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Online Sexual Compulsivity: Getting Tangled in the Net

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### Abstract

The use of adult Web sites for the purpose of sexual expression is becoming increasingly popular and at times problematic. Online sexual behavior is different for each person, ranging from recreational to pathological use. The types of online users discussed in this article include Recreational Users, Sexual Compulsives, and At-Risk Users (consisting of two subtypes, the Depressive Type and the Stress Reactive Type). With the issue of Internet use and overuse gradually making its way into clinicians' offices assessment techniques and treatment strategies for each type of user are provided and suggestions for future research are included.

### Online Sexual Compulsivity: Getting Tangled in the Net

The Internet is emerging as a medium that is influencing and redefining aspects of communication and social relatedness. Since its creation in 1983, the Internet has made accessible to an exponentially growing number of individuals almost every imaginable type of information available through the comfort of home and office computers. In 1997 it was estimated that more than 15 million users went online each day and spent an average of 9.8 hours a week visiting some of the over 200 million available Web pages (Computerworld, 1998). 300,000 new Web pages are added each week and it has been estimated that there will be 94.2 million users in 2001 (REFERENCE?) Given the ease with which the Internet provides relatively anonymous access to information and the discomfort with sex that characterizes the dominant American culture, it is not surprising that many people are finding the Internet to be an attractive forum for engaging in sexual exploration. Indeed, Goldberg (1998) estimated that the five most frequently visited adult Web sites had 9 million visitors in a recent one-month period.

There has been a fair amount of discussion in the fields of communication, sociology, and psychology about the Internet, but there has been little written on how the availability of sexually explicit material and online "sexual activities" affect individuals engaging in these behaviors. Drawing from preliminary research in this area, relevant literature, recent research findings, and clinical experience with this population, this article examines, identifies, and distinguishes three types of individuals who use the Internet for sexual pursuits. The usefulness of the concepts of addiction and compulsivity for understanding maladaptive online sexual behavior are discussed. Finally, treatment strategies tailored to each type of Internet user are suggested

The Internet has also enhanced people's ability to communicate with each other and with commercial and governmental entities. The benefits and disadvantages of this communication medium have been subject to numerous debates. Leaders in the fields of communication, sociology, and psychology have started asking themselves if and how the Internet affects interpersonal relatedness. Thus over 15% of all the online users (CONSTITUTING UNIQUE

VISITORS) in that time period visited those sexually explicit Web sites, and it can be surmised that the percentage of people who used the Web for any number of OTHER sexual pursuits would be many times higher.

The study of Internet sexuality involves reflection on how individuals think of their sexuality while online and the type of behavior in which they engage. Some people may not think of "talking dirty" or of viewing erotic material as an expression of their sexuality. Online users are likely to have different definitions and experiences of what is sexual depending on how conscious they are about their sexual selves and how well their sexual identity is integrated with their overall self-concept.

### Defining Online Sexual Behavior

Defining what sexual behavior is can be complex and subject to moral and normative judgment. For purposes of this paper, sexual behavior is being defined as seeking the gratification of sexual desires or urges through the use or investment of physical, mental, and emotional energy. Thus, sexual experiences involve both the pursuit of sexual activity and the behavior itself. Recognizing this dual aspect of sexual behavior is important to the study of Internet sexuality because this medium allows users to engage in sexually-related activities that do not necessarily, though apparently often do, lead to the physical release usually found in partnered FACE TO FACE (i.e., ()offline) sexual encounters.

Fixation to, or reliance on, an object rather than a person is associated with the notion of what constitutes a paraphilia, a constricted form of sexuality. Given this, can sexual behavior involving a computer as an intermediate or component to sexual activity be considered non-problematic? It has been argued that healthy sexuality requires an individual be able to maintain intimacy and connection with a partner without needing to dissociate or disconnect via thinking of another partner or fantasy, numbing out, or destroying oneself (Schwartz, Galperin, & Masters, 1995). In this () perspective, all forms of Internet sexuality could be viewed as potentially pathological. However, OTHERS WOULD SAY THAT masturbation and the use of fantasy are ALSO () healthy expressions OF sexuality. WHERE THESE TWO VEIWS MIGHT

FIND AGREEMENT THAT A PROBLEM EXISTS IS IN THOSE INSTANCES WHERE over time the () focus on an object, and a preference to use the Internet BECOMES a requisite for sexual arousal. Thus PROFESSIONALS NEED BE CONCERNED THAT online sexuality may lead a person prone to intrapsychic and interpersonal difficulties DOWN A SLIPPERY SLOPE, particularly when associated with other issues such as intimacy disorders.

Internet sexuality, like other forms of sexuality, is best viewed as falling along a continuum ranging from normal and life-enhancing forms of sexual expression and exploration, to () problematic and pathological expressions (Leiblum, 1997; Cooper, Scherer, Boies, & Gordon, in press). There is () evidence that many people (46.6%) who visit Internet sexual sites do so in a recreational way and do not experience negative consequences (Cooper, et al., in press). In examining these participants along several dimensions, there were no reports of adverse consequences from their online sexual pursuits. Currently there is only anecdotal information on physical stimulation (i.e., masturbation) while online or sexual encounters arranged from online communications. In their survey, Cooper et al. (in press) reported that while 88% of the sample experienced some form of excitement when pursuing sexual interests online, few (20%) felt both excited and aroused. This indicates that for most people, online activities may be sexual in more of an entertaining or recreational way, like viewing a Victoria's Secrets catalogue or Baywatch, rather than in a genital- or orgasm-focused way. However, the same study identified that 8.5 % of respondents manifested a number of behavioral indications of sexual compulsivity, as well as self-reports of subjective distress and concern. The remaining 45% of the sample had a () mixed picture and it was less clear if they CURRENTLY had a problem with online sexuality, OR MIGHT BE AT RISK AT SOME POINT IN THE FUTURE.

A number of authors and researchers have examined the potential negative effect of excessive online usage, but generally have not focused on how putting sexuality affects this behavior. Young (1999) noted that excessive use of the Internet may cause difficulty in familial, educational, and occupational functioning. Young (1996) used the Diagnostic and Statistical

Manual of Mental Disorders - Fourth Edition (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994) criteria for pathological gambling and modified them to reflect possible criteria for Internet addiction. Cooper et al.'s (in press) recent survey provided preliminary data in the first direct study of Internet sexual compulsivity.

Those who work in this field assert that sexually compulsive behavior has reached epidemic proportions (Cooper, 1998b; Freeman-Longo, 1998). The National COUNCIL ON Sexual Addiction AND COMPULSIVITY estimated that 6 to 8 percent of Americans are sex addicts, which is 16 to 21.5 million people (Amparano, 1998). The exact numbers are difficult to estimate because people with these issues are often fearful of the reactions of others, feel ashamed, and thus are more likely to hide the frequency and details of their behavior. The Internet further complicates this by facilitating anonymity and enabling sexual activities to be pursued in an even more isolated and solitary fashion.

The National Council on Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity (Amparano, 1998, p. A1) defined sexual addiction as "persistent and escalating patterns of sexual behavior acted out despite increasing negative consequences to self and others." Carnes (1991) identified ten criteria that indicate the presence of sexual addiction:

a pattern of out-of-control sexual behavior; severe consequences due to sexual behavior; inability to stop despite adverse consequences; persistent pursuit of self-destructive or high-risk behavior; ongoing desire of effort to limit sexual behavior; sexual obsession and fantasy as a primary coping strategy; increasing amounts of sexual experience because the current level of activity is no longer sufficient; severe mood changes around sexual activity; inordinate amounts of time spent in obtaining sex, being sexual, or recovering from sexual experience; neglect of important social, occupational, or recreational activities because of sexual behavior. (p. 11-12)

For the purpose of this article, sexually compulsive behavior or sexual compulsion will be used to describe problematic sexual behavior unless referring to other sources' terms. Cooper (1998b) defined sexually compulsive behavior as "an irresistible urge to perform an irrational sexual act" (p.1). Borrowing from Carnes and others, Cooper identified five hallmarks of sexual compulsion. Early indications are that these appear to be particularly prevalent in online users. They include denial; unsuccessful repeated efforts to discontinue the activity; excessive amounts of time dedicated to the activity; the behavior having a negative impact on social, occupational, and recreational functioning; and repetition of the behavior despite adverse consequences.

The first characteristic of online compulsive behavior, denial, is AN important defense mechanism that facilitates the progression of all addictions. Because the Internet is playing an increasingly critical role in the American culture, heavy use may not initially seem problematic. Persons are likely to () underestimate and underreport their overall use and to specifically hide the sexual activities in which they are engaging. They are also likely to argue, as WITH MOST dependencies, that the behavior does not have power over them and that they "can stop whenever they choose." FINALLY, THEY CAN PERSUAVIVELY USE THE RATIONALIZATIONS THAT THEIR BEHAVIORS IS BOTH VICTIMLESS AND HARMLESS (DELMONICO, 1997).

The second characteristic of online compulsive behavior is that individuals make repeated efforts to discontinue or decrease their online sexual pursuits. These individuals often engage in self-talk such as, "I'll go online for three hours instead of four," or "This is the last time I'm doing this," and repeatedly try to cease the activity, but to no avail as the sexual temptation is but a hyperlink and a click away. THUS THE INTERNET MAY ACTUALLY LEAD VAST NUMBERS OF PEOPLE INTO SEXUAL ACTING OUT WHO WOULD OTHERWISE NOT HAVE BEEN SO AFFLICTED.

The third characteristic is the amount of time expended on the activity. This includes time actually engaged in the activity as well as time fantasizing about it, planning for it, reliving it, or hiding it. Cooper et al. (in press) found a strong correlation between time spent online for

sexual pursuits and measures of sexual compulsivity. Those users who did not appear to have a problem with online sexual activities (46.6%) reported spending less than one hour a week online in this way. On the other hand, the 8.5% of respondents categorized as sexually compulsive acknowledged spending at least 11 hours a week in online sexual pursuits. This might provide at least one clear data-driven guideline by which to identify an individual with a problem. Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukopadhyay, and Scherlis (1998) also found a correlation between amounts of time online and indicators of distress.

Cooper's fourth characteristic is the individual's pursuit of THE behavior despite negative ramifications in the areas of social, occupational, or recreational functioning. In her study of general Internet usage, Young (1996) found that respondents reported moderate impairment in the areas of academic, relationship, financial, and occupational functioning, and 51% reported severe impairment in the same areas yet they continued their Internet usage. It is not difficult to imagine students spending hours online at the expense of fulfilling their academic obligations, or employees who are similarly distracted or otherwise misuse their computers at work for non-business purposes. A significant area of impairment is likely to be in the relationship domain, particularly as partners or spouses become aware of the sexual component of their loved ones' Internet use, or notice a decrease in the amount of shared sexual intimacy.

Cooper's fifth characteristic of sexual compulsivity, repetition of the problematic behavior, can be observed in Internet users' continued need to seek online sexual gratification despite JOB LOSS, SEXUAL HARRASMENT SUITS, ARRESTS, FAILED RELATIONSHIPS, OR OTHER adverse consequences previously mentioned. THUS IT IS CLEAR TO EVERYONE ELSE THAT THE SEXUAL COMPULSION IS CONTROLLING THE PERSON, RATHER THAN THE PERSON CONTROLLING THEIR SEXUALITY.

#### Distinguishing Types of Online Users

The broader literature that seeks to understand those with sexual acting-out issues suggests that while these individuals are not a unitary group, there may indeed be similarities in behavior, cognitive processes, motivation, and overall psychological functioning. While these

assumptions remain to be verified empirically for this population, an attempt has been made to understand the various types of online users along similar dimensions. Five broad notions emerged and appear related to the etiology and development of sexual compulsivity: hypersexuality, paraphilias, identity development, disorders of the self and of intimacy, and childhood sexual trauma.

Kafka (1994) identified persistent hypersexual desire as a marker of sexual compulsivity.() HE examined the overlap that exists between nonparaphilic and paraphilic sexual behavior in an effort to identify what common characteristics relate to the compulsive aspect of the sexual behaviors. The previously recognized diagnosis of nonparaphilic sexual addiction was removed from the DSM-III-R (1987) and was not included in the latest 1994 edition. Kafka (1994) coined the term paraphilia-related disorders to essentially replace nonparaphilic sexual addiction. He defined paraphilia-related disorders as "sexually arousing fantasies, urges or activities involving culturally sanctioned sexual interests and behaviors that increase in frequency and intensity (for at least 6 months duration) so as to interfere with the capacity for reciprocal affectionate sexual activity" (p. 40).

In a study of 100 men, Kafka (1994) found that the most common paraphilia-related disorders in males were "dependence on pornography, protracted promiscuity, and compulsive masturbation," ranked from least to most prevalent, and hypothesized disorders for women were "sexual masochism, compulsive masturbation, and protracted promiscuity" (p. 40).

COMPULSIVELY Viewing sexualLY EXPLICIT Web sites, as well as masturbating while online, can clearly be seen to meet Kafka's definition. No differences were found between a paraphilic group and a nonparaphilic disorder group on the number of weekly orgasms, amount of time spent in sexual activities, unconventional sexual activities, onset of hypersexuality, and the use of conventional and unconventional fantasies. While paraphilias are considered more severe and subject to legal sanctions, similar underlying factors appear to be at work. Similarly, viewing online sexual behavior along a continuum and recognizing common underlying

components of the behavior may be useful in the study and treatment of sexually compulsive behavior.

While sexual compulsivity may have a sudden onset at any age, it might be useful to consider its manifestation within a developmental perspective. Kafka (1994) argued that sexually compulsive behavior may begin in childhood or adolescence and take the form of compulsive masturbation, often laying the groundwork for a pattern of sexual compulsion in adulthood. MANY LEADERS IN THE FIELD HAVE PROPOSED THAT the behavior IS BEST thought of as a manifestation of a disturbance in functioning, such as a dissociative process resulting from previous sexual trauma (Schwartz et al., 1995) or a disorder of the self (Baum, & Fishman, 1994). This suggests a potential link between unresolved sexual conflicts and foreclosure of sexual identity. In this context, it is surmised that relational crises or other specific high stress periods may activate the compulsion for individuals at risk.

Schwartz et al. (1995) offered an explanation of sexual compulsivity resulting from his study of childhood sexual trauma. He noted in his clinical work that sexually compulsive clients who have a history of physical or sexual abuse and neglect are often either amnesic or they minimize and distort their histories. He pointed out that factors that originally cause sexual compulsions are not necessarily the factors that maintain and perpetuate them. Schwartz et al. (1995) also emphasized the role of dissociation in sexual compulsivity. Moreover, they identified the need for sensation-seeking or conflict to provide relief from inner emptiness and boredom as common features of chronic dissociation. Empirical evidence and clinical experience also confirms the relationship between online sexual compulsivity, sensation seeking, and distress (Cooper, et al., in press).

It remains to be determined how the five notions related to sexual compulsivity reviewed in this section may be useful to the study of online sexual compulsivity and its treatment. Having access to a myriad of online sexual activities raises even more cause for concern as any incipient or ongoing compulsive behavior can then be more easily engaged in a hidden and isolated fashion. The factors that make sex on the Internet a powerful medium include

accessibility, affordability, and anonymity, and this triad has been referred to as "The Triple A Engine" (Cooper, 1998a). Users can comfortably log on any time of the day or night, at little or no cost, and can choose to obscure or misrepresent their true identities. The missing element, of course, is live human contact, but that may not be an inhibiting factor (it may even be a facilitative factor) for those who use the Internet for sexual pursuits. DELMONICO (1997) POINTS OUT THOSE WITH CYBERSEX ISSUES ARE OFFERED THE PERFECT VENUE IN WHICH TO CONJURE THEIR FANTASIES AND OBJECTIFY OTHERS WITHOUT ANY FEAR OF REJECTION. Particularly at risk are those already struggling with sexually compulsive tendencies and those who may ALREADY find sexuality a way to avoid intimacy and emotions (Irons & Schneider, 1997).

It is known that large numbers of Internet surfers use the medium for sexual pursuits (Cooper, et al., in press; DELMONICO, 1997; Goldberg, 1998). The amount of variation and the broad choice of online sexual activities seems almost endless and while that may be helpful to some people (Cooper, 1998a), it might prove dangerous to others. To help clinicians better formulate questions, assess their clients, and conceptualize appropriate interventions, profiles of three ways that users engage in online sexual pursuits are proposed.

### Recreational Users

The first type includes recreational or nonpathological users. Some Internet users may simply be satisfying their curiosity about available online sexual material. Others may be searching for specific sexual information and use adult Web sites for more educational purposes. Finding information on the Internet about sexual techniques or positions, for example, may feel more comfortable than going into a book store or library to secure such information. Still others may search for an adult Web site, download nude "teaser" pictures (these are typically nude pictures that can be viewed free-of-charge to give the consumer an idea of what is available at that particular site), and decide whether or not to pursue the site further. For these people, engaging in these activities may be more about curiosity, novelty, or entertainment, and is

typically not problematic. Such individuals can access sexual material online intermittently and do not find it to be PARTICULARLY engaging in any ongoing manner. In fact, they may eventually find themselves feeling indifferent or bored with the lack of sexual variety offered online. "For individuals who are not true sexual obsessives, the repetitiveness of the images and the unreality of the activity are doomed to eventually disappoint" (Leiblum, 1997, p. 25). Another factor may be that these people require a FACE TO FACE interaction or emotional involvement with a partner to sustain their sexual interest over the long term.

Case Illustration: Recreational User. Jennifer is an 18-year-old single female who is a senior in high school. She recently received a personal computer from her parents as a gift for her 18th birthday. She can now use the computer in the privacy of her own room, and has been surfing the Internet curiously looking for information on different topics. She is a Varsity cheerleader for her school and is particularly interested in learning more about other cheerleaders. Using a search engine, she types in "cheerleaders," which links her to a number of different sites that she can browse. She looks at several and stumbles on one site that has nude pictures of female and male college cheerleaders. She is curious and looks at other sites as well. At first she finds them titillating but after a while becomes bored. Intermittently when logging on and bored with her school work, she surfs sexual sites to see "what is new." Typically it seems that the amount of time they hold her attention is just enough to give her a short break before she returns to her homework.

### Sexual Compulsives

Individuals who exhibit sexually compulsive traits and experience a fair amount of trouble in their lives are the second type of Internet users. They may have an already established pattern of unconventional sexual practices such as having a preoccupation with pornography, having multiple affairs, engaging in sex with several or anonymous partners, phone sex, paying prostitutes for sex, or any one of the more conventional paraphilias listed in the DSM-IV (1994). These activities have varying degrees of consequences, both with respect to the individuals (e.g.,

level of safety, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV, etc.), as well as to their relationships with others.

Unconventional sexual practices should be understood within the cultural context. For example, some sexual practices of gay men that are widely accepted in the gay community could be deemed pathological when viewed from outside the sub-culture, but are not necessarily pathological or compulsive. On the other hand, the sexualization of interactions in some segments of the gay community may increase the risks for predisposed men.

Sexually compulsive persons with paraphilias may be inclined to act out their sexual fantasies with nonconsenting victims through exhibitionism, frotteurism, pedophilia, and voyeurism. Engaging in such behaviors escalates the level of danger because getting caught could lead to any number of negative consequences including arrest and possible incarceration. With respect to the Internet, "netsex is a source of discovery and validation" for paraphiliacs (Leiblum, 1997, p. 25). They can go online and find adult Web sites AND NEWSGROUPS devoted to unconventional sexual practices and actively participate in chat room discussions with other paraphiliacs. They can also find locations where paraphilic sexual apparatus are sold as well as places they can go to meet others like themselves.

The development of online communities LIKELY serves a normalizing function that is similar to the experience of group therapy participants. If the PURSUIT OF THE SEXUAL gratification IS transferred from GENERAL AND INDISCRIMINATE acting out to BEING CONFINED to the Internet, it MIGHT THEN be viewed IN MANY RESPECTS as less HARMFUL TO OTHERS AND RISKY FOR THEMSELVES. EVEN SO, the sexually compulsive style WILL continue to have psychological limitations and adverse consequences for individuals, regardless of whether OR NOT they are acting on their desires. A second is whether involvement in a closed community might further insulate these individuals from general social norms and reinforce denial and cognitive distortions while reducing incentive to seek help and challenge their proclivities.

Case Illustration: Sexual Compulsive Type. Samson is a 45-year-old married construction contractor with three children. He initially believed that his sexual exploits were due to his dissatisfaction with his marriage and that he would not do the things he did if his wife satisfied him sexually. After some therapy and a breakdown of denial he reported that, "For a long time I told myself that this Internet sex thing, the strip clubs, and the prostitutes were simply a manifestation of my dissatisfaction with my sex life at home. But now I wonder if that's just an excuse. It's true that my wife and I seldom have sex, but I also don't try to make love to her, even though I find her very attractive and beautiful. I have become so dependent on other things that I have redirected all of my sexual energy away from my marriage." Samson reported that for the past 12 years he engaged in a wide variety of sexual activities on almost a daily basis. He went to adult bookstores, peepshows, massage parlors, topless bars, and masturbated at home to videos. Often he engaged in these activities while intoxicated on alcohol. Samson's use of the Internet for sexual gratification was just another way his sexual compulsivity was manifested. Interestingly it was also what led to his wife to seriously confront his behavior as she became aware of his use of their home computer to access sexual sites.

#### At-Risk Users

The third type of Internet users do not have histories of sexual compulsivity. However, their online sexual pursuits have caused problems in their lives. In some ways this is the most interesting group as it appears that these are people who may never have had difficulty with sexual compulsivity if it were not for the Internet. They may have a vulnerability to or proclivity for sexual compulsivity, but have sufficient internal resources and impulse control to have resisted acting on these behaviors until faced with the power of the Triple A Engine. AS MENTIONED EARLIER this population may have a LEARNED predisposition for dealing with certain emotional issues through sexual means and this tendency could be exacerbated through their online sexual behavior as a result of a temporary regression in their defense mechanisms and a loss of usual coping strategies.

The at-risk group consists of two subtypes. Subtype one, referred to as the Depressive Type, consists of at-risk users who generally are depressed, dysthymic, or anxious. Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukopadhyay, and Scherlis (1998) found that greater Internet use was associated with decreased communication with family members with whom they live, a reduction in the size of their social networks, and an increase in feelings of loneliness and depression. While the above study focused on general patterns of Internet usage, it can be speculated that analogous findings might be even more PROFOUND for those pursuing sex on the Internet. Similarly, Kafka (1993) indicated that the comorbid conditions often present in nonparaphilic individuals are depression, dysthymia, and anxiety.

The depressed subtypes connect to adult sites in a time-limited way in which they feel in control. Sexual encounters may be one of the few experiences powerful enough to penetrate their dysphoria and malaise. This group may find the Internet particularly seductive and gratifying, and they are likely to use it more consistently and with an escalation in frequency over time. As opposed to recreational users, these people are less likely to habituate or get bored with online sex and decrease their usage. Instead, they might search for other adult sites, different varieties, alt.sex sites, or sexual chat rooms. They might also become involved with phone sex or its much more powerful 90's cousin, live video streaming.

Case Illustration: At-Risk User, Depressive Type. Richard is a 20-year-old single college student. He is shy, has few friends, and often feels dissatisfied with his life. Nevertheless, he has experienced some success academically which has helped his self-esteem. Richard began using the Internet around age 18, when he entered university. He discovered sexual sites by accident after having searched for a band called "Bare Naked Ladies," which resulted in linking him to numerous Web sites containing images of naked women. Excited, Richard found himself with an erection. Later that day, he used these images to masturbate. The next day he went back to his computer and searched for more Web sites with pornographic images. With thousands of sites from which to choose, he lost track of time and missed a class. While concerned about missing his class, Richard felt an odd kind of invigoration. After that day, Richard vowed not to miss a

class again due to being online but quickly felt the urge to return to his computer. The online viewing while masturbating became a pattern for Richard. He withdrew from the few friends he had, developed a sleep problem, his grades slipped, and his feeling of depression increased. He consulted a physician hoping to get a prescription for sleeping pills. The physician suspected depression and referred Richard to a psychologist in the university counseling center.

The second subtype, referred to as the Stress Reactive Type, is characterized by a tendency for individuals to avail themselves of online sex primarily during times of high stress (Leiblum, 1997). They use sex and the Internet as a temporary escape, distraction, or means of dealing with certain feelings that arise from stressful situations. These individuals are typically more interpersonally connected and use more sophisticated coping strategies. However, when they lose their sense of connection, they MAY BE UNABLE TO TOLERATE BEING ALONE AND THEIR OWN AFFECT AND DESPARATELY SEARCH FOR A REPLACEMENT- ANY REPLACEMENT. ONE COMMON WAY FOR THIS GROUP TO temporarily satiate those needs and deal with uncomfortable feelings IS by having an online sexual experience. When the stressful time has passed, they are likely to decrease their use of online sex of their own accord and resume the more typical coping strategies that are effective in their daily lives. What is usually a recreational and non-problematic activity may be used in time of crisis to ward off anxiety or avoid dealing with the challenge to the self that is experienced in a primary relationship.

Case Illustration: At Risk User, Stress Reactive Type. Steven is a 35-year-old divorced man with a 4-year-old son. He has a successful career as an attorney. Prior to his divorce he did not exhibit symptoms of sexual compulsion. Around the time of his divorce, after separating from his wife, he began going online to fill the time when he was alone. During this time he discovered chat rooms. In one of his early interactions he connected with a woman in a chat room and was introduced to cybersex. While he and this woman exchanged sexual talk in a "private room" he masturbated. He was very excited by this and at the same time felt guilty for his behavior. The next day he decided he would no longer masturbate online, but instead find

someone to date. While dating someone for a few weeks he did not even think of online sex but when it ended, he again found the images and excitement from the chat room coming back to him. After a couple of days when he was feeling upset about his marriage and overwhelmed with work, he decided to take a short break and go online. He did not consciously intend to seek sexual contact, but nevertheless he visited the same chat room as before and found himself flirting with another woman online. From this point forward a pattern developed in which he regularly began to go online for sexual release when he was feeling stressed. As his online sexual behavior continued he at times decided he wanted to stop, but alas he returned to the chat rooms again and again. He began to loathe himself and realized that outside help might be necessary, although his shame kept him from seeking the help he desired for months.

#### Assessing and Treating Online Sexual Addiction

Despite the breadth of literature that exists on the treatment of sexual compulsivity, few articles have specifically addressed how to treat online sexual behavior. In this section a comprehensive approach for the treatment of THE VARIOUS types of individuals WITH INTERNET RELATED compulsive sexual problems is presented. Building on established models, assessment considerations are briefly discussed, treatment approaches unique to compulsive online sexual behavior ARE introduced, relapse prevention strategies used to promote adaptive coping ARE reviewed, and some of the underlying issues AND co-morbid conditions that may need to be addressed later in the treatment ARE offered.

#### Assessment

A psychological evaluation that includes a mental status examination and a history of psychosocial and sexual development should be completed. This evaluation also serves to identify co-morbid conditions such as depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive behavior, and substance abuse. How and when to deal with such conditions need to be factored into the overall treatment plan. The therapist should pay attention to any indication that the client's current functioning is associated with a history of hypersexuality, paraphilias, identity confusion, intimacy issues, or childhood sexual trauma. The above information can help to determine the

type of online sexual compulsion that is BEING presented. As noted earlier, sexual acting-out problems may have predated online sexual compulsion for some individuals. For others, the Internet has acted as a catalyst for the manifestation of a compulsion. The therapist needs to BE comfortable IN gathering specific details and PATTERNS of how THE online sexual behavior is manifested, AND the degree to which the CRITERIA FOR sexual compulsion IS MET.

One STRUCTURED way to determine the degree to which features of compulsivity/addiction are present in online sexual behavior is by using the Online Sexual Addiction Questionnaire (OSA-Q), a heuristic tool developed by Putnam (HYPERLINK <http://www.onlinesexaddict.com/osaq.html>). Areas identified on the OSA-Q that relate to online sexual behavior include life interference, social withdrawal, obsessive-compulsive behavior, tolerance/withdrawal, emotional distress, and impairment. These categories were developed to reflect areas theoretically linked to addiction. They are analogous to the DSM-IV (1994) criteria for Substance Dependence, Impulse Control Disorders, and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, and they overlap with Cooper's (1998b) hallmarks of sexual compulsion mentioned earlier. Assessing these areas serves to identify a focus of treatment.

The behaviors assessed by the OSA-Q may also provide cues that help therapists identify when a problem exists. In online users, cues requiring further evaluation INCLUDE relationship difficulties, decrease in work performance, complaints of financial problems, and emotional distress (ESPECIALLY IN THOSE CASES where it appears the cause of the distress is being concealed.) These individuals may present for treatment without readily expressing or identifying online sexual behavior as a problem. Not acknowledging a problem is fairly common in this population and is often related to denial and feelings of shame and embarrassment. Thus, it is increasingly important that therapists ask about Internet usage and sexual use of the Internet in particular. Client responses, as well as collaborative information from involved others (family, spouse, or employer), when appropriate, will help therapists determine whether further assessment is warranted.

Treatment Strategies for Compulsive Online Sexual Behavior

The nature of online sexual behavior suggests the need for strategies tailored to the idiosyncratic behavior patterns of the individual and to the unique characteristics of computer and Internet usage. Initial strategies with all individuals experiencing problems related to their online sexual behavior will include a focus on interrupting the cycle of online sexual behavior and, once that is done, on maintaining abstinence from sexual behavior while online. Two important considerations follow. The first is how individuals CAN BETTER UNDERSTAND THEIR MOTIVATIONS AND FEELINGS AND THUS LEARN TO IDENTIFY AND MODIFY THEIR behavior patterns. The second is how the power of the Triple A Engine can be countered.

HELPING clients in LEARNING TO OBERVE THEMSELVES AND self-monitor their sexual behavior allows both theM and theIR therapist to gather information about their unique pattern. PAYING ATTENTION TO THEIR INTERNAL WORLD ALSO HELPS CLIENTS SEE THAT THERE ARE IDENTIFIBLE CAUSES AS WELL AS REINFORCERS FOR THEIR BEHAVIORS AND THEREFORE IT IS SOMETHING THEY HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO BE ABLE TO CONTROL. IN ADDITION, IT may BE FOUND that behaviors, EMOTIONS, and situations thought to be completely unrelated to online sexual behavior in fact are critical events that must be factored into the treatment. It is important to note that negative emotional states, interpersonal conflict, or social pressure preceded 71% of relapses across a variety of addictions (Cummings, Gordon, & Marlatt, 1980).

CLIENTS NEED TO SEE THAT IF THEY CAN IDENTIFY THE CAUSES AND PRECIPANTS OF THEIR SEXUAL ACTING OUT THEY MAY BE ABLE TO INTERVENE. SIMILARLY IF THEY KNOW WHAT SITUATIONS ARE RISKY FOR THEM THEY CAN TAKE NECESSARY PRECAUTIONS. FOR MANY WITH INTERNET ISSUES SIMPLY turning on the computer and going online MAYBE A PROBLEM. ()

Reinforcement occurs BOTH from the sexual ENJOYMENT AS WELL AS THE DISTRACTION FROM MORE UNCOMFORTABLE ()emotional states. For example, if a person feels anxious or depressed and experiences relief from these feelings through the online

behavior, then the latter is reinforced. Thus, an individual can develop a cycle of behavior where a negative emotion is experienced, Internet use ensues, sexual behavior occurs, and negative emotion is temporarily blocked, thus reinforcing the cycle. With each additional enactment of the cycle, feelings of shame, decreased self-esteem, and loss of control increase, which in turn, fuels a downward spiral. Information gained from THE AFOREMENTIONED TYPE OF SELF OBSERVATION () HELPS with the interruption of the behavior, points out RISK FACTORS, OPENS OTHER potentially fruitful areas for treatment, HELPS THE CLIENT BEGIN TO REGAIN A SENSE OF CONTROL IN THEIR LIFE. IDENTIFIABLE AND WILL assist with the prevention of relapse.

TYPES OF CATEGORIES preceding online sexual behavior THAT may be targeted in treatment include actions (e.g., turning on a computer), emotions (e.g., excitement or shame), thoughts (e.g., "I'll just check out one Web page."), and physiological responses (e.g., sexual arousal). In addition, AS THE CLIENTS BECOME MORE COMFORTABLE IN THE TREATMENT AND SHARING AND SELF-AWARENESS INCREASES THE THERAPIST MAY BE ABLE TO SEE that online sexual behavior increases during times of stress as with the At-Risk User, Stress Reactive Type, or in relation to depressed feelings, as with the At-Risk User, Depressive Type. Information gathered regarding these types has specific implications for treatment and will be addressed later in this article.

Once a cycle has been identified, CERTAIN CLIENTS NEED STRUCTURED HELP AND SPECIFIC GUIDANCE IN TAKING steps to interrupt it. Although it may not be feasible for those who use a computer for work activities to stay off-line, when possible, it might be helpful to take a holiday from the computer while learning ways of coping with urges. In either case, a strategy developed by Young (1999) termed "practicing the opposite" might help CERTAIN people interrupt their pattern of online behavior. Young stated, "The goal of this exercise is to have patients disrupt their normal routine and re-adapt new time patterns of use in an effort to break the online habit" (p. 8). Young explained that abstinence from particular applications, such as chat rooms, may be necessary if attempts at moderating behavior by

changing one's routine has been unsuccessful. The ultimate goal of treatment strategies aimed at breaking the cycle is for online usage to be completely disconnected from sexual arousal and that those sexual energies be redirected toward a more appropriate object choice (e.g., a FACE TO FACE romantic partner).

THERE ARE ALSO A NUMBER OF CONCRETE STEPS THERAPISTS SHOULD BE AWARE OF TO HELP THEIR CLIENTS TO () counter the power of the Triple A Engine. A FEW ARE MENTIONED BELOW FOR THERAPISTS TO PICK AND CHOOSE FROM AS THEY SEE FIT. The first place to start is with accessibility. To assist with this endeavor, an Internet Service Provider (ISP) such as Integrity Online can be used to prevent access to pornographic Web sites. Also, pornography filtering software programs like Net Nanny or Safe Surf may be installed on personal computers to interfere with accessing of sexual sites. Of these two strategies, the use of an ISP that prefilters access is strongest because savvy computer users can disable the filtering programs. As a partial solution to this problem it has been suggested that the recovering addict have a friend or sponsor enter the password to the filtering program so that it could not be easily disabled (Delmonico, 1997). Nevertheless, Delmonico (1997) noted, "there are many limitations to these programs, but they can serve as a frontline of protection." If possible, it is best to make use of both ISPs that prefilter and software that filters on the users computer because neither, by itself, is able to filter out all Web sites with sexual content. The purpose of using an ISP and filter is two-fold. First is the obvious prevention of access to sites with sexual content. During this period of interruption, individuals have the opportunity to use some of the coping strategies learned in therapy. The second purpose is that the interference caused by the filtering program and the ISP serve to make the problem more salient, which interferes with the process of denial and signals that action in line with one's relapse prevention plan is in order.

The next strategy to offset the power of the Triple A Engine is to change the perception that the behavior is affordable and of little cost to the individual. The financial cost of the online sexual behavior may be minimal since there is no shortage of online sites where one can engage

in sexual activity at no charge. However, some people seeking treatment may have spent large sums of money to gain access to special sexual services online. In either case it is useful to explore all of the ways that the online sexual behavior is exacting a toll, whether it be money, time, relationships, or self-esteem.

The most powerful strategies in dealing with the Triple A Engine have to do with addressing the anonymity of the sexual behavior. This is dealt with in part by discussing the results of self-monitoring in therapy. Traditional and effective options include individual psychotherapy where patients can share their secrets in a safe environment and thus challenge their denial as well as understand the reasons that their sexual behaviors have such a hold on them. Couple therapy can help an individual see her or his partner as a source of support instead of as an obstacle and vehicle for projected shame and self-hatred. As with most sexual compulsions, 12-step and therapy groups are often an essential element of an effective treatment package. Internet-based solutions may also be used to address anonymity. Online individuals may get support from participating in listservs, e-mail support groups, and by going to bulletin boards, Web sites, and chat rooms that focus specifically on sexual addiction. Individuals report that reading the posts of others struggling with the same problem gives them strength to abstain. The best sites provide a space for individuals to develop an identity and become known. Paradoxically, participants can preserve a sense of safety through anonymity, while letting others know them by using online names. It appears that being known by others, even if one's true identity is concealed, can result in an increased accountability to a group one joins voluntarily. Additional information about online resources follows.

### Online Resources

Useful online resources that provide information, services, and links are presented below in Table 1. Recovery resources on the Internet include newsgroups, email groups, chat rooms, and web sites that provide information, services, and products related to sexual addiction recovery (Delmonico, 1997).

Newsgroups are forums where people can post text messages that others can respond to. These forums have the benefit of being accessible and free. A major problem with newsgroups that focus on sexual addiction is that they are targeted by the adult entertainment industry. In these newsgroups it is typical to see more adult entertainment postings than postings of appropriate material dealing with recovery. An alternative to these newsgroups are bulletin boards on web sites that are monitored and kept free from inappropriate postings or advertising.

Email groups are an association of individuals who are on an email list. When email is sent to the list address every person in the group receives the email sent. These groups may be used to discuss issues related to sexual addiction and as a form of social support for group members. Email groups allow for the development of a cyber community that supports its members during times of crisis. Participation in such groups may be used as part of a relapse prevention plan to deal with urges to act out sexually. Email may also be used as part of a 12-step program. Individuals can work through the steps as part of an email group and use email to correspond with their sponsor.

Newsgroups, bulletin boards, and email have the benefit of being available 24 hours a day. At anytime that there is a need, individuals can use these forums to write out thoughts and feelings knowing that others will see what they write and may respond. These resources however, do not allow for real-time communication, which is the benefit of using chat rooms. Chat rooms are used for live text-based conversations. In a chat room two or more individuals meet, write, and respond to what others write, in real time. Chat may be used for online groups (e.g. 12-step meetings) and for educational purposes.

It is important for users of Internet resources to be cognizant that a great deal of information obtained in face-to-face contact is missing from text-based communication. For example, vocal and nonverbal visual cues are eliminated. Thus, with chat and email there is a high potential for miscommunication and individuals are more likely to project their own biases into interactions whenever written information is ambiguous.

Communication using audio and video is increasing online. People are connecting cameras to their computers and projecting live images of themselves over the Internet. These forms of communication are already being used by the adult entertainment industry. There is potential to use these forms of communication therapeutically as well. Nevertheless, many sexually compulsive individuals value their anonymity and will likely be reluctant to make use of therapeutic resources that include identifying themselves on video. Given the limitations of current technology, it appears that at the present time online resources are best used as sources of information, support, and part of a relapse prevention plan, but not for the direct provision of psychological services by mental health professionals.

Yet there is another way that the Triple A engine’s ability to reduce common sexual barriers might prove to be a powerful force in online sexuality. This time in a facilitative way to those in the earliest stages of recovery. Those with sexually compulsive features whose denial is starting to crack just a bit might find the internet to be an extremely valuable starting point from which they can begin to examine some of their own behaviors and assess whether or not they do indeed have a problem. With just a basic knowledge of computers and search engines those interested will be able to find online recovery resources (some of which are listed in Table 1) and access them immediately at any moment in time (e.g, after the typical remorse that follows engaging in a sexually compulsive behavior) that they are open to it. They are more likely to be willing to take this step when feeling the protection of the anonymity of the internet. Those terrified of being seen may find themselves to be reassured by knowing that they need not self-identify in any way, and that if they choose, they can just "lurk" and observe other participants. This low investment method might enable those who are still not ready to fully acknowledge their problems to at least begin to expose themselves to others in recovery and potentially get them started on the path earlier than they otherwise might have.

**Table 1. Online Resources**

<b>Web site with URL</b>	<b>Resources provided</b>
Grant Me The Serenity... Self-Help & Recovery <a href="http://www.jps.net/Sunflake">http://www.jps.net/Sunflake</a>	Extensive links to a variety of recovery resources, including sexual addiction.
Online Sexual Addiction: Education, Support, & Resources <a href="http://onlinesexaddict.com">http://onlinesexaddict.com</a>	Monitored bulletin board service, chat, online course, and links to recovery resource.

Sex Addicts Anonymous <a href="http://www.sexaa.org/index.htm">http://www.sexaa.org/index.htm</a>	Information about sexual addiction and 12-step group resources, including online chat groups.
Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous <a href="http://slaafws.org/">http://slaafws.org/</a>	Information about sexual addiction and the 12-step approach.
Sexual Addiction Recovery Resources  <a href="http://home.rmi.net/~slg/sarr">http://home.rmi.net/~slg/sarr</a>	Extensive list of links to resources on sexual addiction.
Sexual Compulsives Anonymous  <a href="http://www.sca-recovery.org">http://www.sca-recovery.org</a>	Information about sexual addiction and 12-step group resources, including online chat groups.
SexHelp.com  <a href="http://www.sexhelp.com">http://www.sexhelp.com</a>	Articles, links, and information about treatment services offered.
The National Council on Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity  <a href="http://www.ncsac.org">http://www.ncsac.org</a>	Articles, member directory, and contact information.
The Sexual Recovery Institute  <a href="http://www.sexualrecovery.com">http://www.sexualrecovery.com</a>	Articles, links, and information about treatment services offered.

### Relapse Prevention Strategies Used to Promote Adaptive Coping

It is useful for individuals with online sexual compulsivity problems to learn adaptive strategies for coping with their sexual urges AND THE UNDERLYING MOTIVATIONS. These strategies can be integrated into the structure of a relapse prevention plan developed to: 1) help decrease the probability of getting into high-risk situations, and 2) provide specific guidelines and means of coping when they cannot be avoided. This AGAIN BEGINS WITH SELF-AWARENESS.

The client can ALSO be helped to refrain from specific behaviors that lead to the online sexual activity by committing to positive behaviors that reduce stress and increase satisfaction with life (e.g., reaching out to a trusted other, exercise, () relaxation techniques, social activities, and hobbies). Giving in to urges to go online for sexual gratification can be prevented by talking with supportive others, attending a 12-step meeting, using positive self-talk that focuses on what can be done to cope, and alternative behaviors in which individuals can engage.

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TRADITIONAL Relapse prevention strategies are generally applicable to individuals struggling with compulsive sexuality. They are also helpful in treating all types of individuals experiencing psychosocial difficulties related to their online sexual behavior. However, THESE more general treatment approaches may be most effective when used in conjunction with more specific strategies tailored to the respective subtypes of online users.

#### Treatment Considerations for Different Types of Online Users

Recreational Users. The recreational user is not likely to present online sexual behavior as a chief complaint. For most recreational users seeking therapy, such behavior may not be a problem. It is worthwhile, however, to keep AN EYE OUT FOR the possibility of sexual acting out especially when dealing with relational problems, isolation, lack of social skills, sexual dysfunction, and long-standing patterns reflecting difficulty in establishing intimacy. This is particularly relevant when a client has talked about frequent computer usage either at work or at home.

At-Risk User, Depressive Type. The initial stages of treatment with Depressive Type Users should focus heavily on reducing symptoms of depression, especially if there is any indication of suicidal ideation. Evaluation for the use of antidepressant medication may be warranted. In MANY OF these individuals the online sexual behavior may be viewed as a form of self-medicating. Depending on the severity of the depression, it may be that the use of strategies to address compulsive online sexual behavior will need to be postponed. Oftentimes the

depression may be more of a chronic, low-level dysthymic state (KAFKA, 1993) where the person feels inadequate and unworthy. When this is the case, underlying issues that might relate to the depressed state need to be addressed. In addition, exploring the ways that online sexual behavior help the user cope with this condition may be critical. In many cases the sexual pursuits may provide a transient distraction or escape from their pervasive negative affect. For others, the online universe provides a forum in which users can reinvent their lives, CONJURE UP THEIR OWN FANTASIES, and feel confident and competent (DELMONICO, 1997).

The aforementioned constellation of chronic depression, feelings of inadequacy and anxiety may take a heavy toll, particularly in the sexual arena, leaving the person either physically or emotionally unable to enjoy sexual experiences with loved ones in their lives. Kaplan (1974) noted that sexual problems might be caused by a number of factors including fear of sexual failure, demand for sexual performance, and fear of rejection by one's partner.

As a result of these concerns, these individuals may experience a reduced ability to function sexually and find online sex to be a safer, more attractive alternative. This is because the online environment is generally responsive, but not demanding. This user would probably be more inclined toward the type of sexual experience that avoids or minimizes personal interaction. Obtaining sexual satisfaction in this way may operate with avoidance so that a person does not have to encounter the fear associated with face-to-face sexual relations. However, it is likely that this retreat into the Internet will only compound the person's depression and leave her or him feeling more hopeless that they can ever be happy and effective in their FACE TO FACE lives.

Therapists should consider that despite the likelihood that those who fall into this depressive subtype will at first be resistant to the notion of any type of group experience, its inclusion can be a key element in the client's progress. Modalities in which a person can observe, with little or no required participation (e.g., either 12-step or online options), might be a "doable" first step for these clients and should be strongly encouraged. AS THE TREATMENT PROGRESSES MORE TRADITIONAL OFFLINE GROUPS SHOULD BE ADDED.

At-Risk User, Stress Reactive Type. With the Stress Reactive Type, self-monitoring of behavior should be emphasized to determine the conditions under which sexual acting out is used to relieve stress. This will allow the therapist to tailor the development and implementation of stress management strategies. Stress management strategies may include general relaxation and cognitive coping approaches as well as specific strategies that relate to problems with anger, relationships, or work. Stress management will be an important component of the Stress Reactive Type's relapse prevention plan and can be integrated with the use of online resources. After the use of software filters and a prefiltering ISP have been instituted, the client can be given online homework that involves finding and using resources that promote adaptive coping. The client's experience with these exercises should be reviewed in therapy and urges that arise should be processed. As online behavior comes under greater control, therapy can shift to other issues that related to the development of the compulsive sexual behavior (e.g., relationship and marital problems, intimacy deficits, and family of origin issues).

Sexually Compulsive Type. The approach to treatment with online sexually compulsives is comparable to that used with individuals who are sexually compulsive but who have not ventured online. The initial stages of therapy will focus on breaking the cycle of compulsive sexual behavior. IN MORE SEVERE OR DANGEROUS SITUATIONS IN-PATIENT TREATMENT MAYBE WARRANTED. SOME COMBINATION OF relapse prevention, individual therapy, AND 12-step group participation would be LIKELY. In addition, if the individual is in a relationship, couple therapy and possibly family therapy would be warranted. AS MENTIONED EARLIER(), it is recommended that the individual use an ISP that prefilters access to pornographic Web sites and also use filtering software on THEIR personal computer. The client can also be provided with the URLs to recovery-oriented Web sites where THEY can find information and support. ()

#### Considerations for the Treatment of Co-Morbid Conditions and In-Depth Therapy

Most sexually compulsive individuals present with co-existing conditions. These conditions may be detected during the initial assessment. When that is the case, timing the

treatment of underlying psychological issues becomes crucial. In many situations, it will be appropriate to focus on the compulsivity and to address underlying issues as they unfold during the course of therapy. Occasionally these issues may take precedence over dealing with the online sexual behavior (e.g., if the individual is acutely suicidal) and may require referral to a psychiatrist for a medication evaluation. See Balon (1998) for a review of medication options in working with sexually compulsive behaviors.

The authors' clinical observations support Schwartz et al.'s (1995) position that sexual compulsives can be quite self-centered. Many have deep narcissistic injuries that make it difficult for them to empathize with others. When they appear confident, it is usually as a defense against a damaged self-esteem. It is not surprising that these individuals will have relational difficulties with their intimate partners and may find the transient and self-serving interactions common on the Internet to be a comfortable place for them to gratify their sexual desires. This view of narcissistically wounded individuals is also consistent with Schwartz et al.'s (1995) conceptualization of sexual compulsion as a manifestation of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder associated with early sexual trauma. In this perspective, relational stress constitutes a particular form of stress to which sexually compulsive individuals are most sensitive. Interpersonal dynamics may reflect reenactments of the original trauma where the victim plays a similar role or attempts to master the trauma by taking on the role of the aggressor. The development of insight into these behaviors, and the feelings that underlie them, can be helpful in interrupting these repetitive patterns.

For individuals in romantic relationships, online sexual compulsivity will often vary with relationship difficulties. In most instances a pattern of causal directionality can be discerned. Do relationship problems result in problematic online sexual behavior? Or, does engaging in online sexual activities cause relationship problems? These questions have implications for therapy as they relate to the concepts of () codependence. Partners of those with compulsive online sexual behavior may enable the online sexual behavior by maintaining emotional and physical distance and by not confronting relationship difficulties. In these relations it is common for each to point

at the other in lieu of TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR their own portion. The therapist's task is to help each acknowledge THEIR respective contribution to the problems and to focus on changing what THEY can control (i.e., THEIR own behavior). In ongoing relationships this is best accomplished in couple therapy.

Anger is an emotion that needs to be closely examined when working with sexual compulsives. According to Earle and Earle (1995), "Most sex addicts and co-addicts in recovery need to learn, often for the first time, how to express their feelings, especially anger, appropriately" (p. 88). Engaging in online sexual activities may be one way certain people indirectly express anger toward their partners, their parents, or themselves. For others, anger, aggression, and sexuality get mixed up and can result in sexual acting out or a paraphilia. As was mentioned earlier, paraphiliacs may turn to the Internet as a place to satisfy their desires. They may feel safer from prosecution and rationalize that they are causing less harm to themselves and others than if they acted out their sexual desires elsewhere.

An in-depth exploration of early sexual experiences and early beliefs about sexuality may reveal important intrapsychic issues. When a person has experienced sexually traumatizing events in the past, efforts to resolve the trauma are recurring and may be reenacted as a way of gaining control over the experience. Therapy needs to help the person understand the link between these early experiences and their current problems.

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Applying the notion of reenactment supported by ego states (Schwartz et al., 1995) to online sexuality invites therapists to pay particular attention to the specific behavior and fantasies of individuals who go online for sexual pursuits. The choice of a specific medium or Web site, as well as the content of chat room conversations, may provide important data on what issues the user is attempting to work through.

Therapists should also be aware that in online interactive sexually focused chat rooms, another users' comment, action, or reaction can disturb the individual who unconsciously is attempting to master a trauma. Verbalizing a fantasy and sharing it can enhance the user's

excitement. It can also leave her or him more vulnerable to the conscious and unconscious reactions of unknown individuals potentially acting out their own traumas. Online communication provides a sense of safety and control in which to share sexual fantasies. This may be illusionary, however. Individuals may be less in control of their fantasies while sharing them online than they would with a 3D, known sexual partner.

These are just a few of the underlying issues that may be addressed in the later part of treatment. Of course the specific issues will be dictated by the unique factors associated with each case.

### Summary and Conclusions

( ) MOVED PARAGRAPH--Using the Internet for sexual pursuits is likely to become even more common as people spend increasing amounts of their professional, academic, and personal lives online. However, despite the tremendous media attention devoted to online sexuality, the professional attention and level of understanding of this phenomenon is still in its infancy. More sophisticated theories and models of online sexuality need to be offered and then tested empirically. This paper examined how the wider availability and use of the Internet may be exacerbating this trend, motivations for why and how this is occurring, and specific strategies and underlying dynamics that therapists might consider when working with clients with these issues.

As researchers BEGIN TO study this area, it will be important to keep in mind cultural and sociological perspectives, as there are many other meanings attached to sex, the Internet, and the combination of sex on the Internet besides that subscribed to by the dominant culture in the United States. Clearly, the meanings attached to these activities by a 35-year-old married Silicon Valley male computer programmer, and a 62-year-old Hindu female school teacher in India will be vastly different. Therefore, BOTH THEORIES AND interventions must factor in the cultural context of the user.

While many may be able to use the Internet and even engage in online sexual pursuits with little or no adverse consequences, there is a clear subset of people who manifest sexually

compulsive difficulties when faced with the myriad of sexual opportunities the Internet offers. Some of these people may simply be broadening ongoing sexual proclivities to include online opportunities. Yet even more interesting are those users who would be unlikely to develop sexually compulsive behavior, but who do as a result of their Internet usage. This in part appears to be due to the power of the Triple A Engine. Future research focusing specifically on the characteristics of at-risk individuals and how these features interact with the power of the Internet IS CRITICAL.

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