

Video Transcript: About Behavioural Addictions Video Series – Episode 3: Caught on the Net

How often have you seen someone walking down the street completely absorbed in their smartphone until...oops!

Hi. I'm Bruce Ballon, a psychiatrist working with the Problem Gambling Institute on Ontario at CAMH, and the host of this series on behavioural addictions.

For this third episode, I'm talking to people about their online behaviour as we explore the question, 'Can you actually be addicted to the internet?'

Interviewer: Do you mind if I ask you how many minutes you use the internet for during the day?

Woman 1: A lot. A lot.

Woman 2: Five hours.

Man 1: Eight hours a day.

Woman 3: Probably ten or twelve hours a day.

Woman 4: Probably ten to twelve, yeah.

Interviewer: Are you surprised by that?

Woman 3: I'm a little grossed out, yes.

Interviewer: Do you think that's a lot?

Man 1: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: Do you think that's a lot?

Woman 1: Yeah! Yeah, absolutely.

Woman 4: I have a hunch because I'm like this all the time, but...

Interviewer: And do you think that's a lot?

Woman 3: Compared to everyone else? No, probably not.

Man 2: You go on one thing, then another thing, jump, want to check the other thing, and you look at the time, it's four hours.

Interviewer: And are you surprised by how much you use the Internet?

Woman 2: No, I can't live without it.

Man 3: When you ask me the question, I realize it's quite a lot, in fact. Yeah.

These people are no exception. We live in a wired world, and in fact Canada is leading the way. Recent research shows that Canadians spend more time online than people in 11 other countries studied. And the average youth spends 7.5 hours online every day.

Let's face it: we live in the 21st century. Using the Internet for the most part can be very beneficial. We can connect globally on projects, monitor our health, meet new friends, date, bank, shop, and learn. Virtual is becoming the new reality.

But technology also has its down side: information overload, distracted driving, increased access to online gambling, and fatigue from staying up too late gaming or binge-watching.

Since technology is here to stay, how do we make sure we don't get too caught up in it? First of all, it can be helpful to set some boundaries. Decide how long you want to spend on the net each day. Establish some down times, such as no smart phones at the dinner table. Try putting your tech to bed before you. Schedule a time when you can totally unplug.

Next, recognize that behaviours fall along a continuum, from where you don't do the activity at all, to where your whole life revolves around it, similar to substance abuse or dependence. But addiction is a powerful word, and we should all be very careful when we use it. More practically, it's the behaviour that will tell if there's a problem.

Think of it this way: are you stuck in the behaviour, so that it's running you, rather than you're in control of it. That's what the concept of addiction is trying to get at. If someone is gambling, gaming, shopping, social networking, or watching online porn or entertainment, are they doing it for fun, or are they developing a need for it, experiencing cravings, preoccupied and stuck, with all of those neurotransmitters saying "Go!", and you can't work the brake that says "No!": it's when the behaviour becomes the thing you have to do, even when it's costing you in other ways that are important, such as sleep, or personal connections, or work, or other forms of play. That's when the behaviour's playing you more than you're playing it. Recognizing you're stuck is a big moment. Hold that thought. It could be the start of a turnaround.

And more and more, we are seeing these problems, which traditionally we thought people had to take drugs to have happen to them, occurring in behaviours that don't require you to consume drugs, to get your brain to become wired and hooked on experiences. It's because they are rewarding that they have this addictive potential. When people are distressed, disconnected, unhappy, or experiencing conflict with

others, they are more vulnerable to the escape these behaviours offer people, and more at risk at getting stuck on the behaviour. It often takes hard work to get unstuck.

While we're learning a lot about this widening world of behavioural addictions, why we're really here, is because we know a lot about helping people get unstuck and live happier, healthier lives.

If you or someone you know might need some support, find out more at ProblemGambling.ca.