

# Therapeutic issues with internet addicted clients

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Internet addiction is a new area of clinical practice and this article outlines sub-types and intervention techniques associated with Internet addiction recovery to assist therapists in assessment and treatment planning with this population.

Internet addiction is typically defined as an impulse-control disorder that does not involve an intoxicant. Common symptoms include: a preoccupation with Internet use, lying about behavior, psychological withdrawal when offline, jeopardizing significant relationship, job, educational or career opportunities because of the Internet, and an inability to control use. Associated features of this disorder include sleep deprivation, moderate physical complaints such as back strain, eyestrain, carpal tunnel syndrome and frequent time distortion when using the Internet.

Internet Addiction is a broad term covering a wide-variety of behaviors and impulse-control problems that is further categorized in five specific sub-types based upon the application that triggers the compulsion:

## **1. Cybersexual Addiction**

Individuals who suffer from Cybersexual addiction typically are either engaged in viewing, downloading, and trading online pornography or involved in adult fantasy role-play chat rooms.

## **2. Cyber-Relational Addiction**

Individuals who suffer from Chat Room Addiction become over-involved in online relationships or may engage in virtual adultery. Online friends quickly become more important to the individual often at the expense of real life relationships with family and friends. In many instances, this will lead to marital discord and family instability.

## **3. Net-Compulsions**

Net Compulsions encompass a broad category of behaviours including obsessive online gambling, shopping, or stock trading behaviors. In particular, individuals will utilize virtual casinos, e-auction houses, or e-brokerage houses only to lose excessive amounts of money and even disrupt other job-related duties or significant relationships.

## **4. Information Overload**

The wealth of data available on the World Wide Web has created a new type of compulsive behavior regarding excessive web surfing and database searches. Individuals will spend greater amounts of time searching and collecting data from

the web and organizing information. Obsessive-compulsive tendencies and reduced work productivity are typically associated with this behavior.

### **5. Computer Addiction**

In the 80s, computer games such as Solitaire and Minesweeper were programmed into computers and researchers found that obsessive computer game playing became problematic in organizational settings as employees spent most days playing rather than working.

While most agree that the Internet is a productive tool, research findings document serious negative consequences when used in an addictive manner (e.g., Griffiths, 1997; Morhan-Martin, 1997; Scherer, 1997; Young, 1997a, 1997b, 1998a, 1998b, 1999). Compulsive use of the Internet is often associated with increased social isolation, increased clinical depression, familial discord, divorce, academic failure, job loss, or significant financial debt as a result of obsessive online gambling, shopping, or day trading.

To best assess the Internet in clinical settings, the Internet Addiction Impairment Index (see below) was devised to measure the level of psychosocial impairment related to net abuse in terms of mild, moderate, and severe:

**Normal range: 0 - 30 points**

**Mild: 31 -49 points**

**Moderate: 50 - 79 points**

**Severe: 80 - 100 points**

This test can be used as a self-report for the client or a clinical measure administered by the therapist.

Treatment includes a variety of interventions with a primary focus on cognitive-behavioral and interpersonal psychotherapy techniques to moderate Internet usage and to address underlying psychosocial issues often co-existent with this addiction (e.g., social phobia, mood disorders, marital dissatisfaction, job burnout, childhood sexual abuse). Therapy should utilize time management techniques that help the client structure and regulate internet sessions and strategies that help clients,Å develop alternative activities that take them away from the computer should be reviewed (e.g., more time with family, engage in hobbies, or exercise programs).

Internet addicts typically suffer interpersonal difficulties such as introversion or have limited social support systems in place, which is in part, why they turn to virtual relationships as a substitute for the lack of real life social connection. In other cases, due to their addiction, they have lost significant real life relationships such as a spouse, a parent, or a close friend. Interpersonal Therapy is a brief form of treatment that focuses on education use to improve interpersonal functioning. Specific interventions include encouragement of affect, communication analysis, modeling, and role-playing to establish new ways of interacting that address role transitions and interpersonal deficits. The use of twelve-step groups should also be applied to assist clients in finding adequate support and sponsorship that enable recovery. Finally, couples counselling may be an essential part of recovery among Internet-addicted clients whose marital and familial relationships have been disrupted and negatively influenced by Internet addiction.

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#### Internet Addiction Impairment Index (IAII)

Based upon the following five-point likert scale, select the response that best represents the frequency of the behavior described in the following 20-item questionnaire.

**0 = Not Applicable**

**1 = Rarely**

**2 = Occasionally**

**3 = Frequently**

**4 = Often**

**5 = Always**

1. How often do you find that you stay on-line longer than you intended?
2. How often do you neglect household chores to spend more time on-line?
3. How often do you prefer the excitement of the Internet to intimacy with your partner?
4. How often do you form new relationships with fellow on-line users?
5. How often do others in your life complain to you about the amount of time you spend on-line?

6. How often do your grades or school work suffer because of the amount of time you spend on-line?
7. How often do you check your e-mail before something else that you need to do?
8. How often does your job performance or productivity suffer because of the Internet?
9. How often do you become defensive or secretive when anyone asks you what you do on-line?
10. How often do you block out disturbing thoughts about your life with soothing thoughts of the Internet?
11. How often do you find yourself anticipating when you will go on-line again?
12. How often do you fear that life without the Internet would be boring, empty, and joyless?
13. How often do you snap, yell, or act annoyed if someone bothers you while you are on-line?
14. How often do you lose sleep due to late-night log-ins?
15. How often do you feel preoccupied with the Internet when off-line, or fantasize about being on-line?
16. How often do you find yourself saying „Äújust a few more minutes,Äù when on-line?
17. How often do you try to cut down the amount of time you spend on-line and fail?
18. How often do you try to hide how long you,Äöve been on-line?
19. How often do you choose to spend more time on-line over going out with others?
20. How often do you feel depressed, moody, or nervous when you are off-line, which goes away once you are back on-line?