

# Faculty and Employee Assistance Program

## NEWSLETTER

### SEX AND THE INTERNET

**Personal computers** and the Internet have revolutionized the way many people live their lives. Unfortunately, like many other activities, their use can be destructive as well as constructive. The Internet can be a source of erotic fantasy, pornography, illicit relationships and cyber affairs, all of which can devastate a person's family life and career.

Sex on the Internet has been called the crack cocaine of sexual compulsivity, by clinical psychologist Al Cooper of Stanford University. Cooper, who places the number of online sex addicts at more than 200,000 nationwide, says those most vulnerable to addiction are people with suppressed sexual lives who have found an endless supply on the Internet. Most are lonely and/or involved in unsatisfying relationships, and cyber

sex fulfills a need left vacant in their normal daily lives.

Sexually compulsive behaviors, which include downloading pornography and/or involvement in cyber affairs, begin in chat rooms or other interactive web sites and often lead to actual meetings and encounters.

#### **Triple A Effect**

Online sexual addiction is a rapidly growing disorder, caused by what Cooper calls the Triple A Effect:

#### **Accessibility, Affordability and Anonymity.**

**Accessibility.** Online sexual material is just a click away. Although buying pornographic magazines or videos may be as easy as walking or driving to a store, it is even easier to turn on the computer. Sex is the

number one searched topic on the Internet, according to a study by Cooper et al. published in *Professional Psychology:*

*Research and Practice.* In April 1998 alone, the researchers reported 9 million visitors to adult web sites, which represented 15 percent of the 57 million Americans using the world wide web. For people who use sex as an outlet for stress, loneliness, boredom or emotional pain, cyber sex can take over because it is so easily accessible.

**Affordability.** Access to online sexual activities is often simply the cost of an Internet services monthly fee. Less expensive than renting several videos or engaging a prostitute, online sex can offer a cheap thrill. However, it is worth noting that online addicts can easily spend thousands of dollars in

credit card charges to Internet sex businesses.

**Anonymity.** Users can be whomever they want to be on the Internet as a result of the freedom in cyber space. A shy person can suddenly become totally uninhibited. Online sex addicts can establish fantasy pseudo-intimate relationships based on whatever persona they want to project.

### **Cyber Affairs Built on Fantasy**

Cyber affairs are not only sexually exciting but intimate feelings can develop quickly because the relationships are based on fantasy. People can

create and project whatever they want onto their cyber partners.

Few would dispute the freedom of expression afforded by the Internet. However, when online encounters become compulsive, they can destroy normal healthy relationships at home and on the job as Internet relationships become more rewarding than off-line lives.

Researchers say that people who spend approximately an hour a week in online sex activities are probably just expressing curiosity and have not lost control. However, anything over 11 hours a week in online

sex translates into psychological distress. People admitted to researchers such activities interfered with other aspects of family and business life. Because online sex addiction is so gratifying, it is rare that the online sex addict will ask for help. More often, a family member or work associate will force them to seek treatment. Your EAP can provide confidential help to determine the best resource for you or your family member. Help may include a support group, a 12-step program for sexual addiction or a referral for counseling.

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**Internet use can become addictive. The following screening tool, found on the Center for Online Addiction website ([www.netaddiction.com](http://www.netaddiction.com)), can provide an indication of addictive Internet use.**

1. Do you feel preoccupied with the Internet (do you think about previous online activity or anticipate your next online session)?
2. Do you feel the need to use the Internet for increasing amounts of time in order 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 of relieving a dysphoric mood (e.g. helplessness, guilt, anxiety, depression)?

Answering yes to five or more questions probably means the Internet is creating a problem. Researchers say the cutoff score of five is consistent with the number of criteria used for pathological gambling and is seen as an adequate number of criteria to differentiate normal from pathological addictive Internet use.

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