



THE SCOTSMAN
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Clicking the habit

JESSICA KIDDLE

GAZING longingly at a pair of suede Gina kitten heels on her computer screen, Tracey's heart flutters as she waits to make her final bid. It is 4am and there are two hours of the eBay auction left. The shoes are a dinky size three and could be hers for the bargain price of £149. Tracey wears a size seven, but it doesn't matter. She wants them and is willing to stay up to make the winning bid.

Tracey is not a real person, but this scenario is a realistic illustration of what is going on in the houses of internet addicts across the country. Their vice might not be alcohol or food, but the dependency some people have on the "high" they get from either buying that online bargain, gambling, or just spending hours surfing the net, posting to blogs, instant messaging, taking part in video games or looking at porn is no less potent.

In America, specialists at the Internet/Computer Addiction Services, a therapy clinic in Redmond, Washington, estimate that between 6 and 10 per cent of the country's 189 million internet users have a destructive relationship with the web of the kind that alcoholics share with the bottle. And, although there are no specific figures for the UK yet, experts report that the number of internet addicts here is currently rising at a rate that is causing concern.

Andrew Poole, the online services co-ordinator for the UK gambling charity GamCare, is one of those who are concerned. "Like online shopping, remote gambling on a mobile phone, on television or on the internet is still in its infancy, so the prevalence of addiction is still relatively low compared to the conventional types of gambling," he says. "However, the numbers are definitely increasing and the burgeoning number of treatment centres popping up in the UK show that a growing number of internet addicts need help."

Like any other form of addiction, it takes a long time for people to admit they have a problem, which, says Poole, might account for the relatively low number of known net addicts in the UK. But with the huge rise in online shopping (according to the Office for National Statistics, UK shoppers spent £4.98 billion online last Christmas) and internet-based casinos (Poole says there are now 2,000 online gambling sites), a new wave of addicts is being formed.

"Although poker is a game of skill, online versions of games such as roulette and dice are very dangerous and I wish they'd never been invented," says the journalist and poker commentator Victoria Coren, who is herself a regular online poker player. "It's all down to luck, and you can become addicted to winning or losing at the touch of a button. It's a form of madness."

The removal of cash makes online gambling even more dangerous. "Online casinos are the Holy Grail of gambling for the industry," Coren says. "Chips were invented because players forgot they equate to playing with real money; electronic money is even less real."

Stories of addicts getting into financial difficulties because of their online gambling or shopping are increasingly common.

In March this year, 25-year-old Richard Mahan from Aberdeen was charged with charged with 21 counts of fraud at Forfar Sheriff Court when he was found to have run up debts of around £80,000 on his mother's credit card after he accessed gaming sites on the internet.

However, a few late-night eBay purchases or a handful of losses on a game of roulette does not an addict make. So says James Gray, a 30-year-old farmer from Essex, who has made thousands of pounds buying and selling saxophones on eBay. Gray's main reason for logging on is making money or saving it by buying household items at a discounted price - not because he can't stop. He says, though, that he can see how the quest for a bargain can turn into an obsession.

"You get a massive kick from buying on eBay, especially when you enter the winning bid with only seconds to go," says Gray who, when his eBay trading was at its peak, could spend up to four hours a day on the site.

"It's a rush you could definitely get addicted to: a few years ago, when I was trading a lot, I would write the closing times in my diary so I could set my alarm for the end of an auction. I would write this information in code, though, so my wife wouldn't know what I was doing."

Gray would even bargain-hunt while on holiday. "I would always have to find an internet café," he says. "In 2002, when I proposed to my then girlfriend up a hill in Croatia, I had to persuade her to go back into the town for a bottle of bubbly so I could put in a bid for a saxophone. I am not an addict because I am in control, and now I have a child and a business to run I don't buy and sell so often. Admittedly, it is a hobby that takes up more of my time than it should."

But when does a healthy interest in online activities become an unhealthy one - and then tip over into addiction? It is a fine line, but the latter is defined by a psychological dependency, a compulsive need to log on and play or buy. There are many warning signs: feeling a sense of euphoria while sitting at the computer, preferring to spend time online rather than with friends or family, feeling moody and irritable when not at the keyboard, craving to get back to it.

Psychologists also believe that it is the consequences, not the act itself, which defines an addict. In other words, someone who likes to gamble online is not necessarily an addict. Someone who gambles away his worldly possessions, and then borrows money from friends and family to continue playing, is.

Why are so many people succumbing to online addictions? It isn't the internet that is the problem but the people who use it, says Poole, because the internet is simply another medium through which "addictive personalities" get hooked on a habit. For the majority of users, online shops offer a practical service and online gambling is a form of harmless entertainment.

"With an addiction, the particular activity has to be the single most important thing in that person's life, at the expense of everything else, where they will use it as a form of escape and experience withdrawal symptoms if they don't do it," says Dr Robert Lefever, the director of the Promis Recovery Centre in Kent. "People are born predisposed to addiction," he says. "Between 10-15 per cent of us have addictive personalities."

However, the internet can ease the way for potential addicts. **Dr Maressa Hecht Orzack**, the director of the Computer Addiction Study Center at the **McLean Hospital** in Massachusetts says it's all down to the "three As: anonymous, affordable and accessible."

"I am not so sure about the 'affordable' bit," says Poole, "because you can spend pennies or hundreds of pounds, but accessibility and anonymity do play a part. The accessibility is a problem for those who are vulnerable. It's there all the time, and because many people have computers in their houses it means those who have an addictive nature can get their fix when and where they want it."

Nowhere offers anonymity like the web, either. "Forty per cent of all gambling done online is done by women. This is probably because there is a stigma attached to a women walking into a betting shop; they may prefer to do it in private at home."

David Findlay, 28, a poker player from Edinburgh, agrees. "I was amazed by the ease of access and I could see how someone could very quickly become addicted. Where I had seen poker as a night-time activity, I could now play at 11am. I could wake up, sign on and be sitting gambling in my pyjamas three minutes later.

"It's easy to sit at the computer and lose track of time. There have been times that I have played for about ten hours a day. The ease of access financially is another factor that can make it easy to lose money. Like all gambling, you have to know when to walk away, and that can be harder when you're sitting in front of a computer screen."

Despite the risks the internet poses for addictive personalities, there still seems to be a reluctance in some quarters to recognise it. Not so long ago, saying you were "an addict" would usually mean you were either an alcoholic or a heroin user. Now the term embraces shopping, sex, eating, obsessive compulsive disorder, computer gaming, internet surfing and gambling. This growing list is forcing sceptics to ask if these new forms of addiction are actually real, or are they just giving those with little self-control a label to hide behind?

"New forms of addiction, such as online gambling are real addictions," says Ann Jones, the head counsellor and cognitive behavioural therapist at Gordon House in the West Midlands, a specialist provider of residential treatment for addicted gamblers. "In fact, in many ways an addiction to an online activity is worse, because the internet is there all the time."

A growing number of therapists and rehabilitation clinics are treating addicts, often using a 12-step programme similar to that used by Alcoholics Anonymous. In China, the Beijing Military Clinic, the country's first internet clinic, is often fully booked and is reportedly getting 200 more beds this year to accommodate the growing number of young game and chatroom addicts checking in.

"It should be treated like any other addiction and that's what we do at Gordon House," says Jones. "We recommend that people block access to the particular sites on their computer and go cold turkey. We also recommend that they attend GA meetings, where they can talk about their story, as well as attend our counselling sessions. There are also online support groups to which we can direct people. However, for serious addictions we recommend the nine-month residential treatment. This is an intensive programme consisting largely of one-to-one cognitive therapy sessions, whereby we look at the underlying issues of why that person became an addict and encourage them to take responsibility for their actions."

"Our programmes are always oversubscribed," she says. "More services to help people struggling with these new addictions are desperately needed: the number of addicts continues to grow and grow."