

## **Internet addiction**

According to The Office for National Statistics (ONS), in 2010 30.1 million adults in the UK (60 per cent) accessed the internet almost every day. Continuing advances in technology now mean that more people than ever before are able use the internet extensively for both work and social purposes, and research and communication which could have been time consuming now takes just a matter of minutes.

The use of social networking sites (Facebook, Myspace, Friends Reunited, Match etc) is also becoming increasingly popular, with 43 per cent of Internet users posting messages to social networking sites, chats sites and blogs etc in 2010. This activity has proved to be most common among internet users aged between 16 and 24, of whom 75 per cent posted messages and 50 per cent uploaded self created content in 2010. Though social networking is an activity heavily associated with younger generations, in 2010 31 per cent of internet users aged between 45 and 54 used the internet to post messages.

Whilst it is a positive step that we can now talk, search, shop, play, find love and experience all of the other far reaching benefits of the internet, as with everything in life, there can't be a positive without a negative. Internet addiction disorder is the term used to describe excessive computer use which begins to interfere with daily life. As it stands, internet addiction disorder is not officially recognised as a clinical disorder, though an increasing body of research and evidence is establishing internet addiction as a public health concern, with many leading health experts now advising it be officially recognised as a clinical disorder.

The condition exists in many subtypes, all of which are essentially characterised by excessive, overwhelming or inappropriate use of online activities, which if done in person would usually be considered negative. For example, compulsive gambling, shopping, pornography use or gaming.

## **Types of addiction**

Internet addiction disorder covers a variety of compulsive internet activities including the following:

### *Cybersex and pornography*

Though the internet is often a great way of escaping reality, spending excessive amounts of time on the internet engaging in cybersex, viewing pornography, spending time in adult chat rooms or carrying out relationships in online fantasy worlds can begin to have negative repercussions on an individuals real life relationships.

On the World Wide Web we are able to change our identity, remain anonymous and engage in fantasies all from the privacy of our own homes. Whilst this is fine in moderation, compulsively participating in any of these

activities can lead to individuals neglecting their real life relationships, career and emotional well-being.

### Cyber-relationships

The internet is a great way to meet and interact with new people and may even lead to the development of a romantic relationship. However, online relationships are often far more intense than those in reality and there is opportunity to live out our ultimate fantasies. A huge problem with online relationships is that many people online lie about their sex, age, appearance, relationship status and job, meaning that when online friends meet in real-life, unfortunately they may not live up to one another's online persona resulting in significant emotional distress.

### Online gambling

According to the Gambling Commission there are an estimated 236,000 to 378,000 problem gamblers in Britain. Whilst problem gambling has been an issue for a number of years now and there are many associations and support groups offering help and advice, the ease and availability of gambling online has made it more accessible than ever. In addition, recovering gambling addicts may also find it far more difficult not to relapse with the temptation of 24 hour online casinos which are open to anyone of any age. In addition, the financial problems brought on by online gambling can also result in stress, anxiety and depression.

### Gaming addiction

Many individuals find enjoyment in playing online role playing games in their leisure time, and not everyone who does this is an addict. The vast majority of online gamers are able to strike a balance between gaming, work, friends and family, but unfortunately for some the compulsion to play online games becomes uncontrollable meaning that other areas of real life are neglected.

### Spending addiction

Online shopping or auction shopping can be just as financially detrimental as online gambling if a habit gets out of control. Shopping addicts have a tendency to purchase things they don't really need and can't really afford but they do so in order to experience the temporary high of placing a winning bid or owning something new.

## **Internet Addiction symptoms**

Each and every one of us will use the internet in our own way for different purposes and for varying amounts of time. Some individuals who use the internet for work purposes may choose not to dedicate much of their leisure time to web browsing. Others will use occasionally, for instance for a once weekly food shop, others will use weekly perhaps for reading their favourite

online paper or blog, and others will use social networking sites daily for keeping in touch with friends and family.

Internet usage only becomes a problem when it begins to take up too much of your time, to the point where you start to neglect what's going on in real-life.

There are various symptoms of internet addiction, and each individual is likely to experience a different set. However, below are some key indicators to be aware of:

- *Losing track of time* - Many internet addicts find that they lose themselves when they are online and as a result consistently spend longer online than initially intended.
- *Social isolation* - Cracks in your real-life relationships may indicate that you are spending so much time focussing on internet relationships and activities that you are neglecting the current real-life relationships you have with family and friends. Some individuals may also find that they feel their online friends 'understand' them in a way that no one in real-life can.
- *Temporary high* - As with any addiction, individuals keep returning for their next 'fix' because it gives them the feeling of euphoria and excitement. If you tend to rely heavily on the internet for stress relief purposes as a pick-me-up or for sexual gratification then it could be a sign of a deeper underlying issue.
- *Feelings of guilt and defensiveness* - If you are feeling guilty and constantly trying to justify the amount of time spent on the internet, or if you are lying about or trying to hide what you do online then this could be an indicator of internet addiction.
- *Physical symptoms* - Aside from the emotional aspects, excessive computer addiction also causes some physical side effects and discomfort including strained vision, back ache, neck ache, headaches, sleep difficulties, carpal tunnel syndrome and weight gain or loss.

### **Internet Addiction causes**

As mentioned throughout this fact-sheet, escapism is a factor which draws many people to the internet. Anyone wanting to relieve the stresses, strains and issues which are present in their everyday life can use the internet as an outlet for these negative feelings as it can provide temporary comfort, company, and entertainment.

Certain individuals may find themselves at a greater risk of becoming addicted to the internet, for example those who engage in little social activity may try to build new relationships and relate to others by using chat rooms etc. Below are additional factors which may increase a person's risk of developing an internet addiction:

- *Other Addictions* - Individuals who are addicted to gambling and sex for instance (or recovering) may turn to the internet to fulfil their needs.

- Depression - Depression can lead to Individuals turning to the internet to escape their negative feelings.
- Anxiety - People suffering from anxiety may feel drawn to the internet as it is a way of distracting themselves from any fears and worries they may have.
- Social mobility - If a person suddenly finds themselves less active than they used to be (for instance recovering from a serious illness) and it is difficult to leave the house or meet up with family and friends then they may go online to Internet Addiction help seek additional social interaction

There are many addiction services and avenues of treatments available to help individuals back on the road to good health, one of which is counselling.

The ultimate goal of counselling is to help individuals either reduce or stop their addiction all together, depending on their specific needs and goals. Though each counsellor will have their own unique way of working, sessions may involve exploring different ways of dealing with certain urges and triggers and exploring the origins of the problem and the underlying reason for your addiction. A counsellor may also use a technique known as cognitive-behavioural therapy, which is a way of changing an individuals thoughts and behaviours surrounding a certain act or issue.

Counselling is a safe and confidential way of exploring your addiction and the affect it is having on your well-being and fulfilment. A counsellor will work with you to help you make sense of your circumstances, to identify your choices for change and to offer support throughout the entire process.

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