delusive idea, and become decidedly deranged on some one point, that is monomania. This mania will probably bear some relation to injuries intended, or in suspicions of their best friends, or of persons with whom they have no acquaintance. They threaten revenge, and even attempt violence, and thus compel their friends, or the public authorities, to confine them, beyond the power of doing mischief. Such has been the history of many of those who are now in our asylums for the insane, where they constitute not only the most hopelessly incurable class (probably not five cases in a hundred from masturbation ever recovering), but a class the most dangerous, troublesome and disgusting.

*2 A person suffering from a form of mental illness characterized by focus on a single fixed idea or act.

11

MARY S. GOVE [NICHOLS]

From Solitary Vice

1839

Mary S. Gove (1810–1884) addressed her concerns about masturbation to women in particular. She started out as a disciple of Sylvester Graham, accepting both his physiological system and his deep anxiety about masturbation, and, under his influence, she wrote Solitary Vice. She became a lecturer on the body to female audiences, using a mannequin for illustration. By the end of the first phase of her work, Gove emerged as a leading proponent of the water cure, a therapy particularly important to female followers.

... When I commenced my investigations [sic] on this subject, I was not at all prepared for the state of things that met my view. I was not prepared to believe that the vice was at all common among females.

But I have been obliged to believe what numbers have told me of themselves. Some of the most lovely and conscientious females I have ever met, have confessed to me that they had been victims of this habit. They were ignorant of its turpitude, of its moral and physical effects. Information was alone wanting to save these individuals from a state of health which made life itself a burden. Again I ask, shall we withhold correct information from our children, and leave them to the teaching of the enemy of all good and their own depraved passions?

A Christian female has given me the following confession, which she permits me to use as I deem best for the good of her sex:

DEAR MRS. G.—I believe you are engaged in an important and holy work, and my heart's desire and prayer to God is that you may long be spared to prosecute it. It has been neglected till the world is filled with misery and crime. An imperative sense of duty constrains me to communicate some facts that may tend to encourage you, to convince the skeptical, and to arouse those who have the supervision of youth to greater faithfulness and assiduity. When very young I became addicted to self pollution, and continued it for several years, and but for a merciful Providence that made me a subject of converting grace, and an early marriage, I might now be suffering all its concomitant evils.* Allow me to offer a few thoughts respecting the vice. I believe it is very prevalent, though for many years I supposed it confined to myself. Recent facts have fearfully demonstrated the reverse.*** I was most religiously educated. My parents endeavored to make me feel the holiness of the law and its obligations. But the seventh commandment was overlooked.*** Thus was I left, the untaught child of nature, exposed to the unchecked dictates of a depraved heart and corrupt associates. It was unsuspected by my parents. I suppose if I were now to state these facts to them they would hardly credit them. I always supposed I contracted this practice instinctively, till recently, a friend who is several years older than myself, informed me that at the age of four years she taught me.†

*She had suffered much, but owing to her early abandonment of the practice she had obtained tolerable health.

†This friend has continued the practice, in single and married life, until she had wrecked her constitution and made life a burden; and a burden which she must soon lay down.

***In the original text, the stars are likely for emphasis.

The seventh commandment—Thou shalt not commit adultery—was broadly interpreted in this era to forbid all sexual expression outside of marriage, including premarital intercourse and, here, masturbation.
This lady goes on to make some farther statements respecting the prevalence of the practice, which go to confirm the truth of the preceding pages. Almost all those who have confessed to me, that they had been guilty of this practice, who had not been taught the vice, say they thought they were the only individuals in the world who practiced it. I think a majority of those who have communicated with me on this subject had not been taught the vice, and knew not that any other person practised it. Doubtless their parents considered them both ignorant and innocent. Perhaps they thought the safety of these very children consisted in keeping them ignorant. I was once conversing with a mother on these subjects and striving to awaken an interest in her mind, when she remarked with much earnestness, "I believe my child is pure." I had that very child's confession at that time, and knew that she had practised the sin for years, and nearly lost her life by it; and yet her mother believed her pure, and no doubt had felt that it would have corrupted her daughter to communicate this information to her.

Parents are prone to put this evil afar off: to say, my child is pure. But let every mother warn her children, and instruct them faithfully; let her rest assured that no harm can result from it, and in almost every instance it will do good, either by saving the children from falling, or through their means saving others. I knew a young woman who had got some information on this subject, by reading the best book on the subject ever published, viz. Graham's Lecture to young men, and she resolved to inform her only brother.

The hope of society is in the youth, and our hope for our youth is, under God, in a correct course of training, as respects diet and regimen, instruction and warning. Parents should do all in their power, by education, to form right habits, and to prevent the formation of wrong habits. Grace alone can renovate the heart. The present unhealthy and stimulating method of living, prematurely develops the passions, and continually urges to their gratification. Almost all the present habits of civil life are calculated to produce such results. The neglect of bathing, of exercise, the use of soft feather beds, and often the too great abundance of clothing—the use of condiments, pepper, spice, and indeed all heating and stimulating substances, whether solid or fluid; the habitual want of confidence between parents and children; the false delicacy almost everywhere cultivated—all have their influence in bringing about this lamentable state of things. Generally speaking, schools are nurseries of vice.

A short time since, two sisters, ladies of the first respectability, informed me that when very young they were put to a Female Boarding School, where this vice prevailed, and the practice was explained to them. They were blessed with parents who were willing to converse with and warn their children, and they escaped contamination. The best way to guard our children from this vice, is to make their diet plain from the cradle; to exclude all rich and high-seasoned food, meats, pastry, confectionary, &c. from their diet; bathe them thoroughly every day in cold water, or if they be very delicate, in slightly warm water; let them sleep on a mattress, or straw, but in no case on feathers. Let them exercise daily in the open air; clothe them properly, but not with flannel next to skin, unless in cases of disease, when recommended by a Physician. Instruct and warn them; cultivate a spirit of kindness and confidence toward them; listen to their little complaints of what they meet from their mates. I have heard the most disgusting conversation, when a child, from school children, and yet I dared not tell my mother. Many parents will not hear a word of complaint from their children. "Don't tell me tales," say they. The poor child must bear all in silence. Judicious confidence will never foster a spirit of tale-telling.

We have been unjust to children long enough. It is time we act sufficiently for their benefit, if we would save our children.

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12

CHARLES KNOWLTON

Gonorrhoea Dormientum

August 10, 1842

Charles Knowlton was an unusual voice of reason during the masturbation panic. He retained his free-thinking ways throughout his life. Publishing this article in the Boston Medical and Surgical Journal was an indication that he had won respect in the Massachusetts medical community. Knowlton wrote in an era in which many believed that what