

Internet addiction is a growing problem, devastating lives and relationships

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Internet addiction is a growing problem and one expert warns "there is a tsunami coming." One British survey found 40% of people felt lonely without the Net. (Fotolia.com)

Whether you're mid-bite, mid-sentence or perhaps mid-sleep, do you react to that 'bing' from your smartphone? flashing red light that gets you?

You've programmed your phone to alert you to messages, or has it programmed you to respond?

From the constant smartphone companion to the laptop replacing the lapdog, the Internet has many of us on a v – an addictive one.

The consumer research firm Intersperience surveyed more than 1,000 people in Britain and found quitting the I hard for some as quitting drinking or smoking.

Without the Internet, 40% said they felt lonely. Ironically, it's fathomable that 40% of those living with Internet probably feel lonely too.

Laurie Tamblyn, an addictions counsellor in special programs at Toronto's Bellwood Health Services, says there of Internet addiction, including gambling, gaming, pornography and social networking.

"We're just beginning to treat this. It is a big problem and it is going to become bigger before people start recogn need to do something about it," Tamblyn says.

"Some of us believe there is a tsunami coming because we haven't fully recognized the problem yet."

Part of that problem is the generation gap. Children today are children of technology – dependent on the social v tools.

Addiction is a progressive illness that ends up in isolation, Tamblyn says, so Internet use can be a slippery slope, devastating effects on relationships.

"The amount of time people spend lost in their behaviours is comparable to a drinker spending time at the bar ir his family or friends," Tamblyn says.

"The addiction becomes the focus of the addict's life. The focus is to interact with the addiction before anything e

doesn't happen, it results in mood swings and irritability."

Internet addiction can be difficult to diagnose, says Dr. Greg Dubord, who teaches in the psychiatry department University of Toronto.

"Drawing the line between normal Internet use and Internet addiction is often difficult, because no set criteria for the disorder have been established by the American Psychiatric Association."

What is easy to recognize, however, is the impact of web overuse on our relationships.

Though social networking allows us to communicate with people all over the world, at times it seems to segregate ever. Real-life interaction is often interrupted by bings and beeps. Thoughts become tweets and e-mails. Our fin walking and the talking now.

From neglecting friends and family members to creating severe relationship problems, the Internet and our attitudes consume our lives.

One study documents 396 negative effects of the web on social involvement, including significant family problems.

"Reports have shown that excessive use of the Internet resulted in personal and family problems, with 53% of teenagers reporting severe relationship problems," he says.

"Personal and family concerns extended to marriages, dating relationships, parent-child relationships, and close relationships."

Dubord notes one case where a New York woman divorced her husband due to Internet overuse, and an extreme case where a Korean couple so addicted to virtual games they let their three-month-old daughter starve to death.

If you think you may have a problem, Tamblyn says the best thing to do is ask for help.

"You can get an assessment at any treatment centre, or do it online and it's anonymous. There are a lot of people out there's a lot of help."

Too e-dependent? Greg Dubord points out some general warning signs:

1. Lose track of time online.
2. Failed attempts at moderating Internet behaviour.
3. Neglecting work, sleep, friends and/or family to spend time online.
4. Turning to the Internet in times of stress or sadness to feel better.

How to cut down, according to Laurie Tamblyn:

1. Give yourself short breaks throughout the day when you can't check your messages. Try going for a walk without your smartphone.
2. Put your iPad to bed. Set a bedtime for your Internet devices.
3. Wi-Fi-free meals. Wash your hands of wireless devices before eating.
4. Put your computer in a high-traffic area to stay accountable to those around you.

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