

## INTERNET ADDICTION: A NEW DISORDER ENTERS THE MEDICAL LEXICON

Michael O'Reilly

### In Brief • En bref

The latest consequence of the information age may be addiction to the Internet. A psychologist who has established the Centre for Online Addiction in the US says the disorder causes the same type of social problems as other established addictions. Michael O'Reilly went on line to find physicians interested in discussing potential problems posed by the Internet.

L'impact le plus récent de l'ère de l'information est peut-être la dépendance à l'Internet. Un psychologue qui a créé le Centre for Online Addiction aux États-Unis affirme que le trouble cause le même type de problèmes sociaux que d'autres toxicomanies confirmées. Michael O'Reilly a navigué pour trouver des médecins intéressés à discuter de problèmes possibles causés par l'Internet.

If you're not on the Net these days, you're just not with it. Magazine racks, talk shows and even professional journals tout the wonders of the Internet. But as with everything, too much of a good thing can lead to trouble.

It now appears that some users of the Internet and similar electronic systems are becoming hooked. Indeed, if information is the drug of choice, the Internet offers the greatest fix of all. Some users spend hours each day e-mailing and surfing the net — in some cases to the detriment of their "real lives."

Internet addiction disorder (IAD) is as real an addiction as alcoholism or compulsive gambling, says Dr.

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Kimberly Young, a psychologist at the University of Pittsburgh who has established a Centre for Online Addiction in response to what she considers a growing problem.

"Internet addiction does not cause the same type of physical problems as other addictions, such as alcohol, but the social problems parallel these of other established addictions," she warns. "Loss of control, cravings and withdrawal symptoms, social isolation, marital discord, academic failure, excessive financial debt, job termination — these are just some of the consequences documented in my research."

Support groups now exist to help wean people off the Net. (Ironically, some of them are on the Internet, which must be considered analogous to holding an AA meeting in a tavern; see sidebar.) One is the Internet Addiction Support Group (IASG), an electronic forum that allows people

to sign on and get support from other addicts. It currently has about 300 participants from around the world.

Experts working in this new addiction area suggest that to be diagnosed with IAD, users must meet several criteria:

- Are you spending more and more time on the Internet just to get the same level of satisfaction?
- Do you experience withdrawal symptoms (depression, agitation, moodiness) when not on line?
- Do your Internet sessions last longer than planned?
- Do you spend a great deal of time on other Net-related activities, such as buying related books, talking about the Net and trying new software?
- Despite adverse effects (family problems, failure to complete work) do you continue to use the Internet?
- Have your attempts to cut down or stop met with failure?
- Are you giving up important social or occupational activities in order to spend more time in cyberspace?

A person answering "yes" to three of these questions may have a problem, say Young and Dr. Ivan Goldberg, an IASG sponsor.

Dr. Barrie McCombs, a family physician and director of medical information services at the University of Calgary, does not consider himself

a net junkie, but he does see the potential for problems.

"As a group physicians have many of the traits that make us prone to substance or 'software' abuse," he says. "One morning I realized that I had just spent 2 hours reading every message on the six newsgroups I was following. I decided there had to be more to life, so I weaned myself down to two."

Computers have been McCombs' hobby since 1971, and he has turned this interest into both a professional and leisure activity. In his work he uses the Internet for literature searches; when off duty he taps into various "folkie" discussion groups and databases because of his interest in folk music.

Dr. Robert Carruthers is another physician who spends a lot of time on line. He runs a computerized medical records software company in Nanaimo, BC, and is on the Internet from 20 to 30 hours per month.

During his first 6 months on line, the Net claimed nearly all of his leisure time, Carruthers said. "I found that it was easy to find yourself compulsively taking much of the useful content and trying to sort it [for later use]. In the end you spend so much

time reading and filing that you never have time to go back and find the information you need."

McCombs and Carruthers laugh off the label of Internet addict, with McCombs joking that he can "quit at any time." They both agree that moderation is the key.

"There is so much great information on the Web for medical problems that I think anyone with a chronic or unusual disease would be well advised to go on line," says Carruthers.

Dr. Paul Millikin, a pathologist at the College of Medicine in Peoria, Illinois, admits that he is a Net junkie. He ignored the hype about the Internet for a long time, but then a friend introduced him to an histology discussion group.

"The hook was set," he explained. "I'm in my 70s, and I've always been hooked on knowledge. I've found two discussion groups that provide me with new knowledge useful for the practising histologist or pathologist. They offer lots of ideas on how to best process gastric biopsies, or enzymes or others and lots of useful information for my practice. In that respect, I'm hooked."

So is Dr. Jacques Ducharme, a

Montreal surgeon who spends about 20 hours per week on the Internet. He stays in touch with his three sons via e-mail, and uses the Net to communicate with his employer and clients from home.

For him, information related to both work and play is but a click away. "Is this addiction, or just the good sense of using a fascinating and useful tool?" he asks.

In studying this phenomenon, Kimberley Young reviewed the model for substance abuse outlined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th edition). By substituting the word Internet, she established standard criteria for Internet addiction. This tool enabled her to identify and survey about 400 case studies of people who met at least three of the seven criteria. From this she has documented the social and emotional consequences of IAD.

She says home-based computer users are most at risk of developing IAD. Contrary to the stereotype of the computer nerd, a typical addict is a middle-aged female with limited education, although students of all ages and from other social groups feature prominently in her study. "Basically, anyone with access to a modem and the Internet may become addicted," Young warns.

Generally, IAD parallels other addictions in both its consequences and treatment. Young has put together an assessment tool based on her research and has now written two papers and a new book on the subject. Her work was recently presented at meetings of the American Psychological Society and American Psychological Association.

The incidence of IAD is undocumented at this point, but if Young's research and anecdotal evidence hold up, psychiatrists and family physicians may soon be called upon to treat this latest unforeseen consequence given us by the brave new world of information technology. ■

## INTERNET RESOURCES: ADDICTION SUPPORT GROUPS

- To contact the Internet Addiction Support Group (IASG), send an e-mail message to:

[listserv@netcom.com](mailto:listserv@netcom.com)

Subject: leave blank

Message: Subscribe i-a-s-g

- IASG web site

<http://www.iucf.indiana.edu/~brown/hyplan/addict.html>

- Center for OnLine Addiction

<http://www.pitt.edu/~ksy/>

- Netaholics Anonymous

<http://www.safari.net/~pam/netanon/index.html>