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How Computer Addiction Works

by Ed Grabianowski

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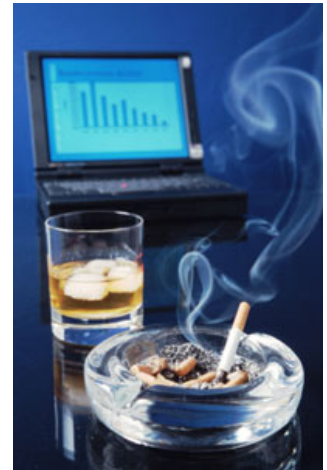
Introduction to How Computer Addiction Works

Obsessively checking [e-mail](#). Playing online games for 12 hours or more at a time. Placing more value on chat-room friends than real friends. Neglecting family, work and even personal health and hygiene. These are all symptoms of a new form of [addiction](#) that has surfaced only in recent years: **computer addiction**. In this article, we'll learn about computer addiction, why it's a problem -- and why some doctors disagree about whether it exists at all.

Creating a single definition for computer addiction is difficult because the term actually covers a wide spectrum of addictions. Few people are literally addicted to a [computer](#) as a physical object. They become addicted to activities performed on a computer, like [instant messaging](#), viewing Internet pornography, playing [video games](#), checking e-mail and reading news articles. These activities are collectively referred to as **Computer Mediated Communication (CMC)**. Computer addiction focused on [Internet](#) use is often called **Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD)**.

The various types of computer addicts have different reasons for their habits. Obsessive chat room use or e-mailing might fill a void of loneliness, while excessive viewing of pornography might stem from relationship problems or childhood abuse. The matter is further complicated by the fact that a computer is a useful tool. It's not like [heroin](#), for example -- there are many legitimate reasons why someone might spend hours using a computer. Even if someone uses a computer extensively for purely recreational purposes, that doesn't necessarily represent a real addiction any more than someone who spends hours working on a model train set, making [quilts](#) or [gardening](#) is "addicted" to those activities. Even the agreed-upon definition of addiction itself has evolved over the decades and remains a matter of debate in the medical community. In fact, the American Medical Association and the American Psychiatric Association do not currently consider computer addiction a valid diagnosis, a controversy we'll discuss later.

As a result of all these complications, any single definition of computer addiction is necessarily broad and a little vague. If the computer use is so pervasive that it interferes with other life activities, and if the user seems unable to stop using the computer to excess despite negative consequences, the problem might be a computer addiction.



John Foxx/Stockbyte/Getty Images

Is computer addiction "real," like alcohol and nicotine addiction?


Video Gallery: Video Games

The [Sony PlayStation PS3](#) was the hottest and most anticipated electronics launch in recent history. It sold out of most stores within hours of its November 2006 U.S. launch.

Some video games actually provide a workout for kids and can help reduce obesity. Learn about [video game workouts](#) in this video from ScienCentral.

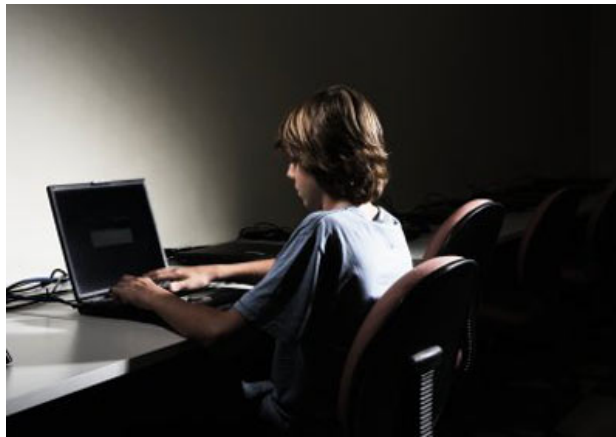
Watch this video about the [launch of Halo 3](#) in New York City with appearances by Bill Gates, Ludacris and Master Chief himself.

Unsafe Internet
Watch this video from Reuters asking "Is there a dark side to the Internet?" (February, 2007)

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Recognizing Computer Addiction

Much of our understanding of [computer](#) addiction comes from decades of research on other addictions, like [alcoholism](#) or [gambling](#) addiction. Psychologists have identified several danger signs for computer addiction. Any of these signs would be a red flag, and multiple signs could mean there's a real problem.



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Many computer addicts hide their computer use from family and friends.

- Staying on the computer for much longer than intended, or not noticing the passage of time while using the computer
- Making conscious efforts to cut back on computer [time](#) and repeatedly failing
- Thinking frequently about the computer when not using it or constantly looking forward to the next opportunity to use it
- Hiding the extent of computer use from family and friends
- Using the computer as an escape when feeling [depressed](#) or stressed
- Missing events or opportunities or failing at non-computer-related tasks because of time spent on the computer. This could include poor job performance or missing out on family activities [source: [Young](#)].
- Continued excessive computer use despite incurring negative consequences, such as marital problems or getting in trouble at work due to computer use [source: [Henderson](#)]

Computer Addiction and Child Neglect

One of the most notorious examples of a computer addiction surfaced in [Nevada](#) in 2007. Michael and Lana Straw had two young children who were neglected to the point of malnourishment and serious health problems because the couple was so obsessed with playing online games. They were each

charged with multiple counts of child abuse [source: [Fox News](#)]. A similar case occurred in [South Korea](#) in 2005, when two parents left a 4-month-old infant alone to play computer games at an Internet café. The baby died [source: [Eurogamer](#)].

Negative Effects of Computer Addiction

Computer addiction can have a variety of negative effects on a person. The most immediate are social. The user withdraws from friends and family as he spends more and more time on the [computer](#). Relationships begin to wither as the user stops attending social gatherings, skips meetings with friends and avoids family members to get more computer time. Even when they do interact with their friends, users may become irritable when away from the computer, causing further social harm.



Stockbyte/Getty Images

Computer addicts withdraw socially as they spend more time on the computer.

Eventually, excessive computer use can take an emotional toll. The user gradually withdraws into an artificial world. Constant computer gaming can cause someone to place more emotional value on events within the game than things happening in their real lives. Excessive viewing of [Internet](#) pornography can warp a person's ideas about [sexuality](#). Someone whose primary friends are screen names in a chat room may have difficulty with face-to-face interpersonal communication.

Over the long term, computer addiction can cause physical damage. Using a [mouse](#) and [keyboard](#) for many hours every day can lead to repetitive stress injuries. Back problems are common among people who spent a lot of time sitting at computer desks. Late-night computer sessions cut into much-needed [sleep](#) time. Long-term sleep deprivation causes drowsiness, difficulty concentrating, and depression of the [immune system](#). Someone who spends hours at a computer is obviously not getting any meaningful exercise, so computer addiction can indirectly lead to poor overall physical condition and even obesity.

Eventually, the consequences of computer addiction will ripple through the user's life. Late-night use or use at work will affect job performance, which could lead to job loss. As the [addiction](#) takes its toll on family members, it can even lead to failed marriages [source: [Young](#)].

Gamed to Death

Addiction to online computer games seems to be a growing problem in Asian countries. [China](#) and [South Korea](#) have both had incidents in which someone died after playing games nonstop for an incredibly long period, sometimes two days or more. A man in China died after a three-day gaming binge at an Internet café (where most online gaming in Asia seems to take place) in 2007 [source: [CNN](#)]. These countries have set up special counseling centers to deal with gaming addictions, and China has enacted strict laws limiting Internet café access.

Computer Addiction Controversy

There is a great deal of debate in the medical community about the validity of computer addiction. There is no doubt that some people use their [computers](#), look at [Internet](#) pornography, play computer games and chat online too much for their own good. There are even some people whose computer use completely consumes their lives. However, many psychologists believe computer addiction is a compulsive behavior linked to an underlying condition, not something that should be classified as an [addiction](#). People who suffer from "computer addiction" are really people who can't control their impulses, say these critics [source: [Surratt](#)]. They claim that some people might identify themselves as having Internet Addiction Disorder as part of a complex social reinforcement process. [Video-game](#) addiction might be the result of [fear-mongering](#) -- scaring parents into thinking there's something wrong with their kids. Some critics even contend that people who are obsessed with online gaming are no different from people who sit on the couch and watch hours of [TV](#) every night. In other words, maybe they're just lazy.



In 2007, the American Medical Association decided that video-game addiction (one possible component of computer addiction) should not be declared an actual disease, pending further research. The American Psychiatric Association also resisted a push to include video game addiction as a mental disorder in the fifth revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders [source: [ExtremeTech](#)].

How Pervasive is the Problem?

Exact statistics on the rate of computer addiction are not available. The problem is not classified as a specific disorder, so there are no diagnostic criteria for determining addiction. Psychology professor Dr. Kimberly S. Young conducted an unscientific survey of Internet users to see how many of them self-identified as Internet addicts. Dr. Young, who is one of the strongest supporters of the "computer addiction as a real addiction" school of thought, found that 80 percent of the people who responded to her survey considered themselves Internet addicts. It is impossible to extrapolate that number into any meaningful statistic, though Young considers it a sign of a "potential epidemic" [source: [Young](#)].



Cancan Chu/Getty Images

An Internet addict in China gets electric shock treatment at a hospital in Beijing.

Getting Help for Computer Addiction

Whatever the classification, excessive [computer](#) use remains a problem for some people. If you view computer addiction as a "real" [addiction](#) similar to [alcoholism](#), the best way to deal with the problem might be a 12-step program following the precepts of Alcoholics Anonymous. Your [doctor](#), local mental health services or your local AA chapter could help you find an appropriate support group. There are online support groups, but results can be mixed -- some compare these to holding Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in a bar.



Photodisc/Getty Images

If online gaming is taking over your life, there are plenty of places to get help.

If you're looking to curb your computer use, here are some helpful tips:

- Make specific time limits. Set an alarm to go off in one hour and end computer [time](#) when it rings.
- Set aside "computer-free" parts of the day. If your computer use starts after dinner and extends into the night, get all your computer work done in the morning and don't touch it after dinner.
- Install software to restrict your access to Web sites that you visit compulsively. Find a friend you can trust to keep the passwords for the software so you can't circumvent it.
- Make a list of things you could be accomplishing instead of wasting time on the computer, and post it prominently near your monitor.
- Enlist family members to help encourage you to limit your use. It might be difficult to stop on your own.
- Put the computer in high-traffic area of the house. With others looking over your shoulder all the time, you'll be less likely to overuse the computer. This is especially effective for parents who fear excessive computer use in their children.

For more information about computer addiction, check out the links on the next page.

Origins of Computer Addiction

In 1989, Kevin Mitnick was arrested for various computer hacking offenses. His [lawyers](#) offered a novel defense -- that he was addicted to computers and thus not responsible for his actions. The defense worked (though Mitnick's addiction treatment did not -- he was later arrested again for hacking). The case introduced the concept of computer addiction. The term was first mentioned academically in "Computer Addiction," a 1989 book by Margaret Shotton [source: [Surratt](#)].

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More Great Links

- [Berkeley Parents Network: Computer Game Addiction](#)
- [Center for Internet Addiction Recovery](#)

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