Taking Back Control From Computer Addiction

Is your computer usage out of control?

by Liz Parnell

It was 3pm when I took back control of my life. There were no screaming confrontations. No slamming of doors or handing in of resignations. I simply turned the computer off and napped on the couch for 90 minutes while my children played. I had my life back.

It hadn't always been this way, the relationship between me and the computer. I think it started about halfway through my daughter's first year. I had post-natal depression. Despite working part time (two days a week in a child care centre looking after other people's babies and toddlers), I felt isolated and alone. I started going on Internet parenting forums, finding a place to fit in. It became addictive. I was on the computer up to nine hours a day. I would check the forums for new posts last thing before I went to bed at night, and first thing in the morning. I'd check the new posts periodically throughout the day, and once I'd read them I'd check if there were any more new posts in the meantime. I was seriously addicted.

I live in Australia and figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics say that as of 2005/06, 70 percent of homes had a computer, with 60 percent of homes having Internet access. The Australian working population spends, on average, eight hours of leisure time per week on the Internet, ranking them second in the world (behind China) in Internet usage. There are four million MSN accounts registered in Australia, and Australian children spend an average of 6.2 hours per week accessing the Internet. In North America, at the end of 2007, over 70 percent of the population used the Internet and the average Canadian family spends 32 hours a week online, according to Digital Media World. Almost 20 percent of Americans spend six hours or more per day accessing the Internet.

Research into the area of technology and Internet addiction is limited, however some small studies have found that excessive Internet usage increases the chances of social isolation and depression. The academic community is divided as to whether technology addiction is a valid addiction, however, research shows that when compared with other indicators of addiction in other areas of life, technology and the Internet can be addictive and five to 10 percent of individuals may be affected. The recent addition of the term "*infomania*" in a number of dictionaries, including the Macquarie Dictionary in Australia, the Macmillan English Dictionary and Webster's highlights the prevalence of our distraction and preoccupation with technological devices.

Signs of Internet addiction are similar to signs of other addictions and include excessive fatigue, declining interest in hobbies, decline in performance at work, using it to escape from other problems and withdrawal from friends, potentially caused by an excessive reliance on online "friends." The problems of Internet addiction and the associated problem of online gaming addiction have been so severe that clinics to treat online gaming addictions have opened in China and Amsterdam.

Excessive reliance on the Internet for personal contact can result in a person being exposed to a unrepresentative demographic. At times, this can be helpful. Individuals battling chronic fatigue syndrome can commiserate with others with the condition in their own time and without leaving their homes. However, it can also promote extremism. People suffering from anorexia can access websites and forums dedicated to anorexia. These "pro-ana" sites encourage these people to go to further extremes of weight loss and limited calorie consumption.

Over the years, numerous studies have shown that individuals who suffer from depression are more likely to also succumb to addictions. More recently, a study on Internet addiction has found that the prevalence of Internet addiction is significantly more frequent in individuals who are clinically depressed. The study could not conclude, however, whether the addiction preceded the depression or the depression preceded the addiction. ▷

According to Maressa Hecht Orzack, director of the Computer Addiction Study Center at Harvard University's McLean Hospital, between five and ten percent of Web surfers suffer some form of Web dependency.
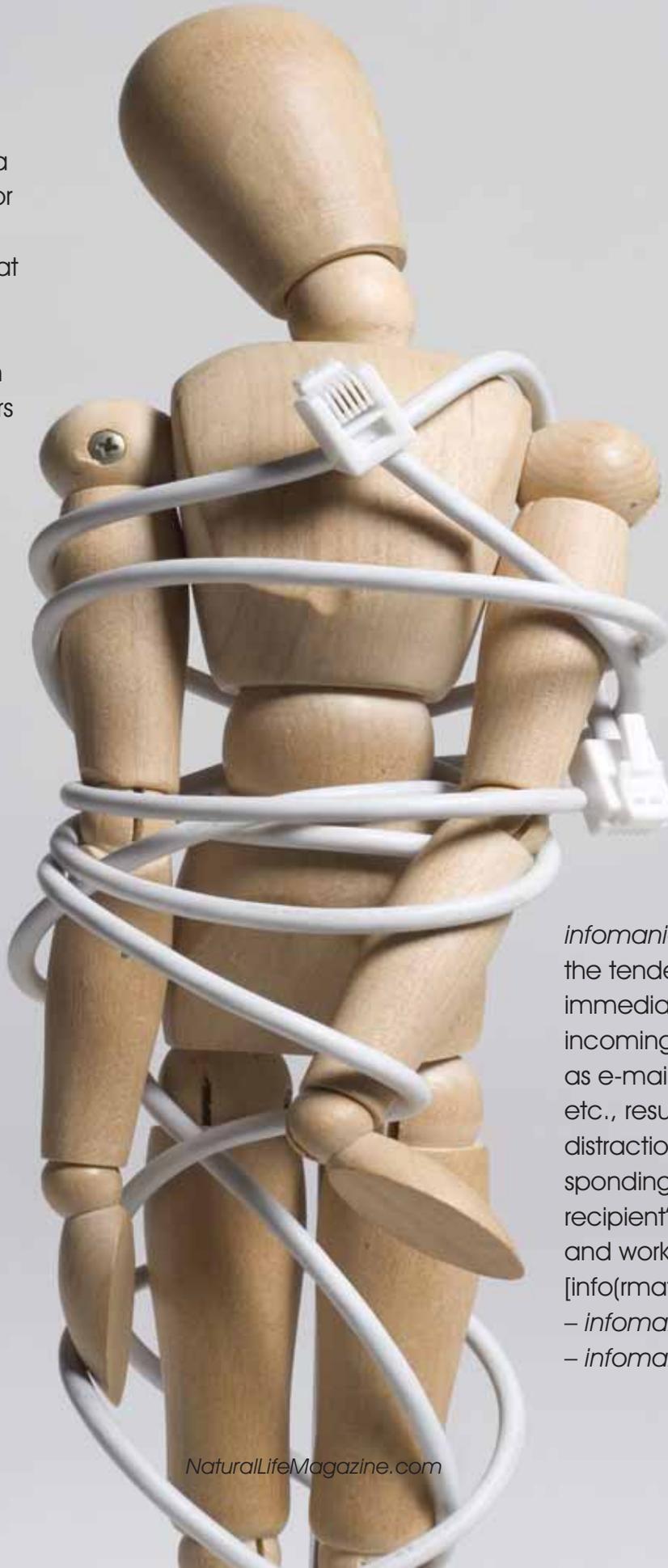
infomania, noun: the tendency to give immediate attention to incoming messages such as e-mail, text messages, etc., resulting in constant distraction and a corresponding drop in the recipient's attention levels and work performance. [info(rmation) + -mania]
– *infomaniac*, noun
– *infomaniacal,* adjective

"I don't even help [my children] with their homework in the evening because I'm in the chat rooms, and I don't help put them to bed because I don't realize how late it is. I also don't help them get ready for school in the morning like I used to do because I'm checking my e-mail. And I just can't stop myself."

Raymond, an Internet addict as quoted in *Caught in the Net* (see sidebar below)

Learn More

The Psychology of the Internet by Patricia Wallace (Cambridge University Press, 2001)

The Soft Addiction Solution by Judith Wright (Tarcher October, 2006)

Virtual Addiction: Help for Netheads, Cyberfreaks, and Those Who Love Them by David N. Greenfield (New Harbinger Publications, 1999)

Caught in the Net: How to Recognize the Signs of Internet Addiction – and a Winning Strategy for Recovery by Kimberly S. Young (Wiley, 1998)

The Center for Internet Behavior
12 North Main Street, Suite 108
West Hartford, CT 06117
www.virtual-addiction.com

Computer Addiction Services
McLean Hospital
115 Mill Street
Belmont, MA 02478
www.computeraddiction.com

I believe that stay-at-home parents, particularly mothers, are exceptionally vulnerable to this kind of disorder. There are many risk factors associated with being a stay-at-home parent that could lead to an Internet addiction.

Firstly, there is the social isolation. Some parents don't have access to a car or public transport, and those who do still spend the majority of their waking hours in the presence of children under the age of five years old. Mothers, in particular, feel this social isolation as studies have proven time and time again that women, more so than men, are social creatures. Many mothers flock to Internet forums and groups for support and friendship. For example, in 15 minutes in the middle of the day, on the popular *Essential Baby* forum there were 1,091 users active, and a total of 120,767 users who had made almost six million posts. This is just one of many forums in Australia and there are many more world wide.

Secondly, the arrival of a new baby is a time of stress. Stress has been indicated in studies following the onset of addictions. Sleeplessness and emotional drain from the responsibilities of caring for a baby or young toddler also contribute to this stress, as can financial strain due to the loss of one income.

Thirdly, there is the added risk of post-natal depression due to hormonal fluctuations following the birth. Post natal depression is defined as depression that begins any time within the first 12 months of their child's life. While women are infinitely more prone to post-natal depression, fathers are also susceptible, especially when their partners are also suffering from depression.

These three factors contributed to my personal Internet addiction. While I am certainly making progress, I still find I spend a lot of time at the computer. However, I have cut down on the number of forums I visit and the amount of time I spend there. I am also striving to be more productive when I am on the computer, using the time to update my website, read up on things that are motivational (at the moment I need motivation to exercise and lose weight) and write articles. If ever I start to let the Internet control my life again, I have standards in place to rein it in quickly.

Liz Parnell is a computer-loving homeschooling mom who lives and writes in Australia. Visit her on the net at www.lizparnell.com. **- NL -**