

Hands Off

Why are a bunch of men quitting masturbation? So they can be better men.

Traditionally, people undergo a bit of self-examination when faced with a potentially fatal rupture in their long-term relationship. Thirty-two-year-old Henry* admits that what he did was a little more extreme. “If you’d told me that I wasn’t going to masturbate for 54 days, I would have told you to fuck off,” he says.

Masturbation had been part of Henry’s daily routine since childhood. Although he remembered a scandalized babysitter who “found me trying to have sex with a chair” at age 5, Henry says he never felt shame about his habit. While he was of the opinion that a man who has a committed sexual relationship with porn was probably not going to have as successful a relationship with a woman, he had no qualms about watching it. Which he did most days.

Then, early last year and shortly before his girlfriend of two years moved to Los Angeles, Henry happened to watch a TED talk by the psychologist Philip Zimbardo called “The Demise of Guys.” It described males who “prefer the asynchronistic Internet world to the spontaneous interactions in social relationships” and therefore fail to succeed in school, work, and with women. When his girlfriend left, Henry went on to watch a TEDx talk by Gary Wilson, an anatomist and physiologist, whose lecture series, “Your Brain on Porn,” claims, among other things, that porn conditions men to want constant variety—an endless set of images and fantasies—and requires them to experience increasingly heightened stimuli to feel aroused. A related link led Henry to a community of people engaged in attempts to quit masturbation on the social news site Reddit. After reading the enthusiastic posts claiming improved virility, Henry began frequenting the site. “The main thing was seeing people who said, ‘I feel awesome,’ ” he says. Henry did not feel awesome. He felt burned out from work and physically exhausted, and his girlfriend had just moved across the country. He had a few sexual concerns, too, though nothing serious, he insists. In his twenties, he sometimes had difficulty ejaculating during one-night stands if he had been drinking. On two separate occasions, he had not been able to get an erection. He wasn’t sure that forswearing masturbation would solve any of this, but stopping for a while seemed like “a not-difficult experiment”—far easier than giving up other things people try to quit, like caffeine or alcohol.

He also felt some responsibility for what had happened to his relationship. “When a guy feels like he’s failed with respect to a woman, that’s one of the things that causes you to examine yourself.” If he had been a better boyfriend or even a better man, he thought, perhaps his girlfriend wouldn’t have left New York.

So a month after his girlfriend moved away, and a few weeks before taking a trip to visit her, Henry went to the gym a lot. He had meditated for years, but he began to do so with more discipline and intention. He researched strategies to relieve insomnia, to avoid procrastination, and to be more conscious of his daily habits. These changes were not only for his girlfriend. “It was about cultivating a masculine energy that I wanted to apply in other parts of my life and with her,” he says.

And to help cultivate that masculine energy, he decided to quit masturbating. He erased a corner of the white board in his home office and started a tally of days, always using Roman numerals. “That way,” he says, “it would mean more.”

For those who seek fulfillment in the renunciation of benign habits, masturbation isn't usually high on the list. It's variously a privilege, a right, an act of political assertion, or one of the purest and most inconsequential pleasures that exist. Doctors assert that it's healthy. Therapists recommend it. (Henry once talked to his therapist after a bad sexual encounter; she told him to masturbate. "Love yourself," she said.)

And despite a century passing since Freud declared autoeroticism a healthy phase of childhood sexual development and Egon Schiele drew pictures of people touching themselves, masturbation has become the latest frontier in the school of self-improvement. Today's anti-masturbation advocates deviate from anti-onanists past—that superannuated medley of Catholic ascetics, boxers, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Norman Mailer. Instead, the members of the current generation tend to be young, self-aware, and secular. They bolster their convictions online by quoting studies indicating that ejaculation leads to decreased testosterone and vitamin levels (a drop in zinc, specifically). They cull evidence implying that excessive porn-viewing can reduce the number of dopamine receptors. Even the occasional woman can be found quitting (although some women partake of a culture of encouragement around masturbation, everything from a direct-sales sex-toy party at a friend's house to classes with sex educator Betty Dodson, author of *Sex for One*).

One of the unintentional pioneers of the current wave of anti-masturbators is Alexander Rhodes, a 23-year-old college student and actor who lives in Pittsburgh. On June 20, 2011, after coming across a study conducted by Hangzhou Normal University in China that found that testosterone levels peak after seven days without ejaculation, Rhodes started a "NoFap" forum on Reddit, where he announced various challenges for those who wanted to abstain. (*Fap* is onomatopoeic Internet slang for masturbation.)

When it first launched, the forum received 20,000 visitors a month. There was no shortage of mutual encouragement, with badges awarded for milestones like going a week, a month, or a year without fapping, and a counter tracking exactly how many days a person has abstained. NoFap's popularity has now ballooned to nearly 400,000 unique visitors per month, and posts have grown in diversity. Some threads tout the perceived benefits of no-fapping ("found my first girlfriend"). Others recommend self-improvement books or revel in a newfound sense of perspective ("I was able to notice birds chirping, which I haven't done in years"), or engage in what can best be described as penis monologues ("Today I was sitting on the toilet and I looked down and I saw my penis and I kinda just stared at it, then I asked him 'What is your purpose penis?' To which he replied 'I dunno lol'").

But perhaps the most noticeable shift within the forum is how NoFappers have begun to characterize their short-term challenges as long-term lifestyle choices—one discussion is literally titled "NoFap isn't a challenge. It's a way of life." In the thread, Aterazideme posted: "I desire to be a person in control of his desires. Each day of NoFap brings me close to that ideal." And that "ideal" is defined pretty consistently, at least to "fapstronauts," as they call themselves. In short, it means being more masculine, which in turn leads to success in other aspects of life. Take the example of 19-year-old Redditor Ojdidit123. After 70 days without masturbating, he wrote, he went from being a virgin to meeting a woman on his flight, getting a "raging boner," and having sex with her in both the plane and an airport hotel.

The confidence he got from that encounter, he said, not only helped him perform well at a job interview later, and secure a job at a hedge fund for the summer, but also enabled him to call a long-simmering crush and ask her out. “All that shit happened in the span of 48 hours,” he posted. “It was pretty fucking crazy.”

The vehemence with which some users espouse the benefits of anti-masturbation surprises Rhodes, who says that he never intended the forum as a self-help initiative. “I saw it as a fun challenge to test your willpower, to put yourself against your instincts and see if you could do it,” he says. Rhodes is also quick to clarify that he thinks masturbation is a normal and healthy human activity.

“I’m less extremist than a lot of NoFap members,” he says. “There are a lot who blame every problem they have on masturbation,” echoing a disclaimer on the NoFap board: “Please do not look to fapstinence to cure all your social and physical ills. If you have other problems that have nothing to do with your sexual habits, they’re still going to be there when you’re done with a NoFap challenge.” I ask if his counter, which reads 40 days, is accurate. He laughs and says no. “My girlfriend’s away in a different state for a few more days. I might have even masturbated before you called me.”

Last August, comedian Greg Barris began talking about his masturbation hiatus in his stand-up routines. He started with a regime not unlike that of a pregnant woman, giving up booze, weed, and caffeine. He also gave up porn. A year later, when a woman he was seeing left town, “like gone, forever,” he decided he would give up sex. “But not trying to have sex, you know?” he says. “Not accidental celibacy.” Masturbation came next. He set a goal of 60 days. As the days passed, he made jokes about his progress online:

“30 days celibate. Hot on Tesla’s tracks. Have created wireless energy out of my humidifier and now my whole apt is off the grid.”

“43 days totally celibate. If you see me and hug me don’t squeeze me too hard.”

“60 celibate today. 60 days no masturbation today. Anyone else?”

Halfway through his experiment, he felt more energy and mental clarity. Throughout the process, “I kept saying, ‘I’m resetting my dick and my brain,’” he says. “If you’re on sex mode, then your brain is probably running like a couple of hundred programs, where it’s like looking for sex somehow.”

Comparing the body to a computer is a common analogy among those in the anti-masturbation community, a subset of which includes the self-proclaimed “biohackers” and “quantified self” enthusiasts who collect data regarding the input and output of their bodies. If the body is a series of systems, the thinking seems to be, then whatever problems exist can be repaired like a piece of hardware. Wilson, the guru of “Your Brain on Porn,” suggests that dopamine receptors will regenerate and dopamine levels increase after a withdrawal period of “flatlining”—total uninterest in sex. Some anti-masturbators even use video-gamespeak when they talk about abstaining on “hard mode,” which means declining sex with a partner as well as with oneself. There’s also the particularly poignant demographic whose sexual lives are so inextricable from their computers that giving up masturbation is a way of unplugging and reentering the world. “I never really had to get out there,” says a 24-year-old law student in California whose longest streak of not masturbating was 105 days (he did have sex with his girlfriend during this time).

Though he started limiting masturbation because it fixed the erectile problems he experienced during sex with his partner, it was also about trying to more actively engage with life. “I was not a troll who lived in my room and played World of Warcraft all the time, but I didn’t really develop fully socially,” he says. The goals for all these men, regardless of their personal lives or relationship statuses, seemed to be similar: to return to a more charged, natural self. It’s a throwback notion—virility as integral to manhood—but many of these anti-masturbators regard it as truth. “I feel like a man again” is a common refrain. One NoFapper referred to his 90 days without masturbation as “a passage into manhood.” They see masturbation as a failure of masculinity—not because it’s shameful or forever associated with adolescence, but because, on a fundamental, even chemical level, it’s draining their true potential.

The medical profession isn’t convinced. Every doctor and psychologist I spoke with informed me that “there’s no evidence” to link masturbation to sexual performance, and that it’s an oversimplification to think that frequent masturbation is the cause of delayed ejaculation. According to Stephen Snyder, a sex therapist in Manhattan, it’s “most often not the case.” Darius Paduch, a professor of urology and reproductive medicine at Weill Cornell Medical College, went so far as to say that ejaculation leads to greater fertility. “In our practice, we pretty much make men achieve an erection at least three to four times a week,” he says. Paduch also cited studies that found that men who ejaculated multiple times a week faced less risk of erectile dysfunction later in life. There’s also the body’s natural process of elimination: Many anti-masturbators start having wet dreams.

But none of that matters to the abstainers, including Matt, whose longest stretch without masturbation was 280 days. He has also encouraged a friend to join the experiment (and is keeping a spreadsheet to chart their progress). “Maybe part of it’s placebo,” he says. “But I’ve become more articulate and more confident. People can even understand what I’m saying better. I’ve become a very different person in a lot of ways.”

Henry went out to California. For two months, he lived with his girlfriend. Their relationship felt strong, the sex was great, and everything seemed to be on track. Then work and family compelled him to return to New York. They remained a couple, and Henry maintained his efforts. He says that his abstention, along with daily meditation and no porn, made him feel confident and grounded. He recorded his voice on his iPhone and claims it had deepened. Perhaps it was all in his mind, but he noticed other benefits, “like when you walk down the street and you make eye contact with a woman, and she smiles. And there’s no darting with the eyes, or no staring creepily, just a more natural exchange.”

He compares the feeling to being on antidepressants: “It was like a buffer, little things didn’t bother me.” He also began feeling more alert. And younger. And he found himself far more attracted to women—not in a furtive or uncomfortable way, but in the sense that the world around him felt more charged. Something totally banal—the before and after pictures of a Weight Watchers commercial, for example—suddenly had meaning.

“It felt like it did when you were in puberty or in college,” he says. “Women became more salient.” For 54 days, he did not masturbate. Then, over the phone, the relationship ended, and so did Henry’s campaign. “I didn’t have any desire,” he says. “I could totally not have done it, but I was like, ‘Fuck it.’”

Bron: <http://nymag.com/news/features/anti-masturbation-2013-4/>