

Cybersex Unhooked:
Understanding and Managing Compulsive Online Sexual Behavior

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Cybersex Unhooked:
Effective Strategies for Managing Compulsive Online Sexual Behavior

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. (Delmonico, Griffin, & Moriarity, 2001)

Chuck's story is not unlike the hundreds of other stories we gathered to write *Cybersex Unhooked*. Although the behaviors varied, the pain, shame, and consequences resonated in all the case examples. How can someone get so "hooked" on something like a computer, or cybersex? As clinicians and researchers, we are only just beginning to understand the power that behaviors can hold in people's lives. Whether the compulsive behavior is related to shopping, gambling, spending, eating, or sex - we can now see the devastation that these out of control urges and behaviors can have on individuals, couples, and families. *Cybersex Unhooked* is a book that helps people understand their cybersex behaviors, and provides concrete exercises that will help them break free from their compulsive online sexual behavior.

Cybersex can be described in three general categories: (1) Accessing pornography on the Internet, (2) Engaging in real-time, online sexual conversations with others, (3) accessing multimedia software (not necessarily online). Regardless of the behavior, each of these types of cybersex can lead to spending inordinate amounts of time engaging in sexual fantasy and behavior, and significant life consequences. How much is too much? How do I know if I have a problem? It is important to remember that the frequency of online sex is only one consideration in defining the problem. Cooper, Delmonico, and Burg (2000) reported that those who spend 11 or more hours per week in online sex, reported more consequences in their lives than those spending less than 11 hours per week. Time online is one factor, but obsession, compulsiveness, and consequences are other things that help determine if a behavior is problematic. The following ten signs may be helpful in determining if someone has a problem with online sexual behavior.

- Preoccupation with sex on the Internet
- Frequently engaging in sex on the Internet in increasing amounts of time
- Repeated unsuccessful efforts to control, cut-back, or stop online sexual behavior
- Restless or irritable mood when attempting to cut down or stop online sex

- Using sex on the Internet to escape from feelings or life problems
- Returning to sex on the Internet to find a more intense or higher risk experience
- Lying to family members, therapists, or others to conceal involvement
- Committing illegal sexual acts online (or related to online behavior)
- Jeopardizing or losing a relationship, job, or educational opportunity
- Incurring significant financial consequences as a result of online sexual behavior

No single factor is more important than any other. If any of the above issues are of concern, it would be important to seek out a professional who is familiar with this topic and discuss it further.

What makes cybersex so powerful? We explain the answer to this question with something we called the "Cyberhex." The Cyberhex suggests there are six basic components of the Internet that make it such a powerful and attractive force for online sexual behavior. These six factors are: Intoxicating, Isolating, Integral, Inexpensive, Imposing, and Interactive. It is rare that any form of media has all six of these factors present simultaneously. Any one of these characteristics would be attractive and powerful, however, it is the combination of these that make the Internet a breeding ground for a variety of compulsive behaviors.

What can we do about online compulsive sexual behavior? As helpless as cybersex compulsives feel, there are some specific treatment approaches that can be useful in reducing or eliminating the power of the Internet. A treatment plan for the cybersex compulsive includes both First Order and Second Order Changes. First Order changes are used to reduce or eliminate access and the power of the Internet. Second Order Changes are used to address more long-term, underlying issues that may be fueling the use of the Internet. The following table includes examples of both First and Second Order Changes that may be included in a treatment plan for cybersex compulsives.

First Order Changes	Second Order Changes
Keep Computer in High-Traffic Area	Address Spiritual Issues
Limit Time on Computer	Examine Healthy Sexuality Beliefs
Use Screening Software	Address Family of Origin Issues
Place Photos of Family on Desktop	Have Physical/Psychological Exam
Use Real Name - not Screenames	Screen for Other Addictions
Find an Accountability Partner	Develop Relationship / Social Skills
Develop Healthy Online Habits	Increase Self Awareness

Cybersex Unhooked is a workbook that looks at all of these issues in detail and provides various exercises to help individuals identify problematic use of the Internet and reduce or eliminate these problematic behaviors. The text explains various aspects of the Internet, what makes it problematic, and provides a number of exercises specifically designed to help individuals examine their cybersex behavior. The book is useful for clinicians, clients, and self-help individuals. *Cybersex Unhooked* can be used as a stand-alone text, or may be used as a supplemental text to *In the Shadows of the Net*.

Online sexual compulsive behavior is an ever-increasing problem, but there is hope for those who struggle with this behavior. More counselors are recognizing the problems associated with compulsive online sexual behavior. If you are that person who struggles with their behavior - seek help - you are not alone. If you are the clinician - learn about the issues associated with this problem and help individuals accurately assess and manage their problematic behavior. Out of this seemingly hopeless and desperate virtual world, will come hope.

Resources

Internet Behavior Consulting
<http://www.internetbehavior.com>

Delmonico, D. L., Griffin, E. J., & Moriarity, J. (2001).
Cybersex Unhooked: A Workbook for Breaking Free from Compulsive Online Sexual Behavior. Wickenburg, AZ: Gentle Path Press. (800) 955-9853

Carnes, P. J., Delmonico, D. L., & Griffin, E. J. (2001). *In the Shadows of the Net*. Center City, MN: Hazelden. (800) 328-9000 - <http://www.hazelden.org>

National Council on Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity
(770) 541-9912 - <http://www.ncsac.org>

Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity: The Journal of Treatment & Prevention. Philadelphia, PA: Taylor and Francis Publishing.
<http://www.taylorandfrancis.com>