

Scientist redefines 'Internet addiction' and sets new standards for treatment

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Is your first craving in the morning for your computer mouse? Do you obsessively check email in the middle of the night?

If so, you may be among the ten percent of all Internet surfers afflicted with “Internet addiction disorder,” a pathological condition that can lead to anxiety and severe depression. To better diagnose and treat Internet addiction, Dr. Pinhas Dannon, a psychiatrist from Tel Aviv University’s Sackler Faculty of Medicine, recommends that it be grouped with other extreme addictive disorders such as gambling, sex addiction, and kleptomania.

A senior lecturer at Tel Aviv University, Dr. Dannon is known worldwide for work in the area of gambling and addiction, a major research focus for him since 1995. His first article on kleptomania was published in 1996. He will present his new research findings on addiction at the National Gambling Council’s meeting in Las Vegas this November.

Internet addiction is currently classified by mental health professionals as an Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), a mild to severe mental health condition that results in an urge to engage in ritualistic thoughts and behavior, such as excessive handwashing or, in the case of the Internet, Web surfing. “But we are saying that we need to look at Internet addiction differently,” reports Dr. Dannon on behalf of his colleagues from Tel Aviv University and the Be'er Ya'acov Mental Health Center. “Internet addiction is not manifesting itself as an ‘urge.’

It's more than that. It's a deep 'craving.' And if we don't make the change in the way we classify Internet addiction, we won't be able to treat it in the proper way."

Two groups are at greatest risk from Internet addiction disorder, Dr. Dannon warns. The first are teenagers. But more surprisingly, the second are women and men in their mid-50s suffering from the loneliness of an "empty nest." The symptoms of Internet addiction in both groups are vague and are often difficult to diagnose. Sufferers may experience loss of sleep, anxiety when not online, isolation from family and peer groups, loss of work, and periods of deep depression.

Treating Internet addiction can only be done effectively, believes Dr. Dannon, if the condition is treated like any other extreme and menacing addiction. For example, a clinician could use talk therapy or prescribe medication such as Serotonin blockers and Naltrexone, which are also effective against kleptomania and pathological gambling. No less important, Dr. Dannon stresses, is that mental health practitioners in schools and workplaces should be made aware of the risks of Internet addiction. Workshops on these risks should be held in both milieus, he advises.

Dr. Dannon and his colleagues have recently reported their findings in the Journal of Clinical Psychopharmacology; and have since waged a mini-campaign around the world to warn doctors about the dangers associated with excessive Internet use. Their research on gambling addiction has been used to educate American doctors taking the annual "Continuing Medical Education" test taken before the doctors can renew a license to practice medicine.

According to Dr. Dannon, Internet addicts are inevitable and a product of modernization. "They are just like anyone else who is addicted to coffee, exercise, or talking on their cellular phone. As the times change,

so do our addictions.”

Source: Tel Aviv University

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