To Get What You Need:
Healthy and Pathological Internet Use

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ABSTRACT

One's passion for the Internet can be healthy, pathologically addictive, or somewhere inbetween. Where a person falls on that continuum is determined by the cluster of needs that are being fulfilled by his or her Internet use and how the internet addresses those needs. This article suggests eight factors that can help clarify the healthy or unhealthy qualities of one's commitment to cyberspace activities, as well the effect of those activities on the person's underlying needs. It then explores the types of needs addressed by internet use. The "integration principle" is proposed as a rule of thumb for assessing pathological and healthy Internet use.

INTRODUCTION

ONE DAY, early in my explorations of the Palace chat site called "Main Mansion,"[1] I found myself in the spa with several other avid users. Main Mansion is the oldest and perhaps the most popular of communities that uses the Palace chat software—software that enables members to interact in a visual scene using icons called "avatars" to represent themselves. In the spa, a curious thing happened whenever we mentioned the word "Palace" in any of our typed-text communications with each other. For instance, when I typed "What do you people think of *Palace*?," I was surprised to see what actually appeared on the screen: "What do you people think of *this thing that is eating my life*?" When I finally figured out that the Palace program itself made this seemingly silly little substitution of words, my confusion turned to delight. Indeed it was an insightful comment by the Palace creator, Jim Bumgardner, who built that trick into the program. It raised an important question, perhaps a worrisome question for some users. IS Palace eating my life?

In many environments on the Internet, some users find themselves so captivated by their cyberspace lifestyle that they want to spend more and more time there, sometimes to the neglect of their in-person life. They may not be entirely sure why they find themselves so engrossed. They can't accurately verbalize an explanation for their "addiction." The humorous substitution of words in the Palace spa suggests that it is an unnameable *thing*—a compelling, unnameable, hidden force. It's not the chat room or the newsgroup or the E-mail that is eating one's life, but the internal, unconscious dynamic it has ignited.

Human motivation is organized around a system of interlocking needs that constitute "the thing." When people become passionate, even obsessed with an activity or person, it is because that activity or person addresses some important desire, often an unconscious one.

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Psychological health is the fluid expression, satisfaction, and realization of needs—a natural rising and falling of appetite. When needs are suppressed, ignored, diverted, or caught in a vicious cycle of superficial or indirect fulfillment, the result can be pathological fixation and addiction. In psychological health, the conscious realization and fulfillment of needs leads to a more solid, integrated sense of self. In pathology and addiction, the self becomes hollowed out and fragmented.

One's passion for the Internet can be healthy, pathologically addictive, or somewhere in between. A variety of factors interact in determining where a person falls on the continuum. Here I will suggest eight such factors that can help clarify the healthy or unhealthy qualities of one's commitment to cyberspace activities as well the effect of those activities on the person's underlying needs.

1. *The number and types of needs being addressed by the activity*. Needs can be physiological, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and spiritual. The more needs being addressed by internet endeavors, the more powerful the hold cyberspace has on the person.

2. *The underlying degree of deprivation*. The more an underlying need has been frustrated, denied, or neglected, the more intense the person's predisposition to seek fulfillment anywhere he or she can. Because cyberspace is such a diversified, compelling, and easily accessed environment, it serves as a ripe target for those thirsts—especially when one's in-person life has been the origin of the deprivation.

3. *The type of Internet activity*. There are various facets to Internet use. Some activities are non-social, such as games, creating software, and collecting information, literature, and graphics. Some interpersonal settings are designed around games and competition, others are purely social. Environments may involve synchronous versus asynchronous communication (e.g., chat versus E-mail) or text-only versus visual/auditory communication. Different types of Internet activities can vary greatly in how they influence different needs. Environments that combine a variety of features may address a wider

spectrum of needs and, consequently, may be more captivating. For example, communities that involve games and socializing, chat and e-mail, or visual and text communication, can be very captivating on many levels.

4. *The effect of Internet activity on in-person level of functioning*. Health and hygiene; success at work; and fulfilling relationships with peers, friends, and family are all important features of adaptive functioning. How many of these features become disrupted by Internet use—and the extent to which they are disrupted—reveals the depth of pathology.

5. *Subjective feelings of distress*. Increased feelings of depression, frustration, disillusionment, alienation, guilt, and anger may be warning signs of pathological Internet use. The person may associate those feelings with cyberspace life or in-person life. Often they stem from internet activity that is superficially addressing or aggravating one's needs.

6. *Conscious awareness of needs*. When people understand their motivations, they are better able to withstand the unconscious "thing" that leads to compulsive Internet use. "Acting out" repressed needs and wishes in cyberspace is only a cathartic activity—a repetition compulsion—that will have to be repeated endlessly. "Working through" underlying needs means that one resolves the conflicts or deprivations related to them, in part, by consciously understanding what those needs entail.[2] Whereas blatant denial suggests addictive behavior and a lack of insight into one's underlying needs, acknowledging one's intense preoccupation with cyberspace may be a step toward recovery—and in some cases may simply be a healthy acknowledgment of a productive passion.

7. *Experience and the phase of involvement*. New users may become enamored with the fascinating opportunities cyberspace offers. The "addictive phase" may eventually taper off as the novelty of the Internet dissipates and the duties of the in-person world call. In some cases, high expectations for online life are dashed. Needs are not fulfilled and the

resulting disappointment leads one back to the "real" world. Some seasoned onliners understand the pitfalls that lure users into intensely emotional and hence addictive dramas (e.g., the psychological effects of anonymity). That understanding helps them steer clear.

8. *The balance and integration of in-person and cyberspace living.* Under ideal conditions, the degree of commitment to online activities and companions is balanced by the commitment to offline activities, friends, and family. The two worlds also are integrated in that one brings online activities into the "real" world, meets online companions in-person, discusses online life with one's in-person friends and family, and establishes contact with some in-person companions via the Internet. Pathological Internet use often results in an online life that is complete isolated from one's in-person life and even guarded against perceived intrusions from the "real" world.

In the sections that follow, I will explore the various needs that may be addressed by cyberspace activities. Although it's helpful to categorize them, any needs overlap and interact in complex ways. Understanding these interactions can shed light on how and why people become healthfully or pathologically involved with the internet.

SEXUAL NEEDS AND MORE

One afternoon at the Main site I asked the group at Harry's Bar why they thought the Palace was addictive. Someone gave a simple, one word reply, "SEX." A hundred years ago Freud claimed that sex was the primary human motive. Maslow[3] placed it at the first level of his hierarchical pyramid of needs. Nowadays cybersex is a popular topic in the media precisely because sex *is* one of those basic biological motivations that commands attention. Worry and outrage among the misinformed that "the Internet is nothing but pornography and sex" is a symptom of technophobia. Most people in cyberspace are not out to satisfy their sex drive. However, some definitely are. When people become preoccupied with online sexual activities,they do so for the same two basic reasons people get obsessed with sex in any context: It satisfies that biological need, but it also addresses a variety of purely psychological and social needs.

Some sexual pursuits on the Internet are non-social; for example, collecting pornographic graphics and stories, without interacting with anyone. For the "normal" person, these pursuits will wax and wane with the natural biological fluctuations in sexual desire. A pathological obsession with such solitary sexual activities indicates anxiety about intimacy. The danger of a compulsive preoccupation also stems from the escalating need for even more variety of sexual material, more daring material, or simply, more material. Underlying psychological pressures to master, control, and "possess"—or to push the envelope of bold, anti-social behavior—intensifies this preoccupation above and beyond the biological drive level. Because the Internet offers an almost infinite supply of easily and anonymously available pornographic material, the fuel for this preoccupation is endless. One can never own it all. There's no end to how daring one can be. Excessive participation in cyberspace groups devoted to sexual stories and graphics (such as the alt.sex and alt.binaries newsgroups) revolves around this endless supply of material. The need to compete and be admired by other participants for the size and diversity of one's collection, and for one's technical know-how in posting to the group, can further reinforce the person's excessive involvement.

Most sexual activity on the Internet is social at some level. Even a person's attitude toward fellow newsgroup members, as in the example above, is a social concern that enhances the sexual preoccupation. For sexual encounters that are explicitly interpersonal, the underlying emotional needs that activate the encounter often are more influential than the purely biological drive itself. Even though cybersex can become addictive because it is an easily accessed, anonymous, and medically safe way to satisfy one's instinctual drive, the psychological dimension cannot be ignored. The fact that cybersex offers, at the very best, only visual and auditory stimulation suggests that the needs

satisfied must be heavily psychological. Cybersex of any type—no matter how anonymous or brief—always revolves around an interpersonal scenario. It's the emotional need satisfied by that scenario that perpetuates the activity. When people identify the activity as purely sexual and fail to realize the underlying psychological need, the potential for addiction increases.

Cybersex makes up for its lack of physical stimulation by the wide variety of psychosexual stimulation it offers. With the safety that Internet anonymity offers, people can experiment with all sorts of behaviors, fantasies, and alterations of their identity and gender. While some enjoy the voyeuristic/exhibitionistic satisfactions of one-way or two-way video, or mutual play with pornographic images and avatars, many prefer the bare bones, typed-text style of sexual encounter because it more powerfully activates the imagination (and transference reactions). With the wide variety of people available on the Internet—and easy paths to find them—a person can quickly find the partners that match his or her desires. And thanks to anonymity, one can easily bail out of an encounter and try again later, someplace else, with someone else.

Experimenting with one's sexuality may be perfectly healthy when it entails a deeper understanding and actualizing of one's needs and identity. It can be a process of working through psychological difficulties. Others may be driven to excessive involvement with cybersex without fully realizing it is an attempt to overcome loneliness or depression, to express anger or dependency, to dominate and control, or to fill an internal emptiness in self. Cybersex then becomes an addictive acting out of needs that never gets fully satisfied. For some, diving deeper into the expression of unconscious fantasies gets out of control. Reality testing from the external world disappears. The absence of real world consequences makes it difficult to curb one's behavior.

Most sensual activity in cyberspace doesn't even involve pornography or "talking dirty" interchanges between partners. Perhaps the word "cybersex" doesn't even apply to most of the sexual activity taking place there. The good old fashioned word "flirting" is more appropriate. Many social environments in cyberspace are free-form social gatherings, almost like ongoing parties. As at any good party, there is a hefty dose of playful flirting. It might be normal fun that doesn't progress to anything sexually intimate. For some people, what makes it more attractive than real world flirting are the same features that makes cybersex attractive. It is relatively anonymous and safe, so people can be a bit more open, bold, and experimental than they would at an in-person gathering. It's possible that in some cases this casual quality of cyberflirting only superficially satisfies deeper needs for companionship, dependency, romance or love, which compels the person to come back for more. Ambivalence about intimacy—wanting it but also not wanting it—could lock some people into a seemingly endless string of flirtations that never progresses to true intimacy. Some people perceive cyberflirting and cybersex as imaginary, "pretend" encounters isolated from their real life and therefore not a threat to their in-person relationships. That same "pretend" quality may make it feel like a "pretend" satisfaction, which fails to fully satisfy and begs for more.

The extent to which people deprived of romance, sexuality, and/or companionship in their in-person relationships will determine how persistently they seek out those things in cyberspace. If one of those needs is not met in an intimate in-person involvement, the individual may look for it on the Internet. If the person becomes excessively preoccupied with the online partner, obviously it can damage the in-person bond. But in some cases the online affair may serve as a supplementary satisfaction that helps preserve a marriage. What the person learns online may in fact be used to enhance his or her "real world" relationship.

THE NEED FOR AN ALTERED STATE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Human beings have an inherent need to alter their consciousness—to experience reality from different perspectives. We pursue this need through a wide variety of activities: meditation, drugs, athletics, sex, and art. Some are more productive than others. Dreams are a nec-

essary, built-in mechanism for achieving this altered experience of self, other, and world on a nightly basis. It allows the expression of the usually unconscious, primary process styles of thinking that provide a different perspective on reality.

Cyberspace may be a new and important addition to this list. Critics often complain that computers and cyberspace have become a substitute for life. Whereas this indeed may be true for some people, we should also consider the possibility that cyberspace may be an adaptive supplement to "real" life. It may be a viable alternative for altering consciousness by providing new, imaginative ways to interact with others and experience the world. One's sense of time, space, and personal identity can change on the Internet. Communicating via typed text for some people feels like a blending of consciousness with the other user. Cyberspace can become a dream-like state of consciousness, particularly in the fantasy worlds of MOOs, MUDs, and multimedia environments where people interact with avatars in imaginative visual scenes. You can shape shift, telepathically "whisper" to other people, and violate the laws of physics by suspending oneself in mid-air, walking through walls, or creating objects out of nothing.

People may be attracted to virtual environments because—like dreams—they satisfy this need for an alternative view of reality by encouraging unconscious, primary process styles of thinking. Like dreams, they also enable the expression of unconscious fantasies and impulses, which may explain some of the sexuality, aggression, and imaginative role playing we see on the Internet. Stretching the analogy even further, we can think of an "addiction" to cyberspace as an addiction to an altered state of consciousness, abstinence from computering to withdrawal or REM (dream) deprivation, and a fervid diving back into cyberspace as a cyberspace "rebound," not unlike REM rebound. The experience may be similar to lucid dreaming, which is a dream in which the person knows she is dreaming and is able to direct the outcome. Supposedly, more primitive people in ancient cultures were able to develop and refine this ability. Contemporary dream workers are attempting to revive those skills.

Pointing and clicking in cyberspace dream worlds may be the computer user's similar attempt to return to those more primitive times. It's an attempt to create and direct a recurring, lucid dream.

Although it has a significant impact on the user, this control over the cyberdream is limited. After all, we have control over the program, but not over the people who occupy it with us. Virtual worlds are not games where we control all the pieces. They are real worlds complete with all the interpersonal triumphs and struggles that stir us up in the physical world. Some users recognize and accept this fact. They ride the flow of cyberspace or choose to turn the computer off when the experience becomes an anxiety dream, or even a nightmare. Those who feel driven to somehow master the dream-like game may have a hard time knowing when to sign off.

THE NEED FOR ACHIEVEMENT AND MASTERY

Everyone has a basic need for learning, accomplishment, mastery of the environment, and the self-esteem that arises from one's achievements. Operant theory in psychology adds that learning is most powerful when small units of accomplishment are quickly reinforced. Computers in general are so "addictive" because they do all of this in a highly efficient and rewarding fashion. You confront a problem or an unfamiliar computer function, you investigate, you try solutions, you finally figure it out, and the computer does something specific and concrete for you that it never did before: challenge, experimentation, mastery, success. It's a very motivating cycle that makes people want to learn and do more.

Many environments in cyberspace—being complex technically, socially, or both—pose few limits on how much a person can experiment and learn. Some new users often take great pleasure in mastering the various technical features of the software. For those people who are not attracted to the technical side of things, there is the challenge of learning the culture—discovering its people, norms, social structure, history and legends and participat-

ing in the shaping of its future. Exploring and mastering the many levels of technically and socially sophisticated environments can be a never-ending satisfier of curiosity and a never-ending source of self-esteem. In most places on the Internet, new technical and social features surface continually. The community changes quickly. To stay on top of things, you must be like a shark: you must keep moving. In many online communities, longstanding members can achieve an elevated status among the population. They can become a host, moderator, wizard, god, or "op" who has powers that ordinary users do not. Ambitions to achieve such honored positions fuel the desire to spend more time online. Getting the position reinforces and intensifies the effort.

The need to achieve in the technical and/or social domain can be a very normal, healthy process. However, some people feel driven to compensate for deep-seated feelings of failure, inadequacy, and helplessness or to overcome desperate needs for acknowledgment, admiration, and love. Obsession with cyberspace accomplishments, technical or social, can become a seemingly endless pursuit that never fully gratifies, especially when the string of possible achievements has no ceiling and the underlying needs are not realized. Being a sophisticate on the Internet means having the whole world and a universe of information at your fingertips. For some it is an addictive, god-like feeling of omnipotence and omniscience. Beneath that feeling, however, lies the realization that you must keep moving to stay on top of it all.

THE NEED TO BELONG

Everyone needs interpersonal contact, social recognition, and a sense of belonging. As humans, we instinctively want to go to a place where everyone knows your name. The sense of self rests on acknowledgment and affirmation from others. Because cyberspace offers a vast number and variety of groups to join, it can satisfy almost any person's need to belong to a particular group of like-minded people. A person easily can compartmentalize his or her group attachments, joining a variety of groups with each one addressing a particular interest

or aspect of personal identity. Simply being a user of a particular program can create an almost instantaneous camaraderie and sense of belonging. The program is a conversation piece—something everyone can relate to. That sense of brotherhood can be especially strong if the users are participating in a brand new environment. They feel like pioneers who, together, are settling new territory, building a new world. It's a very addictive feeling of belonging to a creative process.

A problem may arise when the group starts to flourish. Many new users show up. The community starts to change quickly—more so than in the "real" world. Among the increasing flood of people, if you want to maintain the connection to the community, if you want people to know your name, you *have* to keep coming back. The more time you spend online, the more people get to know you, the more you are considered a member who is "one of us." If you haven't signed on for a few days or longer, you may feel like you are losing ground, that you will be forgotten. You don't want those relationships you developed to fade out, or your identity in the community to fade. So you feel compelled to go back and reestablish your presence. Unconscious fears about separation and abandonment can haunt some users, driving them to compulsive participation.

The frequent joking about being "addicted" among hardcore users can add to the sense of camaraderie and belonging. It may be a healthy identification with a shared commitment, or it may serve to ease anxiety about being excessively involved. Misery loves company.

The JenniCam phenomenon is a unique example of how cyberspace addresses such needs for belonging and the social affirmation of self. There was an overwhelming response to Jennifer Ringley when she set up a live, continuous video broadcast of her dorm room and then later her apartment. People who idealized, even worshipped, Jenni banned together in groups to talk about her, speculate about her, share screen captured pictures of her. She became the focal point of their camaraderie. Their collective admiration of her, a kind of idealizing transference,[4] served to bolster their sense of self. Even though unable to communicate with her, some admirers set up a second com-

puter monitor next to their own, so they could "be with" Jenni as they went about their work. This contact with her, a kind of twinning transference,[5] created a feeling of companionship. In interviews with journalists, Jenni herself described how she felt she might be helping some lonely males by serving as a kind of substitute "girlfriend" who could be with them whenever they wanted her there.

THE NEED FOR RELATIONSHIPS

What must be obvious in this article so far is that almost all activities in cyberspace—not unlike all activities in life—address the most basic of human needs: the need to interact with other humans. More than just an information superhighway, the Internet is a powerful social domain. It is those social opportunities that have the biggest influence on normal as opposed to excessive Internet use.

A stereotype in the minds of the uninformed public is that the Internet is populated mostly by misfits and socially inadequate people. With little social success in the real world, they resort to safe, superficial contact offered through the cold wires and glass monitor screens of cyberspace. This stereotyped thinking is more a defensive reaction to the Internet than an accurate reflection of reality. Nevertheless, some shy, interpersonally anxious, and schizoid people may be drawn to cyberspace relationships. The relative anonymity of cyberspace—especially typed-text communication—can indeed help such people feel more expressive, more in control, and less vulnerable.

For some people, the cyberspace supplement to in-person relationships becomes enriching and educational. They experiment with new ways to express themselves and new types of relationships. In the imaginary MUD and multimedia worlds, they enjoy playing with creative communication tools that don't exist in the real world, such as telepathic whispering and shape-shifting avatars. For those who rely too heavily on cybercompanions to the exclusion of in-person socializing, the outcome ultimately can be less than fully satisfying, disappointing, even destructive. Ideally, the person comes to recognize the limitations and pitfalls of online rela-

tionships. The person learns to balance them with in-person contacts. Compulsive Internet use occurs when the person fails to see these problems. Determined, sometimes almost desperate, the person keeps going back for more.

The excessive preoccupation with cyberspace relationships often is a preoccupation with the dynamics of one's own psyche. The anonymous text-only communication of chat and E-mail can draw out powerful transference reactions. Although the person may feel the emotional drama is with the other person online, a large portion of the perceived relationship is shaped by unconscious remnants of problematic relationships from the person's past. The love, hate, competition, admiration, dependency, fear, is not simply directed toward the online other. It is a struggle within intrapsychic world of internalizations and introjects. The preoccupation with the cyberspace relationship can become an attempt to force the other to conform to one's unconscious expectations and wishes, or to satisfy unconscious needs. Essentially, the person becomes "addicted" to his or her unconscious dynamics that surface in the online encounter.

Transference reactions also can be amplified by a lack of response. As interactive as the Internet is, sometimes it isn't. Your private E-mail never receives a reply. The mailing list or newsgroup members fail to respond to your message. Chat partners seem to ignore you. This failure of reactivity becomes the ultimate blank screen that can magnify a person's anxious fantasies about how others perceive him. Many experienced users understand this tendency to read meaning into a non-response. They don't take it personally. Avid but less experienced users sometimes do not understand. In the absence of a reply, they may inappropriately act on their anxious fantasy, sometimes exaggerating their behavior in order to get a reply. In the online group that seems to ignore them, they may dramatically increase their participation in order to draw some attention. Even under good conditions, a participant in an E-mail list or newsgroup may receive only an occasional reply. This once-in-awhile reaction from others can act as an intermittent reinforcer that leads to increased, even excessive participation—participation that resists extinction.

The lack of face-to-face cues in cyberspace relationships cuts both ways. On the one hand, some people appreciate how the relative anonymity allows them to be more honest and open about themselves. They may feel more "real" online, that others know them more deeply. This enticement may contribute to excessive online activity and withdrawal from in-person people who "don't really understand me." At the same time, the lack of face-to-face cues does eliminate much of what is important about human relationships. Physical appearance, body language, and voice are all significant components of who we are and how we express ourselves. Human physical contact—to touch and be touched—is an extremely powerful need. Paradoxically, cyberspace relationships can be deep and intimate while also being superficial and incomplete. This paradoxical satisfying and frustrating of social needs drives some people into coming back for more and more. When an online relationship reaches a certain level of intimacy, many people want to meet in-person in order to remedy that contradictory mixture. But some choose not to. They do not want the real world to disrupt the acting out of their transference fantasy within that online relationship.

THE NEED FOR SELF-ACTUALIZATION AND THE TRANSCENDENCE OF SELF

At the top of Maslow's hierarchy lies the need for self-actualization. This need subsumes many of those from the lower levels—the need for fulfilling interpersonal relationships, to express oneself, and to satisfy one's intellectual and artistic needs by successfully engaging the world around us. Self-actualization is striving toward the development of oneself as a unique individual. It is the ongoing process of realizing and cultivating one's inner potentials, the flowering of the "true" self.

Are people self-actualizing in cyberspace? Many people feel they are expressing their creative potentials by engaging the technical and social dimensions of the internet. They find themselves realizing inner interests, attitudes, and aspects of their personality that were previously hidden. Many feel they are developing fulfilling relationships with others by experimenting with new ways of being. Some people say they are more like their true selves in cyberspace than in real life. It's difficult to say whether this is true self-actualization or self-deception as a defense against understanding unconscious, pathological motives behind Internet use. The eight factors can help answer this question; But ultimately the answer may be purely subjective—purely in the eyes of the user.

Another important aspect of self-actualization is the development of one's spirituality. This raises a fascinating question. Are people discovering their spiritual life in cyberspace? At first glance, this may seem an absurd idea. But for some users cyberspace does pose some mysteries about the nature of consciousness, reality, and self. As I move through cyberspace, where is my mind? Where am "I"? Am I really just in my body, or is the essence of me somewhere out there mingling with the consciousness of others, merging with that larger consciousness that is the Internet. Is this consciousness less real than what I experience in real life—or more so? If you experience the Internet as the evolution of a world-mind and world-self into a universal whole, then you are part of that whole. You have succeeded in transcending your small, encapsulated identity in order to participate in something much larger than your self. Consciously, or even unconsciously, some people sense "God" out there in the vast ocean of ideas and encounters that is cyberspace. What could be more captivating and "addictive" than the search for God? No doubt, the quest to achieve self-transcendence via the Internet can be a pathological defense against all sorts of personal conflicts and anxieties. In some cases, however, the yearning to immerse oneself in cyberspace could be genuinely spiritual.

THE INTEGRATION PRINCIPLE

The distinction between healthy and excessive internet use is illusive, as is defining any type of "addiction." If a person is captivated by some activity, feels devoted to it, would like to spend as much time as possible pursuing it, it

could be an outlet for learning, creativity, and self-expression. Was Einstein addicted to physics or Picasso to painting? Even in some excessive, unhealthy preoccupations you can find positive features embedded within the problem. In truly pathological addictions, the scale has tipped. The bad outweighs the good, resulting in serious disturbances in one's ability to function in life and increases in subjective feelings of distress. The needs that lead a person to fulfilling relationships, work, and sense of self are being frustrated, side-tracked, or superficially satisfied. In a truly pathological addiction, the person's world shrinks to the addictive activity. Rather than moving toward higher levels of integration and completeness—as in self-actualization—the person's life becomes narrow, rigid, and isolated. Perhaps the best single method for identifying healthy and pathological Internet use involves the last of the eight criteria, what I will call the *integration principle:* "Internet use becomes pathological when it is dissociated from in-person life. It becomes healthy when it is integrated with in-person living."

People become pathologically involved in the Internet when they have dissociated it from their in-person life. Their cyberspace activity becomes an isolated world unto itself. They don't talk about it with friends and family. It becomes a walled-off substitute or escape from their life rather than a supplement to it. Cyberspace becomes a dissociated part of their own mind, a sealed-off intrapsychic zone where conscious and unconscious needs are acted out but never fully understood or satisfied. Reality testing is lost. Alleviating this dissociation is an implicit or explicit component of many of the techniques for helping people who are excessively preoccupied with the Internet.[6]

In healthy Internet use, people integrate in-person and cyberspace living. They talk about their online activities and companions with family and friends. They bring their real identity, interests, and skills into their online life. They call on the phone or meet in-person the people they know online. The integration also occurs from the opposite direction. They communicate with people from their in-person life via E-mail or chat. They explore cyberspace with those people. In the ideal scenario, cyberspace and in-person activities overlap and enrich each other. The "thing" that could have eaten up their lives—without their really understanding how or why—instead expands and enhances their lives. They learn the value of cyberspace living but also use that lesson to appreciate even more the vitality of their in-person lives.

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