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INTERNET ADDICTION IS NOT A VIRTUAL PROBLEM



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Hey, you! Yeah, you there, the one trying not to notice the headline of this column - the one with the page folded down so that no one around you can see what you are reading. Feeling panic or maybe anxiety about the topic? You might be a victim of Internet addiction. Our society is growing more and more dependent on the interactivity available to us on the Internet.

Since America Online introduced the concept of the “instant message,” or “IM,” more than a decade ago, and real-time Internet chat rooms, Internet Addiction has become a major, though be it subtle, problem in today’s society. It is evident in offices, homes, and even schools. Unfortunately, its effects are only now starting to be recognized.

What is Internet Addiction? Addictive use of the computer is not about the amount of time spent on-line, but what is happening during that time. Dr. Kimberly S. Young is a clinical psychologist, and the founder and director of the “Center for On-line Addiction,” a consultation firm and treatment center for on-line disorders.

Dr. Young points out on the Center’s web site that there are, “various types of Internet addiction such as to cybersex, cyberporn, on-line relationships, and information overload,” which is the inability control the compulsive need to absorb more information from the Internet. There is also a growing problem from online gambling, video gaming, and child predators.

Unfortunately, research shows that the symptoms and personalities associated with Internet Addiction are very similar to those of the drug and alcohol addict. Research also shows that the same types of results occur from the addiction as well. However, unlike many other addictions, there is no class, racial, or gender specific correlation associated with this problem. It can affect anyone who has access to a computer for any length of time.

How can you tell if you, or someone you know, are cyber-addicted? Dr. Young suggests some typical warning signs:

1. Do you feel preoccupied with the Internet (think about previous on-line activity or anticipate next on-line session)?

2. Do you feel the need to use the Internet with increasing amounts of time in order to achieve satisfaction?
3. Have you repeatedly made unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop Internet use?
4. Do you feel restless, moody, depressed, or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop Internet use?
5. Do you stay on-line longer than originally intended?
6. Have you jeopardized or risked the loss of significant relationship, job, educational or career opportunity because of the Internet?
7. Have you lied to family members, therapist, or others to conceal the extent of involvement with the Internet?
8. Do you use the Internet as a way of escaping from problems or of relieving a dysphoric mood (e.g., feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety, and depression)?

If you or someone you know can answer "yes" to five or more of the questions, then you may have an Internet addiction. So let's say you realize that you, a friend or family member, or even an employee, is a cyber-junkie. What do you do? Well, as in any recovery program, the first steps are possibly the hardest.

First of all, do not live in denial of this behavior. Admit it, or confront the other person. Say clearly, "I am / You are a cyber-junkie. I / You need help." The next step can be even harder. **TURN OFF THE COMPUTER.** That's right. Turn it off, and get a life. Go out and meet some real people (not the ones from the chat rooms), spend time with family, take up a non-cyber-hobby, and if necessary, get some counseling.

For children who may be addicted to the Net, start by limiting their computer time, and put the machine in an area where an adult may monitor its use. "The Center for On-line Addiction" has a number of tests you can take right on their web site to see if you or someone close to you are addicted. It might seem unusual that one might seek help for Internet addiction right on the Internet, however, this is probably the best way to reach someone having an on-line problem.

What is not considered to be addictive Internet behavior? Normal use of the Internet includes using it in constructive ways, such as for research or schoolwork, communicating with family and colleagues via electronic mail, playing a game from time to time, or keeping up with the news.

Also remember that some homework and research projects require many hours on-line to collect data much in the same way a you would use the information in a library. These are healthy uses of the Internet, so long as they are not totally consuming.

For more information about Internet or cyber addiction, or to take the Internet use survey, visit the "Center for On-line Addiction," at www.netaddiction.com or see your family counselor.