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Recommended Citation
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When Online Lives Create Offline Problems: Internet Addiction Disorder

Posted on October 1, 2009 by Editor

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“Why is it drug addicts and computer aficionados are both called users?” – Clifford Stoll [1]

Introduction

Let me begin with a confession. The first thing I do in the morning (and often the last thing I do before sleep) is check my e-mail. Rarely does a day go by without a visit to my favorite websites and a little more-than-reasonable amount of time is spent pouring over updated player statistics that will undoubtedly give me a competitive edge in my fantasy football league. I find that I am spending an increasing amount of time online and often include in my daily activities a frustrating search for the ever-elusive hotspot. Do I have a problem?

It’s true that more of our daily life is becoming progressively Internet-centered. In fact, in the United States the amount of time spent online daily rose 117% from 2004 to 2009 with an average of 12 hours per week being reported [2]. But how much time online is too much? This has become a topic of much debate in the mental health community. Professionals deliberate not only the impact of increasing levels of time spent on the Internet, but also the likelihood of a formal diagnosis that has found life in the popular media: Internet Addiction Disorder.

What is Internet Addiction Disorder?

Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD) is the term commonly applied to an ongoing pattern of excessive computer use that interferes with daily life [3]. The term Internet Addiction was first put forth in 1995 by Ivan Goldberg, M.D. in a satirical description of addictive Internet behavior which he based on diagnostic criteria for pathological gambling [4]. From the time when Dr. Goldberg first made his farcical diagnosis, a number of mental health practitioners have begun to seriously consider the concept of Internet addiction and how to best provide treatment.
According to the Center for Internet Addiction Recovery, Internet addiction is defined as:

...any online-related, compulsive behavior which interferes with normal living and causes severe stress on family, friends, loved ones, and one’s work environment. Internet addiction has been called Internet dependency and Internet compulsivity. By any name, it is a compulsive behavior that completely dominates the addict’s life. Internet addicts make the Internet a priority more important than family, friends, and work. The Internet becomes the organizing principle of addicts’ lives. They are willing to sacrifice what they cherish most in order to preserve and continue their unhealthy behavior. [5].

While this definition of Internet addiction provides a starting point for researchers and an initial framework for establishing appropriate treatment, no diagnostic criteria has been agreed upon. Furthermore, debate still remains over the existence of this disorder and whether it should be recognized as a problematic behavior worthy of unique definition.

**Diagnostic Issues**

The American Psychological Association (APA) does not recognize a specific definition for addiction, but views this as an umbrella term for a variety of problematic behaviors. However, in the current 4th edition of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV), the APA does provide clear criteria for substance dependence [6]. To be diagnosed as having such an addiction, an individual needs to have at least three of the following criteria within the same year:

1. Tolerance, as defined by either of the following:
   A. A need for markedly increased amounts of the substance to achieve intoxication or desired effect.
   B. (b) Markedly diminished effect with continued use of the same amount of the substance.
2. Withdrawal, as manifested by either of the following:
   A. The characteristic withdrawal syndrome for the substance.
   B. The same (or a closely related) substance is taken to relieve or avoid withdrawal symptoms.
3. The substance is often taken in larger amounts or over a longer period than was intended.
4. There is a persistent desire or unsuccessful efforts to cut down or control substance use.
5. A great deal of time is spent in activities necessary to obtain the substance (such as visiting multiple doctors or driving long distances), use the substance (such as chain smoking) or recover from its effects.
6. Important social, occupational, or recreational activities are given up or reduced because of substance use.
7. The substance use is continued despite knowledge of having a persistent or recurrent physical or psychological problem that is likely to have been caused or exacerbated by the substance.
While the first two criteria are directly related to physiological dependence, it is important to note that an individual can be appropriately diagnosed with substance dependence even in the absence of such physiological dependence. By allowing for a diagnosis of dependence in the absence of physiological markers, many feel that the door is open for appropriate identification of a host of problematic behaviors such as computer games, television viewing, and even cartoon watching [7].

Some view Internet Addiction as a disorder common enough to merit its inclusion in the upcoming 5th revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V). Jerald Block, M.D., a psychiatrist practicing in Portland, Oregon believes a diagnosis for Internet Addiction to be conceptually similar to that of a compulsive-impulsive spectrum disorder that consists of (at least) three subtypes including e-mail and test messaging, excessive gambling, and sexual preoccupation [8][9]. According to Dr. Block each of these shares similar components including withdrawal, excessive use, tolerance, and negative repercussions. Dr. Block does acknowledge that a diagnosis of Internet Addiction is problematic; however, 86% of study subjects presenting symptoms of Internet Addiction also exhibit other diagnosable mental health disorders.

While many within the field don’t disagree that pathological Internet use is problematic, its inclusion in the upcoming DSM remains uncertain. Part of the hesitation stems from a lack of clear definition of what Internet Addiction truly is. Researchers from the United States and South Korea performed a meta-analysis of empirical studies centered on Internet Addiction that has been published in peer-reviewed academic journals from 1996 to 2006. According to the authors, there is a need for researchers to “work to develop a standard definition of Internet addiction with supporting justification” [10]. Without such definitional clarity, research on the issue will likely remain inconsistent and appropriate (and agreed-upon) diagnostic criteria will fail to be established.

Furthermore, according to Vaughan Bell, a research fellow within the Department of Clinical Neuroscience at King’s College London, the Internet is a medium for communication rather than a true activity and therefore Internet Addiction is a fundamentally flawed idea [11]. Dr. Bell believes that excessive computer and Internet use results from the individual dealing with more underlying problems such as social anxiety or depression. He contends that these underlying problems already have well-established treatments and the creation of new addictions will result in confusion for both the individual and the mental health field.

Treatment

Regardless of the ultimate outcome of the “Internet-Addiction-in-DMS-revision controversy”, a number of mental health practitioners have begun treating it as they would other forms of addictive behavior. Recently, the first residential treatment center for Internet Addiction within the United States opened (ironically) near the Redmond, Washington headquarters of Microsoft [12]. The center, named ReStart, is similar to those currently operating in China, South Korea, and Taiwan and is able to provide intensive and personalized treatment for individuals who, until now,
have had to rely on traditional outpatient services including content-control software, cognitive behavioral therapy, and counseling.

Such intensive treatment, however, is not inexpensive. The 45-day program will run around $14,000 and is generally not covered by insurance because Internet Addiction is not a formally recognized diagnosis. The program is designed to help the individual deal with issues including, “obsessive use of video games, texting, Facebook, eBay, Twitter and any other time-killers brought courtesy of technology.” [13]. The ultimate success of such a program, however, remains to be seen as there is currently only a single resident at the treatment center designed to handle up to six patients at a given time.

**Conclusion**

While it is unlikely that the debate over the existence of Internet Addiction Disorder (and the complexities of appropriate treatment if it indeed does exist) will not be settled in the short term, this area promises to be one rich in research opportunity. Given the current increase in time spent on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, it is likely that the average user will spend more time online than ever before. Reports that Twitter saw a 752% increase in 2008 (to a total of 4.43 million unique users) and that Facebook holds a user base that is nearly as large as the entire population of the United States speaks to the increasing importance of the online world in our daily lives [14][15].

Regardless of whether the influence of our time spent online proves to be positive or negative, it is safe to say that the Internet will remain a presence in every individual’s daily life. To conclude, I thought I should provide a response to Dr. Stoll’s question that was presented at the onset of this article…and I promise I will, but first I need to check my e-mail.

**Endnotes**


[8] Dr. Jerald Block, M.D. is a fellow member of the Berglund Center Advisory Board and a frequent contributor to Interface.


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10 THOUGHTS ON “WHEN ONLINE LIVES CREATE OFFLINE PROBLEMS: INTERNET ADDICTION DISORDER”

Irving Gauntt
on January 30, 2014 at 6:16 PM said:

Wow! This can be one particular of the most useful blogs We have ever arrive across on this subject. Basically Fantastic. I am also a specialist in this topic therefore I can understand your effort.

best biometric gun safe
on February 3, 2014 at 10:42 AM said:

First off I want to say superb blog! I had a quick question in which I’d like to ask if you don’t mind. I was curious to find out how you center yourself and clear your mind before writing. I’ve had difficulty clearing
my thoughts in getting my ideas out there. I truly do enjoy writing however it just seems like the first 10 to 15 minutes tend to be lost just trying to figure out how to begin. Any ideas or tips? Thanks!

**best jig saw**

on **February 3, 2014 at 7:43 PM** said:

If some one wishes expert view regarding running a blog afterward i advise him/her to pay a visit this webpage, Keep up the nice job.

**best electric kettle**

on **February 3, 2014 at 8:18 PM** said:

I’m gone to inform my little brother, that he should also visit this webpage on regular basis to get updated from hottest gossip.

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on **February 3, 2014 at 8:55 PM** said:

My brother recommended I might like this blog. He was totally right. This post actually made my day. You can't imagine just how much time I had spent for this information! Thanks!

**folding bike reviews**

on **February 4, 2014 at 12:18 AM** said:

I’ve been browsing online more than 3 hours today, yet I never found any interesting article like yours. It’s pretty worth enough for me. In my opinion, if all site owners and bloggers made good
content as you did, the web will be much more useful than ever before.

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**best infrared grill**

on February 4, 2014 at 2:00 AM said:

When some one searches for his required thing, thus he/she wants to be available that in detail, so that thing is maintained over here.

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**humidifier reviews**

on February 4, 2014 at 3:48 AM said:

Greetings! Very helpful advice within this article! It’s the little changes that make the biggest changes.

Thanks a lot for sharing!

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**best vacuum for hardwood floors**

on February 4, 2014 at 12:30 PM said:

Greetings! This is my first visit to your blog! We are a team of volunteers and starting a new initiative in a community in the same niche. Your blog provided us valuable information to work on. You have done a wonderful job!

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**rifle scope reviews**

on February 5, 2014 at 12:45 AM said:

My coder is trying to convince me to move to .net from PHP. I have always disliked the idea because of the expenses. But he’s trying none the less. I’ve been using WordPress on various websites for about a year and am worried about switching.
to another platform. I have heard good things about blogengine.net.
Is there a way I can transfer all my wordpress content into it?
Any help would be really appreciated!