

Internet addiction

Internet addiction is when a person has a compulsive need to spend a great deal of time on the Internet, to the point where other areas of life (such as relationships, work or health) are allowed to suffer. The person becomes dependent on using the Internet and needs to spend more and more time online to achieve the same 'high'.

There is a range of behaviours that can be referred to as Internet addiction. Other terms for this addiction include Internet addiction disorder (IAD) and net addiction.

Generally speaking, surveys suggest that males who are addicted to spending time online tend to prefer viewing pornographic websites, while females are attracted to chat rooms for making platonic and cybersexual relationships.

Internet addiction is controversial

Medical opinion is divided on whether Internet addiction exists as a mental disorder in its own right or whether it's an expression of pre-existing mental disorders or behavioural problems. For example, a person who compulsively trawls the Internet for online gambling venues may have a gambling problem rather than an Internet addiction.

More research is needed into this 'chicken or the egg' aspect of Internet addiction before any conclusive answers are known. A recent study in the USA showed that four per cent of college (university) students aged between 18 and 20 showed problematic internet behaviour.

College and university students may be particularly vulnerable to addiction, yet studies on internet addiction in students typically only use self-selected online surveys, with no control groups for comparison. Sometime survey studies do not give reliable results as they may only study a single class so the data cannot be generalised to a broader group or population, and the construction and use of surveys can produce results that are hard to interpret.

Signs of Internet addiction

According to the American Psychiatric Association, Internet addiction can include three or more of the following:

- The user needs to spend ever-increasing amounts of time online to feel the same sense of satisfaction.
- If they can't go online, the user experiences unpleasant withdrawal symptoms such as anxiety, moodiness and compulsive fantasising about the Internet. Using the Internet relieves these symptoms.
- The user turns to the Internet to cope with negative feelings such as guilt, anxiety or depression.
- The user spends a significant amount of time engaging in other activities related to the Internet (such as researching internet vendors, internet books).
- The user neglects other areas of life (such as relationships, work, school and leisure pursuits) in favour of spending time on the Internet.
- The user is prepared to lose relationships, jobs or other important things in favour of the Internet.

Different types of addiction

The categories of Internet addiction include:

- **Sex** – the person uses the Internet to look at, download or swap pornography or to engage in casual cybersex with other users. This results in neglect of their real-world sex life with their partner or spouse.
- **Relationships** – the person uses chat rooms to form online relationships ('online dating') at the expense of spending time with real-life family and friends. This could include having online affairs ('cyberadultery').
- **Games** – this can include spending excessive amounts of time playing games, gambling, shopping or trading. This can lead to severe financial troubles.
- **Information** – the user obsessively searches for and collects information.

Social networking addiction – includes the desire to constantly monitor social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. This includes constantly updating profile posts and checking messages to inform friends of what you are doing at the present moment.

A range of theories

The actual cause is unknown. The current range of theories for compulsive Internet use includes:

- **Personality issues** – the user may have personality issues that make them likely to become dependent on a range of things – such as cigarettes, alcohol, gambling, other drugs or the Internet – given the right circumstances.
- **Shyness** – people who are shy in real-life situations may be drawn to the anonymity of the Internet and believe they can be their 'true selves' when online.
- **Biochemical responses** – the person's brain responds to the online rewards with 'feel good' chemicals and this biochemical 'high' encourages dependence.
- **Escapism** – the Internet is so absorbing that the user can forget about their problems or escape negative emotions while online. Because it makes them feel better, it encourages them to turn to the Internet more and more for relief.
- **Instant gratification** – search engines help users find what they want quickly – for example information, gambling opportunities or pornography. This instant gratification encourages them to stay online.

Self-help suggestions

If you think you may be addicted to the Internet and you want to change your behaviour, you could try the following strategies:

- Take note of your symptoms – for example, keep track of your behaviour, thoughts and feelings.
- Think about why you use the Internet so much. What makes you go online? Is there a real problem you're not facing up to?
- Brainstorm (think about) other ways to cope with your problem that don't involve the Internet. Choose some that will work and put them into practice.
- Use relaxation methods like deep breathing or meditation to manage anxiety symptoms.
- Rediscover the neglected areas of your life – for example, socialise with friends, make love to your partner, take your children to the beach, get out and be active.
- Seek professional help if necessary.

Professional treatment

It isn't necessary to quit using the Internet altogether. Professional treatment aims to allow the person to use the Internet positively rather than compulsively.

Internet addiction seems to respond well to cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). This type of therapy focuses on changing patterns of thinking and beliefs that are associated with and trigger anxiety. The basis of cognitive behaviour therapy is that beliefs trigger thoughts, which then trigger feelings and produce behaviours. Consult with your doctor for further information and referral. There are also internet addiction support groups available that may help treat your addiction.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Psychologist

- Australian Psychological Society Tel. (03) 8662 3300 or 1800 333 497

Things to remember

- Internet addiction is an umbrella term that refers to the compulsive need to spend a great deal of time on the Internet, to the point where relationships, work and health are allowed to suffer.
- Medical opinion is divided on whether Internet addiction exists as a mental disorder in its own right.
- Professional treatment, which may include cognitive behaviour therapy, aims to allow the person to use the Internet properly rather than compulsively.

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