



In the Shadows of the Net

Breaking Free of Compulsive Online Sexual Behavior

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Authors' note

Every story in this book is true; however, each has been edited for clarity. Names, locations, and other identifying information have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Editor's note

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Preface

The remarkable and far-reaching impact of the Internet revolution continues to permeate our society in ways few of us imagined. So much is possible through the Net, including sex—and for an ever growing number of men and women and those who love them, cybersex has become a problem.

We have written this book to help you understand problematic Internet sexual behavior: how it starts, how it develops such strength, and how it can even become addictive. In this book, we also offer a plan for successfully dealing with problematic cybersex activities, one that can enable you to regain control of your life and your relationships. This hope-filled guide is designed and written to support your efforts to grow and heal. We also extend our thanks to all those individuals who have graciously allowed us to share their stories in this book.

Contents

Preface	XX
Chapter 1: The Shadow Side of the Net	XX
Chapter 2: Do I Have a Problem with Cybersex?	XX
Chapter 3: Understanding Problematic Behavior on the Internet	XX
Chapter 4: What Turns You On?: The Arousal Template	XX
Chapter 5: Courtship Gone Awry	XX
Chapter 6: Boundaries	XX
Chapter 7: Taking That First Step	XX
Chapter 8: Changing the Way You Live	XX
Chapter 9: Preventing Relapse: Maintaining the Changes You've Made	XX
Chapter 10: Living the Solution: Family Dynamics and Cybersex	XX
Chapter 11: The Web Frontier	XX
Appendix	XX
Notes	XX
Index	XX
About the Authors	XX

Chapter 1

The Shadow Side of the Net

The Internet. The World Wide Web. We speak of it with such awe and reverence that you would think it was a divine being coming to rescue and deliver us into a new and perfect world. An entity so powerful that it will transform—for the better, of course—our businesses, our interactions with others, the way we communicate, the way we shop—every aspect of our lives. Nothing will be the same again—and everything will be better, faster, easier.

Whatever we want—information, goods, connections—we can find it or do it whenever we want via the Internet. Yes, everything . . . even sex. We can have sex on the Internet whenever we want with exactly the kind of person we want.

Sometimes that creates a problem. The opportunity is too enticing, alluring, fulfilling, immediate and powerful. So much is available. There are so many options, ones we've only dreamt of—or have yet to dream of! So much opportunity and stimulation is available that it's difficult to control. And hard to stop. For some it is seemingly impossible to stop.

No, the Internet isn't all sunshine and progress. There is the shadow side to the Net. For some people, the pull of cybersex can be powerful, so powerful, that, like alcohol or other drug, it's hard to put down and control. The shadowy world of cybersex is overtaking and overwhelming far too many people, undermining careers and upending relationships. And the problem is growing. Worse, it is becoming clear that for some, cybersex becomes a compulsive or

addictive disorder. No one could have forecast that cybersex would have had such an impact.

Kevin's Story

Kevin, a married thirty-seven-year-old manufacturing company executive with two children gives his account of what it's like to be hooked on cybersex:

It is 3:30 a.m. and I'm still online. Pornographic images of men, women, and children stream through my phone wires and onto my computer screen. Earlier tonight, after putting my two kids to bed, I watched the evening news together with my wife, Jeneen. Since my wife was tired after a long day at work, she went to bed. Though I, too, was exhausted, primarily from too many late nights on the computer, I, as usual, told her I was still not tired and would stay up late and read for a while.

Once I was sure that Jeneen was asleep, I turned off the bedroom light and headed for the den and the family computer. 'OK, tonight, I'm just going to stay online for an hour,' I promised myself. 'It'll be midnight when I'm done, and that's enough time. I really just can't stay up half the night again. Today at work I actually caught myself nodding off during Allan's important sales plan presentation. I haven't been able to really focus lately, either.'

Once I sat down, I arranged my chair and the screen so that if Jeneen should awaken and come in, I'd have a moment to switch the screen view over to a work-related document. I was more careful now since a few months ago my wife surprised me and saw the photo of a naked woman I was viewing.

I talked myself out of that embarrassing situation with the excuse that while trying to finish a work project, I'd opened an e-mail from one of my colleagues. In it was a link to a site that the guy had said I would find 'interesting.' It was a porn site and I told my wife, I had never seen anything like it and was just looking at it out of curiosity.

I remembered only too well how I'd felt at that moment. Heart pounding in my chest. My mouth instantly parched. Feelings of fear, shock, embarrassment, and panic coursing through my body as, in those very, very long moments, I searched for a plausible explanation. I didn't ever want to go through that again. Besides, I knew there would be no good excuse if my wife caught me again.

I'd actually sworn off porn sites after that night. I deleted the bookmarks and told myself that it wasn't worth it. I realized that I loved my wife and children and didn't want to jeopardize these relationships over some nude photos.

That promise was broken in less than a week. After a particularly hard day at work, I told myself that I deserved a reward. I'd take just thirty minutes to masturbate, and then I'd go off to bed with Jeneen.

For several evenings, I kept to this 30-minute ritual. Feeling more confident now with my control over my Internet usage, I decided to give myself an hour each evening. A few weeks passed, and before I knew it, I was online for hours on end again each evening. I was online until two, three, even four in the morning. I just didn't know where the time was going. What felt like an hour just suddenly turned into three or four. I was searching for just the right woman, just the right look to masturbate to before going to bed. At times, I felt like this Internet thing was spiraling out of control.

I felt extreme anticipation and excitement when I first went online in the evening, the concentration and thrill increasing as I searched various websites and found new ones. But after I masturbated, I felt awful. I had so many harsh feelings and was angry for wasting so much time. I felt ashamed and guilty that I had done this again. And worst of all, I felt helpless and full of despair because I realized I didn't know how or when I would be able to stop. Exhausted and beaten down, I quietly slipped into bed, wondering how I was going to make it at work again on just three hours sleep.

Can you relate to Kevin's story?

Kevin isn't alone in his problems with sex and the Internet. Countless others, men and women alike, also find themselves in what seems to be a futile struggle with online sexual behavior. Mostly they struggle alone and in silence, too embarrassed or guilt-ridden to seek help, not knowing where they can find help, believing that no one else would really understand anyway. Just like Kevin, each day brings a roller coaster of emotions. Perhaps you are in a similar predicament. Have you ever done any of the following?

- kept sexual activity on the Internet a secret from family members
- carried out sexual activities on the Net at work
- frequently found yourself erasing your computer history files in an effort to conceal your activity on the Net

- felt ashamed at the thought that someone you love might discover your Internet use
- found that your time on the Net takes away from or prevents you from doing other tasks and activities
- found yourself in a kind of online trance or time warp during which hours just slipped by
- frequently visited chat rooms that are focused on sexual conversation
- looked forward to your sexual activities on the Net and felt frustrated and anxious if you couldn't get on at when you planned
- found yourself masturbating while on the Net
- recognized the girls in the interactive online video while they recognized your screen name when you signed on
- had sexual chat room friends who become more important than the family and friends in your life
- regularly visited porn sights
- downloaded pornography from a news group
- had favorite porn sites
- visited fetish porn sites
- taken part in the CuSeeMe XXX video rooms
- viewed child pornography on line

Discovering the Net's potential for sexual activity may have at first felt very exciting. After all, a new world was opening up for you ready for exploration. It may have seemed like a harmless one in which to play, to fulfill fantasies, to occasionally find sexual

gratification. It may have felt like a dream come true. But, eventually you may have found, as Kevin did, that there was a downside—a very powerful one that seemed difficult, if not impossible, to control. Even as resolutions are made to limit or stop using the Net for sex, they are rendered hollow by the echoes of previous vows and promises. “How could this be happening to me?” you may wonder. Again, you are not alone in these feelings. The power and attraction of the Internet in general, and its use for sexual activity in particular, has entered and permeated our culture subtly and with blinding speed.

A Different World

It’s almost impossible to imagine it now, but only five short years ago, most of us knew little, if anything, about this thing called the “Internet.” Today, however, its burgeoning growth and wide accessibility are altering patterns of social communication, business activity, and interpersonal relationships. An estimated 9 to 15 million people access the Internet each *day* at a rate that is growing by an estimated 25 percent every three months. Internet users spend an average of 9.8 hours per week visiting the more than 200 million web sites now in existence.

Given the dramatic pace at which this remarkable and powerful technology has entered our lives, few of us are aware that the Internet has profoundly changed many aspects of our lives. Telephones, computers, and television, once separate technologies, are merging. Our schools, work environments, and even our social lives are becoming more and more centered around computers. Five

years ago, you probably could not have imagined doing your holiday shopping online, RSVPing to a wedding invitation via e-mail, being able to send “letters” and photos in seconds to a friend on the other side of the world, or to “chat” online with five, fifty or five hundred people simultaneously. That these activities now seem commonplace indicates just how quickly we adapt to and take for granted technologies that, just a few years ago, lived only in the realms of science fiction.

While it’s not difficult to recognize technological changes, anticipating just how pervasive and profound an effect they will have is a far greater challenge. Numerous authors, including Lynn White in a classic book on the Middle Ages, *Medieval Technology and Social Change*,¹ and Alvin Toffler in *Future Shock*,² argued that new technological developments can actually create changes in human thinking patterns and in how we see the world—what are known as paradigm shifts. Who would have imagined in 1911 when the Wright brothers discovered how to build an airplane that could fly that only 75 years later, national and International flight would be commonplace. That a world without electricity, telephone, radio and television is almost unimaginable today is testimony to the profound effect these technologies had on the human race in less than a century. Our world is absolutely dependent on them. Yet at the time of their discovery, these inventions seemed little more than oddities developed by eccentric inventors.

What effect has the Internet had on society since it began being used by the general public in the early 1990s? It’s difficult to know now, but the speed at which it has penetrated our culture is an

indication of its power. As you know, sexuality is one important aspect of our lives that is being dramatically affected by the Internet. Mention “cybersex” and the response you’ll receive will be, more often than not, a chuckle and a lewd comment. Such reactions do not, however, come from anyone who is familiar with the reality of sex and the Internet. Access to the Internet, and more specifically sex on the Internet, is on the rise in America. Access to these sex-related web sites by children and teens also appears to be on the rise—and is illegal. Hundreds of thousands of adult oriented web sites are readily accessible to online users by simply typing the word “sex” in one of the many search engines available to Internet users. In fact, the word “sex” is one of the most frequently typed words in search engines. (The only words more common than “sex” are “and” and “the.”) Without parental control, a young boy or girl can be exposed to unsolicited e-mails inviting the subscriber to an adult-oriented web site.

The statistics are as remarkable as they are surprising:

- as of January 1999, there were 19,542,710 total unique visitors per month on the top five *pay* porn websites, and there were 98,527,275 total unique visitors per month on the top five *free* porn websites
- in November 1999, Nielsen Net Ratings figures showed 12.5 million surfers visited porn sites in September from their homes, a 140 percent rise in traffic in just six months
- nearly 17percent of Internet users have problems with sex on the Net

- a profile of very severe problems with sex on the Net exists for 1 percent of Internet users—and 40percent of these extreme cases are women
- seventy percent of all e-porn traffic occurs weekdays between the hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m.
- there are 100,000 websites dedicated to selling sex in some way—this does not include chat rooms, e-mail, or other forms of sexual contact on the Web
- about 200 sex-related websites are added each day
- sex on the Internet constitutes the third largest economic sector on the Web. (software and computers being first and second) generating \$1 billion annually
- the greatest technological innovations on the Web were developed by the sex industry (video streaming is one example)

It is easy to categorize online sexual behaviors as either all “good” or all “bad.” The Internet, however, is a communications tool that is inherently neither good nor bad. It is, rather, the interaction of the content offered by its creators (those who host web sites, post to news groups, organize chatrooms, and so on) and the ways Internet users of these electronic meeting sites react and respond to these messages, images, and sounds that result in “good” or “bad” outcomes.³ Some social scientists have noted the educational potential of the Internet, citing the greater availability of information about sexuality and the potential for more candid discussions of sexuality online. The Internet can also offer the

opportunity for forming online or virtual “communities” in which isolated or disenfranchised people can communicate with one another about sexual topics.

Far more often, however, an increasing and rapidly growing number of people find that using the Internet for sexual purposes is fraught with risks and, at the very least, interfering with many aspects of their lives, including family relationships, work life, and financial security.

Three people share their experiences here. [Please note that while the stories used in this book are true, they have been altered as needed to protect individual anonymity.]

Carl, a parole officer, tells his story:

I had worked for several years as a parole officer and recently I'd been seeing more sex offenders, some of whom had been using the Internet in their crimes. I hadn't really known of or thought about the Internet's potential for sexual activity or encounters until I talked with my clients and their caseworkers. Curious about the cybersex scene, I went online a few times at work just to see what sexual content was actually available on the Net. My superiors were aware of my sex activities on the Net and accepted them as necessary for my job. After a few months passed, I was still surfing sex-related sites at work. What's more, the time I spent online had been inching up. One day, I'd been online exploring sex-related sites for nearly an hour. My boss noticed, and