Internet Addiction Afflicting Growing Number of Web Surfers

BY REID GOLDSBOROUGH

One of the top tech trends for 2008 will be Internet addiction, prognosticates J. Walter Thompson, the advertising agency powerhouse. What's old is new again. "Internet addiction has been a concern since the dawn of the Web," acknowledges Ann Mack, the agency's "Director of Trendspotting.

It may not be a new trend, but it remains an important one. Mack points to online discussions, Internet gambling, online porn, and interactive role-playing games. But just about everything about the Internet can snag you in one way or another.

Are you an Internet addict? A surprising number of people are. Between 5 and 10 percent of Web users suffer from some form of Internet dependency, estimates Maressa Hecht Orzack, who has studied computer addiction at McLean Hospital, a psychiatric hospital in Belmont, Mass., affiliated with Harvard University.

There's even a name for it: Internet Addiction Disorder, or IAD. It first made waves in 1995; two years after the Web went graphical with the introduction of the browser Mosaic. Ironically, the disorder was suggested by New York City psychiatrist Ivan Goldberg as a joke, parodying the bevy of new psychiatric conditions that had been recently recognized by the American Psychiatric Association.

But his thoughts struck a chord, with colleagues telling Goldberg that his descriptions were right on target, and Goldberg came to accept IAD as a serious affliction. People were, and are, going overboard, spending too much time online to the detriment of their work, academic, family or social lives.

IAD still hasn't yet been accepted by the American Psychiatric Association as a formal diagnosis, and the term "Internet overuse syndrome" is probably better descriptively. But there are ways to tell if you're so afflicted, according to Goldberg, who maintains a Web site titled "Depression Central" (www.psycom.net/depression.central.html).

You may be "addicted" to the Internet, says Goldberg, if you need to spend more and more time online to achieve the same level of satisfaction and feel anxious when not connected. You might grasp your situation but find it difficult to cut down on your Internet use. If you're an addict, says Goldberg, you're probably reducing or forgoing important social, occupational or recreational activities in favor of your time online. You may even be experiencing sleep deprivation, facing marital difficulties, losing friendships and neglecting your job or school work to the point of risking being fired or flunking out.

Some experts dispute that IAD is a true addiction, but Kimberly S. Young differs. "It's like other addictions," says Young, director of the Center for Internet Addiction Recovery (www.netaddiction.com) and a professor at St. Bonaventure University. "It has same qualities as compulsive gambling, shopping, even smoking and alcoholism." Before you can be cured of Internet Addiction, as with other addictions, you have to recognize that you're hooked, according to Young.

Common warning signs, she says, are compulsively checking your e-mail, always anticipating your next Internet session, and others complaining that you're spending too much time or money going online. As with any other addiction, you have to be motivated in order to kick the habit. "You have to really want to change," says Young.

Reestablishing a healthy relationship to the Internet depends to a great extent on your individual circumstances. In some cases, all you may need to do is develop time-management techniques to help you better control yourself, says Goldberg. You could, for instance, set a daily online time limit of an hour a day.

In other cases, you may need to deal with any underlying reasons that cause you to feel compelled to spend so much time online. There may be problems or conflicts you're consciously or subconsciously trying to avoid, which may be dealt with best through therapy.

"Internet addiction can be an attempt to deny or avoid another more serious problem in your life," says Goldberg. "People spend excess time in front of their computer, or avoid thinking about such difficulties as what they will do when they graduate from school, the infidelity of their spouse, the drug abuse of their children, and so on."

The key concept here is the surrendering of the will. If you no longer control your relationship to it — whether it's an activity such as Internet use or a pharmaceutical drug — you're in trouble.

The Internet is a fantastic medium, dramatically improving our ability to communicate with another and find information to help us with our careers or studies. But, as with most things in life, there's a need to keep things in healthy balance. A

Reid Goldsborough is a syndicated columnist and author of the book Straight Talk About the Information Superhighway. He can be reached at reidgold@netaxs.com or http://members.home.net/reidgold.
Copyright of Community College Week is the property of Autumn Publishing Enterprises, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.