

Internet addiction may be sign of psychiatric disorders

A study suggests that treatment of the other problems may help slow the urge to be on-line

By Malcolm Ritter
The Associated Press

People who seem to be addicted to the Internet often show a bumper crop of psychiatric disorders, such as manic-depression, and treating those other conditions might help them rein in their urge to be on-line, a study suggests.

On average, Internet "addicts" in the study reported having five psychiatric disorders at some point in

their lives, a finding that "just blew me away," said psychiatrist Nathan Shapira of the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine.

It's unclear whether the Internet problem should be considered a disorder or just a symptom of something else, or whether certain disorders promote the excessive on-line use, he said.

Shapira is scheduled to present the study today at the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association in Toronto.

He and colleagues studied 14 people who'd spent so much time on-line that they were facing problems such as broken relationships,

job loss and dropping out of school.

One 31-year-old man was on-line more than 100 hours a week, ignoring family and friends and stopping only to sleep. A 21-year-old man flunked out of college after he stopped going to class. When he disappeared for a week, campus police found him in the university computer lab, where he'd spent seven straight days on-line.

The study participants, whose average age was 35, were interviewed for three to five hours with standard questions so doctors could look for psychiatric disorders.

Being hooked on the Internet is

not a recognized disorder. But Shapira said the excessive on-line use by the study participants would qualify as a disorder of impulse control, in the same category as kleptomania or compulsive shopping. In fact, he suggested the Internet problem be called "Internetomania" or "Netomania," rather than an addiction.

But the striking thing, Shapira said, was the other psychiatric problems that turned up:

— Nine of the 14 had manic-depression at the time of the interview, and 11 had it at some point in their lives.

— Half had an anxiety disorder such as "social phobia," which is a persisting and unreasonable fear of being embarrassed in public, at the time of the interview.

— Three suffered from bulimia or binge eating, and six had an eating disorder at some time in their lives.

— Four had conditions involving uncontrollable bursts of anger or buying sprees, and half reported such impulse-control conditions during their lives.

— Eight had abused alcohol or some other substance at some time in their lives.

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