hadn't gone through that process of hearing the bell and not getting the treat.

And it was really probably miserable for the dogs when they heard this bell the first, I don't know, 100 times or so they would salivate and they would bark and they'd be really upset at Pavlov like, "What the heck dude? Give us our treats." And they'd hear the bell and salivate, and it would be miserable for them. But they did it enough times where they stopped salivating at the sound of the bell.

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This is like you and your pornography habit. You have bells, or triggers, that create urges. It might be the time of day, it might be certain emotions that you feel, it might be certain events that happen, or it could be all sorts of things that trigger this bell that create this urge for you.

And what we learned through this example of Pavlov's dogs is instead of just getting rid of all the triggers, we want to allow those triggers to be there. That urge to be there, that desire to be there and not give it to ourselves, even when we're feeling the desire.

Where most people go wrong is they just try to get rid of everything that would ever make them have an urge to view pornography. But what that does is it keeps you conditioned to wanting the pornography. And so that's what I mean when I say allowing the urge, it means letting that urge be there, and that feeling, that desire that you really want pornography, letting that be there without giving in to it and without pushing it away.

So another example of this is a crying toddler. And I love this example because I have a toddler, so it feels very applicable to me in my life. But if a toddler is screaming and crying for a candy bar, you have a couple of options.

You can yell at him and try to make him stop, which I will tell you from experience does not work. You can just give it to him to get him to stop. Or you can let him cry and cry and cry and cry and let him throw a fit and not give it to him. And we can just sit back, and we can breathe, and we can let him cry.

It's not a problem if he cries. It's not a problem if he throws a fit. And I don't need to punish him for crying or throwing a fit. I don't need to make him stop. I just need to calm and center myself and let him throw that fit. And eventually, eventually he'll stop. And eventually he'll learn that throwing fits doesn't get him candy bars, so he won't throw a fit every time he wants a candy bar.

Now the difference between these two examples, Pavlov's dog and the crying toddler, is that you and your brain is both the dog and the scientist.

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It'd be kind of nice if we could just have someone hold it away from us so that we couldn't get it. But we have to do the work of both.

We have to feel the desire and feel the urges like the dogs and use this higher brain to be the scientist and breathe through it and allow that fit to be there without becoming angry, without shutting it down. Just let it be there and not give it what it wants.

Okay, so that's tool number one, is our higher brain allows us to allow the urge. Like I said, I go into depth in this a lot more in some other podcast episodes. I think episode four is one I go into depth more about this. And then there's another one called Urge Flow. Yeah, so those two, episode four, Stop Fearing Urges and Urge Flow, I dive into that a little bit more.

Okay, the second tool that you can use from your higher brain to override this lower brain is to notice the thoughts that create desire. We have urges that just seem to come out of nowhere from our triggers. But we also have thoughts that create desire.

These thoughts might be, "I want it. I deserve it. Just one more time. I like this. I won't get this again. I need this." Your thoughts create desire and it's really important to be honest about what those thoughts are. And your higher brain is the one that can notice these thoughts. And not just notice them, but also answer them.

I always tell my clients like listen; we're not going to be able to get rid of your thoughts that want porn. We're not just going to be able to turn them off. And we don't want to, we don't need to do that. They're just going to be there. But we can answer them.

So when your lower brain throws out this thought, "I like this. I need this. One more time." We can answer it. So your lower brain says, "But I deserve it," you can answer it with your higher brain, "Do I really deserve this? Do I deserve to look at this? And this short pleasure or do I deserve this life that I actually really want without the porn? Maybe I deserve that more."

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And then your lower brain pops up and says, “But I just really want it.” And then your higher brain can answer, “But what I really want is this life where I'm not viewing porn. What I really want is to quit this. Long term, that's what I want.” And then your lower brain pops up and says, “But just one more time.”

And you can answer it with your higher brain that says, “Remember, every time you view porn, we want it more the next time. So this is just a lie. We know that when I'm saying just one more time, I'm lying to myself. That's okay, I love you. But that's a lie.” Your lower brain says, “But I can't do this.” And your higher brain can answer, “Yes, we've done it before.” Or “Yes, we can. We can practice this, we can learn this. Other people have done this so maybe we can to.”

Your higher brain can also create a compelling reason. I won't go too much into this, it's probably a whole other topic for another episode. But your compelling reason is just a reason that your brain has that is compelling enough for you to quit.

Your higher brain has a great reason to quit. That's why you're listening to this podcast. Your lower brain just wants to be efficient and get the dopamine, your higher brain has a reason it wants to quit. And so if we can foster and create that compelling reason, it will make it easier to answer your brain.

And you can think of this too like that toddler example that I shared. That toddler screaming, “But I really want that candy mom.” Say, “I know, I know you do. We're not going to have it today.” “I really want to go play in the street, just let me go play in the street.” And you're like, “I know you do, and I love you. But that's dangerous, we're not going to do that.”

And then the third tool that you can use with your higher brain is planning ahead. You can plan ahead for upsetting events. If you know that you typically have a hard time at this time of the day or this time at night, you can plan ahead for that. If you know Wednesdays are usually hard for you,

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if you can see ahead for times that are difficult, you can make a plan and plan ahead to be able to handle that upsetting event the best that you can.

So I also like to use this tool, I have a whole video module on this for my clients on how to really create this plan ahead of time and some tips and tricks. But the idea here is very simple, you think ahead of what's going to happen and what's going to be difficult about the event. And you create a plan to follow through with that will help you follow through with your goal of not looking at pornography and to process the urges.

Another way that you can plan ahead is you can decide what days you're not going to look at pornography. This is especially helpful for my clients who are struggling and viewing every single day, and very often way more than they want to be. And saying, "Okay, we're just going to be done," is really overwhelming to them.

And so planning ahead, you can also say "Okay, we're not going to view this day this day and this day." That's a great place to start. And it gives you a chance to prep yourself ahead of time, to watch your brain, to look at its excuses, and to create thoughts to answer it.

In this plan ahead of time, you can also create a plan on how you will process the urges. The stop, drop, and breathe technique. I encourage my clients to, especially if it's late at night, or if they woke up, or if they're in bed, it's really helpful to get up and walk around. When we can change our physical state, it helps our capacity to stay committed to processing the urges. You can create a plan for thoughts that you will have during the urge.

I love it when my clients write a letter to themselves reminding themselves why they're quitting porn. You can write a letter to yourself to read during this upsetting event, during this difficult event.

Okay, so again, those three tools that you can use with your higher brain to override your lower brain is number one, allowing the urge. Allowing the urge to be there without giving into it. Number two, noticing the thoughts that create desire and then answering them with your higher brain. And

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number three, planning ahead and creating a plan ahead of time to help you during upsetting events and difficult events.

All right, and then the big key takeaway that I want you to get from this episode is that your higher brain is incredible. And your lower brain is nothing compared to your higher brain. This is why humans can do so many amazing things.

This is why there's a difference between humans and animals and why we've accomplished so much and innovated and created. It's because we have this higher brain. And you guys all have that too. So of course, you can learn to quit pornography. Of course, you can do that because you have a higher brain.

And this is all stuff that we work on in my program Overcome Pornography For Good. We learn how to put our higher brain back in charge. We do these upsetting events plans and planning ahead of time. We really learn and dive into how to watch your brain. We start learning from our brain after it slips up and looking at what went on and how we can handle that next time. We learn how to rewire belief patterns.

We learn how to sit with those urges, which is this huge higher brain skill. Learning how to sit with it as the scientist when your lower brain is freaking out. And it's difficult, the concept is really simple but it's something that is really difficult and takes a lot of practice. And it doesn't require willpower.

So many of us are used to using willpower. We want to learn to stop using the willpower. The willpower is like, "Make that bell go away, push it away, we don't want to hear that." Instead, we want to just hear it and sit with it. It's something that we really dive into in the program.

We talk about emotions and buffering. Learning emotional wellness so that you can stop using pornography as an escape from your emotions. And there's also a crazy amount of coaching support.

So you can access the Ask A Coach board, which is unlimited coaching through a coaching board back and forth with one of our coaches, as often

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as you want. Lifetime access to that. Weekly calls, weekly live calls where I coach people live and you have lifetime access to that.

Bonus calls, we're starting to do some bonus calls next month. Our bonus call is with Lindsay Poelman who is going to do a call on relationships and a call specifically for the spouses who are struggling with pornography. And so if you join the program for next month, your spouse, if you have a spouse or partner, they'll be able to join that call. And you'll be able to join that call to be able to work on your relationships too.

So there's lots of awesome stuff going on in there. It'll open at the end of the month. I want to make sure you know that that's available to you if that's something that you're looking for. All right, you guys have a great week, and we'll talk to you next week. Bye bye.

I want to invite you to come and listen to my free training called How to Quit Viewing Pornography Even if You've Tried in the Past. If you like the podcast, you will love this free training. We talk about, number one, how to not rely on willpower or phone filters so that you can actually stop wanting pornography.

Number two, how to guarantee that you won't fail no matter how many times you've tried in the past. And number three, how to feel good about yourself while becoming someone who doesn't struggle with pornography. You can access this training at sarabrewer.com/masterclass.