

Cybersex – What is it Exactly?

by Elizabeth Kwasniewski

For many years now, the Internet has been transforming every aspect of our lives, from the way we do business and communicate with others to how we do research and shop around the world without leaving the comfort of our computers. We can find whatever we want on the Internet, including sex.

Sex on the Internet, or cybersex, is big business. Free from censorship and control, the adult entertainment industry is extremely lucrative – its total revenue for 2006 was estimated at \$13.3 billion in the United States and \$97 billion worldwide. For some people, easy, anonymous and immediate access to cybersex sometimes creates a problem. Its pull can be so powerful that - like alcohol or other drugs - it's hard to resist and control.

Cybersex comes in almost any shape imaginable: pornography, live online sex shows, interactive adult chat rooms that let people meet online partners to discuss sexual fantasies and fetishes, or web cams that allow users to view each other in real time. The powerful world of cybersex intrudes into peoples' lives undermining careers, families and relationships. For some, cybersex gradually turns into a compulsive or addictive behavior. Similar to compulsive gambling, Internet addiction is viewed as an impulse-control disorder that does not involve an intoxicant. It shares the characteristics of other addictions – increased tolerance with use, loss of control and withdrawal.

Daniel's Story

For many months, Daniel was surfing pornographic sites on the Internet. Almost every night, he was glued to the computer screen until two or three in the morning in spite of the promises he made to himself to spend online only an hour at a time. Lost in the stream of tantalizing images of women and men, Daniel spent most of his time isolated in his home office with the computer, locked away from his wife and children. Curiosity led him to frequent adult chat rooms where he initiated contact with dozens of lonely women. Depending on his mood or his interest in the sexual scenarios being played out, he'd move from room to room and partner to partner. This is where he first met Anne. They fast became friends and they gradually progressed from casual conversation to sharing their sexual fantasies. Chatting with her and playing out his fantasies was erotically stimulating to Daniel. His anticipation and excitement were at their peak as he'd rush from work to his home office to log on and chat with Anne. Finally, Daniel persuaded Anne to get a web cam so that he could watch her in real time; later on they progressed into intense virtual lovemaking sessions. Having discovered his "ideal" relationship, he lost sexual interest in his wife. Daniel did not need her presence or touch any more.

Daniel's story illustrates the plight of many men and women who often find out that cybersex could be more alluring and sexually fulfilling than they had first imagined. This discovery may come at a big price.

Daniel's habit created harsh arguments with his wife who was hurt by his isolation and neglect, his lies and mood swings, his snapping and yelling at family members if bothered while online. When his secret was discovered by accident, his wife was first

shocked. Then she felt betrayed, enraged, devalued, deceived, hopeless, confused, and ashamed. Their marriage came to a severe crisis.

Where Do I Go For Help?

Dependent/compulsive online users are gradually gaining recognition in the mental health community as clinicians are seeing more and more cases of Internet addiction in their practices. Healing from Internet/cybersex compulsion has to involve three separate, yet interrelated components: the online user's recovery, the partner's recovery, and the recovery of their relationship.

Sex Addicts Anonymous or other 12-step programs could help individuals with symptoms of cybersex addiction. Following the 12-step model, the first and perhaps most important step in your recovery process is an honest acknowledgement that your use of the Internet has become abusive, that some areas in your life have suffered as a result and the resulting shame arising from this must be addressed. Then, the dysfunctional behavior must stop as well as any dishonesty and/or blame directed at your partner. Spouses or partners of addicts are urged to start working on themselves by focusing on their own needs and desires rather than on fixing or controlling the addict. Therapeutic work is instrumental in healing a spouse's damaged self-esteem and in learning how to set appropriate boundaries between oneself and the user's involvement with the computer. To the extent that both men and women can better understand where their partners are coming from with regard to cybersex, they will be in a better position to start the harrowing journey toward rebuilding a relationship based on trust and accountability.