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Internet addiction and relationships: the psychology behind it

Introduction

A lot has been said and described on internet addiction, its causes and treatment. This article briefly laments internet addiction and its impact on interpersonal relationships, highlighting the subtle, yet powerful, psychological dynamics that operates beneath the surface.

Internet addiction disorder (IAD), more commonly called problematic Internet use (PIU), is generally characterized by hyper-ritualistic involvement with the internet, social failure, withdrawal symptoms on abstinence and poor impulse control. It refers to excessive internet use that interferes with daily life. In simple terms Internet Addiction is best described as an impulse control disorder, where the internet users may develop an emotional attachment to on-line friends and activities they create on their computer screens. Internet users may enjoy activities over internet that allows them to meet, socialize, and exchange ideas through the use of chat rooms, social networking websites, blogging etc, and spending endless hours online researching on topics of interest. IAD is often divided into subtypes by activity, such as gaming; online social networking,[1] blogging, email, excessive, overwhelming, or inappropriate internet pornography use[2] or internet shopping addiction. Similar to other addictions, those suffering from Internet Addiction use the virtual fantasy world to connect with real people through the internet, as a substitution for real-life human connection, which may be otherwise difficult to achieve normally.

Signs

Everyone, more or less, gets addicted to internet at some or the other point of time. However IAD gets pathological only when in starts interfering with daily functioning, relationships and social activities and hampers them considerably.

It is difficult to estimate the number of Internet Addicts since our culture encourages and legitimizes the use of new technologies. Moreover, Internet Addiction does not have the same social stigma as other forms of addictions such as alcohol, drugs and gambling. There is much debate as to whether Internet Addiction is different from other forms of addiction despite it manifesting the same symptoms as other addiction problems. However, it has been included in Section 3 of the DSM-V, which is reserved for medical conditions that require further investigation prior to being designated as a separate category of disorder.[3] Recommends the following diagnostic criteria that are required for a diagnosis of Internet Addiction:

1. Is preoccupied with the internet (thinks about previous online activity or anticipate next online session).

2. Needs to use the internet with increased amounts of time in order to achieve satisfaction.

3. Has made unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop Internet use.

4. Is restless, moody, depressed, or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop internet use.

Snigdha Samantray
National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, India

Correspondence: Snigdha Samantray, National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, Cauvery Girls Hostel, Nimhans, Hosur Road, Near Lakkasandra Bus Stop, Bangalore, Karnataka, India, Tel 8150054801, Email snigdhasamantray5@gmail.com

5. Has stayed online longer than originally intended. Additionally, at least one of the following must be present.

6. Has jeopardized or risked the loss of a significant relationship, job, educational or career opportunity because of the internet

7. Has lied to family members, therapist, or others to conceal the extent of involvement with the internet.

8. Uses the internet as a way of escaping from problems or of relieving a dysphonic mood (e.g., feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety, depression)

Why it is addictive?

The addictive potential of internet can be too consuming and can leave deep psychological impact. People become "addicted" to the internet, or act out pathologically during indulgence with internet, when they have dissociated themselves from their real life. Their online activities become a world unto itself. They don't talk about it with the people in their real life. They create a virtual world of their liking online that helps them escape from negativities of their real life. Cyberspace almost becomes a dissociated part of their own mind - a sealed-off intrapsychic zone where fantasies and conflicts are acted out. Reality testing is lost. According to[4] on an even deeper psychological level, users often describe how their computer is an extension of their mind and personality-a "space" that reflects their tastes, attitudes, and interests. In psychoanalytic terms, computers and cyberspace may become a type of "transitional space" that is an extension of the individual's intrapsychic world.

Following Are Some of the Psychological Incentives That Internet Use Provides Leading To Its

Addiction

Anonymity: Nobody likes to raise eyebrows. Expressing desires or seeking gratification for the same becomes a lot easier when done anonymous, especially when the desires or needs are not so socially acceptable ones. The platform to obscure identity, the flexibility to create one as desired, and the ease of access to both desirable and undesirable people makes internet so addictive. The incentive of not

revealing one's identity and yet getting gratified is what fuels this addiction.

Instant gratification: Nobody likes to wait. Nothing can be more motivating than to get instantly gratified of one's desires, especially the socially less acceptable ones. Even the day to day needs and requirements are instantly met online. One does not have to make the effort of going out and seeking the same. The incentive of saving time effortlessly proves addictive.

Excitement and amusement: Nobody likes boredom. The break that internet brings to a monotonous routine life can be impeccably amusing. The ease of access to various activities of interest over a single platform makes internet surfing one of the most sought after leisure activity. The excitement of meeting new people from different backgrounds, race and culture, and interacting with them over social networking sites, makes internet so addictive. The recreational aspect of internet without having to travel to places is what makes it addictive.

Disinhibition: Nobody likes resistance. Internet provides an uninhibited outlet to fantasies and curiosities and the fulfilment of the same. Privacy of access acts as the greatest motivating factor behind it. Creating someone different from ourselves over internet, not only allows us to be something we are not but also to hide something we are and hence curiosities and fantasies are fulfilled in a disinhibited fashion. Because they can't be seen or heard, people may open up and say things that they normally wouldn't say in-person. Self-disclosure and intimacy may be accelerated.

Global access: Internet provides a global platform and hence one of the major instrument behind globalization. The ease of access to people, things and information from any corner of the world makes it convenient and effortless. The incentive of global access in a fraction of time is what makes internet so addictive.

How it affects relationships?

Internet Addiction has global outcomes and affects the addict from all dimensions, occupation physical and mental health, social interaction and relationships. In this review we shall particularly discuss about how and why it affects relationships.

This particular form of Internet Addiction i.e. to relationships formed online, cyber sex and social networking, can go unnoticed, until it is too late. As discussed above the ability to manage ones identity, instant gratification and the ease of self disclosure is what makes the relationships formed over internet exciting and addictive. Moreover it compensates for the feelings of loneliness as it keeps a person occupied with the least need for real life interactions.

Virtual relationships formed over internet create a huge gap in everyday face to face interaction in real life relationships, since the latter is more challenging and lack the idealism that the former appears to have. Being addicted to the internet can be a dangerous and life-changing state. Addiction happens gradually, but often people are so intrigued with the limitless possibilities available to them on the internet, they forget about the consequences of these virtual relationships on real life relationships. People would often prefer to use their imaginations than to interact in real life and face its challenges because using ones imagination makes the other person as perfect as possible. This becomes dangerous as the person they are speaking to could be exactly the opposite of what they think they are, only because their imagination has chosen to make them

that way. Virtual relationships over internet lack the element of non verbal communication i.e. tone, facial expression, gesture and touch. Hence, it is very convenient to use ones imagination to alter one's own thinking to assume the behavior of the other person in favour of their own desire and fantasies. This becomes extremely problematic in married relationships where the individuals who engage in online relationships find themselves more interested in their online friends rather than their spouses, because they have created that person in their own heads, not having the imperfect facts that are present in their spouses. In such a scenario the imperfection of their partners is amplified to such an extent that breaks down the need for communication and intimacy with their partners in real life, creating distance and a real life problem.

Cybersex is another threat to real life and authentic relationships. Engaging in cybersex with individuals online leads to gratification of those desires and fantasies that one would otherwise resist in real life. People, who have Cybersex addiction, are most likely to be addicted because of the anonymity internet offers, the convenience, and also the escape. Indulging in cybersex destroys the pleasure of real life physical intimacy, as it raises the unrealistic expectation and demands in real life which is both difficult to express and meet by their partner. An interesting debate to note here is whether having cybersex while one is married or committed to someone, considered cheating on their spouse or significant other. Some say it is cheating only when physical contact is involved, and so in that case cybersex is definitely not a form of cheating. There are others who argue that if one's spouse or partner found out about their cybersex experiences and felt betrayed, then it is indeed cheating. Some debate that cybersex is not masturbation or pornography it is just an interactive form of pornography. No matter how long one debates this issue, the fact that someone would feel betrayed if their partner engaged in Cybersex activities does not change. Wanting to spend more time online with someone, rather than with a person who is physically present is not only addiction, but most certainly deceitful.

Gender also plays a role in Cybersex addiction. The reason why men and women indulge in Cybersex may be different. Research by the Center for Online Addiction states the following: "Gender significantly influences the way men and women view cybersex. Women prefer Cybersex because it hides their physical appearance, removes the social stigma that women shouldn't enjoy sex, and allows them a safe means to concentrate on their sexuality in new, uninhibited ways. Men prefer cybersex because it removes performance anxiety that may be underlying problems with premature ejaculation or impotence and it also hide their physical appearance for men who feel insecure about hair loss, penis size, or weight gain." This itself explains the core psychology behind the two genders getting addicted to cybersex and finding it less challenging as compared to real life physical intimacy.

Apart from intimate relationships, relationship with family members also gets affected. The inability to take up family responsibilities, to promptly show up for family members at times of need and a breakdown in communication are commonly manifested, significantly affecting the quality of the relationship shared. The need to spend quality time, to seek advice during tough time and to share one's innermost feeling with family members, ceases and hence the individual becomes an isolate, completely cut off into a self-created world of his own where he or she is unable to demarcate the thin line between the real and the virtual, the right and the wrong.

Conclusion

Irrespective of the consequences that Internet Addiction has on real life relationships, without any doubt it has a tremendous psychological hold over an individual operating in cyberspace and his relationships, causing dissociation of the real into the virtual and letting the subconscious surface and play its defences. Only an aware and self-disciplined individual can escape the subtle yet powerful psychological manipulation of this addiction to know the boundaries and where to draw the line. Treating internet as a means to an end helps to perceive it just as a commodity and not as something to seek life contentment from.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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