

Net Junkies: Is the Internet Hazardous to Your Health?

Michael Devitt

Fifteen years ago, computers were looked upon mainly as the tools of scientists, engineers and big business. Now, more than 40 percent of American households have a personal computer; more than a third of those homes have access to the internet.

Many scholars have hailed the internet and its vast network of computers as one of the greatest advances of the 20th century. The net is an amazing source of information. Businesses and financial firms can set up electronic stores to attract customers. Students, teachers and researchers can use it as an investigative tool. Doctors and scientists can work on line to learn more about the latest developments and advances in their respective fields.

The average person is finding the internet to be a great convenience: shopping on the net; pay bills on line; and communicating with friends and family, all without having to leave the home or pay expensive charges. People the world over are using the internet to connect with individuals from other countries and cultures, developing new relationships and having experiences thought impossible just a few years ago.

But for all the good the internet has done in just the past few years, a dark side of the technology appears to be emerging as well. Recently, a number of reports have been published which show that for some people, the Internet can become an addiction much along the lines of other bad habits like cigarettes, gambling or alcohol, and that such an addiction carries with it the same negative side-effects: depression, isolation and withdrawal.

Internet Addiction: A Clinical Disorder?

The first evidence that internet users might be "addicted" to being on line appeared less than two years ago in the journal *Psychological Reports*.¹ Dr. Viktor Brenner, then a doctoral student at the University of Buffalo, composed an online survey on the psychological effects of internet use and abuse. The survey included questions about the subject's background, then asked how much time was spent on websites, chat rooms, newsgroups, etc.), and whether their internet use had interfered with other things they were planning to do. Each response that indicated such interference counted as one point toward the total score.

More than 1,000 users responded to the online survey, with 563 valid completed surveys. Among the results of the survey:

- Computer users spent an average of 19 hours per week online.
- Nearly one-fifth (17%) reported spending more than 40 hours per week on the net.
- Almost everyone who completed the survey exhibited some addiction-like behaviors, with 89 percent scoring above five points on the survey. The average score ranged between 10 and 11.

- "For that (between 10-11) to be the norm suggests that most people who use the internet use it a lot, and at some time it has interfered with something else they were going to do."²

Dr. Brenner ended his 18-month study by saying that the possibility of internet "addiction" warranted further study. "The survey is important because ... there are no other data available about the psychological effects of internet usage. There does seem to be such a thing as internet 'addiction' and we need to look at it more closely."

Following in Brenner's Footsteps

A year later, other researchers began examining the problem more closely. Among them was Dr. Kimberly Young of the University of Pittsburgh-Bradford, who introduced a study at the American Psychological Association's annual meeting in Chicago in 1997. Dr. Young reviewed more than 360 internet surveys of active online users. She found that people dependent on online communication such as chat rooms, browsing the web and reading e-mail suffered withdrawal and other symptoms similar to alcohol or drug addiction when their internet service was taken away.³

The typical internet "addict," according to Young's report, spent an average of 38 hours per week on the web, with the primary areas of interest being chat rooms and online games. Checking e-mail and participating in chats were also popular, but the act of actually browsing the web, particularly for anything educational, was one of the lowest areas rated.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the study was that while the average internet user is still a well-educated male, middle-aged women were the most likely to fall prey to internet addiction. Many were housewives who, like other internet addicts, had a lot of free time on their hands. Other major groups in the "addicted" category included the disabled, retirees and students, who usually have more free time during the day. These groups were originally intimidated by the technology, Young wrote, but they eventually became comfortable and started using online services at a rate of 10 times more than they had before. "It is typically newbies who become excessive internet users," the study said.

Surprisingly, only eight percent of the addicts qualified themselves as high-tech, white-collar workers. More than 40 percent polled said they had no permanent jobs; 39 percent identified themselves as secretaries, teachers, bank tellers or journalists.

Users in the study who realized they had a problem would try to invoke self-imposed limits, which usually failed. After that, Young wrote, "Dependents canceled their internet service, threw out their modems, or completely dismantled their computers to stop themselves from using the internet."

For some users, however, even those extreme measures didn't work. "Dependents explained that these cravings felt so intense that they resumed their internet service, bought a new modem, or set up their computer again to obtain their 'internet fix,'" Young wrote.

As a result of Dr. Young's study, the APA officially recognized addiction to the internet as a legitimate, clinical disorder in 1997, coining the phrase "pathological internet use" (PIU).

Depression Linked to Internet Use

For some people, spending just a few hours a week on line leave them with feelings of depression and isolation. A recent study concludes that the more time people spend on line, the more lonely, isolated and depressed they can become.⁴

The study, which appeared in *American Psychologist* this past September, was conducted by Dr. Robert Kraut of Carnegie Mellon University. A total of 169 family members were studied for two years. The subjects were interviewed before and after they obtained internet access and were given a range of tests to measure their social and psychological well-being.

The study suggests that many people spent time online that they previously had spent with family and close friends. Among other things, family members reported spending less time talking with one another and less time spent keeping up with close friends and acquaintances. The more time the subjects spent on the internet, the higher they scored in measures of loneliness and depression.

The results were especially surprising considering the limited amount of time the test subjects spent on line, an average of only two to three hours per week. Moreover, those in the study used the internet primarily for interpersonal communication, spending more time trading e-mail messages and in newsgroups than browsing the web, for instance.

"We were surprised to find that what is a social technology has such antisocial consequences," said Dr. Kraut. "Perhaps, by using the internet, people are substituting poorer quality social relationships for better relationships; that is, substituting weak ties for strong ones."

Reasons for Addiction

"Beyond amusement, reinventing oneself is a way to fulfill an unmet need," Dr. Young cited in her report. "Those who suffer from low self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy or frequent disapproval from others" are at the highest risk of turning into net junkies. One participant in the survey, for instance, told Dr. Young that, "By day, I am a mild-mannered husband, but at night I become the most aggressive bastard on line."⁵

Anonymity is another part of the internet's allure. People feel more comfortable hiding behind a secret identity. That extra layer of secrecy also could relax a users inhibitions, allowing some people to say or do things they otherwise would not.

"Psychologically, it is easier to establish a relationship with someone you will never meet, and it is natural to exaggerate your physical description," added Ira Winkler, the director of technology for the National Computer Security Association. "And it is easier to pick up another person through cybersex than in real life."⁵

"Many individuals go on line and gain a sense of acceptance from people they don't even know," said Bill Cooley, a drug demand reduction specialist at Keesler Air Force Base in Mississippi. He also noted the difference between a simple hobby, such as stamp collecting or building models, versus an addiction. "Hobbies don't become harmful in terms of the attention they take away from important aspects of our lives -- addictions do."⁶

The Net Addict Self-Test

After reading this article, you may want to consider if you've fallen into the trap of becoming a net junkie. Is surfing the net more of a hobby for you, or is it something you can't do without? Ask yourself the following questions and see just how addicted you are.

1. Do you neglect important activities, social events, work responsibilities, projects or health concerns to spend more time on line?
2. Has a significant other, such as a spouse, boss, close friend or partner, complained that you

spend too much time on the internet?

3. Do you attempt to spend just a brief amount of time on line, only to discover later that several hours have passed?
4. Do you develop cravings and withdrawal symptoms when you're away from the computer for an extended amount of time?
5. Would you rather talk to people on line instead of face-to-face?
6. Do you skip meals, classes or appointments to get on the internet?
7. Do you sleep less than five hours a night just to spend more time on line?

If you answered "no" to the above questions, congratulations! You're not hooked. However, if you answered "yes" to more than one question, you might have a problem. The more questions you answered "yes" to, the stronger your addiction may be.

Internet Addiction Resources

There are a number of services available to help wean net junkies from this dangerous disorder. Among the most noteworthy are:

1. The Center for On-Line Addiction (COLA; www.netaddiction.com) is run by Dr. Kimberly Young, who authored the 1997 study referred to in this article. Listed as the "world's first consultation firm and virtual clinic for cyber-related issues," COLA contains a plethora of internet addiction-related information.
2. Virginia Tech University has published a paper by Jennifer Ferris, "Internet Addiction Disorder: Causes, Symptoms and Consequences." The paper provides a good synopsis of what internet addiction is, offers some explanations behind why some people become addicted, and includes links to a half-dozen sources for further review. Users can access the paper at <http://www.chem.vt.edu/chem-dept/dessy/honors/papers/ferris.html>
3. The American Psychological Association (www.apa.org) contains more than 60 documents relating to the Internet and Internet addiction disorders, and links to policy and government sites for helping people learn to cope with their problems.

There are hundreds of internet addiction resources available on line. Simply access one of the more popular search engines and enter "Internet addiction." You'll be presented with dozens of websites that contain information on the symptoms of addiction, first-hand accounts from former users, support groups, scientific articles, and links to organizations that can help you kick the internet habit.

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