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MY TECH

Addicted to the Internet? It's possible

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Ever open up your Web browser to check on a news item, and suddenly an hour has gone by and you're still online?

Ever log on to research a hotel for a trip and find yourself Googling the names of people you went to junior high with? In between, hours, and dozens of Web sites, may have passed by.

Diane Wieland, a psychiatric nurse and a professor of nursing at LaSalle University in Philadelphia, says you might be dealing with Internet addiction.

In May, Wieland's article "Computer Addiction: Implications for Nursing Psychotherapy Practice," published in the journal Perspectives in Psychiatric Care, was distributed to the media.

As a former psychology major and clinical-psychology doctoral student, my interest was piqued.

Wieland's piece uses the term Internet addiction disorder.

Symptoms of Internet addiction disorder, according to the article, include a general disregard of one's health, personal needs, nourishment and hygiene. It can result in the "cyber shakes," which include "psychomotor agitation and typing motions of the fingers" while away from the keyboard.

Then there are more general symptoms: dry eyes and repetitive-motion injuries in the hands, wrists, neck, back and shoulders.

According to the article, "extrapolating from prevalence rates of other addictions, five to 10 percent of [Internet] users will most likely experience IAD."

Internet addiction? Cyber shakes? I was dubious. Alcoholism is an addiction. Drugs are addictions. Food can be one too. But the Internet?

I called Wieland.

She related a patient's story that caused her to start looking into Internet addiction:

She saw a woman whose husband was carrying on an Internet affair.

"He went into debt buying all kinds of new technology," Wieland said. "He was very secretive about it. He eventually was on the computer so much that he lost his job.

"To me, it seemed like he's secretive, he's on the computer all the time, and he can't pay attention to his job. It certainly sounds like addiction. It also sounds like infidelity."

She tried to find resources on high-tech addiction in a therapeutic setting but came up empty. There were plenty of articles in the academic community about the matter, but they weren't based in a clinical setting.

So Wieland wrote her article. It is a review that pulls details from those articles and applies them to a clinical setting. She notes that all of the information is compiled from details in the previously published articles.

There's even a 20-question Internet addiction test in her piece. It includes questions like, "How often do you find that you stay online longer than you intended?" and "How often does your job performance or productivity suffer because of the Internet?"

"It was clear," Wieland said of her patient's husband. "This person has an addiction. And he had a history of depression."

Which, along with drug addiction and obsessive compulsive disorder, can be an aggravating factor in Internet addiction.

I still wasn't convinced. Those are real-world disorders. Can Internet addiction be in the same ballpark?

"I've had people come in with kids who get really angry when their parents turn off the PlayStation," she said.

Maybe they were in the middle of a good game of Madden football. I'd be angry too.

Wieland's article notes, "Internet addiction is a new term in the psychiatric lexicon; thus, some researchers and practitioners question its validity."

Even Wieland's 25-year-old son "has been arguing with me about this the entire time" since the article was published, she said.

Wieland's approach to the matter is pragmatic.

"The Internet can be used to escape normal stressers in life," she said. "It becomes addiction, in my view, if it starts to dramatically impact the person's life at home and work, where they're neglecting their other, regular responsibilities."

Wieland added, "I agree with the point that the Internet creates easy access to things like gambling, porn, infidelity. It's at your desk, and it's anonymous. Without the Internet, you would have to actually get up and physically go somewhere to get these things," she said. "The Internet provides easy access to these addictions."

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