

Computer Addiction or Healthy Enthusiam?

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Are you a computer addict? ... or is someone you love a computer addict?

If so, you are not alone.

I have this friend who I believe has become addicted to her computer. It started out innocently enough with the purchase of a computer to do her bookkeeping, keep in touch with long distant friends and relatives, or a little light reading. Over the next year or so she began to spend more and more time on it and less and less with her friends. She became withdrawn from society and stopped participating in activities she used to enjoy. Call her anytime day or night and in asking "wha'cha doing?" she states "playing on the computer". I jokingly told her "I think you are addicted to that thing".

As time went on, I began to suspect this wasn't a joking matter and perhaps she could have a real condition with serious repercussions. Termed "Internet Addiction Disorder" by some, or "Computer Addiction" by others, this affliction knows no age or sex boundaries. It isn't confined to any social class, race, or country. It doesn't discriminate.

It doesn't discriminate, but different demographics tend to be addicted to certain elements under the massive umbrella we'll term "computers". Youngsters tend to become so entrenched in their video games that they withdraw from friends, lose sleep, and cease all semblance of learning in school. Teenage females lean towards chat rooms and instant messaging. Housewives and women in general might become addicted to ebay or other on-line purchasing and sometimes incur massive debt, neglect the family unit, and her household chores. Many men, age not being a factor, become addicted to porn and the ilk, computer hacking/cracking, irc or discussion forums or even online gambling. Many neglect work, friends and family. All age groups spend countless hours "surfing". In actuality these examples cross demographic lines and are meant only as a loose generalization. "As a trained cognitive behavior therapist, I often treat gamblers, alcoholics and people with obsessive-compulsive disorder, and have also studied mood changes resulting from the recreational use of psychotropic medication. I concluded that this inappropriate and excessive use of the computer might be a distinct disorder" (Orzack et al., 1988).

Symptoms can include feelings of euphoria or contentment when on the computer and depression or loss when not, craving more and more time on the computer and lying to everyone about their computer usage. Ailments can appear physically as well in the form of carpal tunnel syndrome, back and neck soreness, migrains, eating and sleeping disorders, and even neglecting personal hygiene.

Computers have become a constant in our society and in fact they are present in about every aspect of our lives. They are a convenience, a help, even a necessity. Like food or possibly alcohol, one may need or want to partake in order to

sustain or enjoy life, but when it becomes an uncontrollable excess it can be defined as an addiction. [Webster's \[2\]](#) Revised Unabridged Dictionary (1913) defines addicted as "To apply habitually; to devote; to habituate". Addiction becomes a problem as it interferes with normal life processes. "But as in all addictions, the problem is where to draw the line between "normal" enthusiasm and "abnormal" preoccupation (Suler, 1999).

"We have no idea what levels or kinds of computer usage are "normal." Therefore, we cannot state which behavior is always pathological" (Orzack, 1998). To establish a baseline of normalcy I asked a random sample of 47 people encountered over a three day period throughout the course of my daily life, "how much time do you spend on the computer outside of work within each 24-hour period?". Among this group were friends, co-workers, strangers, and relatives. To minimize bias I asked anyone I encountered regardless of any demographic indicators. Simply put, I asked everyone I ran into, that I hadn't already asked, over the course of three days. Answers ranged from 0 to 12 hours. The average and the number I'm using as a baseline is roughly 2.3 hours per day.

I asked those whose time on the computer each day was greater than 4 hours if they would fill out a survey to help me on a research project and 14 complied. Granted this is a small sample and as such my findings are not exactly scientifically valid. For the scope of this article the results are interesting. Each of the 14 respondents fell into the computer addicted range. That would indicate almost 30% of the given sample was what I considered addicted. Gaming consoles and handhelds were also included as computers.

John M. Grohol, Psy.D. states, "Since the aspects of the Internet where people are spending the greatest amount of time online have to do with social interactions, it would appear that socialization is what makes the Internet so "addicting." That's right -- plain old hanging out with other people and talking with them. Whether it's via e-mail, a discussion forum, chat, or a game online (such as a MUD), people are spending this time exchanging information, support, and chit-chat with other people like themselves" (Grohol, 2004).

Unfortunately it's difficult to locate any real work in this area as most still think of it as a joke. It hasn't become a stigma in our society yet and as such it's being treated nonchalantly or with humor. In phoning local psychologists and mental treatment centers I found only one out of twelve that would even grant a consultation. Among the responses I received, two initially laughed, four referred to me to another doctor, two just said I don't treat that (paraphrasing), two that said they'd get back to me (another paraphrase) and one referred me to Alcoholics Anonymous.

Very few professionals are beginning to consider computer addiction a real affliction such as eating disorders, alcoholism, or compulsive gambling. Dr. Orzack has founded Computer Addiction Services at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts. But this is rare. One of the few serious papers found on the subject described the disorder as "theorized". Even more rare were suggestions for treatment.

For this newly emerging disorder, one might adapt some other basic techniques used in other addiction treatments. Other than using alcoholism as an example and just pulling the plug "cold turkey", some basic suggestions might include:

- Setting time limits and sticking to them
- Perhaps scheduling set blocks of time - like appointments
- No more skipping meals or eating at the computer
- Don't refuse invitations from family and friends (get out of the house!)
- Dust off that bowflex or dig out the old football (then use them)
- Downgrade your connection speed
- If feasible get a new pet or new hobby
- Move the computer to a busy, less private part of the house
- Reinstall Windows! (just kidding).

Unfortunately at this time there is very little work in this area and as such there are few real scientifically valid studies or treatment programs. Whether you believe there is really such a thing or not, perhaps the following [survey \[3\]](#) can be

food for thought.

References

Computer Addiction Services [online: <http://www.computeraddiction.com/>]

International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies, Computer and cyberspace addiction, John Suler, Ph.D. (March 1999, Vol. )

Internet Addiction guide [online: <http://psychcentral.com/netaddiction/>]

Psychiatric Times, Computer Addiction: What Is It?, Maressa Hecht Orzack, Ph.D. (August 1998, Vol. XV, Issue 8)

I'm not a doctor and don't pretend this study is scientifically valid. The sample was small and the questionable methodology of the research and results weren't well documented. It only reflects my personal research and thoughts on the subject.

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Source URL: <http://www.tuxmachines.org/node/335>

Links:

[1] <http://www.tuxmachines.org/taxonomy/term/102>

[2] <ftp://ftp.uga.edu/pub/misc/webster/>

[3] <http://www.tuxmachines.org/node/322>