
CHAPTER 1: *Sharing Our Stories*



At the time, it probably seemed like a dream come true—your discovery of sex on the Internet. You'd already been impressed by all that the Internet had to offer: information, goods, connections, and more. And there was sex, too. Sex on the Internet—whenever you want with exactly the kind of person you want.

Eventually, you began to think that perhaps, for you, sex on the Internet was too good to be true. The opportunity is too enticing, alluring, fulfilling, immediate, and powerful. So much is available. There are so many options, ones you've only dreamed of—or had yet to dream of! So much opportunity and stimulation is available that it's difficult to control. And hard to stop. Maybe, it seems, impossible to stop.

Yes, the Net does have a shadow side. For some people, the pull of cybersex can be so powerful, that, as with alcohol or other drugs, it's hard to control or stop.

You may be wondering whether you're alone in this struggle with sex and the Internet. You're not. The shadowy world of cybersex is overtaking and overwhelming far too many people, undermining careers and upending relationships. And the problem is growing. For some, cybersex becomes compulsive, even addictive. No one could have forecast that cybersex would have such an impact.

Countless people, men and women alike, find themselves in what seems to be a futile struggle with online sexual behavior. Mostly they struggle alone and in silence, too embarrassed or guilt-ridden to seek help, not knowing where they can find help, believing that no one else would really understand anyway. Each day brings a roller coaster of emotions. Perhaps you are in a similar predicament. Have you ever done any of the following?

- kept sexual activity on the Internet a secret from family members
- carried out sexual activities on the Net at work
- frequently found yourself erasing your computer-history files in an effort to conceal your activity on the Net

- felt ashamed at the thought that someone you love might discover your Internet use
- found that your time on the Net takes away from or prevents you from doing other tasks and activities
- found yourself in a kind of online trance or time warp during which hours just slipped by
- frequently visited chat rooms that are focused on sexual conversation
- looked forward to your sexual activities on the Net and felt frustrated and anxious if you couldn't get on when you planned
- found yourself masturbating while on the Net
- recognized the people in the interactive online video while they recognized your screen name when you signed on
- had sexual chat-room friends who became more important than the family and friends in your life
- regularly visited porn sites
- downloaded pornography from a newsgroup
- had favorite porn sites
- visited fetish porn sites
- taken part in the CuSeeMe sexual video rooms
- viewed child pornography online

At first, discovering the Net's potential for sexual activity may have felt very exciting to you. After all, a new world was opening up for you, ready for exploration. It may have seemed like a harmless one in which to play, to fulfill fantasies, to occasionally find sexual gratification. It may have felt like a dream come true. But eventually you may have found, as have many other men and women, that cybersex has a downside—a very powerful one that is difficult, if not impossible, to control. Even as you made resolutions to limit or stop using the Net for sex, they were made hollow by the echoes of previous vows and promises. "How could this be happening to me?" you wondered. Again, you are not alone in these feelings. The power and attraction of the Internet in general, and its use for sexual activity in particular, has subtly captured countless individuals in our culture with surprising speed.

Cybersex Use Growing Rapidly

What effect has the Internet had on society since it came into use by the general public in the early 1990s? It's difficult to fully understand this now, but the speed at which it has permeated our culture is an indication of its power. As you know, sexuality is one important aspect of our lives that is being dramatically affected by the Internet. Mention "cybersex" and the response you receive will be, more often than not, a chuckle and a lewd comment. Such reactions do not, however, come from anyone who is familiar with the extent of sex on the Internet. Access to sex on the Internet is on the rise in America.

The statistics are as remarkable as they are startling:

- As of January 1999, there were 19,542,710 total unique visitors per month on the top five pay porn Web sites, and there were 98,527,275 total unique visitors per month on the top five free porn Web sites.
- In November 1999, Nielsen Net Ratings figures showed 12.5 million surfers visited porn sites in September from their homes, a 140 percent rise in traffic in just six months.
- Nearly 17 percent of Internet users have problems with using sex on the Net.
- Severe problems with sex on the Net exists for 1 percent of Internet users—and 40 percent of these extreme cases are women.
- Most e-porn traffic, about 70 percent, occurs weekdays between the hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m.
- There are 100,000 Web sites dedicated to selling sex in some way—this does not include chat rooms, e-mail, or other forms of sexual contact on the Web.
- About 200 sex-related Web sites are added each day.
- Sex on the Internet constitutes the third-largest economic sector on the Web (software and computers rank first and second), generating \$1 billion dollars annually.
- The greatest technological innovations on the Web were developed by the sex industry (video streaming is one example).

It is easy to categorize online sexual behaviors as either all good or all bad. The Internet, however, is a powerful communications tool that is neither inherently good nor bad. It is, rather, the content offered by its creators (those who host Web sites, post to newsgroups, organize chat rooms, and so on) and the ways Internet users respond to these messages, images, and sounds that result in “good” or “bad” outcomes. Social scientists have recognized the educational potential of the Internet, citing the greater availability of information about sexuality and the potential online for more candid discussions of sexuality. The Internet also offers the opportunity for forming online, or virtual, “communities” in which isolated or disenfranchised people can communicate with one another about sexual topics.

Far more often, however, a rapidly increasing number of people find that using the Internet for sexual purposes is fraught with risks and that it interferes with many aspects of their lives, including family relationships, work life, and financial security.

Three people share their experiences here. *(Please note that while the stories used in this book are true, they have been altered as needed to protect individual anonymity.)*

Jill, a woman in her thirties:

I went online in the early evening each night. I stayed on for hours in a chat room where all the members [virtually] knew one another. These sessions became quite intense. We talked about everything in our lives, including sex, problems at home,

work hassles, our vacations, just everything. And if someone was missing, then an online "crisis" occurred. Since members all had each other's phone numbers, we would call up the missing person at home to find out why he or she hadn't logged on. The conversations were sometimes sexual, but not always. The primary purpose of the chat room was connection, rather than sexual. Every time was like a conference call, but with a lot more of us online—and we were online so much that this chat room just became our life.

Saul, a young man who worked out of his home:

Beginning in 1995, I became caught up in a pattern that began each morning when, after breakfast, I would go to my computer and spend at least two hours downloading thirty-five to forty pornographic pictures and then selecting the "best" fifteen to save. This went on for more than five years. Even with a huge collection of 120 ZIP discs filled with pornographic images, I still didn't have enough. Anyway, once I had my "fifteen daily best," I would masturbate to these images. As an avid e-trader, I then turned my best efforts to making money by day-trading. I'd spend the next four or five hours playing the market, and by mid-afternoon, I was exhausted. Day in and day out, I would get up and do it all over again.

Chuck, a married corporate executive in his early fifties:

I had just sold the company I founded for a great profit. After the pressure and excitement of the months leading up to the sale, however, I felt let down and depressed. Not in the mood for much of anything, I stayed at home and began playing on the computer. One of my favorite activities was to create various personae and then advertise for dates while portraying them in online personal columns. Given the multitude of responses, I turned this into an enormously entertaining game, one that I spent hours and hours playing. Soon, days merged into nights and nights into days. Time blurred. Weeks passed unnoticed. Within a couple months, I was barely speaking to my wife and was ignoring my work completely. My life existed almost solely in cyberspace.

What Is Cybersex?

Internet sex can be accessed and experienced in many different ways. Each has the potential to cause users problems and to lead them into risky or dangerous situations. In the following section, we outline these new avenues of sex to give you an idea of the breadth of the cybersex world.

The term "cybersex" has become a catchall to describe a variety of computer based, sex-related behaviors, many of which you may recognize. They fall into three general categories:

1. Accessing Online Pornography, Audio, Video, and Text Stories

The kind of pornography available on the Internet varies widely, just as it does in the non-cyberworld, ranging from photographs of models posing in bathing suits or lingerie to young children being sexually abused. It can be found in various forms, including photos and audio, video, and text stories. Its variety and ease of access, however, is much greater than offline access. Pornographic materials can be found on personal and commercial Web pages, with access just a mouse-click away. Pornographic pictures, video, audio, and text can also be exchanged via e-mail and discussion or newsgroups. These forums allow participants to use their e-mail to post stories, ideas, photographs, or software related to the topic of the group. These messages can then be stored for other group participants to read or retrieve. Thousands of sex-related newsgroups exist on the Net and represent the highest volume of traffic of all newsgroups.

2. Real Time with a Fantasy Partner

The second form of cybersex takes place in what is known as “real time”—though time may be the only aspect of the interaction that is “real.” Advanced technology has also provided ways to exchange images and files online during a live conversation. In addition, “virtual locations” exist in which you can engage in online chatting with others.

Current technology also allows for the exchange of voice and video images via the Internet. By simply providing a credit card number, you can take advantage of live video cameras that capture and transmit images of males or females engaged in everything from everyday activities to explicit sexual acts. Though a fee is common, some of these sites can be accessed for free. Some live video sites accept requests for specific sexual behaviors from online users, thus enabling an individual to create and fulfill personal fantasies. Thanks to live-video-feed technology, it is even possible to chat online while viewing pornography. Such virtual video booths are steadily growing in number and allow cybersex users to have nearly complete control over the “object” at the other end of the phone line, even though the object is a human being. For a relatively small fee, you can also link to X-rated video feeds without any interaction or, with CuSeeMe software and a Web cam, watch others masturbate or engage in other sexual activities while they watch you do the same.

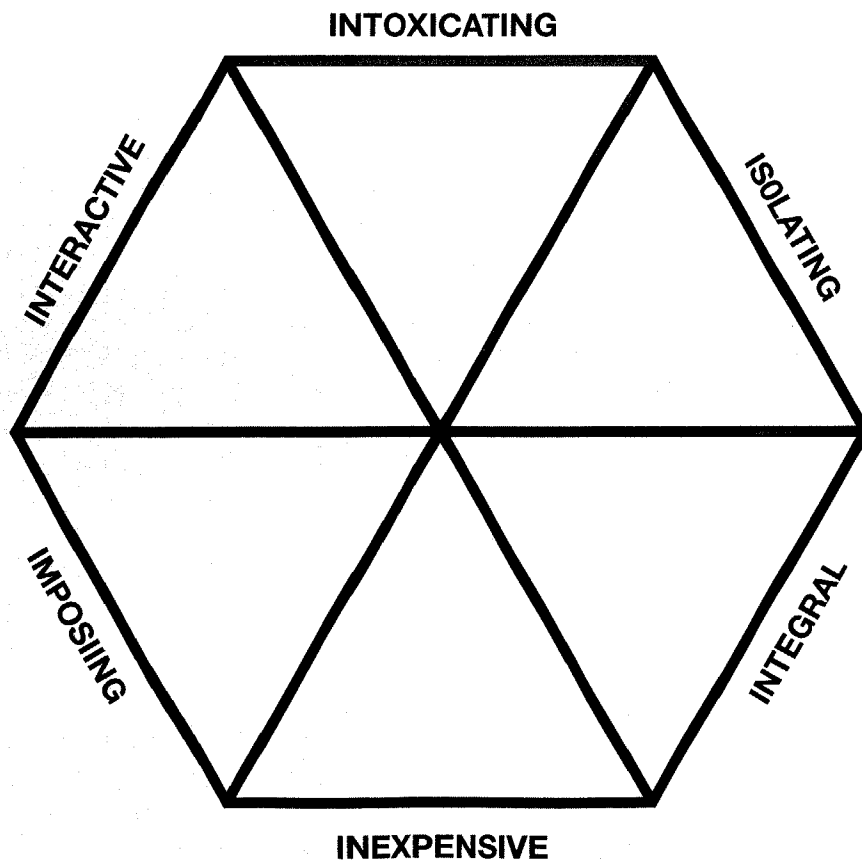
3. Multimedia Software

The final category of cybersex does not take place online at all. With the invention of more sophisticated multimedia systems, people can play X-rated movies, engage in sexual games, or view the latest issues of erotic magazines on a desktop or laptop computer. Compact disc read-only memory (CD-ROM) technology allows companies to release software titles with sound and video clips. Such multimedia productions can also include erotic information.

The Power of Cybersex

With all the forms of media available in our culture, what is it that attracts people to the Internet to engage in sexual activities in such a high-tech fashion? What has attracted you? We believe that the Internet has six attributes—a CyberHex—that, when taken together, make the Internet unique among all other media. The CyberHex attributes make the Internet enormously alluring for someone seeking sexual arousal and fulfillment. These six attributes are Intoxicating, Isolating, Integral, Inexpensive, Imposing, and Interactive.

Figure 1.1 **The CyberHex**



The “CyberHex” is so named not only because it is a hexagon, but also because of the altered state of mind—a trancelike state, or “hex”—that individuals report slipping into while engaging in cybersex. While any one of these six attributes can be powerful enough to entice a person into the Internet, it is often a combination of these six that draws cybersex users into a ritual of sexually acting out on the Internet. Pair these six CyberHex components with a predisposition for compulsive or addictive behavior and you have a recipe for cybersex addiction.

The Internet is the only communication medium that brings together so many attractive features. The synergy created through their interaction makes the Internet much more seductive than any other media.

It’s also important to realize that the Internet CyberHex characteristics affect everyone who uses the Net, not just those who use it for sex-related reasons. This is why so many people who have no previous history of compulsive or addictive behavior are now having problems with their use of the Internet—its CyberHex spell is so powerful that people are drawn into and held in the Internet in an addictive-like way.

In her 1998 book *Caught in the Net*, author Kimberly Young explores the growing problem of Internet “addiction.”¹ Her research (conducted both online and offline) showed that many survey respondents stayed online for six, eight, even ten or more hours at a time, day after day, despite the problems this habit caused in their families, their relationships, their work life, and at school. They reported feelings of anxiety and irritability when offline and craved their next opportunity to go online. Despite Internet-use-related divorces, lost jobs, or poor grades, they said they couldn’t stop or even control their Internet usage. These people show typical indications of problematic Internet behavior: compulsivity, continuation despite negative consequences, and obsession. For some, it is Internet use itself that is problematic; for others, it is engaging in specific online behaviors that causes problems.

Now, let’s look more closely at the Internet’s six CyberHex attributes.

Intoxicating

It may seem that comparing Internet use to a drug use is absurd. Yet individuals who use the Internet for cybersex often report feeling a druglike euphoria while preparing to or engaging in cybersex. It is this “rush” that lures people back to cybersex after they have sworn off such behavior.

The Internet provides immediate access to a staggeringly immense information base. Want to read a German newspaper? No need to go to a bookstore to buy one (assuming you could find a bookstore that carried it). You need only jump online and, with a few clicks of the mouse, you are reading *Der Zeitung*. It’s even possible to log on to NASA’s Web site at any time and access live video footage from space. No matter what our interests may be, we can easily and quickly find information about them on the Net. This immediate access plays directly into our society’s demand to

have desires gratified instantly. We want to get what we want immediately and everything that's available on the Internet can be reached very quickly—and not just information but communication via instant messaging, chat rooms, and e-mail.

The Internet's ease of use further adds to its seductive and intoxicating nature. Surfing the Net requires only a computer and Internet access; one can find access at home, at work, in libraries, in cybercafés, and at the homes of friends and neighbors. Need a Net "fix"? Access can be quickly at hand.

Take this inherently intoxicating nature of the Net and add to it access to sex, an obviously powerful force in people's lives, and its draw is exponentially stronger. Having the easy and immediate access the Net provides to whatever kind of sexual experiences, information, pictures, and videos you want is enormously alluring. Once online, hours can slip by unnoticed, almost as though one is in an intoxicating trance.

In addition, cybersex provides a perfect opportunity for people to develop sexual fantasies and objectify others without the fear of rejection. In fact, the CD-ROM versions of adult sexual material often let the user choose the ideal partner and ideal situation—one step beyond noninteractive magazines. Users may choose a partner's gender, age, hair color, skin color, body type, and eye color, as well as whatever sexual scenario they want to engage in. Some sexual CD-ROM titles are disguised in the form of a game. Perhaps a sexual mystery must be solved or an adventure taken in which users have to solve puzzles or find clues that lead them to their next sexual "conquest." The common factor among all cybersex material is that the user is free to become part of the fantasy without responsibility, consequence, or rejection. What's more, the variety of possibilities on the Internet is truly mind-boggling: whatever kind of sexual activity or depiction you can think of, you can likely find it on the Net.

Isolating

Perhaps the most powerful component of cybersex is isolation: the Internet allows for the aforementioned intoxication to occur quickly and privately. It provides a perfect opportunity to separate yourself from others and to engage in whatever fantasy you prefer without risk of sexually transmitted infections or the distraction of reality. Previous methods of obtaining pornography involved (at a minimum) a trip to an adult bookstore or corner market. Now, with the click of a mouse, those same images will appear on the screen with absolutely no contact with the outside world. Separated from the outside world, users can create the justifications and rationalizations needed to convince themselves and others that their behavior is both victimless and harmless.

This CyberHex attribute also exemplifies the paradoxical nature of the Internet: it can connect us to the world as never before, but, at the same time, it can separate and isolate us from others and the world as never before. While on the Internet, people have no physical contact with others. Time spent on the Net is time not spent in "real time" interactions with those who are important in our lives. A fast-

growing complaint of men and women in relationships is that Net use has taken a partner away from them. The complaining partner is less and less a physical part of the using partner's life because the using partner spends so much time on the Net.

Integral

In just a few short years, the Internet has become an integral part of most people's personal and work lives. Online we can now acquire a home mortgage, shop, trade on the stock market, check the weather anywhere in the world, e-mail friends or business colleagues, create and conduct business, do research for school assignments, and so much more. The prices of computers and Internet access continue to fall and are within the range of many families. What's more, the Internet is available publicly in a variety of settings (e.g., public libraries, coffeehouses, college campuses) and simply seems to be a part of our lives. While such integration allows convenience, it also makes the Internet more difficult to avoid. The more the Internet becomes a part of our lives, the more indispensable—or "integral"—it becomes. The option to not use it becomes ever less viable.

Before the Internet's creation, access to various forms of sex-related materials and sexual experiences had limitations. Most strip clubs and XXX-rated theaters are not open twenty-four hours a day. Buying a porn magazine requires getting to a store that sells them, and most stores aren't open all the time, either. Another limitation is distance/location. Stores, theaters, strip clubs, and areas where prostitutes ply their trade cannot be conveniently found in every neighborhood of every city and suburb or rural community, thus requiring those who wish to access them to have time and transportation. The Internet changed all of this. It offers incredibly broad and easy access to sex of all kinds. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, anyone with the use of a computer with an Internet connection—be it at work, a cybercafé, a public library, school, university, or in the home—can choose from literally millions of sex-related Web sites offering whatever type of sexual experience is desired.

Imposing

While related to the integral aspect of the Internet, this "imposing" attribute suggests that the role of the Internet in our lives today often goes beyond being integral. It is, in fact, becoming more and more of a necessity. Because of the extent to which the Internet is being integrated into our lives, its use is, in a sense, being externally imposed on us by society. Ironically, while the interactive nature of the Internet offers us much control over what we access, this imposing factor suggests a loss of control in that we have fewer options to decline using the Net.

To understand the difference between "integral" and "imposing," let's compare the telephone and the Internet. The telephone has long played an integral role in our lives, but it is not at all as "imposing" as the Net. While few people spend three, five, or eight hours at a time on the phone three or more times a week, many people do spend this amount of time—or more—on the Internet.

In addition, the very breath of the Internet's content is, in and of itself, formidable and imposing. While choice may be good in many circumstances, having too much from which to choose can be overwhelming. Think of the Internet as a Thanksgiving dinner gone wild. There are so many enticing "dishes" and "desserts" from which to choose that you want to sample every one. You know that if you do, however, you'll feel awful afterward. It's hard to say, "No," and despite our best efforts at control, we often overindulge. The Internet offers us so many enticing opportunities that it's difficult to decline. Soon, some people find themselves overindulging to the detriment of their health, families, relationships, and work. And still, stopping seems impossible.

Interactive

Unlike other forms of media, the Internet is truly interactive. Shout or cajole as we might at the faces on our TV screen or at the writer of a magazine or newspaper editorial, we'll get no response. The Internet, however, lets us truly interact with others. We guide it to the locations, people, and information of our choice. Some interactive sex sites allow viewers to choose the person they want to interact with and the activity that will take place. With the right equipment and software, conversations can be in real time. The Internet gives us a sense of control over what we see and receive.

Inexpensive

For anyone on a budget, cybersex provides a low-cost means to a sexual high. Hard-core pornography magazines may run fifteen to fifty dollars. However, for the cost of Internet access (ten to twenty-five dollars per month), anyone can find hundreds of photographs, stories, chat channels, and more. In addition, the user can choose to retrieve and view only the information that is of interest; there's no need to purchase an entire magazine full of mostly unwanted advertisements and articles.

Sex on the Internet: what you want, when you want it, at low cost, minus the messiness and hassles of a real person-to-person relationship, and with complete anonymity. It should not be surprising that the number of sex-related Web sites is exploding, along with the number of people accessing and using them.

These six CyberHex factors also seem to increase the chances that the Internet will become a problem for those who already struggle with sexual compulsivity and for those who are emotionally or psychologically vulnerable to such sexual availability.

While research in the area of cybersex usage is only beginning, a recent survey by Al Cooper, David Delmonico, and Ron Burg of 9,265 Internet users describes three categories of people who use the Internet for sexual pursuits:²

- Recreational users are people who access online sexual material more out of curiosity or for entertainment purposes and are not typically seen as having problems associated with their online sexual behaviors.
- At-risk users may never have developed a problem with online sexuality if not for the availability of the Internet. These individuals use the Internet a moderate amount of time for sexual activities, and, if their pattern of use continues and increases, they could become compulsive.
- Sexually compulsive users are those who, due to a propensity for pathological sexual expression, use the Internet as a forum for their sexual activities. For this group in particular, the power of isolation, fantasy, anonymity, and affordability interacts with certain underlying personality factors to increase their use of the Internet for sexual activities to the point where it becomes difficult, if not impossible, for them to control. Remember that compulsion is a sign of an addictive disorder. One of the signs of addiction to alcohol or another drug is that the substance is used compulsively.

The study found that while 84 percent of the respondents did not meet the criteria for cybersex compulsivity, 6 percent of all respondents scored in a way that suggested cybersex compulsivity. A third group of approximately 10 percent of the entire sample also emerged as “at-risk” users who may not be exhibiting all signs of cybersex compulsion but who are in a potentially dangerous stage with their behavior. According to a July 2000 Nielsen survey, there are 148.8 million Internet users in the United States alone. (International Data Corporation reports that total worldwide Internet users exceed 200 million.) Extrapolating from the cybersex use percentages in the study by Cooper, Delmonico, and Burg, approximately 8.9 million people in the United States (6 percent of 148.8 million) need intervention for their compulsive use of cybersex. In addition, there are another 14.8 million individuals (10 percent of 148.8 million) who are using cybersex moderately and show beginning signs of sexual compulsivity. Their continued use can predictably be a significant danger to many of them. Unfortunately, researchers are concerned that these approximations may be extremely conservative estimates.

Exercise 1: What Attracts You to the Internet?

Now that we've discussed the Internet's CyberHex, we would like you to think about these six characteristics—Intoxicating, Isolating, Integral, Imposing, Interactive, and Inexpensive—and the influence they have on you.

In the chart below, first list these six characteristics, beginning at the top with the one that is most appealing to you and ending with the one that is least attractive.

Next, in the right-hand column, list all the ways this particular CyberHex characteristic pulls you into the Net. What is its "hook" for you? Please take your time and be as thorough as you can. In chapter 4, we will ask you to refer to the information you've written here.

CHARACTERISTIC	WHY IT'S ATTRACTIVE
1. _____	_____ _____ _____ _____ _____
2. _____	_____ _____ _____ _____

CHARACTERISTIC

WHY IT'S ATTRACTIVE

3.

4.

5.

6.

In Conclusion

There is little doubt that use of the Internet will continue to explode. As people spend more time online and look to the Internet to fulfill an ever increasing number of their sexual needs and fantasies, the problems associated with online sexuality will increase proportionately.

We have written this workbook to help you better understand how problematic Internet sexual behavior begins, increases in strength, and even becomes addictive. More important, it also provides a step-by-step plan for successfully dealing with problematic cybersex activities that can enable you to regain control of your life and your relationships. There is help and hope here for anyone who feels entangled in the web of cybersex.

In this chapter, we've explained how cybersex can hold so much power over people's lives. The above exercise helped you begin to think more about your use of the Internet for sexual purposes. In the next chapter, you will learn more about the five types of cybersex users, the indicators of problematic cybersex usage, and the ten criteria of problematic online sexual behavior.