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INTERNET ADDICTION OR CAUGHT IN THE WEB

Key Words: College students, gender differences, denial, obsessive-compulsive disorder, erotic chat, legal aspects, medical information, instant messaging, Bluetooth.

According to authorities at the recent annual meeting of The American Psychological Association, Internet addiction should be classified as a recognized psychological disorder. Getting hooked on the web is much more complicated than other addictions because it can involve very different obsessive activities ranging from compulsive gambling, shopping, daily stock trading and visiting pornographic sites, to checking for new e-mail every few hours and involvement in chat room activities.

College students are at particular risk. In one study, three out of four reported that excessive web involvement had caused problems at school, work, and/or in their personal relationships. A significant number had also experienced mood changes and withdrawal symptoms when they were unable to log on that were consistent with the criteria for addictive behavior.

There is a surprisingly strong correlation between dropping out of college and excessive Internet involvement. In one facility, the dropout rate for Internet addicts was twice that of non-addicted controls. Some campuses try to curtail the amount of Internet time available to students and are establishing support groups.

Females also seem to be particularly susceptible, which may explain the dramatic increase in women web surfers. A few years ago male Internet users outnumbered females 20:1; it is now 3:1 and may soon be equal. It's much easier and quicker to find and purchase items on the web, and the resultant instantaneous gratification can foster obsessive shopping tendencies. Women seem to be particularly attracted to interactive chat rooms. Such sites can become highly addictive for those who are lonely because they provide an easy and safe opportunity to meet and interact with other individuals.

There is also no shortage of sites for compulsive gamblers who can log on any time of day they choose as long as they have a credit card. Other frequent destinations provide sexual excitement that would normally be difficult for females to access, while allowing participants to remain anonymous. In one survey of 18,000 adults, two out of three Internet junkies regularly logged on to porn sites, although the majority of respondents were men.

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The American Institute of Stress*

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Are You An Internet Addict?

Getting hooked on the web can creep up on you before you know it. It often starts out as an occasional effort to retrieve information needed for work or personal use. This inevitably leads to attractive links to sites having little to do with your original search, but prove much more fascinating. Although one might suspect that people whose daily work required frequent Internet use would be most likely to become addicted, only about only 6 percent seem to suffer this fate.

Factors that are unique to the individual seem to be much more important. For some, the Internet proves irresistible because it is such a safe and convenient way to satisfy cravings for gambling, sexual excitement, shopping, going to auctions, playing games, listening to and downloading music, visiting museums and viewing their contents, finding people with similar interests and hobbies, or contacting friends by e-mail whenever you choose. For others, the web satisfies the need to obtain detailed information from any corner of the globe on current events, sports, travel, weather, entertainment, celebrities, products, health concerns, financial news, stock market prices, etc., etc. Numerous search engines make this easy, and you can find out about anything in a few seconds at www.askjeeves.com.

For people with curious minds or a wide range of interests, the awesome amount of alluring material available is overpowering. An hour or two on-line can elapse in what seemed like ten minutes. This type of occasional preoccupation does not necessarily mean you are addicted, unless it leads to spending so much time on-line that it interferes with your normal life. Early warning signs of addiction include: not being able to wait to get on the computer, downplaying or being secretive about the amount of time spent on the web, and a feeling of intense intimacy while on-line. Family or friends are often more likely to be the first to recognize that you have a problem.

You can check your status by seeing how many times you answer "Yes" to the following nine questions.

1. Do you spend more time than you think you should on-line?
2. Do you feel that you would have a problem if the amount of time you spent on-line for personal use were limited to one hour a day?
3. Have any of your friends or family members complained about the time you spend at your computer?
4. Do you find it hard to stay away from the Internet for several days at a time?
5. Has either your work or personal life suffered as a result of spending too much time on-line?
6. Are there particular sites that you find hard to resist visiting daily or do you feel the need to check your e-mail several times a day to avoid missing something?
7. Do you have troubling controlling your impulses to purchase products or services from on-line vendors?
8. Have you ever tried to curtail your Internet use without success?
9. Does a significant amount of your pleasure and satisfaction in life now come from Internet activities?

Four is borderline, and five or six "Yes" responses suggest that you could be headed for trouble. Anything over that implies that you are probably already hooked, and could become a full-fledged junkie;

(Continued on Page 3)

You Know You Are A Junkie When

- You check your e-mail. It says "no new messages." So you check it again.
- You spend half the plane trip with your laptop on your lap and half with your child in the overhead compartment.
- Your bookmarks now take 15 minutes to scroll through.
- Your eyeglasses have a burned in web site.
- Your vacation spot must provide electricity and a phone line for Internet access.
- You find yourself typing "com" after every period when using a word processor.com
- You turn off your modem and get this awful feeling like you pulled the plug on a loved one.
- Your dog or cat has its own home page.
- You don't know what sex three or more of your best friends are because they have neutral nicknames and you never bothered to ask.
- You wake up at 3 A.M. to go to the bathroom and stop and check your e-mail on the way back to bed.
- You move into a new house and decide to Netscape before you landscape.
- You ask your doctor if he can arrange to have six gigs implanted in your brain.
- You wonder how on earth your service provider is allowed to refer to 200 hours per month as being "unlimited."
- A friend stops by to see you since your phone has been busy... for a year!
- Your car crashes through a guardrail on a dangerous mountain road and your first instinct is to search for the "back" button.
- All of your friends have an @ in their name.
- You laugh at people with 9600 modems.
- You decide to stay in college or your job for another year or so just for free Internet access.
- The TV remote is missing and you don't care.
- Your hard drive crashes and you haven't logged on in two hours. You manually dial your access number and try to hum to communicate with it. You succeed!!
- All your daydreaming is preoccupied with getting a faster Internet connection. Tech support now calls you for help.
- You finally do find the TV remote control but now don't remember how to work it.

- Your wife drapes a blond wig over your monitor to remind you of what she looks like.
- You express your feelings in symbols and start tilting your head sideways to smile :-)
- You get a tattoo "This body best viewed with Netscape Navigator 3.0 or higher."
- You get excited whenever you start to discuss the size and speed of your hard drive.
- The last time you looked it was 11:30 P.M. and what seems like only an hour later, everyone's getting up to go to school or work.
- Your spouse says that good communication is very important in a marriage, so you buy her a computer and install a second phone line so the two of you can chat more often.
- You tell the kids they can't use the computer because "Daddy's got work to do" and you don't even have a job.
- You say "Scroll Up" when someone asks "What was it you said?"
- You consider replacing a chair near your computer with a commode or refrigerator.
- Your bathroom looks like this:



Cybersex Addiction

It is difficult for most of us to comprehend media reports of teenagers and children who fall prey to pedophiles, or the mounting numbers of crimes and homosexual encounters that the Internet facilitates. Cybersex sites create a cultural climate of permissiveness that tends to nurture or even validate sexually deviant behavior because of popularity, anonymity, and availability any time of day. The resultant ability to relieve stress and pent up tensions reinforces this type of behavior.

What is especially disturbing is the increasing involvement of individuals with no prior history of having engaged in any deviant behavior. The anonymity of electronic chat provides a greater sense of control over the content, tone, and nature of an on-line sexual experience. As one authority explained, "Unlike real life, a woman can quickly change partners if her cyberlover isn't very good or a man can log off after his orgasm without any long good-byes." Conventional restrictions about sex are eliminated in cyberspace allowing users to play out hidden or repressed sexual fantasies without the fear of being caught. Anyone who has ever wondered what it would be like to have intimate relations with someone of the same sex, what group sex is like, or bondage, cross dressing, etc. can quickly satisfy their curiosity.

Cybersex provides a private and safe way to explore these or any other fantasies. A curious husband or wife may secretly step into the "Dominance and Submission Room", the "Fetish Room", or the "Bisexual Room" and be initially shocked at the erotic dialogue, but at the same time, sexually stimulated by it. This ease of availability promotes sexual experimentation among many who would normally not engage in such behavior. The most vulnerable individuals seem to be those suffering from low self-esteem, a distorted body image, sexual dysfunction, or a history of some sort of prior sexual addiction. There are some gender differences. Men are more likely to keep revisiting pornographic sites, while women tend to become involved in erotic chat room interactions.

Few people have any appreciation of the enormous popularity of cybersex. A 1998 study found approximately 70,000 sex-related web sites, with 200 new pornographic or erotic chat sites being added each day! In one month alone, 9.6 million, or one out of six people on the Internet had logged onto one of the 10 most popular cybersex sites. Probably one in five current web users visit cybersex sites.

Sexual stimulation is the reason that most people initially become involved. However repeated visits over time can provide an emotional lift or even altered state of reality much like the "high" produced by some mood altering drugs. A lonely or depressed woman suddenly feels desired by her many cyberpartners. A sexually insecure man becomes transformed into a hot cyberlover that all the women in the chat room desire. Cybersex not only provides sexual fulfillment, but also allows escape to a fantasy life where one can adopt a new persona and identity.

Women are attracted because it removes the social stigma attached to females who crave and actively seek sex. It allows them a safe way to explore their sexuality in new and uninhibited ways, regardless of the fact that they are not attractive. Men prefer cybersex because it removes performance anxiety that can be the cause of their impotency or premature ejaculation. It also conceals their physical appearance, which is important for those who feel insecure about baldness, obesity, or penis size.

Many consider certain aspects of cybersex to be illegal, even if they don't lead to sexual activities that are punishable under the law. Others view them as more of a mental illness than a crime. In the landmark United States versus McBroom sexual deviancy case, the defense successfully argued that their client's compulsive downloading, viewing, and transferring of web pornography was designed to relieve emotional stress rather than provide sexual gratification. Some sex therapists recommend specific web sites for clients having certain problems, and several have their own. Whether prescriptions for this will ever be covered by health insurance is doubtful.

A Heaven For Hypochondriacs

The Internet is also making it easier than ever to become a hypochondriac. It used to be that if you wanted free medical information, the only option was to trudge to the library and thumb through an out of date Merck Manual or encyclopedia. The PDR (Physician's Desk Reference) could also be consulted to obtain details about prescription drugs and their side effects. (Surveys show that the PDR was the most popular reference book on the shelves.)

The Internet has now made it possible to view the current versions of these and numerous other medical publications. Anyone can now also retrieve abstracts of the 11 million articles from over 400 scientific journals that are archived in the National Library of Medicine. These were previously available primarily to physicians and health professionals and required a familiarity with medical terminology and specific search protocols. The same information can now be obtained by using ordinary language, such as "What are the causes of headache?", or "What new treatments are available for Parkinson's disease?"

Almost half of all people who log on to the Internet do so to seek on-line health information. It is estimated that there are currently more than 30 million web health surfers who have their choice of visiting over 15,000 different sites specifically devoted to providing health information. In addition, there are countless others offering some sort of medical advice or selling a health related product. The problem is that Internet sources of medical information are not monitored or regulated, and there is no control over the quality and accuracy of the information.

Wired worrywarts can not only zero in on exactly what they want to learn about, but also communicate and commiserate with others. Chat rooms and bulletin boards are magnets for these "worried well" because of their unique and rapid interactive capabilities. They now make it possible to share your concerns with thousands of people all over the world with similar interests who may be able to be of assistance, and can respond rapidly. You can also do this at no cost whenever you want.

As noted in a recent Wall Street Journal article, many potential hypochondriacs are drawn to the Internet because they want reassurance that their symptoms are not serious. However, they frequently wind up becoming even more anxious. This is particularly true for headache sufferers concerned about a possible brain tumor. The more they research the subject, the more likely they are to become convinced they have a serious problem.

One thirty-year old woman was concerned she might have multiple sclerosis because of an intermittent tingling in her feet and odd sensations elsewhere. After surfing around she became convinced she was doomed and joined a chat group. The impact of the anecdotal information provided was greatly amplified by personal testimonials, which, as she noted, "made it more powerful than reading chapters in a book. You're talking to someone, hearing about their symptoms-and you think you have them too." She suspects that many other visitors to the same site were also worriers because of the number of postings listing symptoms and asking "Could I have multiple sclerosis?" AIDS sites and chat rooms often attract those afraid of HIV infection despite repeated negative tests. When they learn about new symptoms they were not aware of, it is not unusual for some to start to develop similar complaints.

The information obtained from chat groups and bulletin boards may not be as reliable as material from established medical web sites, but it is often more impressive. As pointed out by a psychiatrist who has been studying cyberchondriacs "There's a conspiratorial tone suggesting that the real facts are being kept from people, that your doctor won't tell you, but here's the real story." He also believes that "People are becoming alarmed about things that aren't that much of a threat." One patient became agitated after reading a web listing of the toxic effects of a medication she had stopped taking decades earlier. Another was convinced she had "mad cow" disease although there were no reports of the disorder in the U.S. The web provided access to over 9000 pages from which she could select

E-Mail Mania

"It is the first thing I do in the morning and the last thing I do before I go to bed at night. I waste valuable study time on it. I go into withdrawal when I don't have it, I feel horrid without it. No, it isn't some bizarre drug. My addiction is e-mail. Sad? Yes. Pathetic? Definitely. But until you have it in your room, at your disposal, at a low cost 24 hours a day, you can't understand. Unless you have friends and family who are all over the province, the country, the world, you cannot understand its appeal. It sucks you in, makes you feel empowered, and gives you a freedom you never knew before. I get all excited when the little song, which means that I have gotten new mail, plays. I love to turn on my computer in the morning and find new messages. E-mail is my addiction and I cannot live without it anymore."

This is from an editorial which goes on to explain how much time the author wastes once he does log on to his e-mail. He spends several hours every day downloading jokes from different sources and trying to be careful not to include them as recipients for all the people he now must forward them to. There are also apt to be numerous unsolicited offers, suggestions on sites to visit, and other items whose headings suggested they might have been of interest but prove to be junk mail. Obsessive-compulsive e-mail involvement is a form of addiction which will undoubtedly become more widespread.

E-mail has become a quick, easy and very inexpensive way to reach an individual or group of people. According to the American Management Association, it has now surpassed the phone as the primary means of business communication. You don't have the problem of interrupting someone when they are on the phone or preoccupied with something else. E-mail also allows you to sometimes reach people that you might not otherwise be able to talk to or who could take considerable time to contact, especially if they are traveling. In addition, unlike telephone or face to face conversations, you have time to think about what you want to say.

Conversely, when you receive e-mail, you can control when you want to read it and when or if you want to reply. Part of the problem is that people learn very quickly that if you want to, you can respond to e-mail fairly rapidly, and in many instances, no matter where you are. The downside of that is that if you don't respond instantly, it may be hard to find an excuse, so it is expected of you.

This promises to get much worse, and so-called instant messaging (IM) will revolutionize communication in the millennium. With today's IM, you can be alerted whenever a friend, co-worker or customer logs on and, if all parties choose, initiate a conversation over the web. In a few years, it will be possible to send "smart" instant messages that will find someone immediately whether they are at work, carrying a wireless phone or hand held PC, or at home watching TV. Messages will be able to be left in real time video, voice or text.

Some of this is already available. Yahoo Messenger users are notified when e-mail arrives, when stocks hit certain prices, or whether they had the top bid in an auction. Others who have the same software can tell if friends are online and can initiate voice chats with up to ten people. Some current Internet protocols also allow net data to reach people as they roam, just as cellular phone calls are routed to mobile users. It is believed that within three years 175 million people will be using instant messaging on PC's and other devices.

New wireless Internet technologies and products are making instant access to e-mail and the Internet even more convenient. Enhanced cell phones, wireless modems, personal desk assistants, and even pagers allow you to get on-line even if you don't have access to a phone line. Microsoft, Yahoo and other information providers are formatting their programs so that in addition to e-mail, you can also get other information. If you sign up for Microsoft's MSN Mobile, you'll get customized weather reports, your daily horoscope, quotes for up to 10 stocks at preset times or price points, lottery results, and personalized reminders delivered to your pager, Personal Digital Assistant (PDA), smart phone, or any e-mail address.

Some PDA's like the Palm VII already offer out-of-the-box wireless Internet access to the Internet and Casio products will soon have this feature as well. Two-way pagers like Motorola's PageWriter 2000x and Research in Motion's Inter@ctive Pager let you send and receive e-mail and can also get stock quotes, news stories, and other Web information. The potential for laptop use is enormous, since the latest wireless modems are sleek, easy to use and reasonably priced. Some connect as soon as you boot up your computer. If you have a digital cellular phone, most companies also offer cables to connect to your laptop's serial port. However, a new technology called Bluetooth may soon make all computer cables superfluous, and allow you to receive instantaneous e-mail wherever you are.

Bluetooth, which is named after an ancient Scandinavian king, is a joint effort of Ericsson, IBM, Intel and Nokia. It is similar to infrared, but can connect devices over a wider range and even if they are out of direct sight. Bluetooth devices can communicate via phone-quality voice or data and can work through walls or from within your briefcase. You can dial the Internet with your cellular phone, beam the connection to your laptop, and print out your e-mail even if the printer is in a different room. Up to 80 devices can be linked on a Bluetooth network.

As previously indicated, I strongly suspect that e-mail addiction will increase and intensify. For those who are already hooked, new enhancements will prove irresistible. Consider the following scenario. You are in a meeting with your notebook computer open in front of you. Suddenly, the cursor begins to blink and a new e-mail message is displayed on the screen. Your computer isn't plugged into anything, your cellular phone is in your briefcase under the table, but you are receiving e-mail because your notebook is communicating with your cell phone, which in turn is in contact with a global wireless network through Bluetooth. This new wireless technology could lead to printers that service themselves as well as remind you to change the toner cartridge, refrigerators that can place orders over the phone when supplies run low, and almost anything science-fiction technology writers can dream up.

Is There Any Solution?

Almost all addicts tend to have a certain degree of denial, and are frequently reluctant to seek help because of the conviction that there is no real problem or they can beat it themselves. Internet addiction is more of an impulse control disorder similar to compulsive gambling rather than a physical addiction to nicotine, alcohol or drugs. People who become addicted often do so because they can't seem to find pleasure or passion in their daily lives. As a result, they try to "tune out" or "get high" with alcohol, drugs, gambling, excessive involvement with sex, work, running, hobbies, or anything that can provide a sense of satisfaction.

The Internet provides a convenient way to engage in vicarious sex, or gambling, or to pursue work and hobby interests whenever you feel the need. Anyone with access can become addicted but home-based computer users appear to be at greatest risk. Contrary to the computer nerd stereotype, the typical addict is more apt to be a middle-aged female with a limited educational background.

Is there any help for those who want to learn how to kick their habit? The Internet Addiction Support Group is moderated by the psychiatrist who coined the term Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD). It is a good place to explain what kinds of problems you are experiencing and learn how others have successfully dealt with similar difficulties. The Center for On-line Addiction (COLA) offers a corporate training program to assist affected workers. It also offers a helpful survey for identifying addictive behavior, as does the Assessment of Internet Addiction site. There is also Internet Junkies Anonymous, which offers the same 12-step program championed by Alcoholic Anonymous. (Unfortunately, all these require logging onto the web again, and you may be tempted to fall off the wagon.) It might be better to buy *Caught in the Net: How to Recognize the signs of Internet Addiction - And a Winning Strategy for Recovery*, or *Hidden Dangers of the Internet - Using it Without Abusing it*.

The Tale Of The Shipwrecked Engineer *(author unknown, e-mail received courtesy of RM)*

A rather inhibited engineer finally splurged on a luxury cruise and just as he was beginning to enjoy himself, a hurricane capsized the huge ship like a child's toy. Desperately hanging on to a life preserver, he alone managed to wash ashore on a secluded island. Outside of a spring-fed pool, bananas and coconuts, there was little else. Since there was no sign of any ships or planes, he lost all hope, and did nothing but sit under the same palm tree daily. After several months had passed a gorgeous woman in a small rowboat appeared, indicating that she had been on the same cruise ship and had washed up on a nearby island. He asked how she got the rowboat and she explained that she whittled the oars from gum tree branches, wove the reinforced gunnel from palm branches, and made the keel and stern from a Eucalyptus tree. When asked what she used for tools, she replied "There was a very unusual stratum of alluvial rock exposed on the south side of the island. I discovered that if I fired it to a certain temperature in my kiln, it melted into forgeable ductile iron. But, enough of that, where have you been living all this time? I don't see any shelter." He admitted that he had just been sleeping on the beach and she asked if he would like to stay at her place.

He eagerly accepted, and she expertly rowed them to her island, tied up the boat with a handsome strand of hand-woven hemp topped with a neat back splice, and took him up a winding stone walk to an exquisite blue and white bungalow she had built. When she asked if he would like a drink he said he was sick of coconut juice, but she told him not to worry. She had a crude still out back and they could enjoy real Pina Coladas. They sat on a couch and had a few drinks. She asked if he had always had a beard, and when he replied "Only since the shipwreck", she said that if he wanted to shave there was a razor in the upstairs bathroom cabinet. No longer questioning anything, he went upstairs, shaved with an intricate bone-and-shell device honed razor sharp, and then showered, not even attempting to guess how she managed to get warm water into the bathroom. As he went downstairs, he couldn't help but admire the masterfully carved banister. "You look great. I think I'll go up and slip into something more comfortable," she said. He poured himself another coconut shell of the excellent Pina Colada and she soon returned. She was now even more attractive in a revealing gown fashioned out of pounded palm fronds, and there was a faint aroma of gardenias.

She moved closer, and in a sultry voice said "We've both been out here for a very long time with no companionship. You know what I mean. Haven't you been lonely, too...isn't there something that you really, really miss? Something that all men and woman need, that would be really nice to enjoy right now!" He immediately replied "Yes there is! There is something I desperately need and have wanted to do since I got here, but being all alone, it was impossible." The beautiful woman put her arm around him, pulled him closer, and in a husky tone whispered in his ear, "Well it's not impossible any more." The engineer, practically panting in anticipation and excitement, breathlessly replied "You mean, you mean..... you have actually figured out some way we can check our e-mail here!!!

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