Debate over Internet “Addiction”

by M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP
Associate Professor of Information Assurance
School of Business & Management
Norwich University, Northfield VT

Kimberly S. Young is a clinical psychologist who has been working on what she calls Internet addiction since the mid-1990s. In 1996, she acknowledged that “the term addiction does not appear in the most recent version of the DSM-IV [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual] (American Psychiatric Association, 1995).”[1] However, she argued, despite objections from many experts that “the term addiction should only be applied to cases involving chemical substances,” she pointed out that a number of studies applied “similar diagnostic criteria” to “problem behaviors such as pathological gambling…, eating disorders…, sexual addictions…, generic technological addictions…, and video game addiction….”

A general definition of addiction is as follows: “Addiction, habitual repetition of excessive behavior that a person is unable or unwilling to stop, despite its harmful consequences. People can be physically addicted to a drug, meaning they may suffer ill physical effects if they stop taking the drug. They also can be psychologically addicted to drugs, gambling, or other behaviors, meaning they feel overwhelmingly deprived if they attempt to stop.” [2]

Young defined Internet addiction in her early research in operational terms: anyone answering “Yes” to any three or more of the following questions would be defined as addicted:

1. Do you feel preoccupied with the Internet (think about previous online activity or anticipate next online session)?
2. Do you feel the need to use the Internet with increasing amounts of time to achieve satisfaction?
3. Have you repeatedly made unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop Internet use?
4. Do you feel restless, moody, depressed, or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop Internet use?
5. Do you stay online longer than originally intended?
6. Have you jeopardized or risked the loss of a significant relationship, job, educational or career opportunity because of the Internet?
7. Have you lied to family members, therapists, or others to conceal the extent of involvement with the Internet?
8. Do you use the Internet as a way of escaping from problems or relieving a dysphoric mood (e.g., feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety, depression)?[3]


A recent brief review of the controversy over calling excessive use of the Internet an addiction appeared in the October issue of CMAJ, the journal of the Canadian Medical Association.[4]
Proponents of labeling excessive use of the Internet argue that the tool is so popular that clinicians are reluctant to recognize and label Internet dependency and abuse as a clinical addiction because of negative connotations of the word. However, other clinicians and scientists argue that excessive use of the communications medium is better described as obsessive use “to avoid dealing with underlying problems, such as depression or social anxiety disorder, which have well-established treatments.” Critics argue that “Creating new ‘addictions’ is misleading and confusing… and will only prevent people from getting the help they need, while undermining their self-efficacy.” Dr Vaughan Bell, a clinical neuroscientist, argues, “The overmedicalization of life’s problems is damaging…. Your actual difficulty may be that you are in a bad relationship or you are depressed, not addicted to the Internet. It’s a neat placebo explanation that doesn’t fully address the complexity of people’s problems.”

David Roman, writing in the *Communications of the ACM* (Association for Computing Machinery), commented on the debate in November 2009: “We published a story about ReSTART, an Internet detox center…. ([http://cacm.acm.org/news/42675](http://cacm.acm.org/news/42675)). It treats behaviors worthy of a 12-step program, such as a monomaniacal desire for online time, an inability to disconnect, and lying about Web habits. But it’s also true that many overworked software programmers would fail ReSTART’s survey on Internet addiction ([http://www.netaddiction.com/resources/internet_addiction_test.htm](http://www.netaddiction.com/resources/internet_addiction_test.htm)).” He adds, “Addiction? Without stronger evidence, the jury is still out.”[5]

REFERENCES


* * *

M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP <mailto:mekabay@gmail.com > specializes in security and operations management consulting services. CV online.<http://www.mekabay.com/cv/ >

Copyright © 2009 M. E. Kabay. All rights reserved.

Permission is hereby granted to *Network World* to distribute this article at will, to post it without limit on any Web site, and to republish it in any way they see fit.