

DE-LAP Zone

A Message from the Delaware Lawyers Assistance Program

Hooked on the Web

By Carol Waldhauser, Executive Director

By his own admission, James Pacenza, Sr. was spending too much time in Internet chat rooms. Moreover, he said he discussed sex in some of them. A former employee of IBM, Mr. Pacenza admits he even spent time in chat rooms during work hours, but claims his behavior was the result of an addiction and that his employer, IBM, should have offered him treatment rather than firing him. Therefore, Mr. Pacenza filed suit against IBM in the U.S. District Court, the Southern District of New York, for wrongful discharge citing age discrimination and Internet addiction.

According to suit papers, Mr. Pacenza states his use of Internet chat rooms was a form of “self medication” to treat post-traumatic stress disorder resulting from his combat experience in Vietnam. The complaint shows that on the day before he was fired, Pacenza wrote a letter to a fallen Vietnam comrade lamenting his death. Afterward, he ventured into an Internet chat room “as a brief diversion from work.” Pacenza says he was fired the next day after a supervisor learned of the activity.

On the other hand, the Defendant, IBM, says Pacenza wasn't fired specifically for using a chat room, but because “he logged on a Web site that contained sexual content on an IBM-owned computer during the workday.” IBM alleges further “the instant messages that Pacenza sent and received on the site's chat room included references to a sex act.” IBM also contends that it has treatment programs for employees “with illnesses,” but had no knowledge of Pacenza having a specific condition. The company says Pacenza was “dismissed for legitimate business reasons.”

Getting Hooked on the Web

Generally, most of us would agree the Internet has changed the way we do things. In fact, it is safe to say for many of us, the Internet is a major source of daily information and entertainment. Fortunately, for most individuals their Internet use is healthy and integrated into their lives with control. Unfortunately, for some, their time spent on the Internet is out-of-control and they are literally hooked on the Net.

Examples of out-of-control Internet behavior may include, but are not limited to: a person who may play hooky from the office or a family event just to master the level of the latest video game; a middle-age individual who spends hours shopping and buying over their means; an individual who enters a chat room compulsively throughout the day at both work and home; or the individual who cannot tear them self away from his/her financial programs and continuous Internet access to stock quotes.

In 2006, a study by Stanford University School of Medicine found that one in eight Americans exhibited signs of possible Internet addiction. Dr. Elias Aboujaoude, the study's lead author, said: “We need to consider the fact that [the Internet] creates real problems for a subset of people.” More specifically, this nationwide study found that up to 14 percent of computer users reported neglecting work, school, families, food, and sleep to use the Internet. Equally as surprising, Dr. Aboujaoude stated he was most concerned about the number of people who hid their nonessential Internet use or used the Internet to escape a negative mood, much

in the same way that alcoholics might. “In a sense, they're using the Internet to ‘self-medicate’” he said. Some say the Internet is addictive to the point where it controls one's life; others argue that the Internet is not the same as getting high or drunk to an extreme.

In another research study conducted by psychologist Kimberly S. Young, Ph.D., there were 496 heavy Internet users who participated in this study. They were compared to the clinical criteria for pathological gamblers (Young, 1996, par. 1). The reason this was done was because pathological gambling is considered the closest type of addiction to Internet addiction since it involves failed impulse control without involving an intoxicant. The participant had to meet four or more of the criteria to be classified as a “dependent” Internet user; if the participant did not meet the criteria over a 12-month period, they were considered “non-dependent” users. The research results found that of the participants there were 239 females and 157 males that met the criteria for “dependent” users while 54 females and 46 males were considered “non-dependent” users. The researchers' conclusion suggested that the dependency of the Internet on an individual can harshly “disrupt one's academic, social, financial, and occupation life” said Young, just like any other disorder; gambling, drug-use, or eating.

Generally, researchers who concur that the Internet is addictive believe that the Internet—like food and drugs, including alcohol, provide the “high” and these individuals become dependent on their use of the Internet to feel good. Suggesting further that these individuals

opt for temporary pleasure rather than the deeper qualities of “normal intimate relationship.” It is believed by many that Internet addiction follows the same progressive nature of other addictions. Internet addicts struggle to control their behaviors; they experience tolerance and withdrawal affects, similar to what an addict of any other substance goes through, and become just as isolated as other addicts. These individuals seem to be rejecting the real world and adopting the Internet as a route of escape to a mood-altering experience.

Conversely, it is suggested that the high number of individuals who use the Internet to a great extent is plausible. Dr. John Grohol suggests most individuals are said to go through phases in their discovery of the Internet and its resources. The first stage occurs when the individual is new to the environment, a newcomer, or is an existing user that finds a new activity; it is referred to as the stage of enchantment or obsession. (This is the phase that can be highly “addictive” to the individual.) Stage two is disillusion-

ment. In this stage, the individual has to become uninterested in the activity they engage in so often. Once disillusionment is accomplished, the individual can safely reach the third stage—balance. This balance symbolized a normalized usage of the Internet; it is reached at a different period by everyone and the phases can still be recycled if the individual finds another interesting new activity.

Accordingly, there seems to be no single behavior pattern that defines Internet addiction. Rather, the signs are when behaviors have taken control of people’s lives and their lives become unmanageable. More specifically, you may be hooked on the Net if you: compulsively use the Internet, you have a preoccupation with being online, you lie or hide the extent and/or nature of online use and behavior, and you are unable to control or curb your online behavior. Similarly, you may be addicted to the Internet if your Internet use pattern interferes with your life in any way, shape or form (e.g., does it impact your work, family life, relationships, school, etc?)

Similar to Mr. Pacenza, whose matter is still in litigation, if you find that you are using the Internet as a means to regularly alter your mood, you may be developing a problem. Remember, it is important to note it is not the actual time spent online that determines if you have problem, but rather how that time you spend impacts your life. Today, there is an intense debate over whether compulsive Internet use should be recognized as an addiction. For more information and a Self-Assessment Internet Addiction test visit: www.de-lap.org or call Carol Waldhauser at the Delaware Lawyers Assistance Program (DE-LAP) 302-777-0124 or 1-877-24DELAP for more information. 