LEARN TO MANAGE YOUR INTERNET USE

COUNSELLING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES (CAPS)

THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY
The Internet is a part of everyday life and there’s an endless number of places where we can spend our time online! The internet makes our lives easier, we get what we want quickly, and find fun at the touch of a keyboard. However, sometimes the internet can also get in the way of us living our lives well and can even threaten the potential to succeed at university.

These pages will provide you with some invaluable tips to help you to better manage your internet use.
To what degree have the Internet and social media penetrated our lives? A recent survey found that more than 1 in 10 people under 25 would actually stop during sex to respond to an online message or alert!

Could it be that there are times when the Internet really gets in the way of us living well? Could it sometimes even threaten our potential to succeed at Uni?

If you’re reading this you’re probably already wondering about the impact the Internet might be having on your well-being. Maybe you’re getting that feeling that the Internet is taking over your life. We can probably all see at least a little of ourselves in this comical take on obsession with social media. Take a look at the video above.

Did you see a hint of your own experience in that clip?!! If yes, and you are concerned that the Internet is getting in the way of your living better - read on! This “Learn To” will help you work out how much of a problem your internet use is for you and show you some effective ways of dealing with it.
Can using the Internet in certain ways really be understood as an addiction?
Internet addiction is not yet formally classified as a psychiatric disorder like alcohol or substance dependence. However, as the research accumulates, persistent overuse of the Internet is increasingly being understood in this way because of its detrimental effects on many people's functioning and well-being.

However, just because you may spend large amounts of time doing a particular activity, it doesn’t necessarily mean you’re addicted. It doesn’t even mean it has to be a problem. The important questions are: to what degree does it negatively impact upon your life?...what is the cost involved in your Internet use?...and are you really willing to continue paying that price?
A good starting point in exploring these questions is to get the perspectives of others. Here’s one article which talks of the difficulties a student faced with Internet addiction. Since you’re probably on Facebook anyway, also check out this page for reSTART, an Internet addiction recovery programme, where people from the online community share stories, information and advice with others who are struggling with their Internet use.

WHAT ARE THE WARNING SIGNS OF EXCESSIVE INTERNET USE?
Consider these questions to see if you are experiencing any of the warning signs of Internet addiction or overuse:
– Do you feel preoccupied with the Internet (think about previous on-line activity or anticipate the next on-line session)?
– Do you feel restless, moody, depressed, or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop Internet use?
– Do you stay on-line longer than originally intended?
– Have you jeopardised or risked the loss of a significant relationship, job, educational or career opportunity because of the Internet?
– Have you lied to family members, a partner, or others to conceal the extent of involvement with the Internet?
– Do you use the Internet as a way of escaping from problems or of relieving uncomfortable emotions (e.g. feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety, depression)?

If you answered ‘yes’ to any of these, maybe take the Internet Addiction Test to get a picture of how severe these difficulties might be.

For a lighter perspective on how to spot excessive Internet/social media use check out this article on ‘Facebook Syndrome’.

So, by now you may be facing up to the uncomfortable reality that the Internet really is getting in the way of living your life well. Below is a range of strategies that people find helpful in changing their excessive Internet use.

1. Reconnect with other meaningful activities
Start by writing down a list of things that you used to do before you got tangled up in Facebook or Myspace, etc. Think about the activities you used to enjoy, that helped you relax, or gave you a sense of meaning in your life. As you complete this exercise you might be surprised at how much you do not do now because you are spending so much time on the Internet. Begin to correct that imbalance by starting to re-introduce those other activities into your daily and weekly routine.

2. Write down exactly how much time you spend on each site
This task is more difficult than you might think. Usually we have a work window open, a Facebook window open and then maybe some windows with our favourite blogs waiting for them to update. What you need to do is note down at what time you open each window. Then when you close the window you need to write the time down again. At the end of the day add up how much time you have been on your chosen site and record it somewhere.

As you’re doing this also think about the different types of online activities you’re engaged in, and try to record the amount of time spent doing each. This might include:
– social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, blogs)
– music and video sites (e.g. MySpace, YouTube)
– email and messaging
– interactive gaming
– newsgroups
– any other types of websites
It is helpful to know how long you have been on the sites is because it gives you a solid measure of how excessive your overuse is. Recovering gamblers do the same thing. They write down how much money they spend in a day. You need to write down your online hours!
This monitoring and increased awareness will help your hours of use decrease over the coming days, weeks, and months.
3. Use Time-Management Techniques
-Cultivate an alternative, meaningful activity. Think of a hobby or activity that you have always wanted to try and commit to doing it in place of some of the hours spent currently on the internet. The more fun things you have in your life every day, the less you will miss the constant Internet buzz and the easier it will get to ride out the urge to go back to it.

- Find external ‘stoppers’. Use the concrete things you need to do and the places you need to go as prompts to remind you when to log off the Internet, and schedule your time online just before them. If this is not effective because you ignore them, use a real alarm clock set to go off when you need to end the session. Keep it at least a few steps from the computer so you have to get up to shut it off.

- Incorporate planned Internet time into your weekly schedule. You don’t have to go “cold turkey” and quit all usage. Reduce your hours by setting specific starting and stopping times. Set a reasonable goal, perhaps 20 hours a week online if you currently devote 40 hours. Instead of “One day at a time,” practice “One time a day.” Try using this schedule to help plan your time.

4. Block Internet sites the REAL way
Your computer allows you to block certain sites. Sure, you can unblock them straight away if you wanted to but the more barriers you put in your way the better. So you can remove bookmarks, deactivate accounts etc.

But, if you want to seriously block these sites from your computer you can do it the REAL way:

- Click START and then select RUN.
- In that box type notepad c:\WINDOWS\system32\drivers\etc\hosts
- A little Notepad will appear with a bunch of computer jargon on it.
- Scroll down to the last line of that code and type 127.0.0.1 facebook.com
- After that, Facebook will never show up on your PC again.
- You can substitute the domain for any other domain that you do not want to view.

5. Meditate when thoughts or urges arise
One of the most powerful ways to untangle yourself from the Internet is to look directly at the tempting thought as soon as it arises in your mind. You do not need to judge it or try to push it out – just look at it, acknowledge it and try to accept it. We call this the practice of ‘mindfulness’ and it is often cultivated through meditation.

The thought might arise as a worrying thought that begs you to check your updates so you don’t offend anyone. Or it might appear as a carefree thought saying, “one quick look won’t hurt”. It will probably be accompanied by that familiar pull to start surfing.

What you probably don’t realise is that if you cultivate the skill of simply observing your experience without acting, those urges pass and you can be freed up to do other things. Meditation doesn’t have to mean sitting at the top of a mountain in the lotus position. There are many simple, practical ways to use mediation practices to promote your wellbeing in your everyday life. If you’re interested in finding out more about this perhaps start with this animated introduction to the key concepts from the meditation experts Headspace. If this seems like something you could find useful maybe try their free, introductory course, available online or as an iPhone app.

For a quick taster, have a listen to our example of the Guided Mindfulness exercise above.

You could also consider attending one of our group courses in acceptance and mindfulness skills, which run each semester.

6. Deal with your procrastination
For many people, using the Internet excessively is the way in which they avoid the boredom or stress of doing other tasks (e.g. an assignment, study for an exam). If you think this could be a reason why you use the Internet so much you’re going to need to get at the source of the problem and learn to minimise procrastination.

A good starting place could be our Learn to Deal with Procrastination self-help module. This has information, advice and specific resources to help you begin addressing the problem. You could also attend our related Skillshop to help you Get Organised, or meet with one of our counsellors.

7. Reconnect with people
Being online all the time can be a pretty isolating experience. Even if we’re connecting with people while we’re on the Internet, we’re probably still missing out on some of the richer parts of human connection that come from being physically present with other human beings. When we’ve withdrawn from our social world it can feel difficult to get back out there.

If you can, make an intention to reconnect with loved ones and friends you haven’t seen for a while. If you’re struggling to develop friendships you could get some tips from our Learn to Build and Maintain Healthy Relationships self-help module. If you find you get uncomfortable in social situations, consider coming along to our Handling Shyness skillshop to learn some ways of increasing your capacity to.

GUIDED MINDFULNESS EXERCISE

Running time: 12 min

See the audio file’s progress bar

Download the podcast

Size: 11Mb (MP3)
If after using these resources you feel you need some further help in learning to manage your Internet use or are concerned about symptoms you are experiencing, please make an appointment with one of our counsellors at Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS) or see your doctor who can provide assessment and referral to services in your local area.