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Addicted to Technology?

Article

Needing the 'Net

SEATTLE, Washington. About a year ago, Ben Alexander was spending nearly every waking moment playing the hugely popular online game World of Warcraft. As a result of his preoccupation with the game, the young man—who had always earned good grades in school and had aspirations of becoming a biologist—flunked out of college. Ben was addicted to a video game, and he was in desperate need of help.

"At first it was a couple of hours a day," said Ben, now 19, adding, "By midway through the first semester, I was playing 16 or 17 hours a day."

Ben first sought help from a program that treated people suffering from substance addiction, but it wasn't a good fit. He then completed a 10-week outdoors-based program, but he felt he still had little control over his habit. Finally, Ben began searching for a facility that specialized in the treatment of gaming addiction, and that's when he found the reSTART Internet Addiction Program at a newly opened center near Seattle, Washington. The program aims to treat pathological Internet use and is designed specifically for people who are obsessed with video games, texting, Facebook, eBay, Twitter, and other technology-based diversions.

While similar treatment facilities are common in other countries (where this type of addiction is taken very seriously), the Seattle facility is the first residential treatment center for Internet addiction in the United States. Patients live at the five-acre (two-hectare) center for the duration of the 45-day reSTART program.

"We've been doing this for years on an outpatient basis," said reSTART co-founder Hilarie Cash, who was introduced to Internet addiction in 1994, when she had a patient whose compulsion to play video games had led to the loss of his marriage and two jobs. "Up until now, we had no place to send them," Cash said of her patients who suffer from computer addiction.

Ben, the new center's first patient, spends his days attending counseling and psychotherapy sessions. When not in sessions, he stays busy doing household chores, working on the bucolic facility's grounds, going on jaunts, exercising, and even baking cookies, activities that are designed to help him sever his ties with the virtual world and learn skills that are more salutary in the real world.



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AP

Some people become addicted to video games, texting, Facebook, eBay, Twitter, and other technology.

According to psychotherapist and reSTART co-founder Cosette Dawna Rae, Internet addicts miss out on real conversations and real human development. Their hygiene, their home, and their relationships often deteriorate, she said, and they don't eat right, sleep properly, or get sufficient exercise.

Some potential effects associated with Internet addiction are extremely serious, ranging from job loss to car accidents for those who are continually texting while driving. Some people have died after playing video games for days without respite—these deaths generally stem from a blood clot associated with being sedentary for protracted periods of time.

Addiction warning signs include being preoccupied with thoughts of the Internet, using the Internet longer than intended, and spending increasing amounts of time online. Other warning signs include repeatedly making ineffectual efforts to restrict Internet use and jeopardizing relationships, school, or work in order to spend time online. Headaches, carpal tunnel syndrome, and changes in weight are also warning signs. Some people suffering from Internet addiction lie to conceal the extent of their Internet use. Some admit to using the Internet to escape problems or feelings of depression.

Experts have surmised that Internet addiction is actually a symptom of other conditions, and they say, therefore, that treatment should take a holistic approach.

Dr. Ronald Pies is a professor of psychiatry at SUNY Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, New York. "From what we know," he said, "many so-called 'Internet addicts' are folks who have severe depression, anxiety disorders, or social phobic symptoms that make it hard for them to live a full, balanced life and deal face-to-face with other people. It may be that unless we treat their underlying problems, some new form of addiction will pop up down the line."

Whether the reSTART program will prove efficacious in the long run remains to be seen. One foreseeable problem is that Internet technology is so pervasive that eschewing it can be nearly impossible in today's world.

For now, however, Ben feels that the program has helped him. "I don't think I'll go back to World of Warcraft anytime soon," he said.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

Dictionary

bucolic (*adjective*) having to do with the countryside or country life

efficacious (*adjective*) capable of having the desired result; effective; successful

Hilarie Cash, of reSTART, says that three of the following symptoms suggest Internet abuse. Five or more of the following symptoms suggest Internet addiction.

- Increasing amounts of time spent on Internet
- Failed attempts to control behavior
- Heightened euphoria while on Internet
- Craving more time on Internet, restless when not there
- Neglecting family and friends
- Lying to others about Internet use
- Internet interfering with job or school
- Feeling guilty or ashamed of behavior
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Weight changes, backaches, headaches, carpal tunnel
- Withdrawal from other activities

eschew (*verb*) to avoid

protracted (*adjective*) lengthy or prolonged

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SEATTLE, Washington. About a year ago, Ben Alexander was spending nearly every waking moment playing the hugely popular online game World of Warcraft. The young man, who had always earned good grades in school, dreamed of becoming a biologist. But as a result of his preoccupation with the game, he flunked out of college. Ben had an addiction to a video game. He was in desperate need of help.

"At first it was a couple of hours a day," said Ben, now 19. "By midway through the first semester, I was playing 16 or 17 hours a day."

Ben first sought help from a program that treated people suffering from substance addiction. It wasn't a good fit, however. He then completed a 10-week outdoors-based program. Still, he felt he had little control over his habit. Finally, Ben began searching for a program that specialized in the treatment of gaming addiction. That's when he found the reSTART Internet Addiction Program at a newly opened center near Seattle, Washington. The program aims to treat pathological Internet use. It is designed for people who are addicted to video games, texting, Facebook, eBay, Twitter, and other technology-based activities.



Photo credit and all related images:
AP

Some people become addicted to video games, texting, Facebook, eBay, Twitter, and other technology.

Similar treatment centers are common in other countries, where this type of addiction is taken very seriously. But the Seattle center is the first live-in treatment center for Internet addiction in the United States. Patients stay at the five-acre (two-hectare) center for the entire 45-day reSTART program.

How many students can perform these tasks:

Ben is the new center's first patient. He spends his days attending counseling sessions. When not in sessions, he stays busy doing household chores. He works on the center's grounds. Ben also goes on outings, exercises, and even bakes cookies. These activities are designed to help him sever ties with the computer world. He will also learn skills that are more useful in the real world.

Cosette Dawna Rae is a counselor and co-founder of reSTART. According to Rae, Internet addicts miss out on real conversations. Their hygiene, their home, and their relationships often suffer, she said. Addicts also don't eat right, sleep properly, or get sufficient exercise.

Some potential effects connected with Internet addiction are extremely serious. Some people lose their jobs. Those who continually text-message while driving often cause car accidents. Some people have died after playing video games for days without a break. These deaths are generally the result of blood clotting. Blood clots can form when a person sits for a long period of time.

Addiction warning signs include being preoccupied with thoughts of the Internet. Some people use the Internet longer than intended. Others spend increasing amounts of time online. Addicts also neglect relationships, school, or work in order to spend time online. Some Internet addicts lie to conceal the extent of their Internet use. Some admit to using the Internet to escape problems. Some use it to escape feelings of depression.

Experts suspect that Internet addiction is actually a sign of another condition. Therefore, they say, treatment should concentrate on the individual as a whole.

Dr. Ronald Pies is a doctor in Syracuse, New York. According to Pies, "many so-called 'Internet addicts' are folks who have severe depression." Many of these people, Pies said, have anxiety or social problems. "It may be that unless we treat their underlying problems, some new form of addiction will pop up down the line."

Whether the reSTART program will work in the long run remains to be seen. One potential problem is that Internet technology is so widespread. Avoiding it can be nearly impossible in today's world.

For now, however, Ben feels that the program has helped him. "I don't think I'll go back to World of Warcraft anytime soon," he said.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

Hilarie Cash, of reSTART points out the signs of Internet addiction. She says that three of the following signs suggest Internet abuse. Five or more of the following signs suggest Internet addiction.

- Increasing amounts of time spent on Internet
- Failed attempts to control behavior
- Heightened euphoria, or excitement, while on Internet
- Wanting more time on Internet, restless when not there
- Neglecting family and friends
- Lying to others about Internet use
- Internet interfering with job or school
- Feeling guilty or ashamed of behavior
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Weight changes, backaches, headaches, carpal tunnel (pain or weakness in the hands, wrists, or fingers)
- Withdrawal from other activities

Dictionary

addiction (*noun*) the state of needing something or believing that you need something

blood clotting (*noun*) the act of blood inside the body becoming thick or developing lumps; the body does this to protect itself, but sometimes clotting can be a problem

depression (*noun*) a condition involving feelings of sadness and hopelessness

preoccupation (*noun*) the state in which a person has constant thoughts about something

