

When Gaming becomes an Obsession:

Help for Parents and their Children to treat Online Gaming Addiction

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“My son is a sophomore in high school and he appears to be addicted to online video games. I think his ideal life would be sitting in front of a computer monitor with an IV in his arm to deliver enough nutrients and caffeine that he wouldn't have to eat or sleep. He also has started to lie to his father and me -- and to his teachers -- about his schoolwork to maximize his access to the video games, particularly those on the web. He has some friends, but they are limited to other “gamers” and he went from being a straight “A” student to failing out of school. In one sense, I'm glad he isn't out on the streets getting into drugs or other forms of trouble. But I fear his life has become so one-dimensional that he will be damaged as a result of this obsession.”

– Linda, a concerned mother in California

What is online gaming addiction?

Online gaming addiction is an addiction to online video games, role-playing games, or any interactive gaming environment available through the Internet. Online games such “EverQuest”, the “Dark Age of Camelot”, or “Diablo II” – dubbed “heroinware” by some players – can pose much more complex problems. Extensive chat features give such games a social aspect missing from offline activities, and the collaborative/competitive nature of working with or against other players can make it hard to take a break.

“I really really really want my life back, 3 years ago I was one of the most popular kids at school, I got invited to all the parties, got lots of girls, had too many friends. Then I became addicted to an online game called Counter-Strike I've been playing for 3 years. It's very hard for me to get off, I wake up in the morning, no shower, get on the computer, stay on till the wee hours of the mornings, go to sleep, repeat...” explained one

gaming addict. “I don't know how to get off, I've tried.... It's just too hard. I heard this is a very common problem, but I really want to get my life back and I'd give anything.”

In the early days of the Internet, MUDDing was seen as the big thing. Interactive online games that were a take off on the old Dungeons and Dragons games, often know as Multi-User Dungeons, or MUDs, that drew upon power, dominance, and recognition within a role-playing make-believe virtual world. Young men traditionally gravitated towards these role-playing games to assume a character role associated with specific skills, attributes, and rankings that fellow players acknowledge and treat accordingly. MUDs differed from traditional video arcade games in that instead of a player's hand-eye coordination improving, the actual strength, skills, and rankings of the character improved. MUD players earned respect and recognition from fellow players, and younger men, especially those with low self-esteem and weak interpersonal skills were at greatest risk to get addicted if they developed a powerful persona within the game.

Today, EverQuest is perhaps one of the fastest growing multi-user games to gain popularity within the mainstream public, which equally seems to impact men and women. Interactive gaming has taken on new themes beyond Dungeons and Dragons and are easier to learn, appealing to the more mainstream. In several documented cases, interactive gaming has led to divorce, job loss, and health problems among those suffer from an addiction. While not as prevalent as addictions to cyberporn or online chatting, interactive online gaming has grown substantially over the last few decades reaching millions of users. Gaming also encompasses traditional board games such as YAHZEE or Bingo that have taken on an interactive and social nature when played online, and virtual

casinos have also grown rapidly, especially among teenagers and college-aged populations who now easily access black jack, roulette, or poker tables online.

Online titles account for a small portion of the overall games business, but research firm IDC expect online games to account for \$1.8 billion in annual revenue by 2005, as Microsoft, Sony and others compete to push gamers online. As online gaming becomes more popular, more parents as well as their children are discovering the addictive lure. “My son has completely withdrawn from his family and from all reality,” explains one mother. “At first, his father and I were happy that he seemed interested in the Internet. He had no other hobbies and he seemed to make friends online, but soon, the game took over his life. He didn’t shower, didn’t eat, and didn’t leave his room. My husband and I became worried and tried to set time limits, but he just got mad. I mean angry and hateful towards us. It was a side of our son we had never seen. All he wanted was the game. We are so scared and don’t know where to turn. Counselors we have talked to just tell us it is a phase and to ignore it, but we can’t. His whole life is the game. This is more than a phase - it is an obsession. We are desperate to find him help.”

The Warning Signs

Parents across the globe are increasingly concerned about their sons and daughters online gaming habits. They are sure that there is a problem but counselors unfamiliar with online gaming addiction don’t understand how seductive they can be. One parent that I had worked with told me she had gone to talked to her son’s guidance counselors, the school psychologist, and two local addiction rehabilitation centers. “No one had ever heard of someone getting addicted to X-Box. They all told me it was a

phase and that I should try to limit my son's game playing. They didn't understand that I couldn't. He had lost touch with reality. My son lost interest in everything else. He didn't want to eat, sleep, or go to school, the game was the only thing that mattered to him. When I told him to get offline, he yelled, screamed, and once, he pushed me. This isn't my son. He's a quiet and loving boy. Now, I don't know who is."

Parents often feel alone and scared as their children become hooked to something that no one seems to understand. "I couldn't believe it when my therapist told me to just turn off the computer. That was like telling the parent of an alcoholic son to tell him to just stop drinking. It wasn't that simple. We felt like no one was taking us seriously that our son had a real problem."

Parents search for information and help of any kind as they helplessly watch their sons and daughters become more absorbed into the computer and begin to see the warning signs of a dangerous pattern. Gamers who become hooked show clear signs of addiction. Like a drug, gamers who play almost every day, play for extended periods of time (over 4 hours), get restless or irritable if they can't play, and sacrifice other social activities just to game are showing signs of addiction. Common warning signs include:

- A preoccupation with gaming
- Lying or hiding gaming use
- Disobedience at time limits
- Loss of interest in other activities
- Social withdrawal from family and friends
- Psychological withdrawal from the game

- Using gaming as an escape
- Continuing to game despite its consequences

Preoccupation with gaming

The addiction process begins with a preoccupation with gaming. Gamers will think about the game when offline and often fantasize about playing the game when they should be concentrating on other things. Instead of thinking about the paper that needs to be completed for school, or going to class, or studying at the library, the gamer becomes completely focused on playing the game. Gamers start to miss deadlines, neglect work or social activities as being online and playing the game becomes their main priority.

Lying or hiding gaming use

Some gamers spend days and nights online. They don't eat, sleep, or take a shower because of the game. They lie to family and friends about what they are really doing on the computer. Students tell their parents that they are doing their homework, spouses tell their family that they are using the computer for work, and friends will make up excuses for why they can't go out – all to find more time to play the game.

Loss of interest in other activities just to game

As the addiction progress grows, gamers become less interested in hobbies or activities that they used to enjoy and more fascinated with the game. I had one mother tell me about her son who loved baseball and played Varsity on his high school team until he discovered X-Box Live. "His grades plummeted after he discovered the game, but it

wasn't until he quit the baseball team that I knew that something seriously wrong. He loved baseball too much. He even won a baseball scholarship for college and dreamed about playing professionally. Now, nothing else matters to him except the game."

Withdrawal from family and friends

Some gamers experience personality changes the more addicted they become. Once outgoing and social, gamers who become addicted spend less time with their friends and family and more time alone in front of the computer. They prefer the game to making social relationships and the people that were once important in real life become less important. As one mother explained, "If no one else existed he would play the game all day." If they do have real life friends, they are usually fellow gamers. In some cases, gamers are introverts and have problems making social connections in real life and turn to the game to find the friendship and acceptance missing in their lives.

Disobedience at time limits on gaming

Because of their addiction, gamers become defensive about their need to play the game and angry when forced to go without it. Parents who try to put time limits on the game describe how their sons and daughters become angry, irrational, and even violent. In one case, a mother told me about her son who spent his nights gaming and his days sleeping. "When I took away his computer, he pushed me, slammed the door to his room, and wouldn't come out all night. When I came home from work the next day, he took a sledgehammer to my computer, which was off limits to him. This isn't my son. He was a good kid and never gave me a moment's trouble until I lost him to the game."

Psychological withdrawal signs from gaming

Gamers who can't access the game experience a loss. They want to be on the game and they miss playing the game. This feeling can become so intense that they become irritable, anxious, or depressed when they are forced to go without the game. They can't concentrate on anything else except when they can go back online to play. Their minds become so fixated on the game that they can experience a psychological withdrawal from the game. Their feelings intensify and they stop thinking rationally and begin to act out towards other people in their lives. All that they can think about getting back to the game and they become angry and bitter at anyone who threatens taking it away.

Using gaming as an escape

Gaming addicts use the online world as a psychological escape. The game becomes a safe means to cope with life's problems. It is a legal and inexpensive way to soothe troubling feelings and can quickly become a convenient way to instantly forget whatever stresses and pains they are experiencing. Like a drug addict or alcoholic who uses drugs or alcohol as a way to escape problems that they aren't able to deal with, gaming addicts use the game to avoid stressful situations and unpleasant feelings. They escape into the gratification of the game and the feelings they associated with playing it. Gamers who feel socially awkward, isolated, and insecure in real life can transform themselves into someone who feels socially confident, connected, and self-assured with others through the game. As the gamer progress deeper into the game, they make friends, or may be their friends were the ones who first introduced the gamer to the game and these social relationships with other players become highly significant. While playing, they feel more

accomplished, more accepted, and better about themselves and through their characters, gamers live out a fictional life that is more satisfying and interesting than their own.

Continuing to game despite its consequences

Gamers often want to be the best at the game. In order to grow in the game, they need to play, especially in Quest type of games, where there is a shared activity, they hunt together for items together and it can take several hours to complete one quest. Gamers who become hooked become obsessed with the need to be the best at the game. They want to feel powerful and want to be recognized by other players and in order to do this they must spend time in the game. With that said, they continue to use the game despite consequences it may be causing in their lives. Among adolescents, they may fail out of school, lose a scholarship, break up with girlfriend or boyfriend, and ignore their basic hygiene just to be online. Among adults, they may lose a job, lose a relationship or their marriage may be tittering on divorce, but still they remain loyal to the game.

A Downward Spiral

The following is an excerpt from an email sent to me from a mother who was searching for an inpatient treatment center for her son who became addicted to World of Warcraft. He posted his story online to help other gamers and their families better understand the downward spiral that occurs as someone becomes addicted. Some details have been altered to protect the identity of the son and his mother.

“One year ago, in the fall of 2003, I was going to West Virginia University and I had a good life,” he explains. “I had friends who I enjoyed spending time with, a

girlfriend who, at the time, I had been dating for 3 years and who I loved very much. I was back in college for my sophomore year and my classes were fun and stimulating. I used to enjoy coming home and thinking about ideas that were raised in class. My family and I had started to come to terms with our communication issues and the fact that we didn't always see eye to eye but ultimately that we cared for one another. This was also helped a great deal by the support of my girlfriends parents...who were also like a mother and father to me. In short: things were good and I was happy.

In physics class my friend started telling me about this new game, Final Fantasy XI. I had never played a mmorpg before but as he began to talk about how he wanted to make a WVA group of people who played and how we would all level together on the same server. The more he talked about the game the more I wanted in on this game. So, I ordered it and eagerly awaited release day, planning out my race and class and ultimately beginning to look forward to the time I would spend with the game.

Well...it came out, and I played...and played...and played. I started playing on Thursday night and didn't leave my room to go to any classes or anything until Monday or Tuesday morning. I was hooked.

I finished out the rest of the semester...my friends who originally played with me began to play less and less as they didn't want to put as much time into it as I was. I also missed quite a few classes...but ultimately didn't completely bomb the semester...(I had a 2.0 that semester and my previous GPA was 3.6). So I went home for break and I didn't play....and I told myself that next semester would be different and I would get straight A's and I would play ffxi but not as much and things...would...be...good.

So, a new semester...I get back...I start playing...and I don't go to the first day of class...or the second...or the whole first week. As things went on, my life got worse and worse (I mean I went to NO classes and I pulled away from everyone). I played more to escape form my pain because when I would actually sit and think about all the mistakes I had made and said to myself "I should have done this or I should have done that to get by in school instead of completely messing it up the way that I did" I would get physically sick. I bathed less. I ate less. I didn't wash my clothes or clean up my room. My roommate knew something was seriously wrong but he didn't know what to do and he was hoping that I would be able to help myself out of the mess I had put myself into.

When the Spring semester ended, I was a wreck. I barely got myself together enough to be washed when my family came to pick me and my stuff up. I hid my addiction until one day my Mom found out. I told her and broke down and cried it hurt so bad. My girlfriend and I almost broke up because I had lied to her so much and pulled away so much she didn't know who I was anymore (hell neither did I) and that hurt too.

I went to see a counselor. I was embarrassed to the point where I turned red when I talked about it but I told this guy that I was addicted to ffxi. He told me I was depressed and treated me for that. Things were good for a while, I was going back to school, my girlfriend and I were getting along, and it felt good to be truthful about the game, but I began to pull away again and depressed again. Now until this time I had not gotten back into any mmorpg but now after I stopped doing everything again and everyone found out about all of it again...I went out and bought World Of Warcraft.

Well, when you see a therapist or whatever, it doesn't help if you aren't doing anything from appointment to appointment, and I was doing Nothing. Not cleaning or

eating right or bathing every day or doing laundry/dishes/cleaning. I was a mess and I got worse and worse and during the day what I would do is play WoW and try to not think about how out of control my life was becoming.

I was afraid and depressed and didn't know what to do and thought to myself how no one would really be able to understand.

I thought seriously about killing myself. I even knew how and where (jumping off a really high bridge near my actual home which was 3 hours driving distance away).

What saved me was the last part of myself saying that. I really didn't want to hurt my family by killing myself or place a huge financial burden on them (which I would have).

My parents made me go to our family doctor and he prescribed Zoloft. Ultimately, the depression finally lifted after lots of counseling and lots of self-control trying to stop gaming. I hurt and used games to feel better about myself when all it did was make my life worse. I can only say that there is help.

Not Just for Kids

Not only are children, teenagers, and college students effected by online gaming addiction, but a growing number of adults are becoming hooked to online gaming.

“The game almost ruined my life,” said Paul, a network engineer in southern



California. “It was my life. I ceased being me; I became Morf, the Great Shaman of the North. Thinking of it now, I almost cringe; it’s so sad.” Paul almost lost his job, his marriage was in trouble, and he wasn't being much of a father to his 1-year-old son. But he had progressed to Level 58 as Morf, the Great Shaman of the North, his character in the online role-playing game “EverQuest” and that was all that mattered at the time.

Long a subject of half-serious jokes among devotees of computer and video games, game addiction is receiving serious attention lately as fantasy games such as “EverQuest” – nicknamed "EverCrack" by many players - proliferate.

A Wisconsin woman has blamed “EverQuest” in a suicide late last year of her 21-year-old son, who had a history of mental health problems and was an obsessive “EverQuest” player. The game was also implicated in the death last year of a Tampa infant, whose father allegedly was so devoted to the game he fatally neglected the child.

While such cases are rare, mental-health professionals say the fantasy worlds offered by computer and video games can become the stuff of very real addictions that destroy marriages and careers. People of all ages are quickly becoming immersed in this virtual fantasy world whereby they can easily escape problems in their lives. “For me, gaming was a way of coping with my divorce,” said Susan, a regular player of the game. “A guy I talk to has been through three girlfriends and even more jobs because of the game.” Like other players, Susan struggles to find a workable balance between gaming and the responsibilities in her life. Yet, she spends nearly 8 hours a day online and often questions her devotion to the game. “I think of quitting all the time,” she said. “I’m neglecting my kids and my husband but the game is so powerful I feel helpless to stop.”

What are the risk factors?

Certain personality traits, psychological conditions, and family situations can become risk factors that make gamers more susceptible to developing an addiction.

Low Self-Esteem

Individuals who suffer from low self-esteem are at greatest risk for developing an addiction to online gaming. In one case, I worked with a 20-year-old from Rochester, NY who was kicked out of RIT. When I asked him about his gaming, he said that his life seemed to be important when he was playing the game. He was important in the game, but in real life, he was someone who couldn't make friends and wasn't fulfilling his parent's expectations. He had failed school, not so much because he couldn't pass the tests, but he couldn't make it to class. He was someone who didn't have a direction in his life, and because of this, didn't feel good about his life. But in the game, all that changed. He was good at the game, had a network of fellow gamers who he felt were his closest (and only) friends, and he felt validated and confident when playing the game.

Poor Social Relationships

A large part of gaming is about making social relationships. Gamers often make friends with other gamers and it is these friends who may even first introduce the gamer to the game. Ultimately, online gaming is a social activity. Most online games include copious amounts of chats, allowing players to interact with each other in the guise of the characters they represent. The social aspect is a primary factor in many game addictions. Many people are lonely, have never felt like they belonged. People get a sense of

belonging in the game. In some cases, it provides the only friends they interact with. Gamers can become hooked on this social fantasy world. Why chat with player in some low-tech Internet browser when you can go destroy the undead, complete epic quests, and chat in a large graphical extravaganza? Gamers can join guilds that provide a great sense of community and accomplishment when they take out those big monsters. Gamers are trying to make their mark on the world in these games and many like this aspect. Being the person with the biggest sword or highest level is what makes them keep playing.

Highly Intelligent and Imaginative Individuals

Gaming provides individuals with an outlet for their imaginations. Especially among adolescents and children who are academically bright and who feel under-stimulated in school, they turn to the game as a place for adventure and intellectual stimulation. Such games also lure players with complex systems of goals and achievements. They drawn into the virtual fantasy world of the game and they internalize the game as a real place and others characters are seen as real people and not fictional characters. Especially in goal-oriented games such as “EverQuest” players engage in activities to develop their characters from one level to the next and compete to find valuable in-game elements such as armor and weapons. Players can find themselves wrapped up in the game for hours as they struggle to gain one more skill or weapon.

Need for Recognition and Power

“I’d say the most addictive part for me was definitely the gain of power and status,” explained Mark, a gamer hooked on Diablo II. “The way in which as you

progressively gain power you become more of an object of awe to the other players...each new skill isn't enough." Among most multi-user gamers, each goal leads to another goal, and there are critical choices gamers make along the way. They invest a lot of time and thought into developing a character. They feel like they have wasted their time unless they reach the next goal. For example, Mark, a college sophomore explained, "By day I am a mild-mannered student, but at night, I become the most aggressive bastard online." Mark had always been a loner. Growing up, he described how, as a middle child, he felt ignored by his parents who gloated over his older sister, a medical doctor, and his younger sister, a freshman at Brandeis, while he attended a state university. He had built up a great deal of resentment towards his siblings and deep down, he hated his parents for such neglect. "On the outside, I looked like the perfect child and no one knew of the anger and resentment that I felt inside," Mark explained. "I was afraid to give into my anger, yet within the game, I confronted my fears and liked dominating other players. I became known as the most powerful and the most respected player in the game, and I needed it that. The game was the only place in my life where I felt important."

Younger They Start Online

Among children, the younger they start online makes them more at risk to develop an addiction to online gaming. Dan started gaming by age 12. He was drawn to Gameboy, Sony Play Station, and Nintendo with his friends, and gradually progressed to X-Box. He was able to manage how much time he spent gaming until he went on X-Box live. "It was like a whole other world opened up to me," he explains. Suddenly, he was able to interact with fellow players inside of sit beside friends while playing the game.

Gaming had already become a large part of his personal identity, and despite having Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) he was able to sit in front of the computer for hours. His parents became concerned when his gaming habit turned into an obsession. “He went into a trance-like state every time he went online but unlike other hobbies, he never lost interest in this,” his mother explained. “When he quit the track team, which he loved, we knew he had a serious problem and the game took over his entire life.” Interestingly, children with ADD have been prone to online gaming addiction and are twice as likely to form an addiction than other children due to the mental stimulation that the interaction with other online players and the challenge the game can provide.

Family History of Addiction

From a family perspective, many addictions stem from a history of addiction in the family as a way to cope with painful feelings and difficult situations. Seeing this is how an aunt, uncle, or other relative copes with problems through drinking, drug use, gaming, or smoking might be signs that this is way to cope with all problems. Especially among children, gamers who become addicted often use the game as way of escaping conflict or turbulence in their lives. Children experiencing a traumatic transition such as divorce or the family is relocating or difficulty dealing with a new step-parent face a personal crisis and may learn to cope through the Internet. Children addicted to gaming often say that they feel alone at home, feel emotionally removed from others, feel pressure to do better in school or feel that their parents are somehow disappointed with them. Like an addiction to drugs or alcohol, they use the game to escape those painful feelings and momentarily feel a sense of acceptance and accomplishment in their lives.

Breaking through the Denial

Like most addictions, the toughest part of recovery is getting the addict to acknowledge there's a problem--a task made all the more difficult by the seemingly innocuous nature of games.

Monica said her live-in boyfriend spends at least 30 hours a week playing "EverQuest" as a female elf--a character choice she finds "weird and disturbing"--at the expense of housework, family obligations and sometimes work. "The saddest part of all is the fact that he doesn't admit that it's an addiction and seems oblivious to the damage his personal life is suffering due to the game," she said.

Compulsive disorders can manifest themselves in many non-chemical means such as gaming, food, shopping, or high-risk sexual behavior, and the mental health field is just beginning to acknowledge the addictive potential of the Internet to the same extent. While research in the addiction field has not been conclusive, most researchers agree that a combination of neurochemical and behavioral bases explain addictive behavior and studies support that non-intoxicants are equally as habit-forming as substances. Despite these research findings, most Internet addicts deny that anyone can "get addicted to a machine" and it is the family and friends who first view the behavior as troublesome.

For players who do admit they have a problem, the most common response is a guilt-and-purge cycle common to many addictions. Many players who realize that they are addicted will kill their characters and delete the game software with no regrets; however, many game addicts aren't as successful.

For most players, true recovery involves looking at the issues underlying the game habit. Addicted players need to examine the emotional motives that prompt them to

play a game excessively and look for alternate ways to satisfy those needs. For many, therapy is necessary for recovery to take place because many need to realize that there is something else going on and they need to be in charge of changing it.

Nicolas Yee conducted extensive player research on “EverQuest” while earning a psychology degree from Hanford College. He found a direct correlation between the amount of time hardcore players spend in the game and a tendency toward neuroticism—“basically how easily a person gets depressed or goes into mood swings,” he said. This type of research suggests that individuals who have other emotional problems may be more at risk to develop an addiction to interactive gaming. In the game, as I have mentioned, these interactive environments allow individuals to experiment with parts of their personality, they can be more vocal, try out leadership roles, and new identities. The problem becomes when players rely upon these new online personas and the distinction between what is real and what is a fantasy role-play game becomes blurred.

What can Parents Do?

*I have found the best way to give advice to your children is to find out what they want
and then advise them to do it.*

--Harry S. Truman

As the addiction develops, children may experience symptoms of withdrawal, which include anxiety, depression, irritability, trembling hands, restlessness and obsessive thinking or fantasizing about the Internet. While online they may feel uninhibited and experience an increased sense of intimacy. Relationships in the real world may be neglected as those in the virtual world increase in importance. Academic

performance is also likely to suffer. If you suspect your son or daughter may show signs of being addicted to online gaming, a carefully planned approach needs to be developed. Some basic communication rules apply. You want to be clear about your goals with your child and wait for a quiet, nonstressful time to talk. You need to decide what you want to say, use nonblaming language, and listen empathetically to your child's response. But the challenges of communicating with children about gaming addiction - or almost any sensitive issue - require special skills and considerations.

Present a united front

In a two-parent household, it is critical that both parents take the issue seriously and agree on common goals. Discuss the situation together and if necessary, compromise on your desired goals so that when you approach your child, you will be coming from the same page. If you do not, your child will appeal to the more skeptical parent and create division between you.

Show your caring

It will help to begin your discussion by reminding your child that you love him or her and that you care about their happiness and well being. Children often interpret any question about their behavior as blaming and criticism. You need to reassure them that you are not making them wrong. Rather, tell your child you are concerned about some of the changes you have seen in them and refer to those changes in specific terms: fatigue, declining grades, giving up hobbies, social withdrawal, etc.

Assign an Internet time log

Tell your child that you would like to see an accounting of just how much time they spend online each day and which Internet activities they engage in. Remind them that with television you can monitor their viewing habits more easily, but with the Internet you need their help and cooperation to become appropriately involved. Put them on the honor system to keep the log themselves for a week or two to build trust between you. If they balk at this idea or clearly lie in their log, you are likely dealing with their denial of addiction.

Set reasonable rules

Many parents get angry when they see the signs of gaming addiction in their child and take the computer away as a form of punishment. Others become frightened and force their child to quit cold turkey, believing that is the only way to get rid of the problem. Both approaches invite trouble - your child will internalize the message that they are bad; they will look at you as the enemy instead of an ally; and they will suffer real withdrawal symptoms of nervousness, anger, and irritability. Instead, work with your child to establish clear boundaries of limited Internet usage. Perhaps an hour per night after homework will fit or a few extra hours on the weekend. Stick to your rules and remember that you are not simply trying to control him or her – you are working to free them of a psychological dependence.

Make the computer visible

Move your child's personal computer out of his or her bedroom and into the more visible kitchen or dining area. You do not want to stare over their shoulder every minute

they are online, but by walking by now and then in your normal home activities you send the message that the Internet is not something they can use on the sly. As you will recall, an insistence on privacy for Internet time usually indicates that the user is doing something they want to hide. If your child needs privacy to write a paper on the computer, allow him or her to move it back to the bedroom temporarily. But keep the modem in your possession so you will know when they go online.

Encourage other activities

When you cut down your child's Internet time, he or she will be looking for something to do, not only to fill in the hours but to achieve a comparable "high." Help him or her find alternative endeavors, whether it be something they used to enjoy or something new, like a chess club at school. Talk to them about what they most enjoy about gaming so you can steer them toward a healthy alternative. If they especially enjoyed taking on many different handles online and acting in the character of those different personalities, encourage them to go out for the school play. And remind them that they still can have the same fun on the Internet - only within limits.

Support, don't enable

Parents often fall into an enabling role with an Internet-addicted child. They cover up or make excuses for their children when they miss school or fail to meet deadlines, and in the name of keeping peace they give in to their children's demands when they complain loudly. If your child does rebel against your intervention efforts, let the first storm subside. Acknowledge their feelings - it must not be easy for them to feel that you are tugging at their

only lifeline - but stick to your goals. Validate them for any effort they are making to work with you. Remind them that other kids have had problems with the Internet and that they found a new way, and that you support them in making these difficult changes.

Use outside resources when needed

If your child is unable to moderate his or her Internet usage and the initial problems persist, along with new hostility in your relationship with them, it is best to seek outside help. You might visit a local alcohol and drug treatment program to gather more information about addictions. School counselors can also help alert you to your child's behavior at school. Ultimately, family therapy may be your best bet to help guide your child's recovery, address family strife, and heal wounds old and new.

Treatment for Compulsive Online Gaming

As in any treatment program, the primary step to take in the path to recovery is to accept and not refute “denial,” a defense mechanism that addicts frequently employ and that effectively stops them from accepting treatment. Once this obstacle is conquered, treatment can be performed more effectively than it would otherwise. It is important to understand that compulsive online gaming is a progressive illness that is treatable. It affects the gamer, their family, their school work or their employer, and their community. It is called “the hidden illness” since there is no smell on the breath nor stumbling of steps or speech. Nonetheless, it is as debilitating as alcoholism or drug addiction.

Often, gamers have other problems that are part of the reason they game. They also have problems that were produced by their gaming. These include relationship,

work-related, legal, emotional problems such as depression, anxiety and substance abuse. It is not known whether one problem causes the other. It is more important to get a clear picture of your immediate concerns and treat them in a structured and systematic manner.

Reducing Your Time Online

Understanding how and when one uses the computer is an initial step in the recovery process. Keep a daily log to track how you actually use the Internet, then, take a few minutes to consider your current online habits. What days of the week do you typically log online? What time of day do you usually begin? How long do you stay on during a typical session? Where do you usually use the computer? Does a pattern emerge? Now, using the daily log, construct a new schedule, or what I refer as *practicing the opposite*. The goal of this exercise is to disrupt your normal routine and re-adapt new time patterns of use in an effort to break the online habit. For example, let's say your Internet habit involves checking email the first thing in the morning. Instead of going online, take a shower or start breakfast first instead of logging on. Or, perhaps you only use the Internet at night, and have an established pattern of coming home and sitting in front of the computer for the remainder of the evening. Wait until after dinner and watching the news before logging in. Practicing the opposite of when you use the computer, when you legitimately must go on the Internet, will disrupt your normal Internet patterns and increase your ability to effectively manage your online time.

As in food addiction, certain foods trigger binge behavior. Let's say chocolate or potato chips will trigger binge behavior but celery sticks will not, so avoidance of those "trigger" foods is a necessary part of recovery. This means, recovery from binge eating is

about relearning how to eat in order to make more informed and healthier food selections with success being is measured through objective goals such as changes in caloric intake and weight loss. The same logic is applied to compulsive online gaming. Part of recovery means relearning how to use the computer in order to make better choices about how you use it. Reducing the number of hours you spend online in an important first step but to fully begin recovery, you must address underlying issues that led to compulsive gaming.

Address Underlying Issues

The ability to mentally absorb oneself into a virtual environment that seems more exciting and more interesting than one's real life reinforces the addictive behavior and can be used as a coping mechanism to deal with missing or unfulfilled needs. That is, gaming momentarily allows the person to forget his or her problems. In the short term, gaming may be a useful way to cope with the stress of a hard situation, however, addictive behaviors used to escape or run away from unpleasant situations in the long run only end up making the problem worse. For the gaming addict, situations such as a death of a loved one, a divorce, or a job loss may trigger using the game as a mental distraction that temporarily makes such problems fade into the background. Since the escape is only temporary, they return to gaming as a means of making themselves feel better without dealing with and resolving the underlying feelings of depression or anxiety in their lives.

In this way, the game produces a type of drug "high" that provides an emotional escape or an altered state of reality that become a highly potential etiological factor. That is, online gaming, the excitement of becoming someone new in a role-playing game, the

challenge of winning the quest, and making new friends through the game, provides an immediate mental escape from their problems and serves to reinforce future behavior.

Therefore, treatment requires addressing those needs that the game fulfills.

Addicts falsely assume that just stopping the behavior is enough to say, “I am recovered.” But there is much more to full recovery than simply refraining from the Internet. Complete recovery means investigating the underlying issues that led up to the behavior and resolving them in a healthy manner; otherwise, relapse is likely to occur. As I have indicated, compulsive online gaming often stems from other emotional or situational problems such as depression, anxiety, stress, relationship troubles, career difficulties, impulse control problems, and/or prior gaming abuse. While the Internet offers a convenient distraction from these problems, it does very little to actually help you cope with the underlying issues that lead to where you are today.

Confronting these problems head-on is the best way to approach them. If you are dealing with low self-esteem or depression, work towards finding healthier ways of dealing with these feelings than using gaming as a means to feel better about yourself. If you are having relationship troubles, head into couples counseling instead of turning to the Internet to address those intimacy issues. If you use gaming at work to handle job stress, explore more effective stress management techniques to help you relax instead of relying on the Internet. If you suffer from multiple addictions, such as to alcohol, food, or smoking, you must address specific ways to cope with the underlying compulsive behavior and recognize the decision chain that leads to a lapse before it actually occurs.

For James, a 21-year-old college freshman addicted to X-Box Live, the hardest part of getting better was finding something else in life that mattered as much as the

game. “At 21, I was going no where fast,” James explained. “I didn’t like school, I didn’t have any friends except those I knew in the game, but yet I saw others around me moving on with their lives. The friends that I had during freshman year were going to graduate while I got myself kicked out of school because I couldn’t stop gaming. My older brother was graduating from graduate school, had a girlfriend and was getting married in the fall, while I did nothing and felt completely stuck in the game. I tried quitting the game so many times, but I felt there was nothing important enough in my life to really quit it for.”

James repeatedly relapsed because he still didn’t deal with his feelings about his career goals. Each time he thought of registering for a semester, taking a course, studying for a class, he felt the pressure and internal judgment of feeling like a failure. He constantly compared himself to his friends and his brother, and relapsed again into online gaming as a way to relieve his underlying feelings of depression and self-doubt.

As part of his recovery, James started taking night classes at a community college, taking one or two classes to see what type of work or vocation he wanted to pursue. He liked finance, a far cry from his major in engineering at the University of Buffalo, and with the financial and emotional support of his parents, he was able to re-enroll full-time at the university and graduated with a degree in Business and Financial Management. His interest in online gaming diminished as he spent his free time studying, going to classes, and making new friends – not to mention that he was finally doing something he loved.

Whatever the situation, confronting the issues that initially drove you towards the addiction will not be easy, but it is the only way to achieve the personal growth necessary to maintain long-term recovery. In our work together, I reviewed with James the deeper aspects of his online gaming activity. I asked questions such as what types of needs does

gaming fulfill? Did gaming give him a sense of power, but offline, did he still feel out of control? Did gaming make him feel better about himself, but offline, did he still feel unsure of himself and the choices he had made in life? Instead of using gaming to avoid difficult feelings, our work together focused on figuring out why gaming had become a way to deal with what wasn't working in his life.

Create Positive Lifestyle Changes

Online gaming is an emotionally draining and time-consuming activity, and to create more time for the computer, addicts neglect sleep, diet, exercise, hobbies, and socializing. The initial loss of online gaming means an increase in idle time or boredom, which only increases the temptation to surf, making it vital for you to create positive lifestyle changes to fill the void created with the time now not spent at the computer.

The idea behind creating positive lifestyle changes is find ways that take you away from the computer that improve your emotional and physical well being. This varies depending upon the individual's specific situation. Some strategies may mean finding spiritual fellowship in the form of personal prayer or pastoral counseling as part of your spiritual wellness and daily recovery. You may practice daily meditation to focus your energy during recovery and improve your ability to fight the temptation to return to the computer. Other activities include getting the proper rest, going to bed at a reasonable hour, joining a gym, and improving your diet to manage your overall physical fitness.

Being at the computer only increases your risk of falling back into old patterns. Therefore, another aspect of creating a positive lifestyle change is to cultivate alternative activities that take you away from the computer and that help to rekindle old activities that have been replaced because of the Internet. It is helpful to take an inventory of what

you have cut down on, or cut out, because of the time spent on the Internet. Perhaps you spend less time hiking, fishing, camping, or dating. Maybe you have stopped going to school events, out with friends, or there is something you have always put off trying.

This next exercise is especially helpful for parents to review with their children who suffer from online gaming addiction. Sitting down together, identify all the activities that have been replaced because of the Internet. Construct a detailed list of hobbies or practices that have been neglected since your child's online habit started. Once an exhaustive list has been made, rank each activity: 1 - Very Important; 2 – Important; or 3 - Not Very Important. In rating this lost activity, work together to genuinely reflect how life was before the Internet. In particular, examine the "Very Important" ranked activities. Ask your child how these activities improved the quality of his or her life. This exercise will help them become more aware of the choices that they have made regarding the Internet and what they have been missing out on because of online gaming. One parent explained, "My son had lost all interest in baseball, which he loved to watch and loved to play. We enrolled him in a summer league. Eventually, he made new friends, reconnected to his love of baseball, and realized he didn't need the game to feel good about himself".

Seek Professional Help

Remember that recovery from compulsive online gaming isn't a simple process, nor does it happen overnight. There will certainly be roadblocks and missteps along the way, so you must be patient. Keep in mind that throughout the entire process, and particularly in the early days of recovery, you will most likely experience a loss and miss being online for frequent periods of time. This is normal and should be expected. After

all, for most addicts who derive a great source of pleasure from their addictions, living without them as a central part of your life can be a very difficult adjustment.

For continued support and treatment, seek professional help. Once you admit and address the problem, the other pieces of your life will fall back into place. Treatment for compulsive gaming is similar to therapies for other forms of addiction. Working with a therapist familiar with the psychological issues associated with problem gaming and with someone who is familiar with the Twelve Steps or Online Gamers Anonymous (www.olganon.org) will ease the transition into treatment if you are new to self-help.

Treatment for Family Members

Addiction affects the entire family. Family, friends and co-workers also suffer. And, these concerned others also go through predictable phases as the problem worsens -- periods of resentment, self-doubt, denial and isolation. They often bail out the gamer. This only worsens the problem. In many cases, family and friends are forced to terminate their relationships with problem gamers - in order to save themselves. Therefore, treatment for family members may be necessary whether or not the gamer is in treatment. This may include counseling for family members, education on problem/compulsive gaming for the family, strategies on how to cope with anger and loss of trust from the addicted loved one, and education on financial protection for the family. Often, gaming addiction will be addressed as a part of the weekly family program. Each week topics related to addiction are addressed to help family members understand the process of recovery, relapse triggers and the importance of keeping healthy boundaries. This is

especially important for parents as they struggle to understand a son or daughter's compulsive need to game and the underlying dynamics associated with their addiction.

Residential care

Residential care may be required to provide intensive therapy when the effects of the game have become severe. Often gamers refuse treatment until they become deeply depressed, are kicked out of school, are terminated from a job, are threatened with divorce and separation, or are thinking about suicide. Once problems have become this severe, it is important to seek professional help for evaluation. Residential treatment programs often last for 4 to 6 weeks of intensive treatment. Some gamers may require more or less time, so recommendations will be made following an initial assessment.

In most cases, the treatment program of a residential care facility is specifically designed to fit the needs of the client, and most sessions focus on individual treatment, educational groups, and family therapy where appropriate to best manage and address the intense feelings surrounding the addiction. Often, parents will initiate residential care for a child addicted to online gaming. It may be difficult to find a facility that understands the special needs of treating compulsive online gaming, but gradually more inpatient addiction rehabilitation centers are learning about this new form of addictive behavior.

Closing Thoughts

For any client, the more you can integrate the needs that the Internet fills into their current lives, the less likely they will rely upon the Internet to substitute what is missing.

Taking the steps necessary to overcome problem gaming is difficult, especially online, when the Internet is there, like a constant temptation, but recovery is possible.

For more information about online gaming addiction or Internet abuse, please contact the Center for Internet Addiction Recovery at www.netaddiction.com.