

Coping with College Series

The Internet...Where Does It Fit in Your Life?

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The Internet may not be the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks about coping with college. What does being happy and successful here at Illinois State have to do with Internet Relay Chat or "surfing the Web"? Look at the following hypothetical scenarios and see whether they could describe you or someone you know:

* Bob is hanging out with tonight's collection of cyber-friends. He "chats" with 10 other people about TV shows, being in college, and so forth. When he looks up at the clock, it's 4 a.m.--another night that just slipped away. He misses his 9 a.m. class for the third time in a week.

* Jenny calls home to talk with her parents and hear their voices. Out of the blue, her mother suggests that she give them her e-mail address at ISU, so they can send electronic mail back and forth and save on phone bills. Jenny gets upset without knowing why.

* Bill has been looking at sexually explicit sites on the World Wide Web for several months. Now, he finds himself spending more and more time and saving more and more images. One day, he discovers he has filled his computer's entire hard drive. This "wake-up call" also makes him mindful of how far behind he is in his classes.

If you recognized yourself or someone else, you have encountered one of the less pleasant side effects of the Internet. For most, the Internet is an amazing reality, a system of computers that many of us depend on for maintaining relationships, gathering timely information, encountering diversity, and having fun. However, the Internet's popularity has led to a host of new puzzles regarding how we relate to each other and what we do in our "virtual community." A few of these puzzles are mentioned, followed by a few ideas to help you keep your cyber-life in balance.

Many Internet users have encountered communication difficulties. These difficulties stem from the differences between non-verbal, oral, and written forms of communication. When we meet face to face, we share words, the emotions and volume behind the words, and all the non-verbal cues our bodies give off. We know more reliably whether someone is tired, bored, happy, flirting, angry, or whatever. The Internet's routers and gateways permit words alone. Communication becomes tricky because we lose all those other "clues" about what someone means and start guessing instead. Though people footnote their feelings on-line in words (<grin>) or with smiley faces (:-)), the impact is just not the same.

Say you are romantically interested in someone and tell them so via e-mail. If they don't write back right away, what does that mean? When they do write back, how much are you likely to read into their words about how they "really" feel? It is easy to respond instantly, rather than giving careful consideration to what someone might have meant when they wrote. High, unexpressed feelings, coupled with instant responding, form a potent prescription for miscommunication.

Net surfing can also land people in trouble. Matthew Gray of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology tracks growth on the World Wide Web. He reports that in June, 1993, there were 130 web sites. As of January, 1997, he estimates 650--thousand--sites. This explosion of growth means that there are almost-infinite possibilities of things to see and do, leading some people to spend too many hours surfing from site to site.

The second, greater struggle is when someone becomes addicted to getting more and more items from the web. Though pornography is a major focus of such addictions, it is not the only one. In some ways, the computer's mouse becomes very much like the handle on a slot machine: perhaps the next click will be an even more exciting picture or better computer program. It becomes all too easy to keep clicking and, like the compulsive gambler, get in over one's head.

What can one do about using the Internet as a helpful tool, rather than a painful or addictive experience? The best advice is to think of the 'net as a Wild West town with some loose rules, but few marshals. In "Net City," it is good to figure out who the good guys and the bad guys are before you share personal information about yourself. It is good to stay calm and be careful what you say so someone doesn't read you wrong and fire a shot at you. If you're spending all your time in the pool halls and brothels, you're likely to come out broke and hurting--be careful of how much time you spend on-line. "Net City" is a fantasy community; though the people you meet and get to know are important, the Internet cannot replace three-dimensional, real-life relationships. It is too easy to present one's fantasy self and not one's real self on-line.

If the Internet is occupying too much of your life, counselors here at SCS have the knowledge to help you navigate this exciting new world more constructively. Call 438-3655 to set up an appointment for confidential, free help. Otherwise, continue exploring this new and exciting way to work and play!