

SURFING NOT STUDYING: DEALING WITH INTERNET ADDICTION ON CAMPUS

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Part One: Risk Factors for Student Internet Abuse

"Staying up late at night on the Internet is the best time I have at school," boasts Kim, a sophomore physics major and regular attendee of the kind of party we just witnessed. "After awhile, it was all I wanted to do, all I thought about. It was all so fascinating. In the chat rooms, I met a woman from Ottawa, Canada, who was a physics major at a university there. I don't see many women physics majors where I am. And I became close friends with a guy living in England, who was actually an exchange student from California. We connected over everything in life!" Kim got so engrossed in her Net world that she ignored her studies. A former math and science whiz in high school with serious career ambitions, she allowed her grades to crash before recognizing that her new obsession was sabotaging her goals.

At least Kim recognized the problem. Most college students, sadly, do not. And as their numbers continue to soar, colleges have become perhaps the major breeding ground of Internet addiction. Here's a quick look at the major contributing factors:

1. *Free and unlimited Internet access* - When freshmen register today, they get a student ID card, a meal card, and most, important, a free personal e-mail account. They've got no online service fees to pay, no limits to their time logged on, and computer labs open for their convenience round-the-clock. It's an Internet user's dream.
2. *Huge blocks of unstructured time* - Most college students attend classes for twelve to sixteen hours per week. The rest of the time is their own to read, study, go to movies or parties, join clubs, or explore the new environment outside their campus walls. Many forget all those other activities and concentrate on one thing: the Internet.
3. *Newly-experienced freedom from parental control* - Away from home and their parent's watchful eyes, college students long have exercised their new freedom by engaging in pranks, talking to friends to all hours of the night, sleeping with their boyfriends and girlfriends, and eating and drinking things Mom and Dad would not approve of. Today, they utilize that freedom by hanging out in the MUDs and chat rooms of cyberspace, and no parent can complain about online service fees or their refusal to eat dinner with the family or help out with chores.
4. *No monitoring or censoring of what they say or do online* - When they move on to the job world, college students may find suspicious bosses peeking over their shoulder or

even monitoring their online time and usage. Even e-mail to co-workers could be intercepted by the wrong party. In college, no one's watching. Computer lab monitors tend to be student volunteers whose only responsibility is to assist anyone who needs help understanding how to use the Internet - not tell them what they can or cannot do on it.

5. *Full encouragement from faculty and administrators* - Students understand that their school's administration and faculty want them to make full use of the Internet's vast resources. Abstaining from all Net use is seldom an option - in some large classes, professors place required course materials solely on the Net and engage in their only one-on-one contact with students through e-mail! Administrators, of course, want to see their major investments in computers and Internet access justified.
6. *Adolescent training in similar activities* - By the time most kids get to college, they will have spent years staring at video game terminals, closing off the world around them with walkmans, and engaging in that rapid-fire clicking of the TV remote. Even if they didn't get introduced to the Internet in high school, those other activities have made students well-suited to slide into aimless Web surfing, skill-testing MUDs, and rat-a-tat-tat chat room dialogue.
7. *The desire to escape college stressors* - Students feel the pressures of making top grades, fulfilling parental expectations, and, upon graduation, facing fierce competition for good jobs. The Internet, ideally, would help make it easier for them to do their necessary course work as quickly and efficiently as possible. Instead, they turn to their Net friends to hide from their difficult feelings of fear, anxiety, and depression.
8. *Social intimidation and alienation* - With as many as 30,000 students on some campuses, students easily can get lost in the crowd. When they try to reach out, they often run into even tighter clicks than the in-crowds of high school. Maybe they don't dress right or look right. But when they join the faceless community of the Internet, they find that with little effort they can become popular with new "friends" throughout the U.S. and in England, Australia, Germany, France, Hungary, Japan, New Zealand, and China. Why bother trying to socialize on campus?
9. *A higher legal drinking age* - With the drinking age at twenty-one in most states, undergraduate students can't openly drink alcohol and socialize in bars. So the Internet becomes their substitute drug of choice: no ID required and no closing hour!

Part Two: Reactions from the Ivory Tower

College administrators are concerned about that they have put all this money in for an educational tool and some students are using it for self-destruction as students chat, play interactive games, gamble online, day trade, download porn, or scan the web. College counselors across the country are seeing more and more cases of Internet abuse on campus as students suffer from the following problems because of Net abuse:

- * Lack of sleep and excess fatigue
- * Declining grades

- * Less investment in relationships with boyfriend or girlfriend
- * Withdrawal from all campus social activities and events
- * General apathy, edginess, or irritability when off-line (cybershakes)
- * Denial of the seriousness of the problem
- * Rationalizing that what they learn on the Net is superior to their classes
- * Lying about how much time they spend online and what they do there
- * Trying to quit completely when threatened with possible expulsion because of poor grades, then slipping right back into the same addictive patterns

Yet, despite these problems, denial cuts especially deep in the college environment because packed computer labs provide an even more effective cover than drinking in a crowded bar. When you're sitting in rows of Internet users whose obsessions manifest in eight-hour sessions, no one's going to tap you on the shoulder and say: "Hey, I think you're seriously addicted to what you do on the computer and you need to get some help." Most students laugh off any suggestion that they're becoming psychologically dependent on the feelings they get from playing games and chat rooms. "Only foolish adults get addicted to stuff they take or things they do," students counter. "Anyway, I'm not as bad as the geeks with the computer majors who never log off and have to know all the software programs. I can cut back or quit fooling around on the Net any time I want."

Then serious trouble sets in: They flunk out of college. Their real-life girlfriend breaks up with them because all they ever want to do is play on the Net. Their parents explode when they find out their huge investment in their child's college education is going to support all-night Internet sessions. They tumble into a major depression when their online steady blips off the screen forever. They experience major withdrawal when they try to quit their habit - even if their only motivation was to stay in school to keep their free Internet access. At that point, the addicted students themselves at last may decide to seek help.

At most universities, however, counselors know little or nothing about the ways of the Internet and its special allure for students. One college counselor was treating a female student who reported feeling extremely depressed because of a recent breakup with her boyfriend. The counselor assumed the boy was another student at that college or a former beau from back home. Not until their fifth session, and only by accident, did the counselor learn that this "boyfriend" existed only in cyberspace. Yet the girl's devastation appeared just as real as if she had known him in real life. The counselor was surprised at how a young adult could get so emotionally attached to a computer pal.

If you're a counselor, learn all you can about the Internet and what students do there. Talk to students about their online activities, ask them questions about what they get out of it, go

online yourself to see what chat rooms and interactive online games look like in action. During intake interviews with students reporting depression or anxiety, make sure you inquire about their Internet habits.

As the Internet is a necessary part of a campus life, educating college counselors is only the first step. Several other universities and campuses strategies across all levels of campus life should be implemented to prevent student Internet abuse:

1. Educate administrators and faculty on the dynamics of Internet abuse to raise awareness and prevention throughout the campus system.
2. Implement resident life educational programs that address student Internet addiction. Similar to alcohol awareness and prevention programs on campus, resident life programs that educate students on the warning signs and risk factors of Internet addiction are known to promote early detection and reduce incidence.
3. Encourage students to seek counseling when Internet-triggered problems arise.
4. Emphasize the importance of student participation in the social world the campus offers. Campuses offer a variety of social clubs and organizations for student involvement and growth and administrators are now actively encouraging students to join these clubs and to get offline.
5. Bring in campus speakers to discuss cyber-behavior to help expand students understanding of the implications of this new technology.

Dr. Kimberly Young is an internationally known researcher, author, and speaker on the impact of technology on human behavior. She serves as the executive director of the Center for Online Addiction and authored *Caught in the Net*, the first book to address Internet addiction recovery. To learn more please visit www.netaddiction.com