

Treatment of Internet addiction: How to intervene with problematic Internet use

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Information networks are media that are characterized by interactivity and personality. Nowadays, they are used more and more also for social interaction, and spending time online has become a common form of leisure. Information networks have become virtual spaces for information exchange and entertainment. Some people find the virtual reality of the Internet so fascinating that they may get carried away, their relationships may wither, their view of the world may become distorted, and their Internet use may replace other activities entirely.

The concept of Internet addiction has become part of our everyday language. However, Internet addiction does not yet have a clear definition or fixed criteria. What is termed problematic Internet use is understood as excessive or compulsive use of the Internet that is so intensive that it causes problems in other areas of a person's life. Problematic Internet use is typically connected to certain applications or websites containing for example adult entertainment, gambling and gaming, or other interactive applications. Excessive Internet use may also result from aimless surfing on different websites or from the compulsive gathering of information or files.

When does Internet use, whether for entertainment or information, turn into addiction? You can search for the answer not only by completing the self-evaluation tests provided at the A-Clinic Foundation's AddictionLink, but also by paying attention to the following warning signs:

- You are unable to control your Internet use.
- You stay online longer than you intended and lose track of time.
- You neglect breaks when you use the Internet.
- You feel you need to use the Internet more and more in order to feel satisfied.
- You think that there are too many interesting websites to stop surfing.
- You experience withdrawal symptoms when you are not online.
- You feel irritated if you have to stop using the Internet.
- You feel guilty and do not tolerate criticism about your Internet use.
- You neglect meals, physical exercise, relationships, work, studies, or sleep because of the Internet.
- You use the Internet to escape from your problems or to brighten your mood.
- You lie to family members and friends to cover up your extensive use of the Internet.

When being treated for addictions, people have noticed that they have internal resources and skills that enable them to overcome their problems. The same way, just as in the case of substance dependence or other addictions, also problematic Internet use can be overcome independently. In most cases, the problem is mild or temporary, not requiring actual treatment. However, if you feel that your Internet use has been excessive or compulsive for a longer period of time, that it creates problems for other areas of your life, that it takes a considerable amount of time from family, studies, or hobbies, or that it creates conflicts or makes you feel guilty, it is a good idea to stop and discuss the situation with a professional.

The first thing is to acknowledge that you have a problem and to find motivation for changing your situation. You can contact for example a youth center or an A-Clinic, which specialize in the treatment of various addictions. By making an appointment, you can discuss and think over your situation together with a professional.

Problematic or excessive Internet use is treated in much the same way as other addictions. The treatment plan and its goals are defined together with the client. Together, the client and the professional also decide what could indicate that the problem no longer exists. An important topic of discussion is also whether or not excessive Internet use is a symptom of other issues such as loneliness, social exclusion, or depression. Excessive Internet use can also indicate a lack of social skills or it can be a way to improve your mood and run away from problems you face in life.

The treatment does not usually aim at putting an end to Internet use but reducing it to moderate and sensible use. The following program can be used in the treatment:

1. Breaking down routines. Try to consciously replace Internet use with other activities.

2. Limiting the time spent online. Use an alarm clock as an aid.
3. Setting goals. Keep the sessions short and scheduled.
4. Totally avoiding the most addictive services or programs.
5. Using check cards for withdrawal symptoms. Make a list of the problems caused by the addiction and another one of the advantages you get from breaking the addiction.
6. Making an inventory. Think about what you have had to give up or invest less time in because of your Internet addiction and what these things mean to you.
7. Maintaining a support network. Create a social network, take part in leisure activities.
8. Going to individual or family therapy.

There are several US-based self-help services for Internet addiction that follow the AA model. In Finland, the A-Clinic Foundation offers a [self-evaluation test](#) at AddictionLink as well as versions of the same test for parents and spouses of Internet addicts. The A-Clinic Foundation also has a [Facebook test](#), a discussion forum, and an anonymous web counseling service. These resources help you to check your situation and start making a change when needed.

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