Fantasies are mental scenes, produced by the imagination, distinct from the reality in which the person lives. In this article we are concerned with those of sexual content.

Everyone fantasizes to a considerable extent; thinking and fantasy are [p. 387] inseparable. Every time one sets a goal, makes a plan, or considers the desirability of a course of action, one fantasizes. One of the ways in which humans differ from animals is that animals, to our knowledge, do not have fantasies.

The use of fantasies to produce and enhance sexual excitement is common. Fantasies may contain activities one would like to do or repeat: sex with a highly desirable partner or partners, or under exciting circumstances. These are unproblematic as long as the fantasizer accepts that there are things one would like to do which are impossible or impractical to realize, and takes steps towards the realization of appropriate fantasies. The prospect of realizing sexual fantasies is one of the great stimuli of human activity.

Potentially more stressful are fantasies of activities one might not or definitely would not like to do. These involve every sort of situation depicted in pornography, among them the infliction or suffering of pain, violence, or humiliation; promiscuous or anonymous sex; unfaithfulness to a partner; the exposure of the body to harm; and activities which do not conform to one’s sexual orientation (gay or straight). Such erotic fantasies are potentially in conflict with one’s self-image, and may cause worry and guilt.

If fantasies cause great distress, the assistance of a competent therapist may be helpful. That such fantasies are very widespread, however, suggests that their existence is normal and even healthy; we all have within us atavistic capacities, such as that to inflict pain, which cannot be expressed directly in a civilized society. Fantasies can help discharge tensions rather than increase them. A fantasy does not produce action against one’s principles or true wishes. Furthermore, fantasies need not be revealed to anyone, although sharing them can be an exciting part of lovemaking. Lovers with fantasies that dovetail (the dominant with the submissive, for example) are truly blessed, although this is far less frequent than pornography would suggest. The commercial sex industry (*pornography, *prostitution, *phone sex) is primarily providing fantasies.

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