

## Balancing Your Internet Use

We spend a lot of time on our computers while at work, but what about at home?

The Internet has provided communication tools that have opened a new domain in social interaction. It is now possible to publish personal thoughts or ideas from the privacy of your own home to a vast audience of hundreds or even thousands of people. It is now possible to chat with people from around the globe, and to maintain instant messaging relationships with strangers.

Research on Internet use is limited but growing, and there is controversy about whether or not Internet use can become an addiction. Dr. Kimberly Young (1), an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Pittsburgh, coined the phrase "Pathological Internet Use" to describe the condition she studied in 396 cases.

Dr. Young presented her findings at the American Psychological Association convention in 1996, in which the symptoms of problematic Internet use were matched to those of pathological gambling. These and other questions about problematic Internet use will remain unanswered until more controlled studies are done.

How many people are likely to be affected? A 1998 study of 18,000 Internet users who logged onto the ABC News web site found that 5.7 percent of the sample met the criteria for compulsive Internet use (2). The majority of those who become "addicted" to the Internet do so in their first six months of exposure, after which their use levels subside.

If you are concerned about how much you use the Internet, consider these suggestions (3): Ask yourself, "What am I missing out on when I spend so much time on the 'Net?'" Write these activities down and decrease your Internet time to do some of these activities.

Set reasonable Internet use goals and stick to them. Take frequent breaks, at least 5 minutes each hour, and

do some other activity.

Alter your routine to break your usage patterns. If you spend evenings on the Internet, start limiting your use to mornings, or alternate your morning/evening usage.

Find other people to talk to. Many people become hooked on the Internet through talking with others online. Find people in "real life" to talk to by joining a club, going to a concert, dining out with friends, or attending a training class.

Examine the underlying issues. Frequently Internet overuse is a symptom of some other problem, such as feelings of emptiness or self-doubt. See assistance for what's going on underneath your Internet use.

Seek out friends and acquaintances who "couldn't care less" about the Internet. Instead of trying to convert



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them to the power and magic of the 'Net, take time to appreciate the reality that all life is not yet online.

Stay connected to the offline world. Visit newsstands, book and music stores and participate in entertainment such as dance, museums, music and live theater. Long novels and poetry readings are hard to experience online.

Treat the Internet as a tool. Stay focused on the fact that the Internet is a means to an end. Plan your strategy - whether you're looking for information or entertainment - with the end in mind and you'll save valuable time.

If you think you might be addicted to the internet or want help overcoming problem behaviors, contact me for a consultation about how therapy might help you.

#### References:

- (1) Young, K. "Pathological Internet Use: The emergence of a new clinical disorder." Paper presented to the American Psychological Association, Toronto, 1996.
- (2) DeAngelis, T. "Is Internet addiction real? More research is being conducted to explore the way people use - and misuse - the Internet." *Monitor on Psychology*, Volume 31 (4), 2000.
- (3) Self-help strategies adapted from Goldstein, D. & Flory, J. *Best of the Net Online Guide Book Series*. Toronto, Canada: Irwin Professional Publishing, 1998, and from Jonathan Kandell, Ph.D., Psychologist and Assistant Director of the University Counseling Center, University of Maryland - College Park, 1996.