

LCL

Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers, Inc. is a private, non-profit corporation. As the State's sole lawyer assistance program, LCL assists lawyers, judges and law students who are experiencing any level of difficulty or stress in their professional or personal lives, providing support, assessment, referral, education, and other services.

briefings

LAWYERS CONCERNED FOR LAWYERS, INC.

WINTER 2005

From the director . . .

Internet — Constructive or Compulsive?

"We are experiencing one of the great phenomena of the last few centuries. The Internet will change everything and everyone."
(Clark Sampson of Netspace, Inc.)

And indeed it has, in ways that are at once exciting and astonishing, but also concerning and potentially destructive. With a mere "point and click," the Internet expands our access to information of any kind. This far-reaching and varied access can be a powerfully seductive lure into potentially destructive behaviors. When the editorial staff considered topics for this issue, it was easy to decide on Internet addiction since our clinical staff had recently seen a number of lawyers describing this problem. As the Internet continues to evolve, new and useful features will inevitably create opportunities for abuse and exploitation, and a certain percentage of its users may need to take special measures to manage their behavior.

LCL relies on the Internet in all the usual ways a business does, including marketing and communication. Our web site at www.lclma.org provides the visitor with information on LCL programs, services and behavioral issues affecting members of the legal profession. Our newsletter, briefings, is posted on our site, along with

copies of our monthly MBA Lawyers Journal Q & A column, and responses to anonymously submitted questions. Our site also constitutes a point of access to prospective LCL clients who find it to be a less threatening way to contact us. We urge you to visit the LCL site if you haven't already.

Using the Internet, our newly appointed Peer Volunteer Service Committee has been hard at work contacting volunteers in order to increase attendance at LCL support group meetings. The results are encouraging as the attendance figures are on the rise. (We appreciate those who have forwarded their email addresses to us and hope to eventually reach all our volunteers in this way as it offers quick and easy contact.) We are planning an Appreciation Luncheon on Monday, March 7th to acknowledge those lawyers who have played such an important role in keeping our support groups going over the years. We urge all those who participate in the Boston, Quincy, Methuen and Springfield groups to make every effort to attend. An invitation will follow.

We hope you find this issue informative and helpful, and invite you to suggest topics of interest for a future newsletter by emailing me at bonniew@lclma.org.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

March 7
Appreciation Dinner
31 Milk Street
Suite 810

May 12
James A. Brink
Fellowship Dinner
Sheraton
Framingham

What is it about the Internet that, for some of the people who use it, results in potentially destructive behavior?

OUT OF CONTROL ON THE INTERNET

I never considered my Internet use to be addictive, but I see now that it was. It was exciting, interesting and fun, and I was completely transported away from difficult problems in my life. It's easier to see, in retrospect, that as my hours on the net at home, and then at work, increased, my family and work relationships deteriorated, and my functioning and even my judgment were affected. My neglect of personal and professional responsibilities resulted in, first, my wife, then my law partner, calling it "quits" unless I got help. Even then, I still thought there was nothing wrong with what I was doing.

The Internet has and will continue to revolutionize our world. Already, its impact has been compared with the discovery of the atom. The web has become an essential tool of communication, commerce, research and industry, and, according to some, is only in an early stage of its evolution, with incredibly sophisticated applications yet to be developed. As a means of communication, and as a source of information and entertainment, the net can significantly enhance our quality of life. A small but significant percentage of Internet users, however, can be lured into a pattern of compulsive

or "addictive" use with potentially serious personal and/or professional consequences. Lawyers are not immune, as several have consulted LCL for assistance following unsuccessful attempts to control this behavior.

What is it about the Internet that, for some of the people who use it, results in potentially destructive behavior? Why do some people put themselves at risk for loss of job, failed relationships, financial harm? To answer this question, it can be helpful to look at two things: the biochemical reaction of the brain to certain types of stimulation, and specific stimulating features of the Internet.

First the brain: Recent brain research is helping us to achieve a better understanding of the nature of addiction to both chemicals and behaviors. According to Robert L. DuPont, MD, author of [The Selfish Brain: Learning from Addiction](#), repeated experiences of pleasure induced by chemicals or certain behaviors stimulate neurons located in the so-called "pleasure centers" (the ventral tegmental area and the nucleus accumbens) deep in the central brain, causing the release of dopamine, 1 of the 3 major neurotransmitters. A surge of dopamine can be

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triggered by a variety of drugs, and also by certain pleasurable experiences (e.g., sex). Once the brain “learns” the connection between the experience and the sensation, even the anticipation of the experience can activate the release of dopamine.

The release of increasing amounts of dopamine in the pleasure centers (which may occur over a period of escalating substance use, or with other repetitive pleasurable behaviors) appears to be a strong factor in the suppression of higher brain functions, as the powerful effects of this more primitive part of the brain attain greater dominance. The result is loss of control over the behavior and addiction-induced distortions in perception and thinking, including dishonesty manifesting as denial, rationalization, justification, minimization, etc. Loss of control and dishonesty (or denial) are basic characteristics of addiction. Brain biochemistry helps explain the “insidious, cunning and baffling” nature of addictive behavior: people so afflicted don’t fully know why they do what they do, and make up excuses that seem to explain their irrational and self-destructive behavior.

It goes without saying that this explanation is the ultimate simplification of an amazingly complex biochemical system

with countless subsystems. The power of the experience of pleasure, reward, and pain to shape behavior in all species speaks to its role in the survival of the species and helps explain why these mechanisms are hardwired into our brains.

Although socio-cultural factors (such as cultural tolerance for addictive behaviors, accessibility, individual values, etc.) play an important role, genetics seem to be the strongest determinant of individual vulnerability to the impact of certain kinds of chemical and experiential stimulation on the brain’s pleasure centers. The addictive process instigated by these behaviors, DuPont notes, is distinct from the processes of mere positive and negative reinforcement in which one tends to repeat behaviors that make us feel good or behaviors that offer relief from emotional discomfort.

There are a variety of ways in which Internet use may set this neuro-biological process in motion:

- The potentially intense experience of power, excitement, exhilaration, accomplishment, satisfaction, even arousal, as a result of being able, at any time, to instantaneously connect to a vast source of information about almost anything from countless resources worldwide.

“Brain biochemistry helps explain the ‘insidious, cunning, and baffling’ nature of addictive behavior.”

Self-assessment for a possible problem with Internet use:

- Has on-line activity led to avoidance or neglect of professional, family, health, financial or social responsibilities?
- Do you anxiously anticipate your next on-line opportunity?
- Has viewing of on-line sexual material replaced appropriate real-life sexual activity or led to secretive involvements endangering your marriage, health, etc.?
- Do you try to hide how you use the Internet?
- Has on-line gambling led to unacceptable losses with personal or professional consequences?
- Are you becoming more irritable, isolated or depressed as your internet use increases?
- Has your time and/or the nature of your activities on-line progressed to the point of endangering your wellbeing? Do you feel "out of control"?

While this is not a scientifically validated set of questions, any "Yes" response suggests a problem and calls for clinical evaluation.

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- A sense of adventure, similar to gambling, created by the unknown of what the next "log-on" may bring, whether it is the acquisition of new and interesting information, or interactive opportunities such as simply communicating with a friend, the potentially more problematic on-line shopping, gambling | or other gaming, private chat-rooms, pornography, on-line affairs and cybersex.
- The gratifyingly disinhibiting effect of the net user's anonymity, permitting:
 - Accelerated intimacy and social connection that can appear to be more honest than verbal communication;
 - Engagement in fantasy, or the creation of a whole new identity, all of which can be very pleasurable.
- A sense of timelessness, in the absence of markers that delineate other activities, e.g., a TV show, which may be mesmerizing but ends at a predetermined time.
- A hypnotic effect, some theorize, of moving images on the computer screen (or television).
- The multimedia appeal (of color, stereo sound/music, speed, flashing graphics).

David Greenfield, a psychologist whose interest in the addictive potential of Internet use was piqued by his own initial experience, found a growing number of people in his practice who were suffering consequences of compulsive use of the net, and noted that the mere act of connecting to the Internet is intoxicating to many people. For most, the novelty wears off in a matter of days or weeks, but for others (he estimates 6% based on a 1999 survey conducted on ABCNEWS.net to which 18,000 people responded), a compulsive or addictive pattern develops, often from the intensely stimulating effect of pornography and cyber affairs, and frequently becomes a major factor in marital conflict and divorce.

How does one know whether their use of the net constitutes an "addiction?" The short answer, which is similar for virtually all chemical or behavioral addictive or compulsive behaviors is: Is it creating problems in any other area of one's life? Are relationships, occupational functioning, personal finances, mood, health, or general wellbeing adversely affected? Has anyone complained about your behavior or the results of your behavior?

(Please see sidebar for more.)

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How can one overcome this behavior, at a time in American life when so many pieces of our lives involve computers? Unlike substance use and gambling (but similar to addictive sex or eating), recovery via abstinence would be difficult, though not impossible. A combination of self-regulation and abstinence from certain kinds of web sites is called for, but will not be easy to achieve. Because behavioral and mental health problems tend to grow in a climate of secrecy, talking about the problem with a therapist, and/or supportive friends or family is an important first step. A therapist

can further help the individual formulate very specific strategies to support abstinence, however that is defined, and assist with the management of predictable withdrawal symptoms that can be very challenging in early recovery. (*See sidebar.*)

Because the Internet is a valuable research and communication tool in the work of law, many lawyers, of necessity, spend significant portions of time on the net. LCL can assist lawyers who may wish to evaluate and/or make changes in the time and manner in which they use the Internet.

A “Brief Bib” for More Information

Caught in the Net by Kimberly Young, Ph.D., (John Wiley & Sons), 1998.

Internet Addiction Guide by John M. Grohol, www.psychcentral.com/netaddiction

The Psychology of Cyberspace by John Suler, Ph.D. www.rider.edu/~suler/psyber/psyber.html

The Selfish Brain: Learning from Addiction by Robert L. DuPont, M.D. (American Psychiatric Press, Inc.), 1997 and (Hazelden), 2000.

What is Normal Internet Use? by Leonard Holmes, Ph.D., www.mentalhealth.about.com/cs/sexaddict/a/normalinet.html

Virtual Addiction: Help for Netheads, Cyberfreaks, and Those Who Love Them by David N. Greenfield, Ph.D. (New Harbinger Publications), 1999.

Some things you can do if you see a problem:

■ **Defeat secrecy:**

Talk to a trusted friend, family member, or therapist. Professional help may be essential (and LCL can help). Position your monitor in clear view of others to prevent secretive use.

■ **Disconnect:**

Determine which Internet activities and/or sites are problematic and create obstacles to their use; e.g., “block” them, or disconnect from the Internet.

■ **Get real:**

Schedule more “real-life” activities, including exercise and face-to-face communication with others.

■ **Track time:**

Set a timer in advance of going on-line to prevent losing track of time. Log off after completing a task. Take periodic breaks from time on-line to re-ground yourself in real time and activity.

■ **Go for goals:**

Clearly write out the behavioral changes you intend to make, and the strategies you will employ to accomplish your goal. Keep a daily journal, especially in early stages of change, tracking your efforts and results.

This newsletter is published by Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers, Inc. for its members and the bar at large. We welcome your comments and questions.

Editor

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LCL SUPPORT GROUP MEETING CALENDAR

TUESDAY

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|-------------|---------------|--|----------------|
| Boston | Every Tuesday | LCL Offices
31 Milk St., Suite 810
Contact: Lottie
617-482-9600 | 1:00 – 2:00 PM |
| Springfield | 3rd Tuesday | Red Rose Restaurant
1074 Main St.
Springfield, MA
Contact: Tom W.
413-737-1616 | 1:00 – 2:00 PM |

THURSDAY

- | | | | |
|--------|----------------|---|----------------|
| Boston | Every Thursday | LCL Offices
31 Milk St., Suite 810
Contact: Lottie
617-482-9600 | 1:00 – 2:00 PM |
| Quincy | 3rd Thursday | Bob Kelly
21 Franklin St.
Quincy, MA 02169
Contact: Bob K.
617-479-8133 | 6:00 – 7:30 PM |

FRIDAY

- | | | | |
|---------|------------|---|----------------|
| Methuen | 2nd Friday | Shadi's Restaurant
58 Osgood St.
Methuen, MA
Contact: Al P.
978-688-7002
or George A.
to let them know
if you plan to attend | 1:00 – 2:30 PM |
|---------|------------|---|----------------|



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