

Let's talk about...

# Internet Addiction

MENTAL ILLNESS DEMYSTIFIED

**FOR MANY OF US, SPENDING TIME ON THE INTERNET MAY BE A GREAT SOURCE OF ENJOYMENT, INFORMATION, AND SOCIAL CONTACT, BUT FOR SOME PEOPLE SPENDING TIME ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB CAN BECOME AN OBSESSION THAT INTERFERES WITH THEIR DAILY FUNCTIONING. IT CAN GET SO OUT OF HAND THAT IT IMPACTS THEIR SOCIAL LIFE, SCHOOL WORK, JOB-RELATED TASKS AND/OR RESPONSIBILITIES AT HOME. SOME RESEARCHERS ESTIMATE THAT BETWEEN FIVE AND 10 PERCENT OF ONLINE USERS ARE ADDICTED TO THE INTERNET. FORTUNATELY, LIKE ANY ADDICTION, INTERNET ADDICTION CAN BE CONTROLLED WITH THE RIGHT HELP.**

**Internet addiction disorder (IAD) is relatively new in the field of psychotherapy**, but while there is some disagreement about whether it is a 'real disorder,' there is no question that counselors are seeing an increase in cases where clients or family members are being negatively affected by time spent online.

Similar to pathological gambling, Internet addiction is an impulse control disorder. Internet addicts are addicted to everything from the act of typing, to chat rooms, online shopping, or three-dimensional, multiplayer games. Early research suggested most Internet addicts were highly educated, introverted males. However, more recent studies suggest the bulk of the problem is occurring among middle-age women on home computers.

No one knows what causes a person to become addicted to the Internet. One theory is that just as a person addicted to shopping may feel a 'rush' from the actions of shopping, the person with an Internet addiction may feel a similar rush from booting up their computer and going to their favorite websites.

Some people develop an emotional attachment to on-line friends and activities which becomes a means to escape from reality and fulfill unmet emotional and psychological needs. Some Internet users create online personas where they are able to alter their identities and pretend to be someone other than themselves. This can be especially tempting for people who suffer low self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy, and fear of disapproval from others.

Another internet-related 'problem' is the need some people have to stay connected 24/7 to their email. In fact the Blackberry, the popular hand-held electronic email device, has been dubbed the 'Crackberry' because some people have a compulsive need to stay connected. Whether or not this is an addiction in the true sense of the word, it can cause problems for people, especially if they are neglecting their close relationships.

## SIGNS OF A PROBLEM

How can you tell if you or a loved one's fascination with the Internet has become less of a tool and more of an obsession? Here are some signs that there may be problem:

- Work or school has suffered due to Internet usage, including being habitually late, missing meetings or tests in order to be online, using sick leave or vacation days in order to stay at home on the computer, getting in trouble at work or school for unauthorized web surfing for non work or school related activities.
- Preoccupation with thoughts of previous on-line activity or anticipation of the next online session.
- Lying to family members, therapists, or others to conceal the extent of involvement with the Internet.
- Losing track of time or being online longer than originally intended; neglecting basic needs such as eating or sleeping.
- Feeling anxious over missing an email, an instant message, or forum posting while away from the computer.
- Repeated, unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop Internet use.
- Feelings of restlessness, moodiness, depression, or irritability when attempting to cut down use of the Internet.
- Using the computer and online activities to hide from emotional problems, or using online activities to change moods. For example using the computer to cheer you up or make you happy.

If you think you have a problem, or someone you care about is complaining about how much time you spend online, then you may have a problem with Internet addiction. As with any addiction, the first step is identifying and admitting there is a problem. And like any addiction, there is help available. If you feel you or a loved one has a problem, then contact your EFAP or a local agency that specializes in addiction.

**Recommended Reading:** *Caught in the Net: How to Recognize the Signs of Internet Addiction – and a Winning Strategy for Recovery*, Kimberly S. Young, Wiley & Sons.



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