Online Addiction

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DIGITAL ISSUES

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The Nature of Online Addiction

Ever since the Internet became accessible to the public in the 1990s, users have reported feeling addicted to going online. In fact, people who owned a BlackBerry, one of the earliest smartphones, often joked that it should be called the CrackBerry because of its addictive properties. Nonetheless, for years addiction experts resisted using the word *addiction* to refer to uncontrollable behaviors related to online activities. Instead, these experts insisted—and some still insist—that excessive Internet use be called a dependency, obsession, or compulsion.

The main reason is because *addiction* has long been used to describe the excessive and harmful abuse of drugs and/or alcohol. The American Psychiatric Association (APA) has classified drug and alcohol addictions as mental illnesses. Therefore, some experts worry that if spending a lot of time on the Internet is deemed an addiction, people whose online habits are excessive but not harmful might be considered mentally ill as well. As prominent psychiatrist Allen Frances notes, "It's a slippery slope. When you turn people's passions and interests into mental disorders, you start to define what's normal and what's not."[8]

Despite such concerns, beginning in the 2000s prominent individuals in the medical community called for the APA to recognize Internet dependency as an addiction. Some have asked the APA to include a diagnosis of Internet addiction in its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*

of Mental Disorders, though the APA has repeatedly refused to do so. Nonetheless, passionate discussions surrounding the idea have caused many medical professionals to reconsider their resistance to it.

As a result, today many experts feel comfortable referring to Internet dependency as an Internet addiction, and there is now a common definition of what constitutes this addiction. According to the Center for Internet Addiction, a treatment center for Internet addicts, such addictions are "any online-related, compulsive behavior which interferes with normal living and causes severe stress on family, friends, loved ones, and one's work environment."[9]

> **"When you turn people's passions and interests into mental disorders, you start to define what's normal and what's not."[8]**
>
> **—Psychiatrist Allen Frances.**

Dominating Daily Life

Michael Murphy (not his real name) experienced this phenomenon firsthand as a sophomore at the University of Miami in 2014. He became hooked on playing an online video game called *League of Legends* (*LoL*). A free download, this fast-paced game groups players into teams of five before each match, giving it a social component that can cause many players to make friends.

Murphy says that one of his *LoL* friends warned him the game could be addictive, but he laughed off the suggestion. Then he began to experience worrisome changes in behavior. He reports,

> I would spend hours behind my screen, so many that I bought eyedrops to keep my eyes from itching to the point where I couldn't play. Half the floor was covered with dirty laundry. I'd grab a shirt off the floor . . . if I did end up leaving my apartment. My pantry held mostly microwavable food that I could make in the time I had to wait while I connected to the [Internet] server and was matched with opponents. My room was full of reeking bowls of leftover Ramen Noodles, now crusted and inedible, and red Solo cups full of old SpaghettiOs.[10]

Addiction-Fueled Illegal Behavior

A 2014 study of high school students in North Carolina suggested that teens who are addicted to the Internet find it difficult to differentiate between legal and illegal behavior. The research team reported in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior* that there was a correlation between Internet addiction and digital piracy (stealing online content). More than 40 percent of the students studied had some degree of Internet addiction. In addition, these students were far more likely to have illegally downloaded software than those who were not addicted. Interestingly, however, addiction seemed to have no bearing on whether a student pirated music or movies.

so he could play every waking hour, and he barely slept. When he did sleep, it was usually in front of his computer. He also ate in front of the computer, and he stopped showering and changing his clothes. As a result, he failed all his classes and only talked to her when he wanted to tell her something about the characters in his game.

Their marriage soon fell apart. Ashley now says of her ex-husband's compulsion to play *WoW*, "I don't think he could have stopped if he wanted."[54] Indeed, Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Sherry Turkle, an expert in technology addiction, says of individuals with such a severe case of Internet addiction, "People behave just as if they were under the grip of cocaine. They are sneaking away to get on Facebook and putting game time above relationships."

Parent-child relationships can also suffer because of such addictions. As Turkle points out, "When Mom's reading 'Harry Potter' to her kids with her right hand and scrolling through her email with her left, the family dynamic is going to suffer. They're really not giving kids their full attention."[55]

Children can also become online addicts. This was the case, for example, with a three-year-old who developed an addiction to the video-sharing website YouTube. "This wasn't something that I meant to happen," the girl's mother says. "It was a bit disturbing." She reports that one day she and her daughter were watching music videos on a tablet when the girl demanded to see more and more of them. Unhappy with the sometimes child-inappropriate content of these videos, the mother coaxed her daughter to watch children's videos instead. Her daughter then became hooked on these videos. "Once she has the tablet and has started watching YouTube, I know that I'm in for a fight [if I try to get her to stop]," says the mother. "There was one tantrum that she had when I went to take it away after two hours of letting her watch, where she literally threw herself on top of the tablet so that I couldn't take it away."[56]

"When Mom's reading 'Harry Potter' to her kids with her right hand and scrolling through her email with her left, the family dynamic is going to suffer."[55]

—Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Sherry Turkle, an expert on technology addiction.

Relationships can suffer when parents spend more time with their online devices than with their kids. Other family relationships can also be affected by addictive online behavior.

SOURCE NOTES

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ORGANIZATIONS TO CONTACT

American Psychiatric Association (APA)

1000 Wilson Blvd., Suite 1825
Arlington, VA 22209
phone: (703) 907-7300; toll-free: (888) 357-7924
e-mail: apa@psych.org
website: www.psych.org

Established in 1844, the APA is the world's largest psychiatric organization, representing more than thirty-three thousand psychiatric physicians worldwide. Its website provides information about mental health issues and APA publications.

Center for Internet Addiction

PO Box 72
Bradford, PA 16701
phone: (814) 451-2405
website: www.netaddiction.com

The Center for Internet Addiction offers counseling for problematic Internet use and related issues. Its website provides information on issues such as compulsive web surfing and online gambling.

Center for Internet and Technology Addiction

17 S. Highland St.
West Hartford, CT 06119
phone: (860) 561-8727
e-mail: drdave@virtual-addiction.com
website: www.virtual-addiction.com

The Center for Internet and Technology Addiction provides counseling, information, and resources related to online addictions. Its website offers articles, news releases, and videos related to these addictions.

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Books

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