Internet and Computer Addiction

Signs, Symptoms, and Treatment

While time spent online can be hugely productive, compulsive Internet use can interfere with daily life, work, and relationships. When you feel more comfortable with your online friends than your real ones, or you can't stop yourself from playing games, gambling, or compulsively surfing—even when it has negative consequences in your life—then you may be using the Internet too much. Learn about the signs and symptoms of Internet addiction and how to balance your life online and off.

In This Article:

What is Internet addiction or computer addiction?

Internet Addiction, otherwise known as computer addiction, online addiction, or internet addiction disorder (IAD), covers a variety of impulse-control problems, including:

- **Cybersex Addiction** – compulsive use of Internet pornography, adult chat rooms, or adult fantasy role-play sites impacting negatively on real-life intimate relationships.
- **Cyber-Relationship Addiction** – addiction to social networking, chat rooms, and messaging to the point where virtual, online friends become more important than real-life relationships with family and friends.
- **Net Compulsions** – such as compulsive online gaming, gambling, stock trading, or compulsive use of online auction sites such as eBay, often resulting in financial and job-related problems.
- **Information Overload** – compulsive web surfing or database searching, leading to lower work productivity and less social interaction with family and friends.
- **Computer Addiction** – obsessive playing of off-line computer games, such as Solitaire or Minesweeper, or obsessive computer programming.

The most common of these Internet addictions are cybersex, online gambling, and cyber-relationship addiction.

Healthy vs. unhealthy Internet use

The Internet provides a constant, ever-changing source of information and entertainment, and can be accessed from most smart phones as well as tablets, laptops, and computers. Email, blogs, social networks, and message boards allow for both public and anonymous communication about any topic. But how much is too much Internet usage?

Each person's Internet use is different. You might need to use the Internet extensively for your work, for example, or you might rely heavily on social networking sites to keep in touch with faraway family and friends. Spending a lot of time online only becomes a problem when it absorbs too much of your time, causing you to neglect your relationships, your work, school, or other important things in your life. If you keep repeating compulsive Internet behavior despite the negative consequences in your offline life, then it's time to strike a new balance.

How do people become addicted to the Internet?

To relieve unpleasant and overwhelming feelings

Many people turn to the Internet in order to manage unpleasant feelings such as stress, loneliness, depression, and anxiety. When you have a bad day and are looking for a way to escape your problems or to quickly relieve stress or self-soothe, the Internet can be an easily accessible outlet. Losing yourself online can temporarily make feelings such as loneliness, stress, anxiety, depression, and boredom evaporate into thin air. As much comfort as the Internet can provide, though, it's important to remember that there are healthier (and more effective) ways to keep difficult feelings in check. These may include exercising, meditating, using sensory relaxation strategies, and practicing simple breathing exercises.

For many people, an important aspect of overcoming Internet and computer addiction is to find alternate ways to handle these difficult feelings. Even when your Internet use is back to healthy levels, the painful and unpleasant feelings that may have prompted you to engage in unhealthy Internet use in the past will remain. So, it's worth spending some time thinking about the different ways you intend to deal with stressful situations and the daily irritations that would normally have you logging on.

Risk factors for Internet addiction and computer addiction

You are at greater risk of Internet addiction if:

- **You suffer from anxiety**. You may use the Internet to distract yourself from your worries and fears. An anxiety disorder like obsessive-compulsive disorder may also contribute to excessive email checking and compulsive Internet use.
- **You are depressed.** The Internet can be an escape from feelings of depression, but too much time online can make things worse. Internet addiction further contributes to stress, isolation and loneliness.
- **You have any other addictions**. Many Internet addicts suffer from other addictions, such as drugs, alcohol, gambling, and sex.
- **You lack social support.** Internet addicts often use social networking sites, instant messaging, or online gaming as a safe way of establishing new relationships and more confidently relating to others.
- **You're an unhappy teenager.** You might be wondering where you fit in and the Internet could feel more comfortable than real-life friends.

- **You are less mobile or socially active than you once were**. For example, you may be coping with a new disability that limits your ability to drive. Or you may be parenting very young children, which can make it hard to leave the house or connect with old friends.
- **You are stressed**. While some people use the Internet to relieve stress, it can have a counterproductive effect. The longer you spend online, the higher your stress levels will be.

Signs and symptoms of Internet addiction or computer addiction

Signs and symptoms of Internet addiction vary from person to person. For example, there are no set hours per day or number of messages sent that indicate Internet addiction. But here are some general warning signs that your Internet use may have become a problem:

- **Losing track of time online.** Do you frequently find yourself on the Internet longer than you intended? Does a few minutes turn in to a few hours? Do you get irritated or cranky if your online time is interrupted?
- **Having trouble completing tasks at work or home.** Do you find laundry piling up and little food in the house for dinner because you've been busy online? Perhaps you find yourself working late more often because you can't complete your work on time — then staying even longer when everyone else has gone home so you can use the Internet freely.
- **Isolation from family and friends.** Is your social life suffering because of all the time you spend online? Are you neglecting your family and friends? Do you feel like no one in your "real" life — even your spouse — understands you like your online friends?
- **Feeling guilty or defensive about your Internet use.** Are you sick of your spouse nagging you to get off the computer and spend time together? Do you hide your Internet use or lie to your boss and family about the amount of time you spend on the computer and what you do while you're online?
- **Feeling a sense of euphoria while involved in Internet activities**. Do you use the Internet as an outlet when stressed, sad, or for sexual gratification or excitement? Have you tried to limit your Internet time but failed?

Physical symptoms of Internet addiction

Internet or computer addiction can also cause physical discomfort such as:

- Carpal Tunnel Syndrome (pain and numbness in hands and wrists)
- Dry eyes or strained vision
- Back aches and neck aches; severe headaches
- Sleep disturbances
- Pronounced weight gain or weight loss

Internet addiction: Cybersex and pornography

While online pornography and cybersex addictions are types of sexual addiction, special challenges on the Internet include its relative anonymity and ease of access. It's easy to spend hours on the Internet in the privacy of your own home, and engage in fantasies impossible in real life.

Compulsively spending hours on the Internet viewing pornography or engaging in other cybersex activities can adversely affect real-life relationships, career, and emotional health.

What's the difference between healthy and unhealthy sexuality?

For most adults, healthy sexuality is an integrated life experience. Sex with partners, with self, or as a part of exploring new relationships is usually a pleasurable act of choice. For sexual addicts however, sexual behavior can be most often defined by words such as driven, compulsive, and hidden. Unlike healthy sex that is integrated into relationships, sexual addicts use sex as a means to cope, to handle boredom, anxiety, and other powerful feelings or as a way to feel important, wanted, or powerful.

Source: *Sexual Recovery Institute*

Internet addiction: Online gambling

While gambling has been a well-documented problem for years, the availability of Internet gambling has made gambling far more accessible. It has also made it harder for recovering addicts to avoid relapse. Online or virtual casinos are open all day, every day for anyone with Internet access. People who don't live within close proximity of a traditional casino or betting track, for example, or even those who are too young to gain access, now find it much easier to gamble online.

Other net compulsions

Net compulsions such as compulsive stock trading or online auction shopping can be just as financially and socially damaging as online gambling. eBay addicts, for example, may wake up at strange hours in order to be online for the last remaining minutes of an auction. They may purchase things they don't need and can't afford in order to experience the excitement of placing the winning bid.

Compulsive online gamers can isolate themselves for many hours at a time participating in virtual reality or online fantasy games, neglecting other aspects of their lives such as work and family.

Internet addiction: Cyber-relationships

When used responsibly, the Internet can be a great place to interact socially, meet new people, and even start romantic relationships. However, online relationships can often be more intense than those in real life. Our fantasies are given free reign and the idea of being with our online love can exceed all realistic expectations. Since few real-life relationships can compete with these wild, fantasy relationships, the Internet addict will prefer to spend more and more time with their online friends.

Another problem is that about 50% of people online lie about their age, weight, job, marital status, or gender. When online friends meet and the real-life person fails to match the online persona, it can create profound emotional disappointment.

Self-help tips for breaking your Internet addiction

There are a number of steps you can take to get your Internet use under control. While you can initiate many of these yourself, it's important you get some outside support as well. It can be all too easy to slip back into old patterns of usage, especially if you use the Internet heavily for work or other important activities.

- **Recognize any underlying problems that may support your Internet addiction.** If you are struggling with depression, stress, or anxiety, for example, Internet addiction might be a way to self-soothe rocky moods. Have you had problems with alcohol or drugs in the past? Does anything about your Internet use remind you of how you used to drink or use drugs to numb yourself? Recognize if you need to address treatment in these areas or return to group support meetings.
- **Build your coping skills.** Perhaps blowing off steam on the Internet is your way of coping with stress or angry feelings. Or maybe you have trouble relating to others, or are excessively shy with people in real life. Building skills in these areas will help you weather the stresses and strains of daily life without resorting to compulsive Internet use.
- **Strengthen your support network.** The more relationships you have in real life, the less you will need the Internet for social interaction. Set aside dedicated time each week for friends and family. If you are shy, try finding common interest groups such as a sports team, education class, or book reading club. This allows you to interact with others and let relationships develop naturally.

Modify your Internet use step by step:

- To help you see problem areas, keep a log of how much you use the Internet for non-work or non-essential activities. Are there times of day that you use the Internet more? Are there triggers in your day that make you stay online for hours at a time when you only planned to stay for a few minutes?
- Set goals for when you can use the Internet. For example, you might try setting a timer, scheduling use for certain times of day, or making a commitment to turn off the computer, tablet, or smart phone at the same time each night. Or you could reward yourself with a certain amount of online time once you've completed a homework assignment or finished the laundry, for instance.
- Replace your Internet usage with healthy activities. If you are bored and lonely, resisting the urge to get back online can be very difficult. Have a plan for other ways to fill the time, such as going to lunch with a coworker, taking a class, or inviting a friend over.

Tips for dealing with Internet addiction:

- Ask yourself, "What am I missing out on when I spend so much time on the Internet?" Write down these activities and decrease your Internet time to pursue some of them.
- Set reasonable Internet use goals and stick to them. Take frequent breaks, at least 5 minutes each hour, and do some other activity.
- Alter your routine to break your usage patterns. If you spend evenings on the Internet, start limiting your use to mornings.
- Seek out friends and acquaintances who "couldn't care less" about the Internet. Take time to appreciate the fact that all life is not yet online.
- Stay connected to the offline world. Visit newsstands, book and music stores, and participate in entertainment such as museums, music, and live theater. Novels and poetry readings are hard to experience online.
- Treat the Internet as a tool. Stay focused on the fact that the Internet is a means to an end. Plan your strategy—whether you're looking for information or entertainment—with the end in mind and you'll save valuable time.

Source: *University of California, San Francisco*

Internet addiction treatment, counseling, and support

Therapy and counseling for Internet addiction

Therapy can give you a tremendous boost in controlling Internet use. **Cognitive-behavioral therapy** provides step-by-step ways to stop compulsive Internet behaviors and change your perceptions regarding Internet and computer use. Therapy can also help you learn healthier ways of coping with uncomfortable emotions, such as stress, anxiety, or depression.

If your Internet use is affecting your partner directly, as with excessive cybersex or online affairs, marriage counseling can help you work through these challenging issues. Marriage counseling can also help you reconnect with your partner if you have been using the Internet for most of your social needs.

For help finding a therapist for Internet addiction, see Resources and References section below.

Group support for Internet addiction

Since Internet addiction is relatively new, it can be hard to find a real-life support group dedicated to the issue like Alcoholics Anonymous or Gamblers Anonymous. If that is a simultaneous problem for you, however, attending groups can help you work through your alcohol or gambling problems as well. Sex Addicts Anonymous may be another place to try if you are having trouble with cybersex. There may also be groups where you can work on social and coping skills, such as for anxiety or depression.

There are some Internet addiction support groups on the Internet. However, these should be used with caution. Although they may be helpful in orienting you and pointing you in the right direction, you need real-life people to best benefit from group support.

Helping a friend or family member with Internet addiction

Tips to helping others with Internet addiction

- Be a good role model. Manage the Internet and computer use in your own life well.
- Introduce the Internet addict to other people who handle their Internet use sensibly.
- Get your friend involved in non-Internet related interests.
- Talk to your friend about your concerns with their Internet use.
- Support their desire for change if they think they have a problem.
- Encourage them to seek professional counseling.

Adapted from: *The University of Texas at Dallas*

Helping a child or teen with an Internet addiction

It's a fine line as a parent. If you severely limit a child or teen's Internet use, they might rebel and go to excess. But you should monitor computer use, supervise computer activity, and get your child help if he or she needs it. If your child or teen is showing signs of Internet addiction, there are things that you can do to help:

- **Encourage other interests and social activities.** Get your child out from behind the computer screen. Expose kids to other hobbies and activities, such as team sports, Scouts, and afterschool clubs.

- **Monitor computer use and set clear limits.** Restrict the use of computers, iPads, or smart phones to a common area of the house where you can keep an eye on your child's online activity, and limit time online. This will be most effective if you as parents follow suit. If you can't stay offline, chances are your children won't either.
- **Talk to your child about underlying issues.** Compulsive computer use can be the sign of deeper problems. Is your child having problems fitting in? Has there been a recent major change, like a move or divorce, which is causing stress?
- **Get help.** Teenagers often rebel against their parents but if they hear the same information from a different authority figure, they may be more inclined to listen. Try a sports coach, doctor, or respected family friend. Don't be afraid to seek professional counseling if you are concerned about your child.

Ref.: http://helpguide.org/mental/internet_cybersex_addiction.htm

Look more here: www.Addiction-Rehab.AboutPhilippines.ph and www.Computer-Addiction.AboutPhilippines.ph