

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Internet Addiction Treatment

Internet addiction is not recognized as a formal mental health disorder. However, mental health professionals who have written about the subject note symptoms or behaviors that, when present in sufficient numbers, may indicate problematic use. These include:

- Preoccupation with the Internet: User often thinks about the Internet while he or she is offline.
- Loss of control: Addicted users feel unable or unwilling to get up from the computer and walk away. They sit down to check e-mail or look up a bit of information, and end up staying online for hours.
- Inexplicable sadness or moodiness when not online: Dependency on any substance often causes mood-altering side effects when the addicted user is separated from the substance on which he or she depends.
- Distraction (Using the Internet as an anti-depressant): One common symptom of many Internet addicts is the compulsion to cheer one's self up by surfing the Web.
- Dishonesty in regard to Internet use: Addicts may end up lying to employers or family members about the amount of time they spend online, or find other ways to conceal the depth of their involvement with the Internet.
- Loss of boundaries or inhibitions: While this often pertains to romantic or sexual boundaries, such as sharing sexual fantasies online or participating in cyber sex, inhibitions can also be financial or social. Online gambling sites can cause addicts to blow more money than they would in a real-life casino because users never actually see their money won or lost, so it is easier to believe the money is not real. Chat rooms can incite users to reveal secrets they would not reveal in face-to-face or phone conversations because of the same separation from reality. Also, addicted users are much more likely to commit crimes while online (e.g., 'hacking') than non-addicts.
- Creation of virtual intimate relationships with other Internet users: Web-based relationships often cause those involved to spend excessive amounts of time online, attempting to make connections and date around the Net.
- Loss of a significant relationship due to Internet use: When users spend too much time on the Web, they often neglect their personal relationships. Over time, such relationships may fail as partners simply refuse to be treated badly and break off from relations with the addicted individual.

Internet addiction is a problem of compulsive stimulation, much like drug addiction. Because of this similarity, well-studied treatment procedures known to be useful for helping drug addicts towards recovery are adapted for use with Internet addicts when the need arises. The techniques described below are drawn from a popular school of therapy known as 'cognitive-behavioral' therapy. Cognitive behavioral forms of therapy are well studied and known to be helpful as applied to many different mental and behavioral difficulties. They are also very practical and focus directly on reducing out of control 'addict' behaviors, and preventing relapse. They are not the only valid forms of therapy, however.

In treating drug addiction, frequently the goal of therapy is abstinence. An alcoholic, for example, is often best off if he or she ceases to drink alcohol entirely and to maintain a sober lifestyle. While this makes sense for a drug like alcohol which we might argue is at best a luxury recreational indulgence and not a necessity, but it doesn't necessarily make sense for Internet over-usage. Much like the telephone, the Internet has become an essential part of modern business. To ask people to not use the Internet at all could be a significant burden for them. Instead of abstinence, then, a reasonable goal for Internet addiction therapy is a reduction in total use of the net. Because Internet addicts by definition will have

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difficulty moderating their use on their own, therapy techniques can be employed to help them to become more motivated to reduce their use, and to become more conscious of how they get into trouble with the Internet.

Motivational Interviewing may be employed to assess how motivated Internet addict may be to change their behavior and to help addicts to increase their motivation to make a lasting change. To accomplish the latter, a therapist may help addicts to develop genuine empathy for the people who are hurt by their addiction (e.g., family and friends, employers, etc.). By helping addicts to see how their actions affect others they care about or are dependent on economically, therapists can help increase addicts motivation to change.

Therapists will also generally help addicts to identify 'triggers' that lead to episodes of uncontrolled Internet use. Naive addicts of any type typically believe that their indulgences “just happen” and that they played little or no role in an episode happening. A more realistic appraisal of an addicts true situation will often reveal that a particular unconscious set of events occurred involving 'triggers' that prompted an addict to binge. Like a noun, a trigger is a “person, place or thing” that is a step in a chain of events that leads towards a relapse into addict behavior. To provide a fictitious but realistic example, a first trigger might be boredom, or horniness, or even a bad mood brought on by a fight. Addicts seek out their stimulation of choice in response to these triggers, most of the time without ever being all that aware of why they are acting as they do. Therapists will often discuss in detail episodes of indulgence with addicts so that they become conscious of their triggers and can choose to act in an alternative fashion when they next become vulnerable. They will also help addicts to generate lists of safer, more functional alternative behaviors they can engage in when they realize they are in danger so that they do not default to their addictive behavior.

Part and parcel with identifying triggers, is helping addicts to set realistic goals for their Internet use. It may be that Internet use is important at use, but needs to be restricted at home. It may be that particular websites need to be avoided, but other uses of the Internet are okay. Therapists work with their patients to set realistic and measurable goals for their Internet usage. Patients are then asked to actually record their Internet usage in a log, which is used in therapy to track progress. For example, to help reduce the amount of time spent of the Internet, or one specific portion thereof, a user will set a maximum allowed time per day or week. The goal is to keep under this maximum--the farther under, the better. To ensure this goal is met, users can rely on timers or alarms, to monitor how long they have spent online. For example, if an Internet user feels he is spending too much time in chat rooms, he may set a goal to spend no more than two hours per week using the Internet for this purpose. He sets a thirty-minute timer for each of the four times per week he wants to use the Internet for chat rooms, and as soon as his timer goes off he exits the chat room. He also records his actual usage on the log so as to see how well he is able to conform to his goal.

The therapy techniques described above are best delivered by a trained mental health professional in the context of a therapy relationship. A fair amount of self-help literature in the form of books and websites are available for those whose problems are not so demanding, or those who simply wish to be more educated about this problem. See the reading suggestions below, or the Links section of this topic center for suggestions.

The bottom line when dealing with Internet Addiction is to identify triggers that lead to problematic use, to set realistic goals for reducing use, and to then stick to and monitor conformance with those goals, sharing this conformity data with someone else to encourage honesty and sticking to the plan.