

# Internet Dependence

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Internet dependence is a term for excessive use of the Internet to the detriment of one's physical, psychological, social, or vocational well-being. The majority of Americans and virtually all college students now use the Internet as a source of information and entertainment on at least an occasional basis. Most use it on a regular basis without becoming dependent upon it. However, for some, involvement on the Internet begins to have serious, negative consequences. When such consequences are minimized or ignored while Internet use increases, Internet dependence is occurring. Excessive Internet use may revolve around chat rooms, pornography; database searches; blogging; gambling; gaming; shopping; or any number of other online activities. As of 2005, it is estimated that 6% of users are Internet dependent.

## Who Becomes Dependent on the Internet?

Anyone can become dependent on the internet. Like other compulsive activities, internet viewing distracts people from uncomfortable emotions. Internet dependence occurs for males and females as well as members of all races, ethnicities, religions, and cultures. However, certain factors contribute, both directly and indirectly, to a greater likelihood of dependence. Individuals who have a history of impulsive or compulsive behaviors, for example, may have more difficulty than others resisting various forms of gratification available online. Similarly, individuals who are shy or socially anxious may prefer the relative comfort and anonymity of cyber-relationships. Those with large blocks of unstructured time on their hands are more susceptible to Internet dependence than those whose free time is very structured and limited. For this last reason alone, many college students are particularly at risk for developing Internet dependence.

## Signs of Internet Dependence

The following are common warning signs that you are at risk for Internet dependence. If you find yourself identifying with these items, please consider getting help in addressing your problem.

- You are spending more and more time online.
- You are spending less and less time with friends or family.
- You are preoccupied with Internet activities and your next online session.
- You feel restless or irritable when you are not online.
- You have lied about your Internet usage or tried to conceal it from friends, family members, or others.
- Your sleep or physical health is being affected by your Internet usage.
- Your academic and/or work performance is being compromised by your Internet usage.
- You use the Internet as a way of avoiding those around you.
- You use the Internet as a way of escaping from your own feelings.

- You have intended to cut down on your time online, but have not.

## **Coping Effectively with Internet Dependence**

The first step in coping effectively with Internet dependence is recognizing that the problem exists. As with other kinds of behavior that have become habitual or compulsive, the individual suffering from Internet dependence may not be conscious of the extent to which his or her behavior has become problematic. The fact that the costs of Internet use have come to outweigh its benefits may at first be denied, but this fact needs to be acknowledged.

On one level, Internet dependence is a behavioral, time-management problem. Most individuals dealing with Internet dependence find that it is helpful to alter their routines. They often need to limit the time they stay online and make an effort to devote time to other activities. They may need outside help of some sort in adhering to the limits they set for themselves.

On a deeper, more significant level, Internet dependence is a problem of human disconnection. It would be most helpful—though it may seem extremely difficult at first—to cultivate flesh-and-blood relationships in addition to cyber-relationships. Avoidance of face-to-face relationships is often a part of Internet dependence. It is also often the case that Internet dependence has been driven by feelings such as boredom, anxiety, emptiness, or loneliness. It is important for each individual to consider what has led to the dependence and what has been keeping it in place. Counseling can be a very useful way of getting support, exploring the issues and feelings involved in the dependence, and deciding what specific options would be most appropriate.

## **For More Information**

Union College students whose Internet use has become unmanageable can obtain confidential help from caring psychologists at the Counseling Center. The Counseling Center also provides consultation to those who have a friend or loved one struggling with Internet dependence. Appointments can be made by calling (518) 388-6161, or by stopping by the front desk at the Wicker Wellness Center.