Internet addiction? Sounds unlikely right? You might ask how can the use of a positive, dynamic force such as the Internet become a negative, debilitating factor in someone’s life? The fact is that, just like the use of food, alcohol or buying material things can be misused and abused, so too can an interest and preoccupation with using the Internet.

Many students are now finding themselves spending longer amounts of time online. The Internet can be an invaluable resource for students in finding information, or communicating with friends and professionals, however some people may find that they start to use the Internet to fill their time, avoid other life responsibilities or neglect normal social interactions, which may be detrimental to their studies, work and social lives as they become increasingly dependent on their ‘logon’. Despite these problems, denial of Internet Addiction can cut especially deep in University students because packed computer labs can provide an even more effective cover than going for a drink at the pub! When you’re sitting in rows of Internet users whose obsessions manifest in 8 hour plus sessions no one’s going to tap you on the shoulder and proclaim “Hey! I think you’re seriously addicted to the Internet and you need to get some help!” Most students may laugh off the suggestion they are becoming dependent on feelings they get from playing games and entering chat rooms. They may think “I can cut back on the Net anytime I want to”... But some students can’t cut back.

Internet Addiction – What is it?

Internet Addiction is a term used to describe a wide variety of behaviours and impulse control problems in cyberspace. It may be interesting to know that there are actually 5 widely accepted types of Internet Addiction:

1. Cybersexual Addiction – to adult chatrooms or cyberporn.
2. Cyber-relationship Addiction – online friendships made in chatrooms or newsgroups that ‘replace’ real-life friends and family. This may also include cyber-affairs.
3. Net Compulsions – such as online gambling or auction addiction or obsessive online trading.
4. Information Overload – compulsive web surfing or database searches.
5. Computer Addiction – obsessive computer game playing or programming.

So what are the most popular Internet activities for University students?

While Universities may be pleased that computer labs are filling to the brim with students keen to pursue their academic interests, it may be surprising to know that many students may actually be participating in the following online activities instead:

- Exchanging emails with friends and family.
- Scanning newsgroups to stay current with the latest information about favourite movies, TV shows and
bands.

• Engaging in online chat groups to vent frustrations, develop friendships, romances or to experiment with different personas.

• Engaging in ongoing online games that seem to never end, where the player is rewarded for accumulated online time.

• Downloading pornographic photos and other forms of cyberporn.

• Endless surfing of web pages on any topic that catches their eye.

The Dynamics that make Universities ripe for Internet overuse

Universities are potential breeding grounds for Internet Addiction because:

• They offer free and often unlimited Internet access.

• They also offer huge blocks of unstructured time (although some labs within ECU have limited computer usage time).

• They can offer the experience of freedom from parental control for some students.

• There is little monitoring or censoring of what students can say or do online (although this is now changing in most universities, including ECU).

• Internet use is fully encouraged by faculty staff and administrators.

• Internet use offers a potential escape from University stressors.

How do I know if I am addicted to the Internet?

You may be addicted to use of the Internet if you can relate to most of the following signs:

• You have used the Internet as a way of escaping from problems or relieving feelings of depression, anxiety, guilt or helplessness.

• You have jeopardised, lost or reduced your investment in a significant relationship, job, educational or career opportunity because of Internet overuse.

• If you often think about previous online activities or are anticipating your next online session.

• If you feel restless, moody, depressed or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop Internet use -“cybershakes”.

• You stay online longer than originally intended or lie about your usage time/content.

Recovery and Addiction Management Strategies

There are several management strategies which can help you take control of your Internet Addiction.

1. Assess your online time.
   Keeping a log for a week can help you realise the actual time you spend using the Internet, which makes it hard to deny your online involvement.

2. Recognise what you’re missing!
   E.g. time with your partner, family or friends, sleep, exercise, hobbies and social events.

3. Use time management techniques.
   Cultivate alternative activities, identify your usage patterns and find external stoppers, such as things you need to do or places you need to go, that remind you when to log off. Internet addiction does not require you to go “cold turkey” and quit all usage, so incorporating planned Internet time into your week may also assist with management, e.g. aim for 20 hours per week if you are cutting down from 40 hours. Instead of “one day at a time”, practice “one time a day”.

4. Find support in the real world.
   Be intentional about reconnecting with friends, family or partners if you have found yourself cut off. To replace the camaraderie often experienced with online friends, you can seek out a social/support group to provide some of that missed support.

5. Recognise your addictive triggers.
   Consider your feelings when you head towards the computer. For example you may feel bored, lonely, depressed, anxious, angry or stressed. Notice how you feel when engaged in a favourite internet activity, e.g. competent, fulfilled, respected, calm, supported, excited or sexy. Recognising these two feeling states before you go online and while you are online, allows you to see what you are running away from and tune in to what you hope to gain by going online. Each time you logon as a response to these triggers you face a choice point. These choice points are crucial for then changing your thoughts and behavioural patterns.

6. Carry positive reminder cards.
   List the main problems caused by your addiction and the main benefits of cutting down your Internet use. Use the cards as a reminder of what you wish to avoid and what you wish to do for yourself.

7. Take concrete steps to manage the problem and address the voices of denial.
   Take steps to actively change aspects of your former routine into a more functional one.

ECU’s Student Counsellors are able to assist in examining any aspect of Internet Addiction should you feel you may have a problem.

Acknowledgements

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Please note that this tip-sheet provides information and guidance only - it is not a substitute for professional counselling and support.