

## 89. Research on Moral incongruence with Ryan Hewitt



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Sara Brewer**

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You are listening to the *Overcome Pornography for Good* podcast episode 89, Research on Moral Incongruence with Ryan Hewitt.

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 we are continuing our discussion with Ryan Hewitt on the research, the emerging research around pornography use. Ryan Hewitt is a researcher around pornography use and Christians or religious individuals. And he is just on the edge of a lot of new cool emerging data around pornography use that I think you will find very, very helpful.

If you want to help him with his research he is looking for participants to fill out a few questions on his website, [outofthefog.faith](http://outofthefog.faith). If you are male, if you are Christian, and if you are between the ages of 18 and 29 I would really encourage and love it if you would go and help him gather more data around pornography use so he can continue to help future generations and get more research based practices that are shame free and that actually solve the root of the poor use.

So enjoy this conversation with Ryan around moral incongruence. And again, that website to help Ryan gather more data is [outofthefog.faith](http://outofthefog.faith). Also, we are linking, in the show notes we're linking a document with the sources for some of the studies that he mentions in these podcast episodes. All right, you guys, listen up and enjoy.

Sara: Okay you guys, welcome back. This week I am here with Ryan Hewitt and we're continuing our conversation around the research around pornography. A lot of new exciting research that helps us understand the root of porn use.

Last week, we talked about addiction, how the ICD11 doesn't classify porn use as an addictive disorder anymore, it classifies it as an impulse control

## 89. Research on Moral incongruence with Ryan Hewitt

disorder. And today we're going to chat a little bit about moral incongruence. So do you want to get us started, Ryan?

Ryan: Yeah, yeah, thanks again for having me on. I know last time we kind of unpacked that whole addiction terminology and kind of concluded with the reality of we've been throwing that word addiction at everything. But even the ICD11 recognized that there's this vast number, you know, at least a significant number of people that experience distress that might mirror in some way.

But it's the distress, if it's related to the moral judgments and the disapproval about their sexual impulses and their urges, then they're saying that's not actually sufficient to meet this criteria. So it reveals a different root. You know, we've long believed it's the addiction, it's the behavior. So what if there's a different root?

And so that's where the realm of moral incongruence, which it's kind of a, I would call it an emerging field in this arena, in the research. It was born out of a psychologist and a sociologist who were taking some of this recent data that they were starting to see regarding this increase in perceived addiction, specifically among people with strong moral convictions like religious individuals.

Sara: Which both of us have seen in our different faith communities and faith traditions, right?

Ryan: Totally.

Sara: Just to remind people, in our last episode you talked about that's what got you started, and a lot of this research was working with young men and seeing this on a really personal level.

Ryan: Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah, again, you just started to hear these narratives that were over and over and everyone thinking they're the only one. And you're like, wait a second, after a while there are some common threads here. And I know that was a small sample, but then I began doing the research and I was like, oh, this is a universal experience.

## 89. Research on Moral incongruence with Ryan Hewitt

So yeah, that's really what got me going down this vein. And so I was really encouraged to kind of see some people that were already, I would say treading through this, navigating these waters. And so these two guys actually came up with this model, they called it the moral incongruence model. More specifically, it's called the PPMI, pornography problems due to moral incongruence model, that's the big fancy name.

Sara: I'm just going to say like that again, pornography problems due to moral incongruence model.

Ryan: Yep, exactly. So kind of an academic model, but you could break it down to say there's two pathways that they presented. The first pathway was what we've long believed to be the way that people get to distress. And the idea is it's the pathway to the distress. What are the factors involved that get someone to experience distress in all these different levels?

That first pathway is the dysregulated or the addictive use. And so what they said is that's kind of been the only pathway we've been using and assuming everyone fits in that. But what if there's a second pathway? And they called that the moral incongruence pathway.

And so as they did research they found that to be the main pathway that described kind of the journey that someone maybe with, mostly religious individuals, people that had a strong moral conviction regarding pornography. They found that to be the better predictor of distress than this other pathway, this dysregulated.

Which, again, supports what the ICD11 was saying. And it honestly supports just what a lot of people in their actual narratives and their journeys are experiencing. It's like when I try to just get to the compulsive behavior, I'm not getting anywhere. But maybe there's something more deeply personal, this moral incongruence that pornography is presenting, that's at the root.

Sara: So good. So this moral incongruence is this idea of like I am not acting according to my values and it's really distressing to me.

## 89. Research on Moral incongruence with Ryan Hewitt

Ryan: Exactly. Yep. They officially, I think the definition is the gap between our sacralized or our sacred moral values and our behaviors. So kind of what I hold most deeply and believe at the deep level, and when my behaviors are out of line with that there's a gap between them.

Sara: Okay.

Ryan: What happens in that gap?

Sara: And what they found in this study is that that gap, like me looking at porn but also believing porn is bad, that moral incongruence is a path to more porn use?

Ryan: Yeah, so their actual study would say that's a path to explain and understand the distress, the root of the distress.

Sara: Okay.

Ryan: Like that path is the root of what's going on causing the distress.

Sara: Okay, so they're saying there's distress with like the dysregulated, compulsive, or addiction, which we kind of talked about last time.

Ryan: Yeah.

Sara: The compulsive or addiction, and then there's the path of the distress, which is moral incongruence.

Ryan: Exactly, yep. So they're saying, hey, now there's two. And to be honest, their model kind of stirred up this, you know, the few people that are in this world doing research in this world saying, wait a second, no, no, no, no, this can't be. I mean, they got a lot of flak.

But there's a lot of research, I won't get lost in it, but they didn't just develop this model on their own, they took all the other research in this arena, and they did what's called a meta-analysis, and said when we combine all that, a new analysis with all the data from all of them, this actually fits.

## 89. Research on Moral incongruence with Ryan Hewitt

And so it's a new model, but it's taking a wide range of data. And again, it actually supports what the ICD11, it very much supports what the ICD11 actually came out with.

Sara: So that doesn't sound like, I don't know, maybe help me understand because that doesn't sound like something that would be really shocking to me, that there's a lot of distress because of moral incongruence. Because there are people who view porn regularly and don't feel bad about it and are just fine. They're like, this is just part of my life.

And then there are people who view porn, the same amount who are extremely distressed about it because of their beliefs about pornography. And the only difference between those two people is what they think about porn and what they think about sex.

Ryan: Yeah, and I'm with you. That's why it's so funny, sometimes the research connects, you know, all this research and then just to come up with like a, of course, like what should be obvious. But then you have to take a step back and you say, well, then why has, what I would say, the church, and again just to reiterate, I come from a faith-based context. Kind of more Protestant, Christianity is kind of the realm that I'm studying in. So that's my background as well.

So then you take a step back and you look at, again, like my context, and say that's an obvious. But then yet, why do we always treat it like an addictive and behavior like we've got to fix the problem, the behavior? You know what I mean?

Sara: Yes.

Ryan: So It's an obvious in one end, but if it's that obvious why are we trying to fix a different root? Or come up with a different solution.

Sara: So like an example would be like someone going to a church leader and saying this. And yeah, we recognize the distress is coming from the moral incongruence, but we're like, okay, now to fix it go to addiction recovery.

## 89. Research on Moral incongruence with Ryan Hewitt

Ryan: Yeah. Right. Right.

Sara: Instead of looking at the moral incongruence that can be causing a lot of distress.

Ryan: Yeah, and I guess just to give a little bit of the background, the moral incongruence, some of your listeners are probably familiar if you have any background psychology, there's a connection to cognitive dissonance theory, which was back in the 50s, 60s. So it's very, very connected. I mean, they're very similar. One is a cognitive level, the other one kind of moves to more of a moral, you know, sacred level.

Sara: Tell us a little bit about that for those who don't know what that means.

Ryan: Yeah. So cognitive dissonance theory was really very similar in the sense that what happens when there's a gap between either two beliefs that we have or a belief and a behavior. Now, this could be just anything of like, you know, the example of like working out. Like, I know working out is good for me and yet, man, I can never go to the gym. It creates a tension, right? There's a cognitive dissonance, there's a gap between those two things.

And what the theorists have always found is, well, people can't ultimately live in that gap forever, they're going to do something to relieve that tension. So well, you either change the behavior, okay, I'm going to start going to the gym. Or you slowly start to just give up on the belief, like maybe it's not that big a deal. Or it reveals what you really believe, which is, I really don't actually think it's that important.

But the point is you won't live ultimately in that forever because it creates such a psychological tension. So now you go to the moral incongruence, you say, okay, this is kind of like that on an amplified or a deeper level. If we take that same approach and you're like, well, you're experiencing moral incongruence, well just change the behavior.



## 89. Research on Moral incongruence with Ryan Hewitt

Well, that's what we've been doing. So we're recognizing there's an incongruence. We may not have called it that, we're like, okay, I feel distressed because I believe it's wrong. But then we just lean into well, so change the behavior. Let's figure out how you can put these protocols in place so that you can do it. And ultimately we're finding that's not a long term solution. It might get you a little ways down the road, but not in the long game.

Sara: Yeah, it's willpower focused, you don't have as much willpower. Yeah, and if that's the only thing that will help that moral incongruence, is by totally changing, 180, you're kind of setting yourself up for a little bit of distress.

Ryan: Right? Right, absolutely. And so what happens is you've got this whole vast number of people that are experiencing this. Now okay, maybe we're identifying the root isn't just the addiction, maybe the root is this moral incongruence. Well then that should, and it needs to drastically change how we approach.

And I think that's where, again, I was drawn to your work because I was like, this is someone who's rethinking the approach based on understanding the root. Because if the root is not clinical addiction, then we can't just be addressing the behaviors.

If the root is a moral incongruence, then we're going to have to somehow get to that deeper level about what we believe. And we haven't talked about shame yet, but that is a direct connection, a correlation into that realm of moral incongruence. Kind of one of my big assertions in my research is that moral incongruence gap is a vacuum for shame. Like that just, it absolutely fills that space.

And so to deal with the moral incongruence we ultimately have to deal with shame, which I think we're going to talk about a little later. But again, sorry to go on on that.

Sara: No, I love it.



## 89. Research on Moral incongruence with Ryan Hewitt

Ryan: But it's an obvious, hey, I feel bad, this is wrong, I feel like it's wrong, but I'm doing it. Okay, well, then maybe we should dig into that instead of just saying stop doing it.

Sara: Yeah. Okay, and maybe we'll talk about this more when we dive into shame. So if we will, tell me and then we'll just move on.

Ryan: Okay.

Sara: But I can see people thinking, okay, so if moral incongruence is the problem, well, first off, let me ask you this. Moral incongruence is what they're finding, the research, is the cause of distress. And how does that connect to the actual use? Does that make sense?

Ryan: Yeah. Yeah, and so to be fair to the full realm of the research there is definitely connections. And that's one of the big push backs on this model, is like, hey, couldn't it be both? And that's why I say yes, I think that actually creates kind of a cycle.

The moral incongruence can actually begin to push you more towards compulsive use, which may look “addictive.” But then that results in more moral incongruence, right? So I think it's actually an integrated pathway.

Sara: Yeah, it sounds like the shame spiral, but in research terms. I don't know if you've heard me talk about the shame spiral.

Ryan: I think I have and yeah, absolutely. I think you're absolutely right. And I think well, I'll pause on my research on shame because I think it's quite fascinating and it connects there for sure.

Sara: Okay, cool. Yeah. Okay, well, we'll address that more. And then I can also hear people saying, okay, but I do have these moral beliefs and these moral convictions that I think are good and serving me in my life. Like I don't want to be really, what's the term? Like I want to be sexually conservative, I don't want to just be really, you know, looking at whatever I want. So, moral incongruence, what does that mean? Like am I supposed to get rid of some of those values? How do I fix this?

## 89. Research on Moral incongruence with Ryan Hewitt

Ryan: Yeah. Yeah, that's a good question. And especially, again, in my realm of faith-based context that's kind of what you start to see amongst younger generations.

So going back, if that model is kind of true and there's this gap in the two, you can't live in that tension forever so something has got to give, whether it's the behaviors or the values. People say, well, I've tried to change behaviors, I can't.

Sara: It's not working.

Ryan: Yeah, so then what happens is, again, you just can't live in that tension forever. So something begins to give on the values side. And so we're seeing that amongst younger Christians, they're becoming more and more accepting of pornography as, well that's just kind of part of my struggle for my generation, you know, even in a faith-based context.

So I think where my research is kind of digging into that specifically is delineating the desire itself and the value itself from how we're equating it with the expression of it. So let me explain that a little. The desire for sex that's at the root of what we are looking for when we go to pornography in many ways. Like there's something driving, there's many things driving it.

But ultimately we are, I believe, as humans built with a desire for sex, and that is right and that is good. And we see that all throughout history and we see that in every, you know, religious background. There's a very beautiful, good design to sex and sexuality.

The problem is for most people, when they feel that moral incongruence, pornography is a counterfeit version of that. So we've equated now this counterfeit version. So the moral value side of that moral incongruence, I believe there's a wrestling out of, no, ultimately, what is it I'm actually desiring? It's like, oh, I desire porn. No, actually, I think you're desiring something deeper, and you've now gone to a counterfeit version of it that's not going to meet the actual deeper desire and need.

## 89. Research on Moral incongruence with Ryan Hewitt

So it's, you know, almost like the easy way is just well, I guess I just need to let go of this moral value that says porn is wrong. It's like well, let's dive deeper actually, sex is good, porn is wrong. So why are you going towards porn? What's the moral value at the root of it that you need to bring into alignment? And do the work there.

Sara: Yeah, totally. Yeah, I love that. To talk about a little bit of my approach here, how I see this connect is like we're going to talk about getting rid of the shame. The moral incongruence is caused by the shame. And once you can do that, that's when you can do the next work, to learn how to stop looking at porn.

But you can't do that when you're stuck in a lot of shame, and you're stuck in the moral incongruence. Then all of your energy is going towards trying to feel better, you know, with this moral incongruence. And when you're trying to feel better, what you do, like when that's all you're trying to do is escape pain, escape pain, escape pain, you go to more porn because porn is a way that you can escape pain.

And so this is something that I say often to my clients, the first thing we've got to address is the shame. And that it's not like, for a lot of people it's like, okay, well, it's either I get rid of shame and then I justify everything. Or I feel shame and I keep working on quitting. There's a middle ground, which is what I'm hearing you say.

Ryan: Yeah.

Sara: The middle ground is sex is good. This sexual desire we have is good. I've done a lot of, for those of you who want more on that I've done a lot of episodes on sexual shame you can go and listen to. Sex is good, this desire is good, and we can learn how to use these desires to create the life we want instead of a life we don't want with porn use.

Ryan: Yeah, that's great.

Sara: Cool. Okay, I love this, this term moral incongruence. And that, just like a quick recap here is that the distress caused by pornography isn't

## 89. Research on Moral incongruence with Ryan Hewitt

always the distress from the dysregulated or addictive use. It's often from this moral incongruence, which is I'm not acting in accordance to my values.

And the research is showing that that distress creates more use, right? Am I saying this right? You're going to have to stop me.

Ryan: Yeah, that piece is kind of more of the, I would say it's kind of the next step of the research.

Sara: Okay, that's me throwing that in there.

Ryan: Well, no, I would actually make the argument that the research suggests that.

Sara: Yeah, I would too.

Ryan: It's almost like no one's done that yet, but when you tie this one study here with this study here, it's like wait a second, over here they're finding that the moral incongruence is the primary cause of distress for many people. And then you take this study separately over here that says, well, internal distress and shame is one of the primary reasons and motivators for people to use pornography. And you're like, okay, well, let's put two and two together here and you're starting to see a cycle.

Sara: Yeah. So back to our example of the person who looks at porn twice a year, the reason you feel so much distress about that isn't because, isn't necessarily because you're addicted to it. But according to this research it can be because of that moral incongruence.

Ryan: Yeah, and what they've found actually, the depths of that moral value, like basically how deeply you hold that as a sacred value correlates to how much distress. And again so your example would, in some ways, the research would say it just reveals someone that just has a very deep moral conviction about this.

## 89. Research on Moral incongruence with Ryan Hewitt

And so even though it's twice a year, definitely not a compulsive use by any definition. But the distress mirrors those that might be really compulsive users.

Sara: Yeah. Okay, really good.

So, we're going to talk about shame, that is the obvious next step, and specifically the research around shame. So join us in the next episode.

I want to invite you to come and listen to my free class, How To Overcome Pornography For Good Without Using Willpower. We talk about how to stop giving into urges without pure willpower or relying on phone filters so that you can actually stop wanting pornography.

We talk about how to stop giving up after a few weeks or months. And spoiler alert, the answer isn't have more willpower. And then lastly, we talk about how to make a life without porn easily sustainable and permanent.

If you're trying to quit porn, this class is a game changer. So you can go and sign up at [Sarabrewer.com/masterclass](https://Sarabrewer.com/masterclass) and it is totally free.