

GETTING WEB SOBER:

HELP FOR CYBERSEX ADDICTS AND THEIR LOVED ONES

An Exclusive Guide for Individuals and Families

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PART I: WHEN FANTASY TURNS INTO OBSESSION

Craig is a banker from Iowa who became addicted to adult chat rooms. He first wrote, "I spend time in chat rooms on office time. Typically, I make up false names and genders for myself, pretending to be other people by sending out pictures (of women, I'm male) and saying they're me, all this accompanied by masturbation whenever I'm alone in the office (usually after hours). I waste hours looking for cybersex, finding the right cyberlover, and the right fantasy for the moment. Its like I need to make the experience last as long as I can before I climax. Typing used to be great, but recently I have moved on to phone sex. It's like an extra benefit, making the sex part real and part fantasy. I do a lot of work-related research on the WWW, but there's almost always one window open on an adult/sex site. Some are "pay" but most are free. I have a habit of saving pictures I like often leads to megabytes, or GIGABYTES of wasted office drive space that I end up deleting all at once after a while.

This is obviously interfering with my work and I fear getting caught by my boss. I'm starting to "work" late just for time alone with the computer, wasting money on pay sites. I try to restrict myself from masturbating at home (I'm married), but I will be right back on the sex sites once my wife is in the shower or asleep. The real scary part for me

is that I like cybersex better than having sex with my wife. Real sex just doesn't seem as good as it is on the Net, and I know this is starting to impact my marital relationship. I need to deal with my problem and learn how to back off from this. I find my behavior hard to control especially because I have constant access to the Net at work. I have thought about trying to use those parental filtering programs on my computer at work to help me kick the habit, but I know my boss would notice if I suddenly put that on the computer. Please help me understand why I find this virtual world so exciting.”

Cybersex offers a distraction to temporarily cope with negative thoughts or problems in your life, as the activity offers you the ability to absorb oneself into the Internet and its various adult sites gives you a means to relax and temporarily feel good about yourself. Overtime, a fun habit develops into a compulsive obsession. At this stage, life becomes unmanageable as relationships or careers are jeopardized because of the compulsive behavior. Longer periods of time are spent searching for new pornographic images or mingling in adult chat rooms. Cybersex no longer seems to be a voluntary act, but a sexual act that must be completed.

Patrick Carnes best explains sexual compulsivity in his pioneer book, *Out of the Shadows*, “The sexual experience is the source of nurturing, focus of energy, and origin of excitement. The experience turns into a relief from pain and anxiety, the reward for success, and a way to avoid addressing other emotional issues in the person’s life⁴”. In this same manner, cybersexual addiction is truly an altered state of consciousness in which ‘normal’ sexual behavior pales by comparison in terms of excitement and relief from troubles that is associated with cybersex.

THE CYBERSEXUAL ADDICTION INDEX (CAI)

Has cybersex added to your life or has it become an unhealthy habit? How can you tell if you have crossed the line? It is such a new disorder that many people aren't really sure how to diagnosis the problem nor how to measure its impact on real life. This following self examine will help you assess you addiction and impairment levels in terms of mild, moderate, and severe. Based upon the five-point likert scale, select the response that best represents the frequency of behavior described in the following 20-item questionnaire.

- 0 = Not Applicable
- 1 = Rarely
- 2 = Occasionally
- 3 = Frequently
- 4 = Often
- 5 = Always

1. ___How often do you neglect other responsibilities to spend more time having cybersex?
1 2 3 4 5
2. ___How often do you prefer cybersex to sexual intimacy with your partner?
1 2 3 4 5
3. ___How often do you spend significant amounts of time in chat rooms and private messaging with the sole purpose of finding cybersex?
1 2 3 4 5
4. ___How often do others in your life complain about the amount of time you spend on-line?
1 2 3 4 5
5. ___How often does your job performance or productivity suffer because of cybersex activities at work?
1 2 3 4 5
6. ___How often do you become defensive or secretive when anyone asks you what you

- do on-line?
1 2 3 4 5
7. ___How often do you become anxious, nervous, or upset when you are unable to access sexually oriented web sites?
1 2 3 4 5
8. ___How often do you fear that life without cybersex would be boring, empty, and joyless?
1 2 3 4 5
9. ___How often do you masturbate during cybersex?.
1 2 3 4 5
10. ___How often do you snap, yell, or act annoyed if someone bothers you while you are on-line?
1 2 3 4 5
11. ___How often do you lose sleep due to late night log-ins having cybersex?
1 2 3 4 5
12. ___How often do you feel preoccupied with cybersex when offline and/or fantasize about having cybersex?
1 2 3 4 5
13. ___How often do you bookmark or subscribe to sexually oriented web sites?
1 2 3 4 5
14. ___How often do you use cybersex as a reward for accomplishing something (e.g., stressful day, end of a task, etc)?
1 2 3 4 5
15. ___How often do you use anonymous communication to engage in sexual fantasies not typically carried out in real-life?
1 2 3 4 5
16. ___How often do you anticipate your next on-line session with the expectation that you will find sexual arousal or gratification?
1 2 3 4 5
17. ___How often do you hide your on-line sexual interactions from your significant other?
1 2 3 4 5
18. ___How often do you move from cybersex to phone sex (or even real-life meetings)?
1 2 3 4 5

19. ___ How often do you feel guilty or shameful after cybersex?
1 2 3 4 5
20. ___ How often do you engage in deceptive or deviant online sexual behavior?
1 2 3 4 5

After all the questions have been answered, add the numbers for each response to obtain a final score. The higher the score, the greater the level of addiction and creation of problems resultant from such Internet usage. The severity impairment index is as follows:

NONE 0 – 30 points

MILD 31- 49 points

MODERATE 50 -79 points

SEVERE 80 - 100 points

After you have identified the category that fits your total score, look back at those questions for which you scored a 4 or 5. Did you realize this was a significant problem for you? For example, if you answered 4 (often) to Question #8 regarding feeling that life would be empty and boring without cybersex, did you realize how dependent upon it you have become? Does it scare you to even consider giving it up?

Say you answered 5 (always) to Question #11 about the changes in your sleeping pattern. Did you realize how much time you lost due to late-night cyber-romps? Were you aware of just how often you do this? Have you ever stopped to think about how hard it has become to drag yourself out of bed every morning? Have you noticed how this lost sleep has begun to take its toll on your body and your overall health?

This pamphlet will outline specific techniques that will help you gain control over your sexually compulsive behavior online and see how this impacts relationships, family stability, and job functioning. If you scored over 80 on the test, you are in particular need of this information. If you found yourself in the gray area with a score of 50-79, I'll help you begin to zero in on the areas of greatest concern to you, then this information will help you construct a new program to a better way of living, both on-line and off. And if you scored in the lower ranges, indicating that you only occasionally spend too much time with the Internet, you'll learn simple time management techniques to help you regain control over the clock. As cybersexual addiction impacts both the individual and the family, the ground we cover along the way will be equally as useful to partners and friends of cybersex addicts.

RECOVERY WHEN RELAPSE IS A CLICK AWAY

Eric is a 46-year-old computer programmer who described how hard it was for him to go 'cold turkey' from cybersex during work. "I always go to the same chat room for cybersex. I feel comfortable there, and I typically find a good partner quickly. I always think about cybersex when I feel stressed from work and overwhelmed on the job. I always promise to only do it for a half an hour or hour, but time just slips by. Besides, my drive is stronger than my wife's so it won't hurt, actually it will help our relationship so I don't go looking for someone in real life. Afterwards, I realize that I should not do this to my wife and also to my work. My boss will find out one day if I don't stop doing this in my office. Each time I log off after cybersex, I promise myself that I will never do it again. I hate myself for all the wasted time I spent online and quickly try to catch up

on the lost work. I go a few weeks, then the pressure seems to build up inside. I play mind games with myself. Telling myself just a little won't hurt. No one will know what I am doing. Sometimes I actually believe that I am in control. I wear myself down and the whole process starts all over again and I feel defeated that I will never get rid of these feelings. The temptation is constantly there and relapse is just a click away."

Relapse is a common struggle for anyone in recovery but the problem often seems compounded by the need to use the computer while in recovery from cybersexual addiction. The relapse process is especially difficult for the cybersex addict due to what I call the **Stop-Start Relapse Cycle**. The cycle is an internal dialogue that serves to maintain the compulsive behavior.

- a. *Rationalization* – Users will rationalize that cybersex serves as a "treat" from a long, hard day of work often making self-statement such as, "Just a few minutes won't hurt", "I can control my net use", or "I am right here at the computer, what the heck?" The user will try to justify the need to look at a few pictures or chat for a few minutes, but they soon discover that time slips by and the behavior is not so easily contained.
- b. *Regret* – After the cybersexual experience, the users' experience a period of deep regret. Once they climax, the addict feels guilt or shame for the behavior such as, "I feel guilty for how this is hurting my wife" or "I can't believe I wasted all this time," or "I am a horrible person for what I just did."

- c. *Abstinence* – The addict views the behavior as a personal failure of willpower and promises never to do it again and a short period of abstinence follows. During this time, the addict temporarily engages in healthy patterns of behavior, resumes interests in old hobbies, spends more time with his family, exercises, and gets enough rest.
- d. *Relapse* – The addict in recovery feels tempted to return to the computer during stressful or emotionally charged moments. They begin to crave and miss cybersex. They tell themselves that cybersex is the best way to relax and feel good about themselves. Or they begin not to care about the consequences. They remember how good cybersex felt both sexually and emotionally, and they forget how bad they felt afterwards. The rationalization period starts again and the cycle repeats itself.

How do you kick the cybersex habit when you need to be on the computer for work? How can you stop abusing when relapse is just a mouse click away? Similar to programs that address overeating and food addiction, you need to learn how to make healthy, positive choices about your Internet use since complete abstinence isn't always possible in today's technological world. There are two basic principles to follow:

Principle One: Learn to moderate legitimate use of the Internet.

Principle Two: Abstain from all contact with sexual material online.

As in food addition, certain types of food 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. Recovery from food addiction is about relearning how to eat in order to make more informed and healthier food selections with success being measured through objective goals such as changes in caloric intake and weight loss.

To address cybersexual abuse and addictive behavior the same basic steps are applied. First, it is important to determine the Internet activities, situations, and emotions that are most likely to trigger net binges. A particular chat room, a certain time of day, or the mood you are in just before you log online may all serve as "triggers" that will lead to inappropriate conduct and abuse. Recovery means relearning how to use the Internet in order to make better choices about time is spent online with success being measured through objective, measurable time management goals and abstinence requirements that are achieved and maintained. Goals should include a reduction in the number of hours you spend online in total, the ability to maintain abstinence from adult online content, and an increase in other offline activities.

Some of you may feel uncomfortable when I use the terms "treatment" and "recovery", because you don't consider yourself "addicted" but rather you seek to gain a better handle over your Internet use. The following techniques are designed to benefit both casual users to excessive abusers. However, drawing upon an addiction model, it is easier to talk in terms of an addiction recovery.

To provide direction to reduce electronic distractions while punching the clock, I have developed a step-by-step program to help you refocus your energy to help you

achieve a healthy balance between the Internet and your life:

1. Keep a Daily Activity Log
2. Cope with Triggers
3. Practice Healthy Internet Use Management
4. Evaluate Possible Techno-Fixes
5. Seek out Support

Recovery isn't a simple process nor does it happen overnight. There will certainly be roadblocks and missteps along the way, so be patient with yourself. 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 on-line 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 the Internet, living without it being a central part of one's life can be a very difficult adjustment.

1. Keep a Daily Activity Log

The first step towards reaching your goals is to thoroughly assess your Internet use during the day in order to identify high-risk situations, feelings, or events that lead to net-binges. During the workday a lot happens to an employee. You may be anxious about a big meeting or feel frustrated or tense after the boss criticizes your work, and you turn to cybersex as way to deal with these emotions and work-related tensions. Certain moods or events during the day can trigger cybersex use and help you escape or avoid a

troubling feeling or tense moment. To help you pinpoint what triggers your cybersex activities I suggest maintaining a Daily Activity Log to keep track of when you use the computer for cybersex each hour of the day, every day of the week.

Keeping a log will help you in three important ways. First, it will serve as a journal of present activities. By reviewing a completed schedule, you will gain a baseline understanding of your daily and weekly activities and how they related to using the computer for cybersex. Secondly, the Daily Activity Log can serve as a prospective guide for future activities. That is, you can use a blank form to schedule alternative activities that are less conducive to computer use such as going out to ballgame, going shopping, or spending time with a family member. Finally and most important for this exercise, you can use the log to identify high-risk situations or events that occur just prior to logging online and you can evaluate the extent of rationalization you make to justify cybersex use.

Below is an example of a Daily Activity Log:

TIME	Mon.	Tues.	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
6-7am							
7-8am							
8-9am							
10-11am							
11-noon							
noon-1pm							
2-3pm							

3-4pm

4-5pm

5-6pm

6-7pm

7-8pm

8-9pm

9-10pm

10-11pm

12-midnight

Each time you go online to engage in any cybersexual activity, record the day, time, and events going on at the moment. You might have an argument with a coworker and turn to the computer for cybersex to momentarily cope with your inner hostility. You might be bored at work and use cybersex to spice up your afternoons. Whatever the experience, write it down.

To gain greater insight into the compulsive behavior, consider the following questions as you complete the Daily Activity Log. Write down the answers to these questions before, during, and after each Internet session. To maximize the impact of this exercise, try to be as detailed and reflective as possible as you go through the questions.

1. What type of situations or feelings do you experience just before you log on for cybersex?
2. What applications are most problematic for you and why? (Be specific, which porn

sites or adult chats)

3. Describe your cybersexual experiences in detail? (i.e., nature of fantasy, how you find a willing partner, what you reveal about yourself, how you end the cybersex session).
4. How do you feel after you log off the computer?

The profile you generate from the Daily Log will provide you with a comprehensive overview of your cybersexual experiences. I suggest keeping this log for at least one week, preferably two weeks so that you can obtain a full picture of your online usage. This exercise will help you discover what triggers the experience in terms of the types of emotions, thoughts, and reactions you have before and after you have cybersex and better understand how cybersex helps to fill a void that you are experiencing in your life.

Thoroughly go through your responses and determine if any patterns emerge. What time of day do you usually log online? How long do you stay on during a typical session? What do you usually use the computer for? What types of feelings or situations precede cybersex use? Does work-related stress trigger your need to search adult web sites? Does checking your email inevitably lead to searches for new pornographic images? Like a craving for a cigarette or a desire to have a drink, emotions such as stress, depression, loneliness, anxiety, or burnout can lead to one's craving for cybersex, which serves as temporary distraction to fill an emotional void. Once you have identified the moods or events that onset cybersex use and potential abuse, the next step is to develop more appropriate ways of coping with these issues than turning to cybersex.

2. Cope with Triggers

Bill is an advertising executive who explains what triggered his cybersex use. He explains, “I think a strong trigger has been reaching 50 years old. I am 53 years old right now. I think there is an underlying feeling that I have not accomplished as much as I would have liked with my life, and I have a younger work colleague that is very accomplished, so I kind of feel overwhelmed about competing in this environment. Of course, spending time in the Internet just makes things much, much worse. I used to be the top ad guy here, but now, it seems that these young hotshots are making more money and moving up faster. I retreat to the cyber-porn, which doesn’t help as I get behind in my work. I come in on weekends to catch up or even stay late, but I always find that porn is always just a click away. I hate myself for all the wasted time on the computer. The whole thing is hurting me. I have lost interest in hunting and fishing, my passions at one time. My marriage of 23 years is now shaky because my wife is suspicious of what I do online all night on our home computer. It would kill me if she found out.”

To cope with his feelings of inadequacy and viewing himself as obsolete, Bill turned to cybersex to momentarily feel better. Bill’s coping strategy not only made the job pressure much worse, but he risked getting caught by his boss. In our work together, Bill discovered that he was unhappy with his job and being in advertising had gotten routine. When he was younger, he wanted to be an actor but his parents strongly discouraged him and didn’t that was a “career”. His mother worked as a secretary for an advertising agency and was able to get Bill an internship there during his senior year of college. A full-time job ensued and Bill gradually moved up to be the top ad guy, however, he always wondered what life would have been like had he pursued acting. His

regret and underlying despair was exacerbated each time the company hired a younger person and each time a same-aged friend announced his retirement.

I also realized that Bill and his wife had grown apart. Their marriage was more about children and a new granddaughter than about romance and passion. Over the past two years, Bill had suffered from bouts of impotence. He tried to hide his problem from his wife by creating arguments with her every time she approached him for sex. He also slept in the next bedroom so that he wouldn't disturb her with his snoring however this was yet another excuse for him to avoid sexual contact with his wife.

Bill used cybersex as a convenient means to cope with his underlying feelings of regret, despair, and sexual anxiety. In our work together, we focused on career and marital issues. First, Bill needed to find fulfillment in his job and we assessed some possible alternatives. With some guidance from his financial advisor, Bill was able to get some freelance work doing advertising work for local theaters and eventually was able to start his own advertising agency specializing in theatrical productions. We also started couples counseling and Bill went for a medical examine and received Viagra from his physician. Through months of counseling and with the help of medication, he and his wife were able to resume an active and healthy sex life. Bill's desire for cybersex lessened as he gained greater satisfaction in his new career and sexual intimacy with his wife improved.

While cybersex is a convenient distraction from problems, "cybering" does very little to actually help you cope with the underlying issues that lead you to where you are today. If you are suffering from marital problems, consider marital counseling to address those intimacy issues instead of turning to cybersex. If you view porn to handle stress at

work, then you need to learn more effective stress management techniques to help you relax besides the Internet. Whatever your situation, please understand that it won't be easy but will be well worth the effort. As in Bill's case, it took courage, and persistence, and determination to overcome the issues that lead him to cybersex abuse.

3. Practice Healthy Internet Use Management

Many users attempt to stop cybersex at work delete bookmarks to their favorite adult web sites and unsubscribe from adult newsgroups or pay sites. Unfortunately, once the behavior has become ritualized, it's just as easy to click back and find these sites again. As one man explained, "I TRY to do things to control my urges such as moving the computer so that the screen is more visible to others, but then I end up blocking the view somehow. I try to put all of my wife's and my email in the same program so that she will see the letters I'm getting, but then I got hotmail account to be anonymous. I delete all my bookmarks, then spend twice as long finding all the websites again. The longest I have been able to abstain is for up to six weeks at a time. But I have kept a log and since November 1998 I have tried to quit 22 times and relapsed!"

Many employees flounder because they don't apply healthy management practices over their daily Internet use. To help you make positive choices, I have developed six time management techniques: (1) set a schedule, (2) use external stoppers, (3) limit non-essential use, (3) prioritize tasks, (5) use reminder cards, and (6) spend time away from the computer. These systematic techniques are designed to help you maintain an appropriate balance with legitimate use of the Internet and a solid abstinence program from the adult web sites.

1. Set a Schedule

Many attempts to limit Internet usage fail because the user neglects to determine and schedule Internet use into his or her workday. To maintain proper use, establish structured sessions that are programmed into your day by setting reasonable goals, perhaps 10 hours instead of a current 20. Then, schedule those ten hours in specific time slots and write them onto a calendar or weekly planner. Try to keep your Internet time at work on a routine, weekly schedule to help avoid relapse. As an example of a 10-hour schedule, you might plan to use the Internet from 8 to 9 p.m. every morning to check your email and then again from 4:30-5:30 p. m., just before you leave for the day. Incorporating a tangible daily and weekly schedule of Internet usage will give you a sense of being in control, rather than allowing the Internet to take control.

2. Use External Stoppers

Unlike television, the Internet doesn't have its own commercial breaks, so it's easy to lose track of time once you are online. External stoppers help you put some type of natural break into your pattern of net use. Simply use concrete things that you need to do or places that you need to go as prompters to help log off. For example, if you need to leave for a meeting at 1:30 am, log in at 12:30 am, leaving exactly one hour before its time to quit. The danger in this is that you may ignore such natural alarms and run late for your next appointment. If this is the case, an alarm clock or egg timer may help. Predetermine the amount of time you will allot for your Internet session and preset an alarm and keep it near the computer. Lets say, you allow yourself one hour to be online,

so pre-set the alarm for one hour's time. When it sounds, that means it is time to log offline. If you fear coworkers wondering why you have an alarm at your desk, then use something covert like a watch alarm.

3. Limit Non-Essential Use

It is important to limit non-essential use of the Internet and this typically means reducing the number of hours spent sitting at the computer. First, you should assess how much time you use the Internet for frivolous things, such as buying a book on Amazon when you could walk down to the local bookseller, or reading the *New York Times* online when you could purchase the paper. Evaluate all the tasks you perform on the Internet and examine which of these can you cut out of your life. The computer is a constant temptation to use it for sexual rather than work-related purposes. So if you do have to be on the computer for work, then you need to limit all extracurricular use of the Internet as a way to minimize temptation.

4. Prioritize Tasks

When you do need to go online, it is important to prepare a list of task priorities to establish Internet goals during each session. Before each online session, prepare an outline of what tasks need to be accomplished during each Internet session and stick to that list as you use the Internet. It is the equivalent of bringing a grocery list with you to do the food shopping. If you don't bring a list, you tend to buy items that you don't really need on impulse but with the list you can limit yourself to buying only those items you need without a lot of excess. If you use the Internet on a daily basis for work, then

each morning you need to put a list together of the day's online activities. A sample list might look like the following:

1. *Check email using MS Outlook Express*
2. *Send attachment to co-worker for review.*
3. *Look up real time stock quotes on E-trade.com*
4. *Order a new sweater through Landsend.com*
5. *Order gifts for nephew's birthday on etoys.com*

This list contains both the specific task such as “look up stock quotes” and the web location to perform the event, “E-Trade.com”. Making a Task Priority list for each session will help you effectively maintain predetermined time limits, minimize the risk of temptations to randomly surf, and prioritize web tasks to prevent relapse.

5. Use Reminder Cards

It is easy to feel overwhelmed through errors in thinking such that you may exaggerate the difficulties and minimize the possibility of corrective action. To help you stay focused on your goals and gain control over inappropriate use of the Internet at work, make a list of the five major problems caused by cybersex in your life. Then, generate a parallel list of the five major benefits for cutting down on your overall Internet use or abstaining from problem applications. It is well worth it to make your decision lists as broad and all-encompassing as possible, and to be as honest as possible. This kind of clear-minded assessment of consequences is a valuable skill to learn, one that you

will need later for relapse prevention. These two lists might look like:

Benefits:

- 1. More quality time and intimacy with spouse*
- 2. Greater attention towards my children*
- 3. More time for enhanced family relations*
- 4. Better job performance*
- 5. Raise or promotion at work*

Problems:

- 1. Divorce from my spouse,*
- 2. Conflicts with extended family*
- 3. Loss of my children*
- 4. Problems at work and distance from coworkers*
- 5. Potential job termination if I am caught*

Next, transfer the two lists onto a 3x5 index card and post the card at your computer if utilize one computer workstation. If you utilize more than one computer workstation, or if posting the card would draw unwarranted attention (e.g., at work among co-workers), than simply keep card in a pants or coat pocket, purse, or wallet. Take out the index card as a reminder of what you need to avoid and what you need to do when you feel tempted to use the Internet instead of doing something more productive or healthy. Review the index card several times a week to reflect on the problems caused by your Internet

overuse and the benefits obtained by controlling your use as a means to increase your motivation at moments of decision compelling on-line use.

If you are having problems generating your list of consequences, try to exaggerate the addiction. When smokers are trying to quit the habit only to relapse, doctors will recommend that they exaggerate their smoking habit. If they normally would smoke a pack a day, now they smoke three packs in a day. The theory is, “Smoke until you are sick of smoking”, so that smoking becomes associated with a sore throat, weak lungs, shallow breath, and an ugly taste in the smoker’s mouth.

This same technique is an effective tool for reflection and continued relapse prevention in cybersexual addiction recovery. Instead of spending your typical few hours a day for cybersex, take a whole day and do it to excess. Even if you want to stop, keep going. If you have something else you should be doing, make yourself stay on the computer. In other words, make yourself sick of cybersex. After one of these deliberate binges, when you start to get bored with the activity, write down the experience. Ask yourself, “Was the cybersex really that great?” “Did the fantasy meet my expectations?” or “Was having cybersex worth all the lost time spent on the computer?”

Try to capture the full impact of how boring it became, how worried you were about being caught, how drained you felt, how your muscles ached at being stationary at the computer, how your eyes got blurry, or how much time you wasted. Keep this list near the computer as a constant reminder so that when the rationalizations begin such as, “Just one more time won’t hurt” you are armed and ready to combat those thoughts.

6. Spend Time Away from the Computer

Being at the computer only increases your risk of falling back into old patterns. Therefore, to maintain healthy Internet management, it is time to cultivate alternative activities that take you away from the Internet. For many, cybersex typically replaces a once cherished activity. It is helpful to take a personal 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, golfing, fishing, camping, or dating. Maybe you have stopped going to ball games or visiting the zoo, or volunteering at church. Perhaps it is an activity that you have always put off trying, like joining a fitness center or put off calling an old friend to arrange to have lunch.

To help you develop or rekindle alternative activities, construct a list of every activity or practice that has been neglected or curtailed since your on-line habit emerged. Now rank each one on the following scale:

1 - Very Important

2 - Important

3 - Not Very Important

In rating this lost activity, genuinely reflect how life was before the Internet. In particular, examine the "Very Important" ranked activities. Ask yourself how these activities improved the quality of your life. This exercise will help you become more aware of the choices that you have made regarding the Internet and rekindle lost activities

once enjoyed. Finding alternative activities that take you away from the computer help you to avoid temptations and aid in relapse prevention.

4. Evaluate Possible Techno-Fixes

Filtering software and family friendly Internet Service Providers (ISPs) are two innovative technological solutions to help you reach your recovery goals. Filtering software such as NetNanny, CyberPatrol, or SurfControl, typically used by parents to block access online sexual content from their children, will help you to self-regulate your Net use. The software will automatically block porn or sex chat sites by shutting down your web browser if you attempt to access this material. For many, this stops the behavior immediately and many describe the experience as a ‘cold shower’ that breaks the trance in their search for cybersex.

Karrie, 43-year old lawyer even enlisted the help of her cyberfriends to make the software work more effectively. She explains, “After I loaded the software on the computer, I told my online friends that I was trying to work on my marriage and about the blocking software. They were very supportive and helped me to stay clean and sober during moments of temptation”.

Unfortunately, for others, they attempt to circumvent the software or simply take it off the computer. In these cases, I highly recommend individuals utilize family friendly Internet Service Providers (ISP) that block pornography and adult sites from the server end (e.g., Family.net, Mayberry USA, Integrity Online). Instead of using software that can be uninstalled these family friendly ISPs can not be disabled. This techno-fix method is much more about making a fresh start. With it, you gain a new Internet

account with a new handle, which allows you to have a clean slate and one that hopefully will keep you on the path of abstinence and recovery. Whether you are considering filtering software or a new ISP, select the solution that best fits your family and work needs.

5. Seek Out Support

Trying to break the cybersex habit can make you feel alone and that recovery is impossible. This leads to feelings of despair and quickly escalates into the Hopelessness Stage where negative thinking replaces positive self statements such as:

“People despise me for my addiction.”

“My family has given up on me.”

“There are so many demands on me, I can not handle them all.”

“My job is boring but I can’t leave.”

“I don’t have anything else to look forward to, so I might as well keep using.”

“I don’t deserve anything better in life.”

“If I try something, it won’t work out for me.”

“My future is empty and meaningless.”

“Things can only get worse.”

At this point, it is easy to feel as if your craving to use is stronger than your willpower to stop. It is vital to build a solid support system who can act as sponsors to help cope with moments of temptation and offer assistance while you struggle with

recovery. This support system can be a trusted friend, a pastor, a support group, or relatives who are there to listen and provide comfort.

However, many cybersex addicts hide their behavior from a partner or loved one and the idea of telling that person the truth is often difficult, because of the damage it may cause in your relationship. While this is always a fear, you should consider how the secrets and lies have already damaged the trust in your relationship. Chances are that your partner already knows that something is wrong and you have fought in the past about the computer. As I talked about in the previous chapter, telling your partner the truth may come with risks, but it also may help the two of you to build a closer, more loving bond together.

For example, Mark was a law student who needed to use the Internet for legal research. To help him abstain from the porn sites, he deleted all his bookmarks, took out his modem from his home computer, and restricted his Internet use to the labs at college, where in public he was less likely to be tempted to download pornography. He also told his girlfriend about his online activities and she was able to help him overcome the desire to return to cybersex. Both were devote Christians and when he felt the urge to go back online, he prayed with his girlfriend to fight the temptation. Through this process, the two of them built a stronger and more spiritual relationship.

Spiritual guidance in the form of twelve-step programs, personal prayer, or pastoral counseling can all prove to be invaluable resource in your daily recovery. Daily meditation will also help you to focus your energy during recovery and improve your inner strength to fight temptation and relapse. In chapter seven, I discuss in greater detail the merits of group work, and specifically Twelve-Step programs, that will help you find

a supportive community to aid in your spiritual healing.

CHECKLIST

Because relapse is so easy, I have summarized the issues in this convenient checklist that you can keep with you to maintain your motivation and reinforce the healthy Internet behavior.

____ 1. Set Goals Related to Abstinence:

- a. “I want to keep my job.”
- b. “I’d like to get along better with my family/partner/spouse.”
- c. “I’d like to use the Internet to enhance my life rather than take away from life.”

____ 2. Assess Current Internet Use Practices:

- a. Look for specific situations in which you are most vulnerable.
- b. Determine new places to use the Internet that are more public and visible.
- c. Assess whether you have taken steps toward reducing Internet availability.

____ 3. Develop Proactive Plan to Deal with High-Risk Situations:

- a. Learn to avoid high-risk situations
- b. Develop alternative activities.
- c. Plan in advance how these might be avoided or successfully coped with.

____ 4. Address How You Will Deal with Abstinence:

- a. What are your current struggles and how will you cope with the emotional and physical losses you may experience when restraining from cybersex.
- b. Minimize deliberate exposure to cybersex-related triggers or situations. Be ready to identify unforeseeable “accidental exposure” to the Internet and be prepared for how to cope with the situation.

____ **5. Make Measurable Changes in your Behavior:**

- a. Maintain a log of hourly changes in Internet use and focus on various internal and external events that contribute to net-binges.
- b. Utilize cognitive and behavioral strategies discussed here when exposure or cravings occur.
- c. Be proactive in lifestyle modifications that take you away from the computer.

____ **6. Find Sponsorship with Loved Ones or Professionals:**

- a. Seek out professional guidance where appropriate to recognize the decision chain that leads to a lapse before it actually occurs.
- b. Discuss ways that friends and family members can assist in your recovery.
- c. If you don't enlist their help, then ask yourself how you will abstain from cybersex without accountability to someone.

____ **7. Correct Maladaptive Thinking that Leads to Relapse:**

- a. Learn about your relapse interpretations “I blew it this time, I guess I will never stop, so I will just keep using.”

- b. Watch out for internal “entitlement” themes, such as “I had a hard day, I deserve to cyber” or “Well, I was productive today, so cybersex will be my treat.”
- c. Encourage yourself to look at slips as isolated incidents that can be conceived of as opportunities for learning.

SIGNS OF HEALTHY CYBERSEX USE

The final step is to give yourself credit for your efforts even if you do relapse once in a while. Get back on the horse and just start again. Because using the computer for work is often part of your daily routine, it may not be easy to detect when you have made progress. To help you points to recognize the steps you have made in your own recovery, I have listed the following ten signs of healthy cybersex use:

1. You stick to your schedule of Internet use and don't eclipse your targeted number of total hours on-line each week.
2. Your spouse, parent, or other loved one tells you they see the difference in your Internet habits and your behavior toward them.
3. You keep a strict accounting of the money you spend for on-line service fees, especially for adult web sites, and stay within your budget.
4. You perform work tasks in a timely fashion that closely resembles your pattern before turning to addictive Internet use.
5. You rediscover those favorite hobbies and activities you used to enjoy.

6. You expend greater energy communicating with those directly in front of you than to strangers on the Net.
7. You see others obsessed with the cybersex in a different light, with an understanding that they're creating problems for themselves and those closest to them.
8. When you do use the Internet for legitimate reasons or for your limited entertainment slots, you feel less and less tempted to resume your old habits.
9. You feel a greater desire to go out with your spouse or family and socialize with friends, turning down fewer invitations and making more of your own.
10. You look back at your time of addiction to cybersex and see a different person from a different period of time.

PART II: WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO TO HELP

After a recent lecture in Nebraska, I noticed several women waiting to speak with me. Gathered in the corner of the room, they stood talking amongst themselves. After most people cleared out and the line dwindled down, I walked over to them. One woman held a copy of my book in her hand and said, "My husband has struggled with this addiction for the last six months, I just didn't know where to turn. I was so revealed to find your book because no one around here knew anything about Internet addiction."

The next woman told me a story about her 31-year old daughter, wife and mother of two toddlers, who was having several cyberaffairs. "Her behavior has just traumatized the whole family. She was the perfect wife and mother until the Internet came into their home. Suddenly, my daughter's entire personality changed. When I tried to talk with her

about it, she became angry and defensive. She used to be able to tell me anything, and now she refuses to talk with me.”

Yet, another woman told me about her sister and the next told me about her son. All of them complained that they were frustrated, scared, and confused by the sudden personality changes that took place after the Internet came into their lives.

Addiction hurts the one you love. Time after time, I receive dozens of phone calls from family members and friends just like this that are searching for validation and guidance with how to confront the problem and deal with the addiction.

ANDREA’S CRY FOR HELP

Andrea is a 45-year-old elementary teacher living White Plains, New York. She wrote to me about her sister’s addiction. Her story captures the pain and frustration that concerned family members, children, and friends of the addict often experience.

“My sister, a married mother of three lost all interest in her teenage and adult children, her husband of twenty-three years and all other outside activities she had previously been involved in. The change was gradual. At first we were just concerned and irritated because she was constantly online and no one could reach her. Then she started developing intense online friendships. Since February of 1998 she has progressed to having what we believe are multiple real sexual relations with men and perhaps women.

We, her daughter and I, have reason to know that these sexual relationships are centered around a slave/master theme. In fact, most of the time when she is in a chat room she is engaged in some sort of weird cybersex. We also know that she is engaged

in this type of sex with live partners, not just on the net. Her high school aged son has caught her with men on at least three occasions but she has denied everything. We know she plans to visit at least two of these men in the coming months. We are terrified for her and don't know what to do. My niece, my parents, and myself have your book [Caught in the Net]. We think my sister is vintage example of the people you describe, with the exception that she has expressed that she doesn't care about the cost of her new behavior, she will not stop for anyone.

My niece and I are the only two people in our family who know the extent of the problem, we know that she is meeting with multiple men. We have tried to protect both my parents and my sister's sons from this because we see no benefit for upsetting them. My sister's husband simply refuses to acknowledge that there is a problem. In fact, he has admitted that sometimes this is a nice change because my sister is off his back. We have not told him the extent of my sister's betrayal. My sister gets calls at all hours from these people. She has changed her dress from that of a normal mom to black lace and tight mini-skirts. She leaves that house at all hours and doesn't return. She goes away for weekends and lies about who she is with. She says she loves these people to them, while she is standing in front of her own family, and then denies a problem.

She is wearing jewelry given to her by these people. She is involving her daughter way too much in this. She has confided in her daughter things that she should not know, but if her daughter challenges her she gets mad and calls her judgmental and brings up anything she can to discredit her 22 year-old daughter. We believe that she will react this way with anyone that confronts her.

We think it is important for you to know just how bazaar and enormous the change has been. My sister has always been a terrific decent religious, caring person. She was the best mom I know. She was fun to be with and talk to. Now, I don't believe a word that come out of her mouth, she lies constantly and doesn't even bother with being consistent. The other thing we thought you should know is that my sister has shown my niece pictures of these people, they truly look like the dregs of society. It is almost like her self esteem has lessened with this contact and she is associating with people she never would have before. These are not working normal people, they are obese, sending nude pictures, one couple says they both love her and she loves both of them, husband and wife.

I don't live with my sister so her addiction has only caused me anger and worry. Her daughter tells me that her mom stopped cooking dinner, which she did every night for 20 years; she stopped asking her youngest son about school and has not asked for a report card in 18 months. She does not attend any of his school functions, even though in the past she would never have missed anything. When my niece was home for Christmas her mother, who she was very close to, did not spend a single evening with her. My niece and her mother got into very harsh argument about these problems and her father sided with her mother, just to make the tensions go away. My parents are very worried, although again, I have not told them everything. My mom is 70 and my dad had by-pass surgery less then a year ago. I don't feel that they need to know as much as I do. Her son in the Navy can never reach home because of her constant usage.

My sister's husband recently began his own online weirdness, sending an advertisement for sexual services. He claims it was a joke. My sister felt the need to call

and inform her daughter of this a seven am one morning, obviously in an attempt to say hey, its not only me. I have failed her in that I have never confronted her on what I see and know. My reasons were that I knew things I wasn't supposed to and I didn't want to upset the rest of the family. I live 800 miles away, so it would be her husband and kids that would take the brunt of my confrontation. My niece and I did not discover that the problem had overflowed into real life and she is meeting these people until about six weeks ago. That is when we searched out and found your book. My niece has confronted her about the danger involved in letting these people have her telephone number and address, but she says they are her friends and she trusts them. Another weird thing that seems to be happening is my sister has told her family enough about the slave master thing that she will openly talk about it, saying it is just a game. We know that it is not, but we think is talking about it to take the sting of weirdness away and make it more normal and acceptable.

We are seeking any help we can get. What can we do? What can you tell us about the sexual addiction, which has come from the Internet? Are we too late? We are thinking about sending her and her husband a copy of your book. We are pretty sure she won't read it, in fact, I suspect she would hide it from her husband. We think we have become enablers by our passivity. We have considered going to her and confronting her, even though we both live out of town. We just aren't sure the best way to proceed and could use advice and insight.”

CHILDREN MAY BE THE FIRST TO KNOW

At an alarming rate, I receive a growing number of cries for help from the

children of cybersex addicts. Here is part of one such letter I received from a son about his mother, "I need your help. I am a 19-year-old who knows that my mom is cheating on my father on-line. She's in her late 40's and pretends to be in your early 20's when she talks to on-line guys. This issue has finally come to a climax with me because I want it to stop, yet I don't know how. It is ruining our mother-son relationship, while at the same time rotting the inside of me because things have currently become extremely ugly. My mother isn't a bad person, to say the least, she is just doing something wrong. She thinks I hate her because of all this anger inside, even though I've told her that I never could hate her because there's so much of her in my heart that it would mean that I'd hate myself. I don't have any money, though I wish I did because she, and the rest of us, need help abolishing this addiction that is taking her away from us."

Because children and teenagers are more computer-savvy than their parents, they are more likely to be the first one in the family to discover mom's online affair or dad's secret online pornography collection. Children who use a parent's computer can accidentally find undeleted emails, locked files, old chat logs, or history folders that reveal the true nature about what a parent does online. And when that child makes this discovery, he or she is deeply wounded and thinks, "How can my mom or dad do this?"

Children are sensitive, especially over matters that concern their parents. In many respects, children grow up with this belief that mommy and daddy will stay together forever, but that doesn't always happen. And it is very difficult for children to learn that a parent had an affair. A child may develop feelings of deep anger at the adulterous parent for having the affair and for breaking the family apart. A parent's infidelity can crush a son or daughter, no matter how they find out. Imagine the shock and devastation

when a child makes this discovery through the Internet.

Not only does this discovery cause emotional pain, but may develop sleep and eating problems and become increasingly depressed as she or he internally agonizes about what to do: “Should I tell my father my mom is having cybersex?” “Should I confront my mom directly?” “How should I tell I found out without her hating me?” “How can I keep my parent’s marriage from falling apart?” “My mom wants to run away with her cyberboyfriend, how can I stop her?” A son or daughter also feels too embarrassed to talk with friends about it, so he or she ends up feeling alone in their emotional struggle and confusion.

Parents who engage in secret cyberaffairs or cybersex don’t realize how easy it is for their sons and daughters to find this information out. If you happen to be a son or daughter reading this book now, here are three important steps to consider:

- (1) do not attempt to handle this all by yourself,
- (2) avoid taking sides with either parent until you learn all the facts,
- (3) talk with a relative, trusted family friend, school counselor, or teacher about the situation for their guidance.

PEOPLE CAN GET ADDICTED TO A MACHINE

Why would a parent use the Internet to the point it causes pain for their children? Why would a spouse jeopardize a marriage for pictures on a computer screen? Initially, cybersex users will rationalize that people are unable to become addicted to a machine. Compulsive disorders can manifest themselves in many non-chemical means such as gambling, 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 cybersex addicts deny that anyone can “get addicted to a machine” and it is the family and friends who first view the behavior as troublesome.

Denial stems from maladaptive core beliefs, rationalizations and distorted thinking that support the addiction. For example, the husband who surfs the Net late at night for cyberporn while his wife and children sleep upstairs tells himself that he isn't doing any harm to his family. He tells himself that having cybersex keeps him from going to strip clubs or worse, running around with prostitutes. What he doesn't realize is the quality time lost with his wife each night he goes online, nor does he think about the lost opportunities to spend with his children, and he ignores how exhausted he feels during work the next day. Cybersex addicts suffer from a variety of rationalizations that serve to justify the compulsive behavior:

- I am oversexed.
- No one will know.
- Its not really extramarital sex - it's just words on a screen.
- No one else is like me.
- Just one more time won't hurt.
- Everyone else is doing it.
- I need this sexual release in order to function.

- My sex drive is just too powerful.
- I can't get addicted to a machine.
- Its been a long day and cybersex helps me relax.
- It is just one large credit card bill for adult web site subscriptions. I've spent my money on sillier things.
- I can't understand why my spouse complains about my computer use, we never did much anyway.
- I must be okay using the Net all night – I still do well in school (or work).
- Doing chores is just not as important as staying online longer
- So I miss a few hours sleep from the Net; that's just wasted time anyway.

BREAKING THE DENIAL THROUGH FAMILY INTERVENTION

How can family help the addict? The first step towards your loved one's recovery is for that person to admit the problem. If he or she is not ready to do that, then the person is not ready for treatment.

So then how do addicts break denial to recognize the problem? Generally speaking, they must first hit the metaphorical 'rock bottom' which is different for each person. In one case, it may be when the divorce papers are finally served, for another person, it may be when they lose their job, and still for another, it may mean being kicked out of school.

Despite how powerful denial is when you are dealing with an addict, there are ways that concerned family and friends can help the addict to recognize he or she has a problem. In the addiction field, this is usually known as a "family intervention".

Interventionists, as they are sometimes called, are specialists who assist families in confronting an addiction. Their services may range from brief consultations to facilitating the actual family confrontation.

Given the magnitude of calls I receive from families who struggle with how to help a cybersex addict in denial, I have included a step-by-step outline to serve as a blueprint and guide for family members and friends to follow. While this pamphlet provides direction, you should seek out the consultation and assistance of a healthcare professional before considering doing an intervention on your own. This type of professional guidance will be instrumental in achieving maximum results with your loved one.

When searching for a healthcare professional, it is important to find one familiar with Internet addiction recovery, however that isn't always easy. Unfortunately, the field is still relatively new and many therapists are unfamiliar with the Internet, and even worse, some reject the notion that people can get addicted to the cybersex. In the previous case, Andrea spoke with several therapists before she came to our clinic. She explained, "The people we are talking to have no experience in sexual addiction or any type of obsessive behavior that was initiated through the Internet. Are we being stupid using them? They are all we have in this small town but we don't want to make a mistake." To help you find a nearby healthcare professional who is knowledgeable with the disorder, the Center for Online Addiction provides a database of local referrals and further information for family members at www.netaddiction.com.

Step 1: Gather everyone together

Family interventions should include everyone concerned for the addict. This may include the immediate family such as a spouse or partner and age-appropriate children, extended relatives such as an aunt, uncle, mother, father, sister, brother, or cousin, and trusted friends. Using this book as a guideline, start talking about the issues and begin to carefully examine how this person has changed since the becoming involved with the Internet.

In many situations, the spouse or partner is left to feel completely alone because he or she is the only one to witness the early stages of the addictive behavior. If you are a spouse living the addict, and haven't already enlisted the help of your family and friends, then now is the time to do so. Don't be afraid that they will laugh. Making a joke out of it is always a possibility as others may find it hard to believe that someone can become addicted to the Internet. If they do start to minimize the problem, educate them on the severity and full extent of the behavior to help them understand. Show them this book and other research materials associated with cybersex addiction to help them see that this is just as real as alcoholism or drug dependence, and is nothing to laugh at.

Step 2: Develop a list of consequences due to the addiction

Once you have collected everyone together, it is time to reflect on the problems created by the addiction. Each of you should independently generate a list of consequences that you have observed due to the addiction. This process allows you to reflect more deeply about your own hurts caused by the addiction. Keep in mind that this isn't a time to air old issues, but genuinely try to think back to when you first noticed a problem. Consider what life was like before the Internet. Generally speaking, cybersex

addiction is a quick fall, often less than one year. Given the short development cycle, much less than when compared to the development cycle for alcoholism or compulsive gambling, it is easier for family and friends to recall what life was like before the Internet.

Ask yourself when you first noticed the shift in behavior. Was it sudden or gradual? Was it little things that slowly weren't getting done around the house such as the laundry, cooking, or cleaning? Did he become less interested in once cherished events such as golfing, going to the theater, or playing cards with friends since the Net? Did she spend less time gardening since discovering chat rooms? Your list can range from hobbies the person used to enjoy to specific consequence resultant from excessive online use such as a forgetting to pick up the children from school, losing a big job promotion at work, failing school, or getting fired. Your list of consequences might look like this:

- Having a close, trusting, and loving marriage
- Stability at the job or being up for a good promotion
- Going boating on weekends
- Spending time with the children in the evenings
- Working on model planes
- Gardening on the weekends
- Going on family outings such as to the zoo or sports events
- Talking on the phone with friends
- Going out to lunch with friends

- Keeping in touch and calling relatives

Your list should be thorough, so try to include as many specific instances as you can possibly think of. When it comes time for the actual family intervention, a clear and comprehensive list will help the person to fully understand your concerns.

One goal of a family intervention is to help the addict realize the consequences of current behavior and what the future will look like if he or she doesn't stop. To facilitate this awareness of what the addict stands to lose, make a second list of what life will look like if he or she doesn't seek out help. These lost goals might include:

- Breaking trust and fidelity in the marriage
- Separation or divorce from the marriage
- Being fired at work
- Money problems
- Losing one's children in a custody battle
- Losing one's friends
- Being arrested (if illegal online activity is present)

Step 3: Share your lists with one another

Next, gather all the family and friends together who will be involved with the intervention and share your lists with one another as a group. Did you all notice any common themes or issues? Did you all notice that his job performance has suffered lately? Have you all noticed that mom seems less interested in the children since meeting

her online friends? Have you all noticed that dad no longer spends time doing once cherished activities with the family such as boating or going to baseballs games, instead he is always ‘working’ on the computer?

The purpose of this group discussion is not to sit around and “bad mouth” your loved one, but rather to help you each crystallize and prioritize your thoughts and generate a comprehensive picture of the addict’s behavior. This is also a process for family members to reveal secrets and share truths. Andrea explains, “Finally, my niece and I have managed to convey there is a problem to the other members of our family, and they are willing to do whatever it takes - but we have not told them everything. The stuff is too ugly and hurtful. We don’t want to tell them, for my sister’s sake and for their sake.” Obviously, each situation is a little different, but for the intervention to be effective, it is important that each relative and friend involved understand the extent of the problem. While the truth may be initially painful to hear, it is better to come from the mouth of a loved one at this stage where the information can properly be absorbed and processed, rather than having it revealed during the actual intervention only to come as a great shock.

The key to this step is to allow family and friends time to openly share feelings and process what living with the addict has been like, in order to gain support and strength from knowing that you are not alone. Gail first introduced her mother to the Internet, and described how this process helped her, “I was so relieved to know that my father also saw my mother’s addiction to cyberchats, she even lied to these men about being married to my father. Initially, I felt responsible for my mother’s behavior because I taught her how to use the Internet. I carried this guilt with me for months, until we all

sat down to talk about the problem. It was so comforting to know that I wasn't alone and it helped ease my sense of self-blame.”

Step 4: Develop a plan for the intervention

It is important to develop a plan for how to execute the family intervention. Time, date, and place should all be considered in this stage. Decide when the best time to have the intervention should be? Should it be in the afternoon or evening? Would it be better after dinner when the person is less likely to be on the Internet? Obviously, the time you designate should maximize the receptiveness of the message so doing it at the normal time the addict goes online won't be a practical time to choose.

What day is best? Are weekdays less hectic than weekends? Or would weekends be a better time because the person doesn't have to go to work the next morning, leaving him or her time to adjust emotionally to what has been said?

Where should you hold the intervention? Should it be at the addict's home? Or should it be in a neutral place, say at a family member's home or a friend's house. If you decide to have it away from where the addict normally accesses the computer (at his or her home), then you must consider how you will get the addict to arrive at the person's house? What will you tell her? Why does she need to go there? One family explained, “We always have Sunday dinner at her daughter-in-law's house. It seemed the only time of the week that she allowed herself to be away from computer.” Each step of the family intervention should be discussed ahead of time, however, don't expect every thing to go as planned. Even if you have considered everything, life has a mind of its own, so be prepared for the best laid plans to change.

Step 5: Rehearse the Intervention

Returning to Andrea's case, she felt overwhelmed about the prospect of the impending family intervention, "I will admit that my niece and I are very uncomfortable about confronting my sister. We would love another suggestion. Much of what we know, we learned because we read some e-mail that we shouldn't have. We are in the strange position of being ashamed to have violated her privacy while knowing that someone needs to know what is going on. I am full of nerves thinking about talking to her. What if she gets mad and never talks with us again? I just don't know how I would handle that."

Andrea expresses the typical emotions family members feel towards doing an intervention – dread, worry, apprehension, and fear. What if the addict becomes defensive? What if the addict storms out of the room? What if the addict refuses to listen? These are all possible outcomes that should be considered. What you are about to do isn't easy. No one likes to confront another person, even if it is meant to help.

To help reduce this anxiety, as a family you should rehearse together for the anticipated intervention in a similar fashion actors rehearse for a theatrical play. What you are about to do is very difficult and nothing prepares you for the actual event, but rehearsal will help you each feel more comfortable with the process and minimize apprehension.

Decide who will be the main spokesperson and in what order you will each speak. As you practice together, carefully consider how you will state your concerns. This isn't a situation calling for "tough love" and focus blame solely on the addict's inappropriate

behavior, as this attitude will only produce shame and resistance. Concentrate on using nonjudgmental language that won't sound critical or blaming and critique each other and refine your statements as necessary. Practice using non-blaming "I" statements that will help your loved one actually hear the message and avoid trigger words such as "always," "never," "should," and "must" that sound like an attack. To enhance the reality of the rehearsal process, enlist a family member to pretend to be the addict. This person should respond in the same way you envision the addict responding, so that you can better anticipate the addict's potential reaction. Finally, try to rehearse as much as possible to help the family prepare to act in a cohesive manner. This type of thoughtful preparation will help you show a united front and send a clear, strong, and confident message that will hopefully save your loved one from self-destruction.

Step 6: Communicate with Warmth and Caring

It is important to communicate with your loved one in warm, supportive, and loving tones during the family interventions. In an ideal situation, the intervention should foster an atmosphere to:

- Negotiate and express needs
- Establish and maintain proper boundaries
- Listen to each other's concerns with respect
- Be comfortable sharing feelings
- Encourage honesty and trust

Despite your best efforts to express create a positive atmosphere, your loved one

may respond with defensiveness, anger, and resistance. During a recent family intervention one mother stormed out of the house crying, “You just don’t understand. I hate you all”. Repeated attempts by her two teenaged daughters, her husband, and her mother to encourage her stay and listen failed. In other cases, the person recognizes the addiction, and his or her behavior is less about denial and more about poor self-control. For example, a spouse feels guilt about the virtual cheating or a parent feels ashamed downloading dozens of pornographic online pictures, but feels powerless to stop. Attempts to go a month or a week or even a day without logging online become an overwhelming task. And the realization that the family knows “the secret” in turn makes the addict feel embarrassed.

Remember that while you have prepared for the family intervention for days, weeks, or perhaps months, this is the first time your loved one has heard what you have to say. Your loved one may be emotionally unprepared to deal with what is being told to him or her, even if he or she knows it is the truth. Reactions in response to the intervention can range in the following ways:

1. *Denial* – Refuses to accept what is being told.
2. *Withdrawal* – Pulls away from the situation and conflict because of hurt feelings, anger, and resentment.
3. *Shaming* – Feels guilty and ashamed by the family’s discovery.
4. *Emotional Cutoff* – Stops all communication and storms out of the room
5. *Threats* – Makes demands, uses ultimatums, or blames family for the problem.
6. *Humor and Sarcasm* – Makes jokes or cutting remarks to shift focus off the conflict.

7. *Manipulation* – Uses guilt and deception to control the family.
8. *Convergence* – Superficially and insincerely agrees with the family to avoid further confrontation.

You should expect a combination of these feelings to emerge and be prepared for the transitional stage that takes place after the intervention. During this transitional phase, your loved one needs time to absorb what has been said and must decide where to go from here. Independent of this person's initial response, there is a period of reflection and discernment to determine the next course of action. This may take days, weeks, or months. Meanwhile, the family is also in transition as they can no longer pretend that the "white elephant isn't in the room". The Pandora's box is now open and you must be prepared for how the family will change.

Step 7: Be Prepared to Treat the Family

How much the family system can recognize old patterns of behavior, learn new communication skills, establish boundaries, and accept personal commitment for change measures intervention success. However, families falsely believe that the only goal of the intervention is to get the addict into treatment as soon as possible. Many families think that once they have done the intervention, they have finished their part and that the addict must be the one to change.

Family interventions are about much more than getting the addict into treatment. The intervention "event" with the addicted person is only a small part of the recovery process. The intervention process is designed to recognize the effects of addiction on the entire family and the family is helped to recognize and change old patterns of behavior.

In this environment, the family members process what has happened to them as a result of the addict's misuse of the Internet. There is no separation drawn between the addict and other family members, so participants discuss the impact of the family's past history of addictive or high-stress behavior on present-day relationships. With the addicted person's entire support system involved, the means through which the person previously sustained her or his behavior are no longer available. Everything changes, and the addict is pulled into the change process. Without this clear-minded insight, the addict may be very successful in treatment only to relapse when they return home because the unresolved family issues.

Andrea's sister, Margaret, struggled with many life issues prior to the Internet. Margaret was on medication for heart problems, asthma and a recent hysterectomy. Married twenty-three years, she has three grown children, one in college, one in the navy and one who will graduated high school last year. She worked off and on for the last nine or ten years at various jobs. She was a stay at home mom until her children were in high school and was very devoted to all of them. Her husband, Alan worked 12-hour shifts as a mechanic in a local plant, came home exhausted, hungry, and tired, and suffered from a drinking problem. While these events existed in her real life, online she was very popular with her cyberfriends and her virtual world served as a convenient escape to avoid several unresolved issues in her life:

- Role as a Mother Changed
- Empty marriage
- Felt isolated and alone by herself each day

- Bored with her daily routine
- Lacked adequate support system of family
- Hadn't cultivated outside hobbies or interests
- Lacked marketable skills to find suitable job
- Suffered from significant health problems over the past year.

Margaret felt stuck her life but the family didn't realize the emotional pain that she was in. Our family goals included ways to develop a better support system, to create cohesion within the inter-familial relationships, and strategies to improve Margaret's independence.

Margaret enjoyed the attention she received from her cyberlovers because Alan was gone all day at work and asleep most nights at home. With the children grown up, she felt her purpose in life had changed and without marketable skills, she didn't think she was capable of getting a job. Margaret grew distant from Alan and she felt more like a maid than a wife, as her main role in the marriage was doing his cooking, cleaning, and laundry. Out of jealousy, Alan was motivated to stop his wife from chatting with men and tried to spend more quality time with one another on the weekends. However, the hardest issue to overcome in their marriage was his drinking problem. He refused to admit his own addiction to alcohol, and put the blame on job stress. With the family's help, he was able to see how much his drinking had become out of control and eventually entered Alcoholics Anonymous.

Margaret's sisters were able to provide support missing in her life. Her sister invited her to join an aerobics class taught through her church and this allowed them to

spend more time together. Over time, Margaret decided to take business courses at the local community college and worked part time in the college library. This not only provided her with a sense of purpose and trained her for future jobs, but now her Internet use focused more on schoolwork than chat rooms. With dedication and commitment from the entire family, successful recovery is possible.

For more information, please contact the Center for Online Addiction at www.netaddiction.com or order *Tangled in the Web: Understanding Cybersex from Fantasy to Addiction*, available in paperback or as an e-book at www.authorhouse.com.

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