

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Tangled in the Net \*

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Right now I am typing this article on my computer. However, less than an hour ago, I was "*surfing the net*." Since I am on a summer break from teaching, I have been spending some money and much time online with my computer. However, at Arizona Western College – and many other colleges and universities – both faculty and students can spend time on the Internet *free*. For most students and faculty who use it, the Internet is a boon. It allows you to communicate with others in your field. Libraries half-way around the world can be researched for information. Replies to inquiries can come in minutes or hours rather than days or weeks. This is the positive side of Internet communication.



On the other hand, some get caught up in the net. Rather than using the net to do assignments or gain needed information, students lose themselves in online games or chat-room banter for hours at a time. Some students spend 40-60 hours per week on the Internet. They neglect their homework and social lives to explore the Internet.

When the lure of the Internet becomes stronger than real-life interactions, these students essentially have an "*Internet addiction*". At the University of Maryland-College Park, Dr. Jonathan Kandell is the assistant director of the counseling center. Kandell has interviewed many students who are addicted to the Internet. Few students come for help claiming an Internet addiction. They come with other problems, but indicate that "*they feel fidgety and nervous during every minute of 'offline' time....*" They go online to avoid the pressures of everyday life.

Students seem to get the same pleasurable or escapist feelings that others get from alcohol, drugs or gambling. Just as alcohol numbs people and gambling gives them a high, the Internet provides an escape into an *alternate reality*.

If students are depressed, anxious or have underlying social problems, the Internet offers an escape. There are many cases of Internet addicts who lose spouses, family and friends. They would rather ask strangers for dates over e-mail than approach somebody in person. Over the net, new and glamorous identities can be assumed. According to Kandell, they believe they have an "*...unconditional acceptance unusual in flesh-and-blood relationships....*" They develop "*...an illusion that these online relationships are the same as the real thing.*" With the greater dependence on Internet relationships, they become less capable of forming or maintaining real-life relationships.

Faculty members are not immune to Internet addiction. Their warning signs are similar to those of their students. Their family, friends, and associates more frequently complain to them about ignoring familial, social or job responsibilities. They spend excessive time on the Internet, even though it causes other problems – lack of sleep, marital discord, poor achievement at work, desertion of friends. When not "*surfing*," they may have obsessive thoughts about the Internet or become agitated and anxious.

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***"When you start using the Internet  
to run away from other parts of your life  
you don't want to deal with,  
that's when you know you have a problem."***

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Very few Internet addicts – students or faculty – will seek help from college counselors. However, psychiatrist Ivan Goldberg has an online Internet Addiction Support Group that can help them overcome their problem. Goldberg's four steps to help their problem could apply to almost any addiction.

- **Recognizing overuse patterns** – Students need to admit that they have a problem. Cues that they are losing control involve less contact with family and friends, missed classes and appointments, and forgotten assignments.
- **Pinpointing underlying problems** – To help themselves, addicts need to be aware of why they are trying to escape reality. It could involve areas such as scholastic failures, uncertainty about the future, problems with the job market, or even romantic frustrations.
- **Tackling the real problems** – Avoiding problems never solves them. When you get back to the problems, they are just as bad or worse. If you can't deal with the problems alone, seek help. Tutors are available to help with studies, and college counselors (or empathetic teachers) can help with other problems. They won't be able to "*wave a magic wand*," but they can help you to help yourself.
- **Controlling computer use** - Students don't need to completely stop using their computer and go "*cold turkey*".

However, they can make sure they fulfill their real-life obligations before they log on to their computers. They can limit their time on their computer by setting an alarm to tell when they need to quit. If they are addicted to chat rooms, they can limit themselves to e-mailing friends, family, teachers and other students.

Of course, I won't fall prey to the lure of the Internet. However, if you ask my wife....

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\* Adapted from Bridget Murray's "Computer addictions entangle students," "Is your computer use out of control?" and "Online programs are just as seductive for faculty," [\*APA Monitor\*](#), June, 1996, page 38-39.