



Internet-Related Problems in Couples: The New Frontier

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**WHAT HAPPENS IN SESSION
STAYS IN SESSION**



Learning Objectives

1. Participants will be able to define and provide examples of Internet-related (online) intimacy problems
2. Participants will learn the **7** vulnerabilities that contribute to Internet-related intimacy problems
3. Participants will learn the **5** common errors made in treating Internet-related intimacy problems
4. Participants will learn **3** strategies to prevent making these common errors



- Think about the last couple problem you saw with where there was an issue related to the Internet
- What were some of the key issues?

We all know an online intimacy problem when we see it...



"Didn't you get my e-mail?"





But what does it *really* mean?

- Broadly defined as interpersonal issues occurring when computer-mediated communication interferes with online relationships or offline relationships.
- Embedded within this definition are three key concepts: online, intimacy, and problems (Hertlein & Desruisseaux, in press)



“online”

- Refers to one of two circumstances
 - One’s participation in online activities to the exclusion of their primary offline relationship
- OR
- One’s engagement with another person online



“intimacy”

- Closeness, openness and vulnerability with one another
- Moss and Schwebel (1993):
 - determined by the level of commitment and positive affective, cognitive, and physical closeness one experienced with a partner in a reciprocal (although not necessarily symmetrical) relationship. (p. 33).
- Laurenceau, Feldman Barrett, and Pietromonaco (1998) found that intimacy is made up of self-disclosure and partner disclosure, which are mediated by perceived partner responsiveness.
- Ongoing (Schaefer & Olson, 1981)



“problems”

- Problematic Internet usage can mean a variety of things, from interpersonal issues (such as Internet infidelity) (Cooper, McLoughlin, & Campbell, 2000; Schneider, 2002) to unethical or criminal behavior (such as cyberstalking).
- Might involve both costs to the primary (and often offline) relationship (such as termination of the relationship) as cited by Barak and Fisher (2000) and Schneider (2002) or costs to the individual psyche, such as pronounced feelings of shame, guilt, and other complicated emotions (Cooper et al, 2000).
- Does the behavior disrupt the intimacy in the primary couple’s relationship, regardless of whether the primary relationship is facilitated offline or facilitated online?



Therefore, online intimacy problems are defined as...

- Any disruption to a couple's intimacy (defined as levels of emotional self-disclosure and the perception of a partner's responsiveness) that is facilitated, in some degree, by online activities or behavior



Examples of online intimacy problems

- Online infidelity
- Social Networking (see Cheng, Phil, Chan, & Tong, 2006, Henderson & Gilding, 2004, Rau, Gao & Ding, 2008, van Manen, 2010).
 - Development of trust, emotional support, accountability, commitment
- Online Massively Multiplayer Role Playing Gaming (Liu & Kuo 2007, Peters & Malesky, 2008)
- Others??

The Seven Factors Related to Online Intimacy Problems

Aaaaaaa...

Also known as
the Seven As

OR...

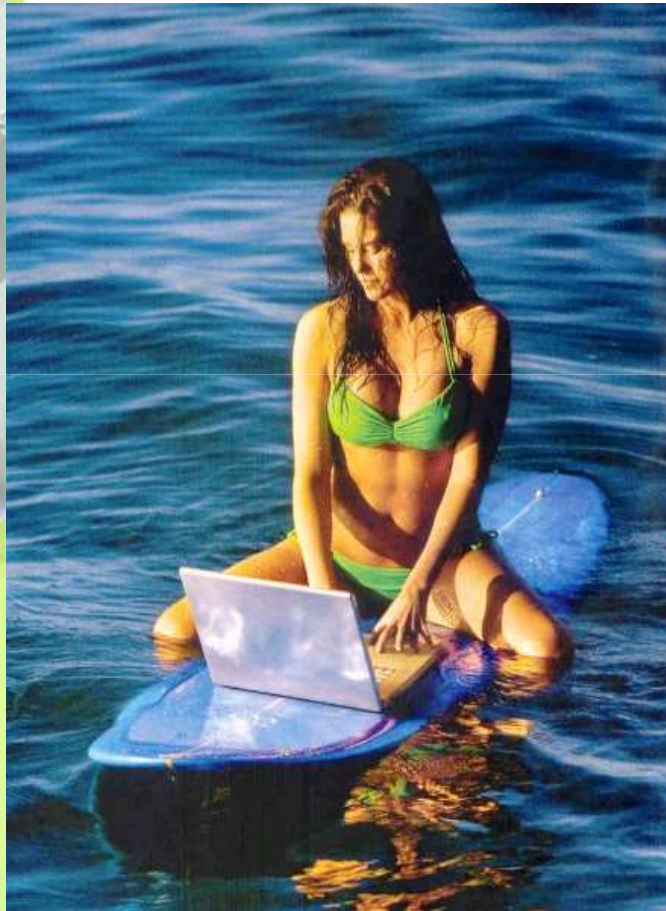


7
WAYS
THE INTERNET
IS RUINING
YOUR LIFE





#1: Accessibility



- Daily and unlimited access/opportunity from many locations-homes, workplaces, eateries, coffee shops, hospitals, PDAs and cell phones (Cooper, 2002).
- Negative work spillover (Campbell & Ling, 2009; Chelsey, 2005) = increased distress, lowered family satisfaction

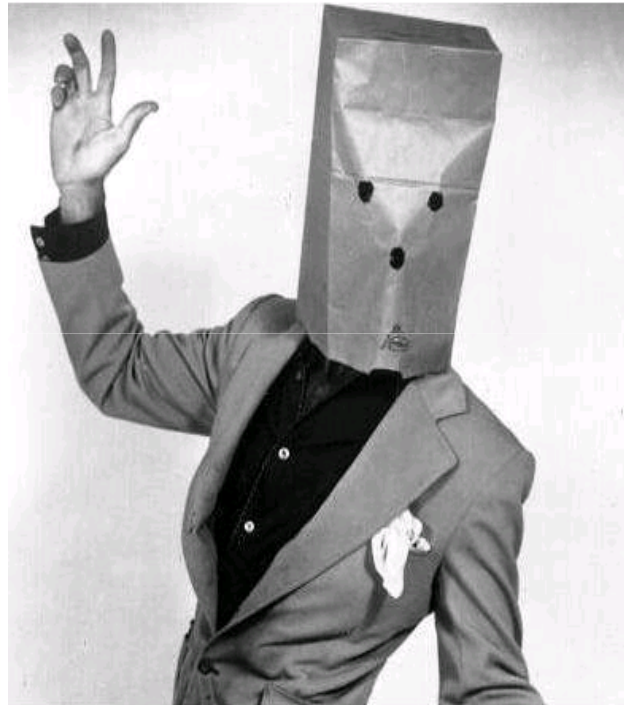


#2: Affordability

- Simple monthly service charge from an Internet service provider
- No receipts (Cooper, 2002)



#3: Anonymity



- “Enhances one’s ability to promote any chosen identity.” (Hertlein & Sendak, 2007, p. 4)
- Problems when the user decides to hide pertinent aspects of him/her in order to pursue a relationship (Cooper, 2002)





#4: Acceptability

- Much of the behavior on the Internet that has been deemed inappropriate in society has found a way to be an accepted way of life on the Internet (King, 1999)



Mike Mcmahon / AP



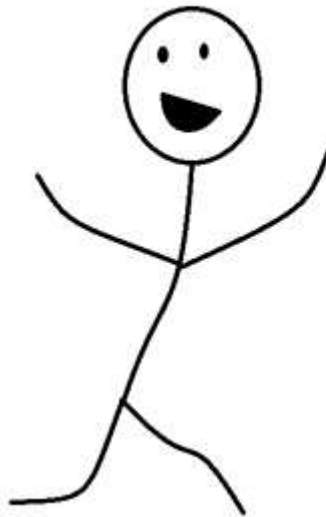
#5: Approximation

- The quality about the Internet which approximates real world situation as the internet can often be found blurring the line between fantasy and action (Ross & Kauth, 2002; Tikkanen & Ross, 2003)
- The mechanics of the message (e.g., grammar) are equally as important as the text itself (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006).

#6: Accommodation

- Internet provides greater opportunity for one to act a certain way in “real time” but have a different persona when it comes to online behavior and activities (Hertlein & Stevenson, 2010)

ONLINE PERSONALITY



REAL LIFE PERSONALITY





#7: Ambiguity

- Difficulty of defining online behaviors as problematic
- Definitions, interpretations, contracts (Hertlein & Stevenson, 2010)





Case Example

- David and Lucy have been dating for 3 years. They were considering marriage but had recently experienced some challenges that interfered with their ability to move forward.
- Lucy discovered David had been communicating with a former female co-worker online via a social networking site. These conversations had happened late at night and while she was asleep. She also discovered that he was looking up this person's picture with a Google search.
- Since then, she has become suspicious of any contact he makes with women both in email and on his cell phone. She defines the problem as infidelity; he does not, though he admits that he was attracted to this person. He has since indicated that he has stopped any communication with this person and Lucy believes him.



*Five Common Errors in
Treating Online Intimacy
Problems*



ERROR #1:

Assuming the identified patient/involved partner is addicted to the computer or sex



Three-factor model of Internet Addiction

- Obsession
- Neglect
- Control disorder
- Demetrovics, Szeredi, & Rózsa (2008)



Dimension	Internet Addiction	Internet Sex Addiction	Internet Infidelity
Involved Parties	Primarily an individual activity	Primarily an individual activity	Primarily a relational activity; generally an identifiable third person
View of Problem	Characterized by time (amount of hours) spent on the Internet	Characterized by the content of activities, online or otherwise	Characterized by the content of activities online; time spent online is primarily conducted in secret from the primary partner
Physical Symptoms	Tolerance, withdrawal are key concepts with regard to online opportunities	Tolerance, withdrawal are key concepts with regard to exposure to sexually explicit material	Tolerance, withdrawal do not play a part
Presence/Absence of Addictive Properties	Speed, accessibility, potency of information are factors	Speed, accessibility, potency of information are factors	Relationship, sexual, and connection are factors



ERROR #2:

Assuming a woman who participates in online intimacy with others online is more pathological than a man



Gender Differences

- Previous research has found that men were more likely to cheat than women (Blow & Hartnett, 2005).
- However, these differences might be evening out with the Internet
- Perhaps related to increased accessibility (Cooper, 2002)
- This error may result in treatment being geared toward more individual modalities than focusing on couple dimensions



ERROR #3:

*Treating a second-order
change problem from a
first-order change
perspective*



First vs. Second Order Change

- Therapists say...
 - Etiology of Internet infidelity is from some deficit in the couple's relationship (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008).
 - Treatment strategies such as moving the computer to another room as limiting access to the computer were reported (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008).
- Why?



Other self-of-therapist issues

- Younger therapists focus treatment on environment
- Female therapists connect problem to larger issues in the couple relationship
- More religious therapists put greater focus on environment and individual issues
- The more negative your infidelity experience with your partner, the greater focus on relational issues



ERROR #4:

*Lack of a clear definition
of the problem*



Problem Definition

- Emotional?
- Physical?
- Cybersex?
- Glass's (2002) concept of the slippery slope



ERROR #5:

*Lack of attention to potential
“self-of-therapist” issues that
might emerge*



Self-of-Therapist

- When the definition of health is narrowly defined based on biases, therapists limit their effectiveness (Bernal & Castro, 1994).
- Sexual issues in treatment are inherently value-laden
- Some variables affecting how a therapist conceptualizes and treats Internet infidelity cases include: religiosity, age of the therapist, personal experience with infidelity, and therapist gender (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008).



*Three Strategies to
Prevent Common Errors*



PREVENTION TIP #1:

Conduct a thorough assessment, including an assessment of the factors associated with intimacy



Survey says...

To what extent do you ask about the role of technology in couple treatment?

Do not see these cases	10	9.0%
Never	13	12.87%
Rarely	41	40.59%
Often	29	28.71%
Always	8	8%
TOTAL	101	

n = 101; mean = 3.12; sd = 1.06



Attending to Multiple Dimensions

- Intersystems Approach
 - Biological
 - Psychological
 - Dyadic
 - Family of Origin
 - Sociocultural
- Seven As
 - Acceptability
 - Affordability
 - Anonymity
 - Affordability
 - Approximation
 - Accommodation
 - Ambiguity



Conduct assessments when appropriate

- Consult the DSM
- Diagnostic questionnaire (Young, 1996)
- Internet-related Addictive Behavior Inventory (Brenner, 1997)
- Beard's (2005) assessment considerations work



Assessment items

- **ACCESSIBILITY:** ask what the rules around usage are in the home? Who has access to whose passwords? Normalize need for trading passwords for a while; physical boundaries versus psychological (identify the boundaries)
- **AFFORDABILITY:** Ask what is the cost to the relationship
- **ANONYMITY and ACCOMMODATION:** Ask how the individual has a need to be a certain way that is difficult in the context of the relationship.
- **ACCEPTABILITY:** Ask questions about surrounding the social network of the couple
- **APPROXIMATION:** ask about what might be good to include in the relationship that the couple is getting online
- **AMBIGUITY:** Develop a definition with a couple



PREVENTION TIP #2:

Seek out good supervision



Supervision

- Core component of managing biases in treatment is providing education (Guanipa & Woolley, 2000).
- Consider developing a network of other clinicians who are struggling with this same issue in their cases.



PREVENTION TIP #3:

*Develop a definition of
online intimacy problems
AND online intimacy
health*



Defining Issues

- Use the definition provided earlier
- Broad enough to encapsulate the betrayal and each partner's experience of what happened, but narrow enough to speak to the betrayal aspect.
- Focus on the aspects of the definition that are individual to each partner



Where do we go from here?

- MFTs have the skills and the knowledge to make a contribution to understanding more about how these issues impact couples and families
- This is just a smaller picture of a larger puzzle



Where do we go....*(cont.)*

- A larger picture of the impact is to help people understand how advances in new media contribute to more intimacy in a relationship or detract from intimacy in a relationship
- Recently developed multitheoretical framework may address this (Hertlein, in press)



Questions? Comments?

