

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

Internet Addiction

Currently, Internet Addiction is not an official disorder, and many mental health professionals are not certain if it ever should be considered a real disorder. Nevertheless, compulsive Internet use is a serious problem for many people, and there are methods that can be helpful in alleviating this problem. This article will look at the background of the addiction, symptoms, and possible treatment methods.

Twenty-five years ago, the only people who spent a majority of their leisure time on the computer were paid members of the technology industry. Today, however, surfing the Web has become a pastime as social and marketable as bar hopping or going to the movies. As the web has become a part of mainstream life, some mental health professionals have noted that a percentage of people using the web do so in a compulsive and out-of-control manner. In one extreme (1997) Cincinnati case, unemployed mother Sandra Hacker allegedly spent over 12 hours a day secluded from her three young and neglected children while she surfed the Web. For better or for worse, this phenomena of compulsive Internet use has been termed 'Internet Addiction' based on its superficial similarity to common addictions such as smoking, drinking, and gambling. Internet Addiction has even been championed as an actual disorder, notably by psychologists Kimberly Young, Ph.D. and David Greenfield, Ph.D. However, at this time the true nature of Internet Addiction is not yet determined.

In a true addiction, a person becomes compulsively dependent upon a particular kind of stimulation to the point where obtaining a steady supply of that stimulation becomes the sole and central focus of their lives. The addict increasingly neglects his work duties, relationships and ultimately even his health in his drive to remain stimulated. In some cases of addiction (such as addiction to alcohol or to heroin), a phenomenon known as tolerance occurs, wherein more and more stimulation is required to produce the same pleasurable effect. A related phenomena, withdrawal, can also occur, wherein the addicted person comes to be dependent upon their source of stimulation and experiences dramatically unpleasant (and even potentially lethal -- as can be the case with alcohol) reactions when he goes without it. Sources of addictive stimulation can be chemical (as is the case with addictive drugs such as alcohol, cocaine, nicotine and heroin), sensual (as in sex) or even informational (as in gambling or workaholism). What all sources of addictive stimulation have in common is that they provoke a strong, usually positive (at first) reaction in the potential addict, who then seeks out the source of that stimulation so as to obtain that feeling on a regular basis.

While many people like to engage in sexual relations, or gamble, or have the occasionally drink because of the pleasure to be had, clearly not all people who do so are addicts. Rather, the term addiction only applies when someone's stimulation seeking gets to the point where it starts interfering with their ability to function normally and non-neglectfully at work and in relationships.

Some psychologists do not believe in addiction to the Internet itself, but rather in addiction to stimulation that the Internet provides. They suggests that new Internet users often show an initial infatuation with the novelty of the Web, but eventually lose interest and decrease their time spent online back to a normal, healthy amount. Those users who do go on to show compulsive Internet utilization, for the most part become compulsive only with regard to particular types of information to be had online, most often gambling, pornography, chat room or shopping sites. This is not an addiction to the Internet itself, but rather to risk-taking, sex, socializing or shopping. In essence then, the chief addictive characteristic of the Internet is its ability to enable instant and relatively anonymous social stimulation. “Addicted” Internet users are addicted to a favored kind of social stimulation and not to the Internet itself, although it is also true that the Internet has made it vastly easier and more convenient for someone to develop such a compulsion.

© 2026 LifeWorks (US) Ltd.

Because the Internet is used by many people as a normal part of their career or education, knowing how to separate excessive from normal use becomes difficult and cannot be accomplished using simple measures such as amount of time spent online in a given period. Most fundamental in differentiating normal from problem Internet use is the experience of compulsion to use the net. Normal users, no matter how heavy their usage, do not need to get online and do not neglect their occupational duties or their relationships with family and friends to get online.

Help for Internet related addiction is available from multiple sources. Anyone concerned about serious problem Internet usage should consider consulting with a local licensed psychologist, social worker or counselor, specifically one with experience treating addictions. Cognitive therapy based approaches are recommendable due to their systematic and direct focus on reducing problem use and preventing relapse, and the strong scientific support for the approach. Marital and or family therapy approaches may be useful as well when an individual's Internet Addiction is affecting their larger family system (such as might be the case when a husband uses Internet-based pornography as his sole sexual outlet, leaving his wife frozen out). More than a few books and self-help resources (such as audio tape sets) are also available for those who want to educate themselves on the problem.