

by Kevin Roberts

Getting Beyond



UNLIKE MANY MEMBERS OF MY FAMILY AND OVER HALF I dodged the bullet of substance abuse.* Having witnessed the effects of a different sort: between 1993 and 2003, I logged over 14,000 hours became an all-encompassing obsession.



One of my worst binges came after a student gave me the game *Age of Empires*. The moment I installed it on my computer, the game became my life. One weekend, I told everybody that I was out of town and sank into the game. A persistently ringing phone jolted me out of my trance. It was Doug, a childhood friend who rented a room next door. "I'm aware what's going on over there," he declared.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I hedged, my right hand continuing to work the mouse.

"Well, you might have fooled me," Doug said, "except for one miscalculation: You should have turned down the speakers. The sound is traveling through your walls into my living room!" The noise bothered him less than my attempt to lie to him. He refused to let me isolate myself.

"How long have you been playing?" he asked.

"I don't know," I replied—truthfully.

"It's noon right now," he went on. "Have you been to bed yet?"

To my chagrin, I realized I had spent twenty-six hours immersed in the game.

Recovery

Such binges—the longest lasting forty-nine hours—took their toll on my mental and physical health. Excessive playing and Internet use gave me carpal tunnel syndrome and persistent back pain. They have been a significant barrier to friendships, relationships, and jobs.

* Biederman, J., Monuteaux, M., Spencer, T., Wilens, T., MacPherson, H., & Faraone, S. (2008). "Stimulant therapy and risk for subsequent substance use disorders in male adults with ADHD: a naturalistic controlled 10-year follow-up." *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 165(5), 597-603.

I would chat all night online with "friends" all over the world to the detriment of going out with friends in the here and now. I was shocked to realize how much of my adult life centered on video games and the Internet.

Finally, in 2003, I could no longer ignore the discomfort and dissatisfaction of my unrealized dreams. Through therapy, weekend retreats, and support from my family and friends, I started a program of recovery. Early in my recovery, I saw the link between my addiction and my ADHD. In *Driven to Distraction* by Edward Hallowell and John Ratey (Touchstone, 1995), I discovered my ADHD-driven need for constant mental stimulation. I gravitated to games because they offered an uninterrupted flow of challenges and rewards that roused me in ways that the mundane and repetitive rhythms of life did not.

Such is the case for most of the folks I see professionally. I developed the curriculum and am a teacher for a program called EmpowerADD to teach people affected by ADHD, mostly high school and college students, the skills they need to succeed. Almost ninety percent of our participants are excessive Internet, computer, or video game users. Their struggles in school contrast sharply with their achievements in the cyberworld.

Like many in the program, sixteen-year-old Ryan belonged to a clan, a group of online "friends" who assemble every night to fight, adventure, and explore. Ryan has trouble getting up in the morning and arriving on time to school, but is always prompt for online game meetings. He plans missions and organizes patrols in the cyberworld, while never developing his ability to problem solve and organize the details of real life. He has totally mastered many games while failing classes and neglecting the important people in his life.

Games like *Halo*, *Call of Duty*, *The Sims*, and *World of Warcraft* take center stage for

kids like Ryan. As their bodies, responsibilities, and relationships suffer, they continue to game. Their immense talents and potential stagnate. They prefer their games to everything and everyone else in their lives. Often, this singular, cyber-oriented focus is just the tip of the iceberg: many game-addicted adolescents and adults with ADHD also have anxiety and social issues that they are not confronting, as well as a variety of

Takeaways

A problem may exist if:

- ▶ You (or your loved one) spend more than two hours a day on cyber-related pastimes.
- ▶ You (or a loved one) have turned away from family, friends, and other interests that were once enjoyable in favor of "screen time."
- ▶ If excessive cyberactivities continue in spite of negative consequences, such as physical pain, poor performance in work or school, or damage to relationships.

If you suspect a problem:

- ▶ Consider bringing in a therapist to help you and your loved one work through any underlying issues.
- ▶ Realize that if screen time is curtailed or eliminated, you have to find adventure, interaction and excitement in the real world. Otherwise, you risk relapse or picking up another addiction!

Remember that cyberaddicts are often creative and highly intelligent. Help them find ways of channeling their gifts in real time.

Cyberaddiction

ADHD, Addiction, and the Cyberworld



OF UNTREATED ADULTS WITH ADHD,
substance abuse, I succumbed to temptation
playing computer games. A casual amusement

unexamined emotional and self-esteem-related problems. Excessive gaming only makes these issues worse.

MySpace, Facebook, Twitter and simply surfing the Internet also entrance many a person with ADHD. Madison, a seventeen-year-old EmpowerADD participant, had a superior IQ but was failing three classes. On my recommendation, her mother examined her iPhone use. During the school day, the young lady sent an average of seventy-five text messages and over a hundred Facebook messages. Her clandestine in-class iPhone use let her evade the boredom she felt in school, allowing her to escape her problems, rather than confront them.

Most individuals with ADHD find sitting through classes incredibly frustrating. The environment feels counter to most, if not all, of our perceptual, communicative and learning-style preferences. We become bored, restless and irritated. The cyberworld's endless supply of constantly changing stimuli offers a welcome respite.

But, like anything rewarding or pleasurable, it can be taken to extremes. Those of us with ADHD have brains that make us particularly susceptible to addiction. I regularly deal with teens who have used marijuana and alcohol, but cyber-related obsessions represent the most common barrier to success. The problem has grown so much in recent years that I have started running support groups for cyberaddicts.

Achieving balance

As my own history demonstrates, the creativity and spirit of adventure that many people with ADHD possess can be consumed by the cyberworld. We find our games, social net-

working sites, and Internet surfing so satisfying that these behaviors become embedded in what scientists call the *reward circuitry* of our brains. We become dependent on the jolt they give to our brains. When our access is taken away, we go through withdrawal, experiencing physical and emotional discomfort. Many of us become full-fledged addicts.

The good news is that the world needs cyber-adept people. Commerce, communication, and marketing are increasingly transacted online. Parents whose children are cyber-oriented and have ADHD need to recognize the value of this interest. Video games, the Internet, and the computer can be the most powerful rewards for these children. This is particularly poignant since it can be difficult to find rewards that will motivate them. I recommend that screen time be linked to a variety of desirable behaviors including homework completion, household chores, and respectful conduct. I also suggest that parents buy aerobic video games like *Dance, Dance Revolution*, and link screen time with exercise.

The benefits of the cyberworld are numerous, but we must be cognizant of achieving balance. If a child seems drawn to the adventure of the cyberworld, it is important to help him or her find adventure in the real world. Twelve-year-old Tyler was hooked on squad level shooting games like *Call of Duty*. His father got him interested in paintball, which became a biweekly father-and-son activity. Tyler did not stop playing video games, but after a few months of paintball his father noticed that the boy tired more quickly of video games and it became easier to get him off a game.

The father of a discovery-oriented eleven-year-old excessive gamer, Will, started taking his son on adventure bike rides. They



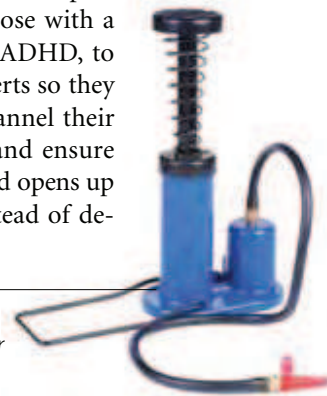
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joined a group of “urban explorers” who regularly rode through rarely-seen parts of the city of Detroit: old industrial sections, unused railroad networks, and historic districts. Will loved it. His father bought a GPS which they used to plan rides all through the metro area. Will's father found a way to engage the boy's love of exploration in real-time. He also got him out of the house for some much-needed exercise, and probably prevented a full-blown addiction.

If your child is already addicted, seek the advice of a therapist before you confront the addiction. The circuits of our brains can become intertwined in the characters and events of a magical reality. The games and social networking profiles become extensions of ourselves. We chase rewards in our games and amass friends in our online networks with the same intensity that people pursue food when they are hungry. The cyberworld can completely absorb the motivational circuitry of our minds. When you attempt to help a cyberaddict, you must realize that you are battling fundamental forces within the brain.

By and large, people with ADHD love the cyberworld. Given the structure of our brains, however, we can easily become addicted. I strongly advise parents, especially those with a child affected by ADHD, to become cyberexperts so they can effectively channel their child's potential and ensure that the cyberworld opens up opportunities instead of destroying them. ●



With a background in education, **Kevin Roberts** has been an ADHD and academic coach for the last thirteen years. A speaker at national conferences, he is the curriculum writer and developer of the sixteen-module program EmpowerADD, and the author of the forthcoming *Cyber Junkie: Escape the Gaming and Internet Trap* (Hazelden, September 2010).