

**Lost In Cyberspace: The Growing problem of Compulsive Internet Use**  
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It may be known by many names: Internet addiction, Compulsive Internet Disorder, or Pathological Internet Use. What ever we call it there is hardly a mental health or addictions practitioner who hasn't seen some form of this modern digital malady in their practice. Family Law attorneys are reporting record numbers of divorces related to cybersex and cyber affairs. Employees are being fired for cyberslacking at work, due to excessive e-mail, downloading pornography, or endless cybersurfing. There is no doubt that the Internet is the spearhead of the digital industrial revolution, but is also the sword of Damocles when it comes to its powerful psychological impact on some people's lives. In my research survey of nearly 18,000 people (in conjunction with ABCNEWS.com) I found that nearly 6% of those surveyed met the strict criteria for Compulsive Internet use, with another 4-6 % abusing the Net on a regular basis. The Internet is not as benign as we might think, it has powerful mood altering capabilities, and over 29% of those I studies report using the Internet to "alter their mood or escape on a regular basis.

**The Reality of Internet and Computer Addiction**

Compulsive Internet use seems to produce the same type of tolerance and withdrawal as other addictions. There is also growing research evidence supporting the conclusion that many Internet users, perhaps as many as six percent, are being negatively impacted by their Internet use. It seems that you can develop a tolerance to Internet use, as you may need greater amounts of time online or to access more stimulating material. Although Web sites need not be sexual in nature in order to become addictive, they often

are for a great number of Netheads. Of those who meet the criteria for Internet addiction, 62 percent regularly logged on to pornography sites, and reported experiencing sexual arousal while online “sometimes.” They spent an average of over four hours per week viewing material on the adult sites, and 37.5 percent reported masturbating while online! For these Internet users, the Net offered a high degree of stimulation and sexual excitement.

### **Losing Control**

Fred’s story reflects a fairly typical scenario of a man whose sexual preoccupation became dangerous when combined with the power of the Internet. Fred is a 29-year-old professional with a very promising career. His excessive, and at times, self-defeating Internet use pattern demonstrates how sexually addictive the Internet can be.

Fred is on the corporate fast track to money, success, and is contemplating becoming engaged to his girlfriend of three years. Everything seems great, except that Fred is addicted to pornography on the Internet. When I first met him, he was spending several hours during and after work viewing pornographic pictures, sometimes until 3:00 am only to be at work again by 7:00 am. He compulsively rented adult videos and planned his business trips around having access to the Net or to adult video stores. Sometimes he would buy sexual products over the Net, and has even found himself ripped off through his credit card.

Fred spent hundreds of dollars on Internet access while surfing on the Net for

hours searching for naked women. He described himself as obsessed, and out of control, but unable to stop on his own. He'd tried a half-a-dozen times before, but with no lasting results. Fred finally came to see me after he saw our ad and Web site that discussed Internet addiction issues. He'd hit bottom. He no longer felt he had control of this part of his life and he was scared. He could control every other aspect of his life, but this one was too powerful to handle alone. Through psychotherapy and a therapy group he has been getting the help he needs, and his life is beginning to turn around. For Fred, and many others, any interaction with the Internet *can become* so sexually stimulating that it leads to an addictive pattern of use.

### **Is it Physical or Psychological?**

The distinction sometimes made by health professionals between physical and psychological addictions is probably irrelevant, and is certainly impractical. We are holistic beings. After all, you don't see many bodies walking around without brains or visa versa do you? (Ok maybe you know a few people who fit the bill!) This artificial distinction between the mind and body has little practical validity for understanding how addiction actually works, because our minds and bodies are actually integrated and function as one in the same. There are distinct chemical pathways that connect virtually every part of the body to our central nervous system, including the endocrine system. In short, we are what we *think*, what we *feel*, and *do*. Everything we experience impacts our psychological and physical health and visa versa. Health then, is the integration and appreciation of the interrelationship between *all* parts of us, including the less tangible spiritual side of ourselves. To follow, disease then is the absence of that *healthy*

*integration*, and one experiences a “*dis-ease*” in their life. Addiction can be a chief symptom for how that disharmony can become expressed in our lives.

The psychological dependence that occurs when someone becomes habituated (tolerant) to a behavior or substance is very powerful. You can develop strong rituals and habits around the behavior and this becomes woven into the very fabric of a person’s life. Almost all of the people I treat for an addiction feel a real “*need*” for the behavior or substance which controls them. And many of the people I have interviewed for this book state that they need their Internet use in much the same way. The Internet has become out of control for them and has taken a central, and dysfunctional, position in their life.

Perhaps no case better expresses the power of Internet addiction than Sandra Hacker’s (Yes that really is her name!) She made front-page news as the first well-publicized legal case involving Internet addiction. She was charged with neglecting her children while spending all day and night online. She had apparently left her children to live in squalor while she locked herself in a nice clean room with a new computer and modem. This case drew a lot of publicity because it broke the country’s collective denial about the possibility of addiction to the Internet, and it showed how children can be negatively affected by the Internet. The story demonstrated that the power of Internet addiction could override even the most basic instincts of protecting our children. And while it does reflect an extreme example, her case is probably less unique than we think. Since then, I have been contacted numerous times to consult with individuals about

Internet addiction and child custody issues, along with cases where Internet addiction has affected marriages, jobs, finances, and relationships.

### **We Get High From What We Do.**

Behaviors that are potentially addictive include *work, sex, gambling, food, exercise, shopping, television, computers, the Internet, in addition to drugs and alcohol use*. This list is by no means exhaustive. There are probably as many possibilities as there are potential pleasures. It is my contention that the basic psycho-biological process of addiction is fairly similar regardless of the initial source of the “high.” What do all the above behaviors have in common? What makes them addictive? And why do some individuals become psycho-physiologically dependent on these behaviors, while others do not? After all, these are behaviors that *most* people engage in on a regular, if not daily, basis without any problems, however, when combined with certain circumstances, an addictive pattern can emerge. Often this addictive pattern is not appreciated until the addiction has taken serious hold and there are obvious negative consequences. It is likely that many people become addicted to seemingly innocuous behaviors; the Internet is simply the most recent addition to a long list of behaviors that we may find addictive. In fact, a cable modem installer recently commented to me that he has never seen such strong reactions from people as when their Internet service is interrupted. He described a significant “withdrawal” from the Internet (as compared to TV) when their Internet access went down.

## **The Use and Abuse of the Internet**

Why is the so Internet addictive? To answer this question, let's look for a moment at the nature of gambling which may have a lot in common with the Internet. Few people would argue that gambling is potentially addictive for some people. Just look at the presence of Gamblers Anonymous (GA), support groups for family members of gambling addicts (GAMANON), and the numerous programs sponsored by private and governmental agencies. Even state lottery commissions and casinos offer assistance! In Connecticut there are advertisements for help glued onto the lottery machines! Clearly, gambling addiction is a real phenomenon and there are those individuals who, for whatever reason, find themselves gambling well beyond their means, in a compulsive and self-destructive manner. This behavior has tremendous implications on the quality of their relationships and their health. People can lose their house, car, family, and job, all the while continuing to find themselves gambling. They may be in a casino, betting on a sporting event, playing the stock market, lotto, or simply playing bingo—all for the purpose of receiving that “hit.” All of these behaviors most likely involve an elevation of the neurochemical Serotonin that we experience as a temporary sense of exhilaration. This process is short-lived, but very intense, pleasurable, and habit forming. We know that most people like to experience pleasurable things, as well as to stop unpleasant things. We also know they will repeat experiences they see as pleasurable. Normal life seems dull compared to the excitement of the addiction “hit” and many addictions get their start from a general sense of boredom. Boredom can present you with a very uncomfortable feeling, a sense of being ill at ease, which many people try to escape from.

I believe that many self-destructive behaviors get their start this way. They are initially an attempt to solve a problem (boredom), but in the process, the addiction develops, beginning a new problem.

We don't like to feel uncomfortable and we don't have time to feel bad. Feeling bad requires us to think, feel and perhaps *do something* that might take some effort to change our life. This can be a hard thing for many of us to do. The reasons why this is so hard are complex. It probably involves an expectation in our culture that we *shouldn't* have to feel bad at *all*; and if we have to feel bad, it should not be for very long. Addictions may, in part, be the result of a society that has lost its ability to heal itself-- a culture with no tolerance for pain, and no patience to change. Addictions are a way of separating us from our inner experience and this is done with the implicit approval of everyone we meet, including the media. No one wants to *feel anything*, least of all, anything uncomfortable. So we go on and try to numb our discomfort in a wide variety of ways, with the Internet as the latest. That is not to say that the Internet is all bad; it certainly is not. It will make a huge contribution towards improving the quality of our lives. However, the Internet's addiction potential is simply the opposite side of the coin and represents dialectic of the good it can do.

### **The Longest River: Denial**

A hallmark of someone who is engaging in this addiction pattern, but who has not accepted that their behavior is out of their control, is *denial*. Denial is a psychological defense mechanism that enables a person to continue to engage in a behavior in spite of

relatively obvious negative consequences on their life. It's a way to protect ourselves from seeing or feeling things that are unpleasant.

In the case of the gambling addict, there may be repeated warnings from his or her spouse that they will not tolerate continued spending of household savings, job loss, and constant harassment by creditors. In light of this, the gambling addict will still deny that they have a problem with gambling and will believe that they have complete control over their actions. Denial permits one to distort reality, a very powerful psychological defense; it can have devastating consequences on our life, and the ability to disregard such negative consequences while continuing the behavior is a hallmark of denial.

Denial is present, to some extent or another, in all addictions. It's necessary, in the development of an addictive process, to experience a sense of denial while the addiction is beginning to take hold. Otherwise we would not continue with the addictive behaviors. Because of denial, the impact of our negative behavior is never fully appreciated until the consequences become so overwhelming that they can no longer be ignored. This is sometimes referred to as "**hitting bottom.**" People may continue their behavior indefinitely, with no recognition of the negative consequences of their actions, in spite of numerous personal disasters. Often an individual will not seek help for a specific problem; unless they've recognized that they are no longer in control of the situation and need help. This usually happens at a point when the negative impact of their addiction has become grossly obvious and their denial is broken. *It is a process that cannot be rushed.* Each person has to discover their own time frame for how and when to

deal with their addiction. This, of course, can be very frustrating for family and friends of the addict, who often notice the problem long before the addict does.

Negative consequences of Internet use vary considerably. I have been consulted on Internet cases where employees have been caught using their work computer for personal Internet access (in some cases wasting considerable company time and/or downloading sexually related material onto their computer). In some cases, individuals could be charged with sexual harassment as a consequence of exposing fellow employees to sexually explicit material against their will (even accidentally!). I've also seen numerous cases of couples with significant marital or relationship problems due to Internet abuse, at times even resulting in child custody investigations!

Everyday I hear or receive stories of people who are getting into trouble with their online behavior at home or at work. We as a society, along with the mental health and addictions professions, are in collective denial about the extent of some the real and potential problems with Internet use and abuse. Although it is not clear how widespread compulsive Internet use is, it is clearly a growing problem. I fear that as broadband access increases from the current 6% level, that we will see an increase in compulsive Internet use; The increase will occur because just as the faster modes of absorption of a drug increases the addictive potential a drug. Broadband Internet access provides the "hit" in a much more rapid manner enabling a faster psychological impact.

Few people, except for those who have had a problem, recognize the power and attraction of being online.

This is changing rapidly however. Although it is probably not an epidemic, I have little doubt that millions of people are experiencing a negative impact in their lives because of their compulsive use of the Internet and I believe that number will continue to grow. Recognition of both the dark and light side of the Internet will enable us to be served by technology, instead of ensnared by it!

This article was excerpted in part from the book **“Virtual Addiction: Help for Netheads, Cyberfreaks, and Those Who Love Them”** (New Harbinger Publications, 1999) by Dr. David Greenfield. Dr. Greenfield is the President and CEO of The Center for Internet Studies ([www.virtual-addiction.com](http://www.virtual-addiction.com)), and is the Founding partner of Psychological Health Associates in West Hartford, CT. He currently serves as President of the Connecticut Psychological Association, and maintains a clinical, consulting, and lecture practice. Dr. Greenfield may be contacted by e-mail at: [drgreenfield@virtual-addiction.com](mailto:drgreenfield@virtual-addiction.com) or 860-233-9772, ext. 14.

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