

CLOSE TO HOME



DEALING WITH
electronic
addiction



Reconnecting to the real world

Sharon probably should have known she'd develop an electronic addiction. She's one of those intense, "all or nothing" people, whatever she's doing. Facebook hooked her inside a week.

A familiar figure on the peace and justice scene in Winnipeg, Canada, Sharon is a freelance writer and social activist. She works hard at networking and organizing to further the causes she holds dear. That's why she signed onto Facebook. She saw the Internet social networking site as a great way to connect to issues and people.

Sharon's writing schedule gave her lots of time to spend with her two hundred online "friends." That meant less time writing, organizing, and community building. When she hit six hours a day with Facebook, Sharon knew she was addicted. "That scared me," she says. Sharon realized, with a little prodding from her husband, that living life through social media, despite the vast information and resources available there, wasn't enough for a "people person." As she puts it, "I wasn't spending enough time in the real world."

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After a year on Facebook, with tears and a real feeling of loss, Sharon signed off. Two weeks later, she still felt disconnected. She called it withdrawal. She now has to consciously remind herself how she can reach out to others through letters, email, the telephone, and in-person encounters. On the plus side, she now has a lot more time for writing, community building, and just

being "out and about" with real people in the real world.

Sharon knows the social media temptation will always be there, but she's determined to resist it because she knows what addiction cost her. And she carries a new concern for those who abandon more personal modes of human communication for the virtual world of Facebook and Twitter. She worries that people will forget how to talk to each other face-to-face, and that young people immersed in electronic media simply won't learn the basic, interpersonal skills vital to building a just and peaceful community.



What is electronic addiction?

For many of us, addiction has always meant an unhealthy dependence on physical substances like alcohol or drugs. But a growing number of health professionals and social scientists believe that millions of people are addicted to technology, with damaging results. Some experts have even asked that Internet addiction be included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the guidebook for mental health professionals.

Electronic media have been affecting our lives since the telegraph was invented before the American Civil War. In *The Victorian Internet*, Tom Standage writes that instantly transmitted electronic information was “like a drug to businessmen, who swiftly became addicted to it.” Some managers fell victim to nervous exhaustion from the inescapable pressure of responding to telegrams (demanding an immediate reply, much like email today) that showed up at all hours, disrupting family life.

When radio arrived in the 1920s, families gave up evening traditions of reading, singing, or conversation to enjoy the new medium’s information and entertainment. Then came television. People gladly sacrificed social activities, including church attendance, to be in front of the tube. Today, the average North American household consumes more than seven hours of TV a day.

Now add iPods, video games, cell phones, the Internet (where pornography, social media, online gambling, and even online auctions pose problems for some people)—all vying for our money and our minds. Studies suggest that five to ten percent of us, adults and children, may be prone to electronic addiction. Especially vulnerable are those already suffering from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), innate hos-

Some warning signs of addiction to electronic media:

- you can’t stop using it or feel uncomfortable being away from it;
- you spend more time with it than you intended to;
- your use of the technology crowds out other activities;
- you spend more time with it than with real friends;
- you’re online more than twenty hours per week;
- you find yourself looking for more “shock value” in the Internet porn you view;
- you lie about your involvement with electronic media;
- you neglect personal hygiene, or you forego sleep in order to spend more time with the medium.

Medical experts generally agree that these behavioral addictions put us at risk of serious emotional and physical problems. You owe it to yourself and those you love to make an honest assessment of your relationship to electronic media.

tility, social phobias and poor social skills, depression, poor self-esteem, sexual abuse, anxiety, introversion, poor impulse control, and compulsive behavior problems.

What effect can an electronic addiction have on us? It can lead to a decline in physical fitness, poor grades, behavioral problems, and loss of relationships, marriage, or jobs. Internet porn addiction can reduce our interest in a spouse or partner and grow cancerously from viewing to cybersex to physical infidelity. For Christians, it’s often accompanied by excruciating guilt. Compulsive cell phone users, who won’t stop talking or texting while driving are now blamed for 2,600 fatal accidents and 570,000 injury accidents each year.

Electronic addiction, the Bible, and the Christian story

The Bible speaks directly to our responsibility for each other's well-being. In the early accounts of Genesis (4:9), when God confronts Cain over the slaying of his brother Abel, the murderer utters a profound rhetorical question: Am I my brother's keeper? The resounding response is: Yes! As Christians, we are called to monitor ourselves and our brothers and sisters for anything that might threaten those relationships.

When the effects of electronic addiction are examined, you'll see that they generally revolve around relationships. Alcoholism or drug addiction can come between us and others. So, too, electronic addiction can come between us and others, and ultimately, between us and our God.

An unhealthy relationship to electronic media can blind us to reality. Psychologists recently identified a cell phone condition called "inattention blindness," which offers a painful illustration. Many people have sought hospital treatment for injuries they suffered while walking down the street talking or texting on a cell phone. Some are so focused on their phone that the scene in front of them simply does not register, and they walk into buses, windows, lampposts, and us.

Too great an attachment to electronic media can also blind us to ourselves, and rob us of our inner life. Luke 2:19 tells us that after the shepherds told Mary the news of Jesus' birth reported to them by angels, she pondered these things in her heart; she thought and prayed about them. That would have been hard to do if she had an iPod blasting music into her brain all the time, as many people do today. Elijah might never

have heard the "still small voice" of God (1 Kings 19:11-13), if he'd had a TV show cranked up on his cell phone.

The late Neil Postman's harsh critique of electronic media, especially television, is called *Amusing Ourselves To Death*. Postman feared that our growing dependence on visual images would cause our abilities to read, to think, and to reason—all of which

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require words—to wither. Prayer and meditation are both forms of thought. If our relationship to electronic media reduces our ability to engage in both of them, our spiritual life will certainly be threatened.

The Bible and Christian faith offer us both hope and guidance in dealing with electronic addiction. The hope for those caught in addiction grows out of God's affirmation that we are our "brother's keeper." If we need help, the community of faith should be a safe, supportive place we can turn to. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, it is the role of the church to reach out to those in trouble, to "restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness" (Galatians 6:1-2), even if the trouble involves sexual entanglements, which today might take the form of Internet pornography addiction.

No one could have predicted humankind's reaction to electronic media. Now that we see it, the community of faith should be first in line to help us.

Steps toward healing

Those who treat electronic media addiction don't mince words about how important it is to seek help. One website described it as nothing less than taking steps to cut out the cancer and get back to friends and family.

You can start with a simple self-test. The websites netaddiction.com and virtual-addiction.com offer diagnostic quizzes for cybersexual addiction, Internet addiction, obsessive online gaming, compulsive online gambling, online auction addiction, as well as a partner's addiction test, and parent-child addiction test. Don't assume that you and those you love are immune. Electronic addiction is an equal-opportunity seducer; it afflicts people of all ages, genders, and backgrounds.

It is critically important that you respond honestly to the self-test. Counselors and treatment programs all insist that the first step toward recovery is admitting you have a problem. Depending on the nature of your dependency and on the way your faith community deals with "hidden" issues, that can be hard to do—especially for sex-related addictions. It is important for the church to understand this issue and offer "gentle" support to those who need it.

If you believe you've developed an unhealthy relationship with electronic media, these steps might help you get it under control.

1. Log on to the Internet only once a day and limit your stay to fifteen minutes or less.
2. Schedule more face-to-face time with friends and family.
3. Use the phone to contact people, not social media.
4. Remove Internet applications from your cell phone.
5. Read a real book.
6. Go outside for a walk.
7. Install filtering software in your computer to block porn sites.
8. Find an accountability partner and add software that allows that person to track your online travels and confront you about problematic places you visit.

If you can't control your addiction, you should seek professional help. A counselor can help identify underlying problems (like depression or impulse control issues) that make you more vulnerable to the attraction of electronic media.

If your loved one needs help . . .

Addictions counselors report that most of their clients seek treatment at the urging of a loved one, who recognizes the trouble signs. As your loved one's "keeper," schedule a special time (away from the electronic media) to express your concern, name specific behavior patterns, identify how you feel your relationship is suffering as a result, and suggest the steps listed here—including professional intervention if necessary—as a way to deal with the problem.

For serious cases, residential treatment centers offer programs lasting anywhere from thirty to ninety days or longer (see resource list). These programs are expensive, but they report success in restoring deeply addicted people to wholeness. They caution, however, that recovery from an electronic addiction (like escape from substance addictions) is a life-long process, involving months of withdrawal and, occasionally, lapses back into addiction. For this, it is especially important that the faith community walks with people as they make their way back from the isolating depths of electronic addiction to meaningful, real-life relationships.

For further awareness and help

Center for Internet and Technology

Addiction www.virtual-addiction.com

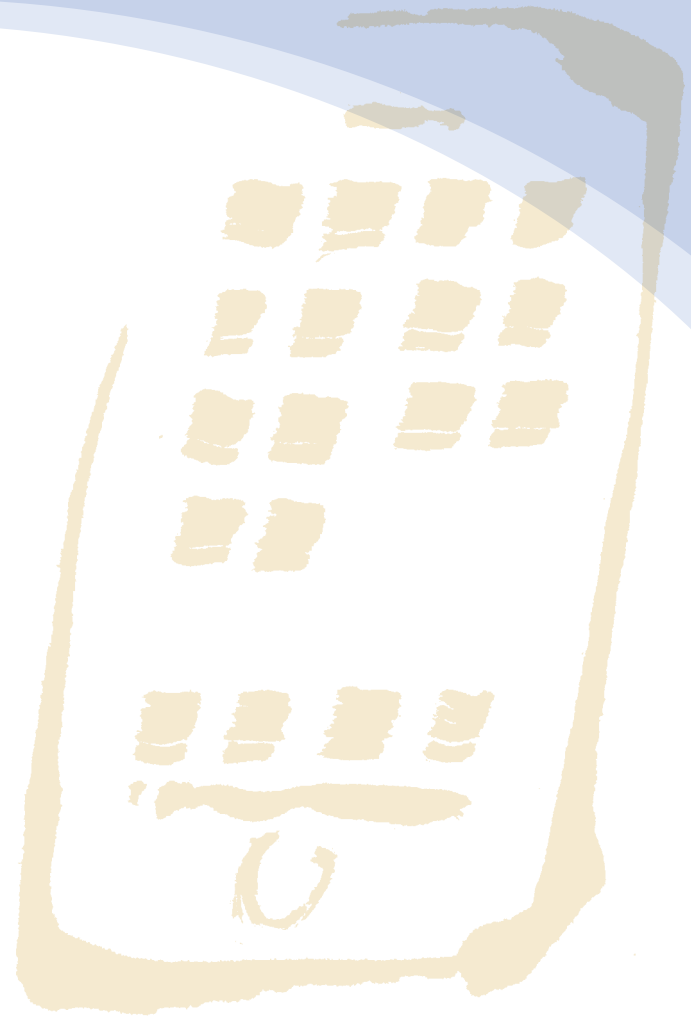
In-person therapy and phone consultation service, self-tests, articles, and treatment resources.

Center for Internet Addiction Recovery

www.netaddiction.com In-person, phone, and online counseling; self-tests, articles, and treatment resources.

On-Line Gamers Anonymous www.olganon.org

Internet support group for those involved in online gaming.



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**Local resources for help with
electronic addiction:**

**For more information on other Close to Home
titles, go to:**

www.mennomedia.org/closetohome

