

LAWYERS CAUGHT IN THE NET

Donald is a sole practitioner who knew the benefits of the Internet. He relied upon e-mail to contact colleagues and clients and used online databases to conduct legal research. One evening, alone in his office, he accidentally stumbled upon an adult entertainment website and, out of curiosity, scanned through several of its pages. The next week, stressed after a long workday, he returned to the site for a little relaxation. "Just a few minutes won't hurt," he rationalized as he surfed.

Over the next few months, Donald searched for new pornographic websites as a way to relieve his job pressures. Soon, he found himself going to work early, taking more breaks, staying late, and even coming in on the weekends to surf. His behavior grew more and more out of control, and his life gradually became unmanageable. He cancelled appointments, missed deadlines, lost cases, and ignored his wife and family just to find more time at the computer. Repeated promises to stop failed until he finally admitted that he was addicted.

Internet addiction affects 5 to 10 percent of all online users. The legal profession has already seen the impact of this disorder with an alarming number of divorce cases, child custody battles, and other litigation prompted by Internet addiction. Recently, employees fired for Internet abuse filed disability claims under the Americans with Disabilities Act against former employers for providing access to the digital drug. When lawyers become hooked, their practice can also be affected. To help prevent this, this article reviews the warning signs, consequences, and treatment involved in Internet addiction.

ARE YOU HOOKED?

How can you tell if you are already hooked? Perhaps you spend a little too much time online. Does that automatically mean you are addicted? No. The

volume of time alone is not the best way to diagnose the disorder. We can't say, for instance, that 10 hours per week is okay, but that the eleventh hour is a sign of an addiction. Instead, you must evaluate your online usage against the following set of behaviors that characterize the basic warning signs of Internet addiction:

1. Do you feel preoccupied with the Internet, that is, do you think about previous online activity or anticipate your next online session?
2. Have you repeatedly made unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop Internet use?
3. Do you feel restless, moody, depressed, or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop Internet use?
4. Do you repeatedly stay online longer than originally intended?
5. Have you neglected sleep, proper diet, or exercise just to surf?
6. Have you experienced eyestrain, back strain, or carpal tunnel syndrome because of your Internet use?
7. Have you jeopardized a significant relationship, job, or educational or career opportunity because of the Internet?
8. Have you lied to others to conceal the extent of your involvement with the Internet?
9. Do you use the Internet as a way of escaping from problems or feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety, or depression?

Answering "yes" to five or more of these questions suggests that addiction is present. However, given the popularity of the Internet, legitimate business usage may mask the addictive behavior even when a person meets all of the criteria.

Internet addicts are commonly attracted to online pornography or adult sex chat rooms. They

also may obsessively check stock quotes, day trade, play computer games, gamble in virtual casinos, chat online with strangers, or search for information not relevant to work. The immediate and often required access to the Internet becomes a constant distraction that can wreak havoc on the addict's professional and personal life.

CYCLES OF ADDICTION

So what does this mean for you, a lawyer in a sole or small firm practice? Having such job independence most likely means that you have a private office free from the structure of corporate management. Since no one monitors your computer usage, counterproductive and maladaptive online behavior is easily concealed. Job productivity suffers as the Internet-addicted lawyer wastes enormous amounts of time and energy at the computer when he or she should be working. The addicted lawyer will gradually withdraw from colleagues and staff, miss deadlines, and even jeopardize cases – all to maximize unproductive use of the Internet.

Not only is work performance hindered, but family problems also may develop. The addictive behavior may extend to home computer use when addicts lie about their Internet habit and are less and less available for the significant people in their lives. To spend more time on the computer, they may even cancel family or social outings and also begin to withdraw from community involvements.

Despite these consequences, addicts believe they can handle their obsession. Soon, however, the addict discovers that time slips by and the behavior is not so easily contained. A period of deep regret may follow as the addict realizes that work is piling up and feels guilty for all that time wasted on the computer.

Addicts view their behavior as a personal failure of willpower and promise never to do it again, so a short period of abstinence follows. During this time, the addict temporarily engages in healthy patterns of behavior, works diligently, resumes interest in old hobbies, spends more time with the family, exercises, and gets enough rest. However, cravings eventually develop as temptations to go online emerge during stressful or emotionally charged moments. The addict recalls the self-medicating effects of the Internet

and the relaxation and excitement it can provide. Soon, the rationalizations start again, and the immediate availability of the computer starts the cycle anew. The addict feels unable to stop and doesn't know where to go for help.

GETTING UNHOOKED

Do you have to detach the modem or dismantle the computer just to kick the online habit? Complete abstinence is not possible when Internet use is required for work. Therefore, one goal of successful recovery is to moderate legitimate business use of the Internet while abstaining from those aspects of cyberspace that are most troubling. Begin by incorporating a tangible schedule of Internet usage that will give you a sense of being in control, rather than allowing the Internet to take control of you. Learn to set reasonable time limits pertaining to your computer use. For example, instead of a current 20 hours per week, set a new limit of only 10 hours per week and schedule those hours in specific time slots. Keep your Internet usage on a routine schedule to help maintain discipline and avoid future relapse. Other ways to keep your Internet use under control include:

- Utilize external aids such as an alarm clock or timer to remind yourself when it's time to log off.
- Use another person's Internet account to increase accountability of online actions.
- Find new places to use the Internet that are more public and visible.
- Apply filtering software that blocks access to problematic websites.
- Cultivate new activities or interests that take you away from the computer.

Cutting back on Internet usage is only part of the solution. Internet addiction often stems from underlying psychological or situational factors that increase the risk for the disorder to develop. For example, addicts often use the Internet to escape from stress, depression, anxiety, job burnout, work pressures, or marital discord. The Internet addict may be reluctant to seek help for these other issues, fearing that his or her addiction may be "discovered" in the process.

Successful recovery means finding healthier ways of coping with the issues. Recovery may include individual therapy, couples counseling, support group participation, or treatment at a specialized rehabilitation center for Internet addiction. If you suffer from the cycles or symptoms described in this article, reach out for help.

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