

# PREVENTION DISCUSSION & ACTIVITY GUIDE



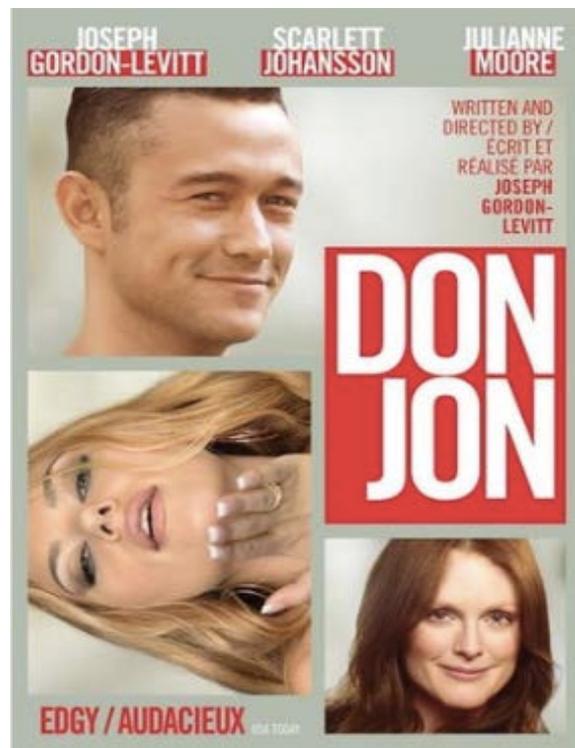
**WCSAP**  
Washington Coalition of  
Sexual Assault Programs

## Sex, Gender Norms, and Pornography: Examining the film *Don Jon*

In this discussion and activity guide, we examine the mainstream film *Don Jon*. This popular film addresses several of the root causes of sexual violence and can be used as a fun and engaging tool when working with youth.

Included in this guide you will find:

- Notes to facilitators
- Summary of the film
- Tips for framing the discussion
- Key points to highlight
- Discussion questions
- Interactive activities



## Note to Facilitators: Considerations before Beginning

This film contains graphics images of sex and pornography and has a MPAA rating of R. This means this film is designed for a more mature audience and may not be suitable for those under the age of 17. Please consider this when scheduling a viewing or incorporating into a prevention program. As always, review the film before hosting a viewing and discussion.

This film has overt sexual themes and the discussion following will encourage talking openly about sex, sexuality, gender roles, and social pressures or norms related to all of these. We recommend creating a set of group agreements to establish expectations of respectful dialogue during the discussion and activity.

These can be challenging conversations to have with a group and some participants may be uncomfortable engaging. Respecting participants' boundaries without silencing folks who want to talk about their own experiences can be a tenuous balance. Additionally, it's important to acknowledge the specific sub-group portrayed in the film, and how stereotypes are often problematic. For example, "Guido" is a term that is often considered offensive by Italian American people and also sensationalized in pop-culture, so addressing and challenging this language is important.

While sexual violence is not explicitly portrayed in this film, it is important to be aware that disclosures may occur. Make sure resources are available for those who may be triggered by the conversation, and be prepared to handle disclosures either in the large group or one-on-one.

## Summary of the Film

Don Jon follows Jon, or Jonny, (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), whose character mimics the stereotypical “Jersey Shore”-type guy: he cares about his family, his car, his apartment, his friends, his appearance, and having fun. He goes out on the weekends to pick up women and never really engages in relationships.

The problem is, having sex with the women he meets in bars is never really as satisfying as watching porn—something Jon does 20-30 times a week. Jon explains that real women always want to have sex in the missionary position so they can look him in the eye and they expect reciprocity during sex, will not perform oral sex on him without expecting oral sex in return. In short, Jon is bored with sex with another person because, unlike porn, he does not “lose himself” in it and real women don’t act like porn stars.

He thinks this will change when he meets Barbara (Scarlett Johansson), who he and his friends call “a dime.” Barbara expects more than just a one-night stand, and they end up dating and falling in love. She pushes him to change his life by returning to school and introducing her to his friends and family. When she discovers that he watches porn she gets extremely upset, prompting him to lie and say he never does it. He then begins to hide it and is caught by Esther (Julianne Moore) who is in his night class with him. Unlike the other people in his life, Esther does not seem fazed by Jon’s porn watching—instead, she gives him a porn film that she says is better than what he watches. Also unlike other people, Esther is not in opposition to porn in general, but says the porn he watches is not realistic.

When Barbara checks Jon’s browser history and finds that he does indeed watch porn, and often, she breaks up with him, calling him sick. Jon then returns to his old life, and at the next night class, has sex with Esther in her car. During their conversation, she pushes him to think about why he enjoys porn so much. Because of her questioning, he realizes he is unable to masturbate without visual stimulation from porn, and finds her again to talk about it. Esther tells Jon he cannot “lose himself” during real sex because unlike porn, sex is intimate and needs to be reciprocal. After Jon finds her crying, Esther discloses that her husband and son had died a year before and she and Jon have sex where they are both clearly emotionally invested. After this, Jon begins to engage in a meaningful and reciprocal relationship with Esther and it appears he ends his relationship with pornography.

## Key Points

Below we highlight some of the significant scenes and language from the film you will want to integrate into the discussion to help participants make the connection to underlying root causes of sexual violence.

Jon finds porn more satisfying than real sex because it's only about him. Real sex doesn't live up to the fantasy presented in porn: that it's only about male desire and pleasure.

Jon's list of interests reflects his views on entitlement and ownership over women's bodies and sex by listing them with the object: his body, his pad, his ride, his "girls", and his porn.

Jon and his friends use language that allows them to see women as objects and distance themselves emotionally. They rate women's attractiveness on a scale of 1 to 10, compete for sexual conquests, and use language such as "smash" in reference to sex.

The theme of women as objects is also present in the ways in which Jon and his father describe when they found their romantic partners. Jon repeatedly refers to Barbara as "the most beautiful thing" he has ever seen and Jon's father tells a story of meeting his mother and saying "that's mine".

Jon adheres strictly to traditional masculinity through an extremely meticulous routine. Every Sunday Jon is shown with severe road rage while on his way to church. There, he confesses to his premarital sex and porn consumption, of which he keeps meticulous count. He then says his Hail Mary's at the gym. He also has a weekly meal with his family.

The movie asserts that romance movies act in similar ways to porn, in that they create unrealistic expectations of love and relationships, and assign very particular gender roles to relationships ("he would give up everything for her").

Much of the movie contains commentary on the ways in which porn harms Jon, and this is reinforced through value-based statements from Barbara. Esther's critique relies on the limitations of the messages and roles in the porn he consumes and balances that with the possibility not all porn is created with these messages.

Towards the end of the film, Jon develops empathy towards Esther and they engage in an intimate conversation. After this, Jon's connection with Esther leads to a more satisfying emotional & sexual relationship. It appears to have ripple effects across other aspects of his life.

## Framing the Discussion

These questions may help provide a framework for the movie that brings the aspects you'd like to focus on to the group's consciousness. Depending on group dynamics, it may be more helpful to discuss these out loud or to have group members write about them privately.

This would also be a good time to lay out group expectations and agreements that foster respect and comfort with one another. This will help prepare the group to engage in the framing conversation with an open mind about respecting different values and opinions.

- What is your personal opinion on porn? Why do you feel that way?
  - Note to Facilitators: push for concrete reasoning, not just "it's gross"
- Do you think all porn is the same?
  - What if porn were to portray only realistic bodies having realistic sex?
  - In what other ways do we idealize unrealistic images in our culture? Is this better or worse than porn?
- How do you think porn influences people's sexual relationships?
  - How do you think the other idealized unrealistic images mentioned above influence people's sexual relationships?
- How do you think men are socialized to view sex and relationships? What do they value in partners, and what do they expect out of their partners?
  - How are women socialized to view sex and relationships? What do they value in partners, and what do they expect out of their partners?
  - Where do these things align, and where do they differ?
  - Do these views and expectations change?
- When it comes to sex, how do couples negotiate sex and sexual boundaries? Is that ever portrayed in porn?
- How do you think porn or porn consumption contributes to sexual violence?

## Discussion Questions

### Sex

- Do you think Jon enjoyed sex at the beginning of the movie?
- He says that he can “lose himself” in porn, but not during real sex. What does the movie identify as the reason?
  - What are some possible alternative reasons?
  - Note to facilitators: some answers may include anxiety around not meeting other people’s desires/expectations, not having his desires/expectations met; anxiety around his own body image; performance anxiety; self-fulfilling prophecy that sex will never be as good as porn; desire to control every aspect of his life, like his apartment, car, etc..
- What are some ways he could work through these issues?
  - Note to Facilitators: Some answers may include: talking about his expectations and desires, and moving slowly to make sure he doesn’t feel pressured to move straight to sexual intercourse.)
- Do you think the women he was sleeping with at the beginning enjoyed it?
- Do you think he enjoyed it at the end?
- Do you think Esther enjoyed it at the end?
- There is a scene in the movie where Barbara convinces Jon to go to night school while rubbing up against him in the hallway of her apartment building. Do you think she was really interested in sex with him in that moment?
  - If not, what was the purpose or goal of her using sex in that moment?
  - Do you think that was appropriate?
  - What could she have done instead?
- Outside of the above scenario, how else is sex used as a tactic of control?
- Is consent obtained at any point in the film?
  - Note to facilitators: Give a brief definition of consent, if needed.
- Are sexual desires negotiated at any time in the film, consciously/verbally or unconsciously/nonverbally?
  - What assumptions does he make about his sexual partners’ desires?
  - Note to facilitators: It may be helpful to refer back to certain assertions in the film about Barbara being too attractive to have to give oral sex, saying that he has to give oral sex in order to receive it, or assuming that they will not want to have sex in positions other than missionary.
- Was there any sexual violence portrayed in the movie? If so, how and against who?

## Relationships

- Do you think Jon enjoyed his relationship with Barbara? How do you know?
- Do you think Jon's relationship with Barbara is healthy?
- Was there equal power in Jon and Barbara's relationship?
  - In what ways did the characters exert power over one another?
- When Barbara looks at his browser history and they fight about his lying, he says that they had sex whenever she wanted to. What does this say about the power dynamic in the relationship and Jon's involvement in it?
- Do you think Jon enjoyed his relationship with Esther?
- Do you think Jon's relationship with Esther is realistic?
  - Who has the power in that relationship, or is it equal?

## Objectification of Women

- When in the film did you notice objectification?
- When was it absent?
  - Note to facilitators: Some points you could bring up here are his use of "most beautiful *thing* I ever saw" when talking about Barbara, his father telling the story about how he met Jon's mother and saying "she's mine." The rating of attractiveness, not getting any girls' names, instead labeling them by physical characteristics. Listing girls on the same level as his physical appearance, his apartment, his car, etc.
- During several scenes media was shown (the burger advertisement, the movie posters, porn clips, and romance film clips). What messages did the media portray, and in what ways are they reflective of the relationships in the movie?
  - Note to facilitators: The burger advertisement and porn clips are all real, and not manufactured for the film. The burger advertisement showed a highly sexualized woman in a bikini, with the tagline, speaking about the burger, saying it is "not just a piece of meat," implying that the woman is, in contrast.
- At one point, Jon's friend says that "Twos and Threes are open-minded ladies." What do you think this means?
- How did Jon's relationship with his father contribute to his beliefs and attitudes toward women and sex?

## Gender Roles

- What do you think the sister's significance was to the story?
  - How did her silent presence add to the film? What do we learn about her character through the one line she has in the film?
  - How does her femininity compare with Barbara and Esther's?
- How is masculinity enforced in the film?
  - Note to Facilitators: Answers may include homophobic slurs, by questioning how much Jon values traditionally masculine things like football, through "tough love."

## Porn

- How did Jon's porn habits influence his real-life sexuality?
- Do you think watching porn can be healthy?
  - What makes it healthy vs. unhealthy?
- At one point in the movie, Jon compares watching porn with watching romantic movies. What do you think about this? Do you agree/disagree?
- When Esther brings him Danish 70s porn to watch, she calls mainstream porn "fake." This unsettles Jon. Why might that be?
  - Note to Facilitators: An answer could be that he realizes he's potentially built an ideal sexual scenario based off of simulated sex. He wants to believe that it can be like that in real life.

## Community & Societal Influence

- During one confession, Jon attempts to explain to the priest how his sex with Esther was "different," and was confused by receiving the same penance. What do you think about this?
  - Is all premarital sex the same or is it more moral when there's an emotional connection?
  - Should quality of sex be a factor?
- Jon is portrayed as a "Jersey Shore" stereotype. Does this stereotype make it easy for us to dismiss these issues as not being universal?
  - In what ways do you think Jon's situation is relevant to the wider society?

## "Act-Like-A-Man" Box Activity

Adapted for the film *Don Jon*

### Materials:

Blackboard, dry-erase board, or flip chart paper and markers or chalk.

### Film Scenes to Draw From:

- The priorities Jon lists in the beginning of the movie.
- The rating system of women and the competition for sexual conquests.
- The Carl's Jr. burger ads, where it says "more than just a piece of meat."
- Jon's assertion that Barbara is the "most beautiful thing I've ever seen."
- Jon's father's proclamation about Jon's mother "I saw her and said, 'that's mine.'"
- Physical fighting with friends and homophobic put-downs (calling one another a "faggot" for thinking his girlfriend isn't the most attractive woman).
- Dinner scenes with Jon's family

### Activity:

When possible, have the group refer back to the movie to highlight the differences between expectations and reality. A good consideration is to let folks come to conclusions that make sense to them on their own; the more the group is engaged with one another, the better.

1. Draw a person surrounded by a circle.
2. Ask the group what Jon thinks it means to be a man. Write their responses on the inside of the circle.
3. Ask the group what Jon's community (church, parents, friends, etc.) thinks about what it means to be a man. Write the responses on the outside edges of the circle.
4. Ask the group whether these values line up or not.
5. Ask whether these values align with their own.
6. Draw another person next to Jon.
7. Ask what Jon (and his community) thinks about what it means to be a woman at the beginning of the movie and write the group's responses on the inside of the circle. Talk for a bit about examples from the movie.
8. Ask the group whether these values align.
9. Look over the two boxes and ask what is the same and what is different?
10. Ask how these beliefs may have changed for Jon over time.

11. Ask how these beliefs may have influenced Jon's sexual relationships over time.

**Follow-Up Questions:**

- What does Jon think about manhood/what it means to be a man?
  - What does Jon's community think about this?
  - How do you know? Can you give me an example?
- In what ways are these similar or different?
- How do you think these attitudes influenced Jon's relationship to his sexuality/sexual relationships?
- How do you think these attitudes influenced Jon's non-sexual relationships?
- What do Jon and his community think about what it means to be a woman at the beginning of the movie?
- How does Jon think about women at the end of the movie?
  - How do you know?
  - Can you give me an example?
- What do you think about these categories? Are men and women exclusive categories, or are their overlapping characteristics?
  - In what ways are these categories helpful?
  - In what ways are they harmful?
- With these notions of masculine and feminine roles/attitudes in mind, do you think Jon would ask for things he wants?
  - Does he do this when it comes to sex?

## Alternate Activity

Depending on how engaged your group is, you may want to do something a little more active. Split your group up into two separate groups. Assign each group one of the following question sets:

1. What does Jon think it means to act like a man? How does this change throughout the film? What does Jon's community think it means to act like a man? How do they show this in the film?
2. What does Jon think it means to be a woman, and what characteristics does he value in women? How does this change throughout the film? What does Jon's community think about this? How do you know?

Provide time for the groups to discuss these questions. If there is more than one facilitator, have them sit with the group in case they need a little guidance or a push to go deeper. If there's only one, visit each of the groups to check in and make sure they're engaged. Whenever they seem about ready to move on from this part of the activity, ask them to create a short skit that illustrates the ways these beliefs shift and interact throughout the film.

### Follow-Up Questions:

- How did it feel to act that out?
- How did you draw from your own experiences to create that skit?
- Why did you choose to focus on the interactions you did (why focus on the priest, the family, the different female characters, etc.)?
- In what ways were the two skits different?
  - In what ways were they similar?
- Do you think these attitudes influenced Jon's relationship to his sexuality/sexual relationships?
- With these notions of masculine and feminine roles/attitudes in mind, do you think Jon would ask for things he wants?
  - Does he do this when it comes to sex?
- What do you think about these categories? Are men and women exclusive categories, or are their overlapping characteristics?
  - In what ways are these categories helpful?
  - In what ways are they harmful?