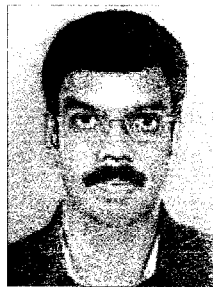# Internet Addiction

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Internet addiction is becoming widely recognized and acknowledged, particularly in India where it is affecting large numbers of people, and soon going to be a national health hazard. Internet addiction is described as an impulse control disorder, which does not involve use of an intoxicating drug. Some Internet users may develop an emotional attachment to on-line friends and activities they create on their computer screens. Internet users may enjoy aspects of the internet that allow them to meet, socialize, and exchange ideas through the use of chat rooms, social networking websites, or "virtual communities."

Internet users spend endless hours researching topics of interest online or "blogging". Similar to other addictions, those suffering from internet addiction use virtual fantasy world to connect with people through net, as a substitution for real-life human connection, which they are unable to achieve normally. Internet addicts spent an average 2.7 hours a day playing online games and surfing the net, where as the average hours spent using the net is 1.9 hours for non-addicts. Three subtypes of internet addiction have been identified: video game addiction, cybersex or online sex addiction, and online gambling addiction. One of the major reasons that the internet is so addicting is the lack of limits and the absence of accountability.

A growing epidemic

Research on internet addiction is originated in U.S. by Dr. Kimberly Young. In 1996, she presented the first paper on the topic at the American Psychological Association's annual conference held in Toronto entitled, "Internet Addiction: The Emergence of a New Disorder". Since then, studies have documented internet addiction in Australia, Italy, Pakistan, Iran, Germany, and the Czech Republic. Data from China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), showed that over 513 million Chinese are now connected online, which is 55.4% of the "netizen" population in Asia, and 23.2% of the similar population in the world. Around 8% of 100,000 Japanese school children were addicted to internet, according to a survey by Nihon University.

According to Maressa Orzack, director of the Computer Addiction Study at Harvard University's McLean Hospital, between 5% and 10% of Web surfers suffer some form of web dependency. According to the Center for Internet Addiction

Recovery (whose director is Kimberly S. Young, a researcher who has lobbied for the recognition of net abuse as a distinct clinical disorder), "Internet addicts suffer from emotional problems such as depression and anxiety-related disorders and often use the fantasy world of internet to psychologically escape unpleasant feelings or stressful situations." Over 60% of people seeking treatment for internet addiction claim involvement with sexual activities online which they consider inappropriate, such as excessive attention to pornography or involvement in explicit sexual conversations online. More than half are also addicted to alcohol, drugs, tobacco, or sex.

Who is at risk?

About half of those with internet addiction are young males under 30 years. Men tend to seek out power, status, dominance and sexual fantasy on-line, gravitating more toward the sources of information glut, aggressive interactive games, and sexually explicit chat and cyber-porn sites.

Women seek out supportive friendships, romantic partners, and prefer anonymous communication in which to hide their appearance. In general, men are more likely to enjoy searching for information of personal interest other than the requirements of work. Female Internet addicts become addicts through using social applications, such as social media networks (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), chat rooms, and instant messaging. For females, online addiction is a way of relieving pressure. The online world can be a great escape for women who lead stressful lives. This is why the statistics show that women with relationship problems are more likely to suffer from online addiction. However, this is dangerous, as online addiction is likely to only pull females further away from those suffering relationships.

Younger people are more likely to fall victim to internet addiction. However, treating these age groups' addictions cannot be easily done simply by applying a single method to a single age group. Children and teenagers can't control their emotions as their frontal lobe has yet to fully develop. So they are more likely to be addicted to the internet than adults. Some people are drawn to a "faceless community," one where a person can enter into multiple cyber-relationships with anonymity and create one or multiple new on-line personas. Certainly persons with quite a lot of discretionary time on their hands are susceptible, including homebound people or college students adjusting to the new schedule on a university campus.

Both introverts and extroverts are likely to become internet addicts. Introverts tend to be drawn to the net due to the anonymity of the net; they can act freely in a social forum without having to worry about being judged. Extroverts are tend to be drawn to the net due to the ability to contact with others, despite being alone at home; for this reason extroverts may prefer the net to TV as a hobby. In addition, those who tend to think in an abstract manner are more at risk for internet addiction. The internet provides a suitable environment for those who like to experiment with new gadgets and ideas.

Biological basis

Compulsive internet use can produce changes in the structure of brain such as reductions in the sizes of dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, rostral anterior cingulate cortex, supplementary motor area and parts of the cerebellum. These changes reflect learning-type cognitive optimizations for those using computers more efficiently, but also impaired short-term memory and decision-making abilities.

What are the effects?

Pathological use of internet results in negative life consequences such as job loss, reduced work performance, marriage breakdown, financial debt, and academic failure. Real life relationships are disrupted as a result of excessive use of net. Internet addicts spend more time in solitary seclusion, spend less time with real people in their lives, and

are often viewed as socially awkward. Arguments may result due to the volume of time spent on-line. They may attempt to conceal the amount of time spent on-line, which results in distrust and the disturbance of quality in once stable relationships.

Many persons who attempt to quit their internet use experience withdrawal symptoms including: anger, depression, relief, mood swings, anxiety, fear, irritability, sadness, loneliness, boredom, restlessness, procrastination, and upset stomach. Internet addiction can also cause physical discomfort or medical problems such as: Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, dry eyes, backaches, severe headaches, eating irregularities, (such as skipping meals), failure to attend to personal hygiene, and sleep disturbance.

Prevention and treatment

In many cases, though not all, internet overuse corrects itself. Corrective strategies include content-control software, counseling, and cognitive behavioural therapy.

How to avoid internet addiction

1. Admit that you have an addiction and that there is no use in avoiding the truth.

2. Realize that more and more people in the world are becoming addicted to internet. You are not the only one with this problem; it is becoming more and more common and more and more well known. Don't be embarrassed, find others with the same problem and help each other to beat it.

3. Get a hobby or an interest that doesn't involve internet or video games. Get involved with organizations, clubs, sports, church, music, dancing, singing, etc. Go for a walk with a friend or do some exercise. Go to bed on time and get a good night's rest. Keep up with the local events in your community. There may be talks, film screening, concerts, local sporting events, book exhibitions etc. Find some, as long as it is not on the net, and get involved.

4. Complete your studies. If you are a student, do your homework and study. You will feel great knowing that you did your homework early. Read books or magazines at the library instead of browsing for information. Teachers would rather have to use a real book than internet.

5. Help with meals. Your parents will be happier that you're helping out with dinner or dishes instead of chatting online. Cook or bake something one night for the family. Anything that gets you off the computer for a while will help and increase your confidence that you can stay off even longer.

6. Hang out with friends. Plan a trip to a tourist spot, mall, or ice cream parlour. Get a friend to walk with you for the afternoon. Avoid places that have free internet access such as coffee shops.

7. Plan for a family get together. Instead of watching TV or doing individual things during dinner time, eat dinner with family and plan games afterward.

8. Limit your computer time. Make sure not to turn it on too many times a week. If you have a laptop, make sure to put it somewhere that you can remember but not somewhere that you see every day. Try keeping the lid closed when you are not using it; when the computer is not looking at you, you are less likely to use it. If you have a desktop PC, try not to go near it or put something over it like a sheet.

9. Call people instead of sending messages. Call a friend and ask them to go outside for a short brake. This will distract you from the computer.

10. Use an alarm clock or timer. Before using your computer decide on a time limit such as 30 minutes. Set the clock and make sure that you get off the computer when the time is up. Alternatively create a shutdown timer shortcut on your desktop.

11. Don't eat meals in front of your computer! Eating at a separate place will help you to not go online.

When to seek help?

If you still can't get out of this problem consult a mental health professional for help. Along with psychotherapies and behavior therapies your doctor can prescribe medications to treat an underlying problem if you have one, such as depression or social anxiety disorder. The rehabilitation program will involve outdoor learning centers where participants will be encouraged to interact via sports and games. The staff will include psychiatrists, and psychotherapists in case students need counseling during their stays.