

Large study of Internet use finds 6 percent are addicts

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SECTION: State and Regional

LENGTH: 522 words

DATELINE: BOSTON

Almost 6 percent of Internet users suffer from some form of addiction to it, according to the largest study ever of such people.

"Marriages are being disrupted, kids are getting into trouble, people are committing illegal acts, people are spending too much money. As someone who treats patients, I see it," said David Greenfield, the therapist and researcher who did the study.

The findings, which were released Sunday at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, appear likely to bolster the expanding acceptance of compulsive Internet use as a real psychological disorder.

Kimberly Young, a pioneer in the new field of research, said the latest study is so broad that it "adds a layer of legitimacy to the concern that Internet addiction is real."

However, the 6 percent figure is lower than some estimates of 10 percent or more stemming largely from research on college students.

Greenfield, a psychologist in West Hartford, Conn., carried out the study jointly with ABC News. He collected 17,251 responses to an Internet use questionnaire distributed and returned through the Web site ABCNEWS.com.

He adapted his questions from a widely used set of criteria for gambling addiction. For example, the questionnaires asked if participants had used the Internet to escape from their problems, tried unsuccessfully to cut back, or found themselves preoccupied with the Internet when they were no longer at the computer.

As with gamblers, participants who answered "yes" to at least five of 10 such questions are viewed as addicted. A total of 990 participants, or 5.7 percent, did answer "yes" to five or more questions. With an estimated 200 million Internet users worldwide, that would mean that 11.4 million are addicts.

The question about using the Internet as an escape yielded more "yes" answers than any other: 30 percent.

Greenfield's analysis of the data suggests that Internet users' feelings of intimacy, timelessness and lack of inhibition all contribute to the addictive force of the Internet.

"There's a power here that's different than anything we've dealt with before," said Greenfield.

Researchers say the 6 percent figure is one of the best estimates yet, but did caution that it is based on a group of people who use only one Web site, however broadly aimed. The questionnaire also followed ABC News coverage on Internet addiction, so relatively more compulsive users might have been drawn to the survey.

Greenfield, though, argued that his estimate is conservative. Just as a drug is most addictive when absorbed directly into the bloodstream, he said, the Internet's potential for abuse will grow with modem speeds and ease of access.

Researchers said Internet addiction will ultimately be broken down into several categories, perhaps revolving around sex and relationships, consumerism, gambling, stock trading, and obsessive Internet surfing for its own sake.

Therapists at the psychology meeting said they have successfully treated some Internet addicts, often with a mix of talking sessions and programs aimed more narrowly at reducing a sharply defined set of behaviors.