

The Silent Addiction

What role does the Internet play in your life? In most cases, the Internet is a productive tool. You can find information, do research, shop and instantly keep in touch with family and friends through electronic mail or make new friends and connections inside online chat rooms. But there is an unintended consequence of this technology, something that observation and recent studies have identified as Internet addiction, a disorder that has silently crept into our homes, schools and businesses.

As the Internet moved quickly to become a daily part of our lives, people started to experience another type of addiction with dramatic consequences. Cheryl, a forty-four-year-old real estate agent explained, "When I got my first computer, I thought the CD player was a cup holder, but within six months, I was spending nearly eighteen hours a day on the thing. My children constantly complained that I tied up the phone line with my modem. I neglected my friends and my family, and I rarely

showed homes because that only took time away from the computer. This thing was eating away at my entire life!” Like Cheryl, old and new users alike have experienced the gravitational pull of cyberspace.

Internet addiction isn’t something that we think of as a real addiction. In fact, when the coauthor of this book, Kimberly Young, started to study Internet addiction in 1994, most people laughed when she told them what she did. Even now some people still snicker, but it is an all-too-real condition.

When we hear the word *addiction*, we often think of physical addictions to drugs or alcohol, something involving the use of an intoxicant that creates a chemical dependency. However, in the past few decades, researchers have identified another kind of addiction. They call this phenomenon *process addiction*. Process addictions involve dysfunctional patterns and observable addictive symptoms that cluster around certain behaviors, such as eating, gambling, sex, relationships, shopping and spending. Process addictions impact people’s lives in the same way physical addictions do, affecting our marriages, our jobs and our personal well-being because we are consumed with a particular behavior—consumed to the point it becomes addictive. The addictive process:

- is a recognizable psychological and behavioral syndrome;
- expresses itself in a particular individual in relationship to specific substances or processes;
- exhibits a striking similarity and commonality among addicted individuals regardless of their specific circumstances and particular addictions.

To help understand the psychological hook of online compulsivity, we first explore the underlying dynamic of process addictions.

PROCESS ADDICTIONS

Stanton Peele, a noted authority on addictive behavior, explained “addictions provide a psychological hook that gives you feelings and gratifying sensations that you are not able to get in other ways.”¹ According to Peele addictions accomplish something for the person, however illusory or momentary these benefits may actually be. Because of the mental pleasure that people find in their addictions, they begin to behave more intensely about them. Addiction, therefore, isn’t limited to the ingestion of a drug or product that used over a prolonged period of time will result in a chemical dependency or physical need. Addiction also refers to maladaptive behaviors that provide compulsive escape from the problems in people’s lives.²

Whether one’s addiction is to a substance (alcohol, licit or illicit drugs or chemical product) or a process, crossover, switching of addictions, multiple addictions and a changing pattern of addiction are common but not universal features of an underlying addictive illness. Whether the addiction is single or multiple, substance or process, legal or illegal or an unstable and shifting combination of all the above, certain recurring and recognizable common features distinguish addictive from non-addictive processes.

Characteristics of the addictive process are:

Salience: Occurs when the activity or drug becomes the most important activity in a person’s life.

Mood modification: Occurs when one’s physical state alters, as in feeling buzzed, high, numb or tranquil when on a drug or engaged in an addictive activity.

Tolerance: When one requires an increased amount of the substance or activity over time to produce the same euphoric effect, one's tolerance is said to have increased.

Withdrawal symptoms: When one stops taking a substance or participating in an addictive activity, unpleasant feelings—physical and mental—most likely occur.

Conflict: As a result of the addictive chemical or activity, often interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts occur.

Relapse: Occurs when the tendency to repeatedly revert to earlier pathological patterns of use re-emerges, and for the most extreme patterns of use to be quickly restored after many years of control or abstinence.³

Reviewing these characteristics, we see that core patterns of behaviors are associated with the addiction process. Whether a substance or process addiction, addicts become consumed with the activity or drug, using it as a form of escape and relief from existing problems in their lives. We see that addicts will rely upon the activity or drug to alter mood, a key motivator driving the addiction and that unpleasant feelings occur when forced to go without it, leading to withdrawal and frequent relapse.

Roger, a thirty-three-year-old computer engineer, explained, "Being online felt like a drug high. I was hooked on online games, and every time I played *EverQuest*, I felt completely absorbed in this online fantasy world. My wife yelled at me every night because I hardly spent any time with her, my kids hated that I tied up the computer, and it started to affect my work. I skipped meetings, missed deadlines, and once I called in sick just to stay home and play *EverQuest*. It got so bad that my wife of eighteen years threatened to leave me and my boss fired me when he found out I was playing the game at work. For me the Internet became

more than just a fascination; it was an addiction.”

Addictive fascination has been justly compared to the more commonly known stage of romantic or infatuated love in which the lover thinks constantly of the beloved and pines and suffers when not in his or her presence. An individual in such a state of mind is said to be obsessed with his love object and subordinates every other aspect of his existence, including at times his health, work and other relationships to the fulfillment of the almost unbearable need and longing to be united with his beloved. And we know from life, as well as literature, that so passionate and frequently desperate are such lovers that at times they even die or kill as a consequence of or for their love.

Anyone who understands the terrific drive and intensity that underlies and propels well-established addictive illness will not be surprised at the difficulties individuals encounter when attempting to control or terminate their addictive behaviors. In such situations the biblical quote, “the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” is an apt description of affairs once the individual has reached the stage of recognizing his addiction and the need to do something about it (Matthew 26:41). In many, if not most cases, addicts recognize the harmful nature of their behavior only very late in the course of the addictive process, attempting to conceal it and making the problems created by the addiction worse.

PRAYER CONNECTIONS

- As you finish reading this section on the signs of addiction, what fears have surfaced? Write down the fears of which you are aware. How do you feel as you look at your fears?

- Ponder the following Scriptures:

[D]o not fear, for I am with you,
do not be afraid, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you.... (Isaiah 41:10)

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your
Savior. (Isaiah 43:1–3)

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear....
(1 John 4:18)

- Whose perfect love casts out all fear? Journal your responses, feelings or questions to the above readings. Listen to or sing “Be Not Afraid,” which was recorded by the St. Louis Jesuits.

THE GRAVITATIONAL PULL

Similar to an alcoholic who needs to consume greater levels of alcohol in order to achieve satisfaction, online addicts need to spend progressively longer amounts of time online. Furthermore, addicts will go to great lengths to mask the nature of their online activities, primarily to conceal the extent and nature of the behavior. In most cases of process addiction, an individual's compulsion is often associated with increasingly painful states of tension and agitation that is only relieved through the completion of the act. For example, an alcoholic is driven to drink or an overeater is driven to binge on food during moments of tension and anxiety. Similarly, as with other addictive disorders, uncomfortable emotional states, negative thoughts or stressful situations can all serve to trigger online binges.

EMOTIONAL STATES

Feelings such as depression, hopelessness or pessimism can drive the alcoholic to drink or the overeater to eat. The addictive behavior itself acts as a way to temporarily avoid these feelings. Under the influence the alcoholic feels as if all the other problems in her life disappear, and when eating, the overeater experiences a sense of peace and relaxation, lessening the overwhelming stress and frustration she feels.

Addictions create a numbing effect. The alcoholic becomes numb to his feelings and perceptions, thus creating a false sense of security. The apparent benefits produced by this positive, altered state reinforces his drinking, long before a physical dependency has set in. The overeater is most vulnerable to bingeing during moments of tension, and eating becomes a way to find comfort and relief from the pressures in life. In each case

the compulsive behavior serves to reduce the underlying emotional tension, and similarly, an Internet addict's use of the computer is less about using it as an information tool and more about finding a psychological escape to cope with difficult and painful feelings.

Like a craving for a cigarette or the desire to have a drink, emotions such as stress, depression, loneliness, anxiety or burnout can lead to an addict's need to go online, which serves as a temporary distraction to fill an emotional void. Online addicts explain that they feel a difference between online and offline emotions. They feel frustrated, worried, angry, anxious and depressed when offline. When online, they feel excited, thrilled, uninhibited, attractive, supported and more desirable. These strong positive emotions reinforce the compulsive behavior.

NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

Addictive thinkers often feel apprehensive because they frequently anticipate disaster, even when there is no logical reason for doing so. While addicts are not the only people who worry and anticipate negative happenings, they tend to do this more often than other people. Internet addicts engage in this same type of catastrophic thinking and suffer from a constant stream of negative thoughts that lead to low self-esteem. These harmful thought patterns include all or nothing thinking, magnification of personal problems and selectively interpreting negative events and referring those to themselves. In particular, Internet addicts tend to dwell on negative events and immediate outcomes, fail to make accurate internal attributions, have low rates of self-reinforcement and high rates of self-punishment. However, online they create a virtual life that provides a subjective escape to avoid real or perceived problems. Virtually, the

addict feels more confident, possesses a greater self-regard and achieves a more optimistic self-evaluation. This relieves feelings of personal inadequacy and deep core beliefs about themselves, such as "I am no good," or "I am a failure." However, relief is only temporary, so the act is repeated.

STRESSFUL SITUATIONS

According to Peele a person is vulnerable to addiction when she feels a lack of satisfaction in her life, an absence of intimacy or strong connection to others, a lack of self-confidence or compelling interests or a loss of hope.⁴ In a similar manner, individuals who are dissatisfied with or upset by a particular area or multiple areas of their lives have an increased likelihood of developing Internet addiction because they don't have any other way of coping. For example, instead of making positive choices to directly address a marital problem, job dissatisfaction, medical illness, unemployment or academic instability, Internet addicts will typically go online for hours. This serves to dull the pain, avoid the problem and maintain the status quo. When they log offline, they realize that their difficulties have not changed. Nothing is altered by Internet use, yet it appears easier to jump online than to deal with the difficult or overwhelming life issues head-on. Such substitution for missing needs often allows the addicts to temporarily escape their problems, but the substitute behaviors are not the means to solve the root of the real underlying problems in their lives.

A DOWNWARD SPIRAL

The longer the person is away from the Internet, the more intense such unpleasant feelings become. Therefore, the driving force for many online addicts is the relief gained by engaging in

the Internet. And because addictions serve a useful purpose for the addict, the attachment or sensation may grow to such proportions that it damages a person's life.

These feelings translate into cues that cultivate a psychological longing for the euphoria associated with the Internet that enables a person to forget or feel OK about some insurmountable problem. The Internet provides an artificial, temporary feeling of security or calm, of self-worth or accomplishment, of power and control or intimacy or belonging. Therefore, the Internet blocks out sensations of pain, uncertainty or discomfort by creating powerfully distracting sensations that focus and absorb attention. It is these perceived benefits that explain why a person keeps coming back to the addictive experience. When they are forced to go without it, addicts experience withdrawal, panic and even racing, obsessive thoughts, such as, "I must have it"; "I can't go without it"; "I need it."

Elizabeth worked as a history teacher for a community college outside of Detroit. At thirty-eight she spent her nights in front of the computer reading sites on historical figures to help prepare her classes and scanning Web sites on gardening, her one true passion. One night she discovered a chat room for gardeners. "It started innocently enough," Elizabeth explains. "Out of curiosity, I talked with a few of the members. We had so much in common, and soon they became my closest friends. I didn't eat, didn't sleep. All I did was chat and instant message (IM). Whenever I felt stressed at work, had a fight with my boyfriend, or when I found out my mother was diagnosed with cancer, it was the one safe place in my life where I could turn. It's like I disappeared into this virtual world that didn't demand much from me, but gave me all kinds of acceptance. But really all it did was make

my life worse. My boyfriend left me, my friends stopped calling, and I was hanging on to my job by a shoestring. I even tried to get my boyfriend to go online just so he'd stay, but he wanted nothing to do with it. He wanted me to give it up, but I needed it too much. When it comes right down to it, I wouldn't give it up, not even for him."

Ask yourself the following questions and see what patterns emerge:

- What time of day do you usually go online?
- Do you log online the first thing in the morning?
- Do you deprive yourself of sleep to stay online?
- How long do you typically stay online?
- Are you online for just a few minutes or for a few hours?
- How do you feel just before you log online?
- Are you stressed, annoyed or tense, but feel more relaxed, less irritable or less anxious when online?
- Do you ever use the Internet to forget other problems going on in your life, perhaps a recent fight with a spouse, a disagreement with a coworker or a bad day at school?
- Does being online make you momentarily forget about these problems? Or does it in some way help you cope with them?
- How do you feel when you are offline?
- Do you ever miss or crave the Internet?