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Assisting Adolescents manage Internet Excessive Use and/or Addictions

Dr Kimberly Young¹ has likened Internet addiction to addictive syndromes similar to impulse-control disorders on the Axis I Scale of the DSM. Meeting five of the following symptoms were considered necessary to be diagnosed.

1. Do you feel preoccupied with the Internet (think about previous online activity or anticipate next online session)?
2. Do you feel the need to use the Internet with increasing amounts of time in order to achieve satisfaction?
3. Have you repeatedly made unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop Internet use?
4. Do you feel restless, moody, depressed, or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop Internet use?
5. Do you stay online **longer than originally intended**?
6. Have you jeopardized or risked the loss of significant relationship, job, educational or career opportunity because of the Internet?
7. Have you lied to family members, therapist, or others to conceal the extent of involvement with the Internet?
8. Do you use the Internet as a way of escaping from problems or of relieving a dysphoric mood (e.g., feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety, depression)?

Other Symptoms Include:

- Failed attempts to control behavior
- Heightened sense of euphoria while involved in computer and Internet activities
- Neglecting friends and family
- Neglecting sleep, meals, (even showering/toileting) to stay online
- Being dishonest with others
- Feeling guilty, ashamed, anxious, or depressed as a result of online behaviour
- Physical changes such as weight gain or loss, backaches, headaches, carpal tunnel syndrome
- Withdrawing from other pleasurable activities

Detecting the Problem

The problem with many addictions is that it can be hard to tell when a hobby has become more than just that, and taken a hold on you. It can also be hard to be honest with yourself or your adolescent son or daughter when facing a list of symptoms, so let's go through a few:¹

1. Your adolescent spends more time with the computer than with people. This includes family, friends – at school and in the community, and others – that is being in the community mixing with the general public. The first symptom of the problem is spending more time with the computer or mobile phones with web access than with the people in their life.

2. The adolescent cannot abide by their own boundaries. Part of personal development is about setting and abiding by boundaries, which happens to be where most people fail when it comes to addiction. If your adolescent tells you that they'll only spend an hour online before doing their homework and end up online until well after you've gone to bed, you're in for some tough times ahead. This self-deception is a concerning sign of internet use heading into addictive patterns of behaviour.

3. Lying to others about their computer usage. Number two was about self-deception – this one is about lying to others, particularly parents who may have already negotiated limits about computer usage. Lying about usage so they can stay on that "little bit longer" is a big, glaring warning sign.

4. Feeling unable to live without the computer/internet. If your adolescent feels they can't go without the internet for more than a few hours, they may well have an internet addiction. *"But I have to do my schoolwork online!"* Ask your adolescent if they could do the work offline and then give it to you or someone else to execute online

5. Misguided spending on computer expenses. Other than this is associated with online gaming subscription fees, but can also be related to internet usage and volumes of data downloaded. When limited financial resources are being applied to gaining internet access over and above other usual (and often higher priority) expenses, it indicates a dependency.

¹ Source: Center for Internet Addiction Recovery (www.netaddiction.com)

Solving the Problem – this is targeted at the Internet User.

Solving the problem on your own, or with the support of your family, requires that you're doing so before it gets out of hand and to the point where you need to pay excessive prices for therapy. If you're unsure, trying to solve it on your own and seeing how far you get is a great test – if you can't manage it, go get help.

- 1. Set your computer usage boundaries early on.** There's no point trying to change your habits if you haven't decided on your new boundaries. How long are you going to use the computer from now on? For what purposes? Decide this first, take action second.
- 2. Get your family and friends onside.** Ensure your family keeps you accountable and limits the amount of time you spend online. Set a time limit in hours or minutes and make it clear that there are *no* valid excuses for extended use; you've got to be dragged away from the computer no matter what, once your time runs out.
- 3. Give them the passwords.** Once you've got the agreement of your family or roommates to help you out, let them change the passwords to your computer's user account, the modem or router, and your email account. I'm tempted to leave this next sentence out for the sake of the self-deceivers, but you may be able to avoid this pretty ruthless precaution if you can still manage to self-regulate with the help of some self-discipline.
- 4. 4Modify your routine.** If you trap yourself by checking email first thing in the morning or heading straight for the computer when you get home from work, intending to get off and do other things but never quite getting there, change your routine a bit and get other things out of the way first. It's much easier to get off the computer if you don't get on it! Wait until you've done your household chores and got time spent with the kids (or pets, if that's more your thing) out of the way, then give yourself some net time. Reward yourself, in small amounts, for holding out.
- 5. Don't use the computer for recreational purposes.** Remove the emotive feel-good incentive to use the computer by using it for business and email. Get it done and get off. Uninstall computer games, and vow to stay away from social networks and other recreational web destinations for at least a month or two.
- 6.** Find recreational activities in real life and completely replace your internet entertainment with them. Completely. Seriously!
- 7. Track your progress.** Remind yourself how much good progress you're making by tracking the amount of time you spend online compared to the boundaries you set in step one. Only spent 8 hours online out of the 10 you allotted for the week? Great work – you'll do even better next week!²

² Young, K.S. (2007) Treatment Outcomes with Internet Addicts *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, **Vol. 10(5)**, pp. 671-679.

What is an Internet Addiction Disorder?

As the incidence and prevalence of **Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD)** has been increasing exponentially, so too has the need to understand and identify clinical symptoms surrounding IAD much better.

Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD) - Diagnostic Criteria

While not yet included within the major diagnostic classifications systems (DSM-IV-TR or ICD-10); a framework of diagnostic criteria for IAD is already being discussed. Internet addiction has been compared to addictive syndromes similar to impulse-control disorders on the Axis I Scale of the DSM-IV-TR. For example:

A maladaptive pattern of Internet use, leading to clinically significant impairment or distress as manifested by three (or more) of the following, occurring at any time in the same 12-month period:

(I) **tolerance**, as defined by either of the following:

- (A) A need for markedly increased amounts of time on Internet to achieve satisfaction
- (B) markedly diminished effect with continued use of the same amount of time on Internet

(II) **withdrawal**, as manifested by either of the following

- (A) the characteristic withdrawal syndrome
 - (1) Cessation of (or reduction) in Internet use that has been heavy and prolonged.
 - (2) Two (or more) of the following, developing within several days to a month after Criterion 1:
 - (a) psychomotor agitation
 - (b) anxiety
 - (c) obsessive thinking about what is happening on Internet
 - (d) fantasies or dreams about Internet
 - (3) The symptoms in Criterion 2 cause distress or impairment in social, occupational or another important area of functioning
- (B) Use of Internet or a similar on-line service is engaged in to relieve or avoid withdrawal symptoms

(III) Internet is often accessed more often or for longer periods of time than was intended

(IV) There is a persistent desire or unsuccessful efforts to cut down or control Internet use

(V) A great deal of time is spent in activities related to Internet use (e.g., buying Internet books, trying out new WWW browsers, researching Internet vendors, organizing files of downloaded materials.)

(VI) Important social, occupational, or recreational activities are given up or reduced because of Internet use.

(VII) Internet use is continued despite knowledge of having a persistent or recurrent physical, social, occupational, or psychological problem that is likely to have been caused or exacerbated by Internet

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Managing Adolescents' excessive Internet usage

use (sleep deprivation, marital difficulties, lateness for early morning appointments, neglect of occupational duties, or feelings of abandonment in significant others).

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