

Coping with College Series

Is Your Internet Use a Problem?

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Do you frequently hear the complaint "You're always online?" Do you ever notice you've been online for longer than you realized? Do you ever eat meals in front of your computer? Answering yes to these and other questions may mean that you have a problem with Internet use. Consider the case of Scott, a Texas student whose case was illustrated at an Internet Addiction seminar. He spent approximately 18 hours each day on the Internet, and in just 4 months logged in well over 2000 hours (the equivalent of working a full-time job for one year)! Needless to say, Scott's academic and social life suffered greatly because of his excessive Internet use. The Internet has many positive functions, and it is only when it interferes with other aspects of one's life that it becomes a problem.

Approximately 28% of all Internet users are college students. Studies of college-student Internet use suggest that "normal" use of the Internet falls around 8 hours per week. Studies of those college students with "addictive" or "dependent" patterns of Internet use revealed that they spend upwards of 22 hours per week online.

The first question you should ask yourself when assessing your Internet use is "How much is my Internet use impacting my life in a negative way?" Those who have unhealthy patterns of Internet use miss out on other "real-life" opportunities, such as socializing with friends, going to meals, going to class, and sleeping. If you notice that you're drifting apart from friends, activities, or organizations and spending more time on the Internet, this may signal a problem. Reactions to *not* using the Internet, such as becoming unreasonably frustrated, angry, or anxious when you try to cut back on your use or when connectivity is slow or blocked, may also be warning signs. A major indication of a problem is when relationships with others are impacted because of Internet use: others criticizing the frequency/duration of your use, lying to others about the nature/duration of your use, or replacing "real" relationships with Internet chat, pornography, or cybersex are all indicators of problematic patterns of Internet use.

There are ways to curtail your use. For example, make a list of all the computer-related "chores" you have to do, such as research, checking e-mail, etc. Set a reasonable amount of time to do this and only allow yourself to be on the computer for that amount of time. If you find this or other measures to limit your use fail, you may need additional help. Remember that Internet use is something you control—not something that controls you. If you feel a loss of control, seek help from friends, family, or counseling.