

The Question No One Wants to Ask, but Everyone Wants to Know: Is it ok to Masturbate?

Many people are curious about the “M” word, yet the topic can bring about such discomfort, shame, and avoidance. As Shane (my husband and co-founder of Missionaries to Ministers) and I speak and counsel those who are struggling to become free sexually, and as we consider what is best in our own process of recovery, the topic of masturbation inevitably comes up, both for men and women. I hope to inform you and cause you to ponder some questions as to where you land on this much heated debate.

When a person masturbates to orgasm, the brain releases a “feel good” chemical called oxytocin. This is meant to create the bond between husband and wife and reinforce the physical, emotional, and spiritual connection. It is a feeling of being out of control, yet it is a feeling that is desired. Very rarely in life (unless maybe you are an adrenaline addict) do we seek times of being out of control. In the confines of a safe, trusting relationship though, we can explore trust and even receive a reward for it through an orgasm with the release of oxytocin.

The Bible does not directly address the subject of masturbation. In biblical times, though, people often married during adolescence and there may not have been as much need for solitary release. What is addressed in the Bible is the theme of self-sacrifice, laying ones life down for another.

A man has a biological need for sexual release, much like a nursing mother needs to express her milk. It can be painful for both to have to hold back. For women, the sex drive can increase a few days before her cycle, and she may feel the need for release as well. So is it sinful to masturbate when your wife is on her cycle, or pregnant and unavailable, or if you are traveling? Is it wrong for a woman to masturbate when she is feeling the urge and only does it a few days before her cycle? Is it okay for someone who is unmarried or widowed?

Here are some questions for those brave enough to ask:

1. Is it helping or hindering my relationships? Am I serving myself instead of serving the one I am committed to?
2. Do I have an addict brain (where once in a while, or in special circumstances is not enough and leads to compulsivity? i.e., I can't stop. I need it.)
3. Is it done in secret, or in private? Secrecy harbors shame and justification. In privacy, there is freedom to choose.
4. What is the fantasy about during masturbation? Is it like the Song of Solomon, thinking about one's spouse or is it about someone else's bride or groom? Be honest.
5. How do I feel afterwards? What is my conversation with God like? Do I seek forgiveness?

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There may not be a blanket answer for everyone on this topic, but it is important to seek that which is most beneficial for you both spiritually and relationally. Here are a few more questions to help determine what is right for you: Do you need it? Is it negatively impacting your relationships? Is it a secretive thing? Do you feel remorse?

If you answer yes to any of these questions you may want to consider how you use masturbation as a coping mechanism, which may keep you from looking at an underlying issue. For those with sexual compulsivity, we believe that sexual pleasure is meant for a man and a woman, and not for self-satisfaction. It is easier to masturbate than to work on a sexual relationship that could bring mutual satisfaction.

If however you masturbate as a way of relieving the intense physical pressure when a spouse is not physically available, are open about it to your spouse and they are understanding, can have pure thoughts during the act, and feel relief afterwards and a thankfulness to God for the experience, then it might be ok for you.

“ ‘Everything is permissible for me’, but not everything is beneficial” (1 Cor. 10:23). It all depends on what is spiritually and relationally best for you.