

FAMILY ISSUES

Dedicated To The Memory Of Yechezkel Chezi Goldberg, H"YD



Torah & Psychological Insights Into Relationships

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Internet Addiction – The Frightening Truth And the Inspiring Possibilities for Recovery

We all know that the complete freedom, anonymity and breadth of access offered by the Internet present a major temptation and require constant vigilance. However, most people do not realize the extent of the problem or the numbers of individuals who are living double-lives, feeling tormented and wracked by guilt and shame because of their on-line activities. Most people think there is a small percentage of deeply troubled individuals who are drawn into various immoral and improper behavior. They do not think that their neighbor, their child's rebbe, their spouse or any other normal-looking, upstanding and apparently healthy individual, could be plumbing the depths of a nether-world filled with intensely sexual and perverse imagery or engaging in cyber relationships. Even those who concede that Internet pornography and cyber-relationships pose a great danger and may snare decent moral people from time to time, think, "surely, in the big picture it can't be that bad. After all, there are no real victims and it doesn't go beyond imaginary fantasies."

Unfortunately, for a growing number of victims, this is simply not true. Many people – from all age groups, all walks of life, men and women – are being drawn deeper and deeper into the terrible world of Internet addiction.

We are not here to declare war on the Internet, inflate claims or engage in conjecture. Rather, we will only discuss facts, based on true first-person accounts sent in by Internet addicts and lust addicts who are part of an on-line recovery community known as Guardyoureyes.org. With minimal advertising, Guardyoureyes.org currently has 1,800 members – and its membership list grows daily. This is indicative of the number of people who are in need of their support.

In the vignettes below, you will hear from people whose lives were devastated and became unmanageable as a result of their addictions, but who were also fortunate and courageous enough to rebuild and recover with the help of Guardyoureyes.org.

Some of you may get angry or defensive; perhaps believe that these letters and statements are fraudulent or authored by people who want to make a *chillul Hashem*, (*chas v'shalom*) by accusing *rabbanim* of immorality. Of course, that is not the intention of this article or the authors of these statements. Rather, it is vital to understand that though the majority of people are not engaging in these behaviors, there is a minority who are terribly affected-and even great people have stumbled. The word must get out so people can take realistic precautions and understand the enemy well.

A top-notch *bochur* who led a painful double-life and who was deeply ashamed by his own behavior, was unable to stop until he found the right help. He wrote the following note:

"I applied and got accepted by a number of the finest yeshivas in America. I thought, 'Maybe then?' I was at the absolute top of my shiur. Yet the burn didn't end. I traveled to Eretz Yisrael and waited for comfort. Yet comfort didn't come – except from one source. I became a confidant of some of the Gedolei HaDor, I mastered vast amounts of shas...pain...and porn.... Between chaburos.... And so I hated myself. Every fiber of my being, every fiber of my

existence. There was no way to feel good – except for one. The escape – escape! Escape from me! Escape from being! Escape from breathing (like that suicide attempt when I was fourteen)...pornography! Acceptance! It makes no demands, always comforts, always medicates... And then, during random web surfing, I found hope. I found Guard Your Eyes.

"Suddenly, I wasn't alone. I wasn't the only one who suffered abuse – so many of us have. There were so many resources for how to deal with my addiction. I began posting on the forum. Finding understanding...I got educated. I discovered that I wasn't bad or broken; I was ill. I saw that there were tools to deal with my pain – if one didn't work, another would. Suddenly the possibility of happiness became real to me. I found comfort. My habits began to fall away. Finally, GYE recommended a therapist. Taking the plunge in being honest – which I could have never ever done without the GYE forum as a middle step – with a real human being, recommended and vetted by the people who knew. And suddenly I saw all that I had kept under the surface. Under the skilled care of my therapist, the pain and agonies of the past came to the surface and slowly evaporated away. But realize this – I am charismatic, brilliant, learned and well liked. I probably will get a fine position someday in either chinuch or rabbanus – and no background check will ever find the pain I carried. I know that GYE saved me. That gateway is what makes all the difference between getting the help you need – or putting everything in a sealed box until all hell breaks loose."

A Bais Yaakov graduate, who could not reconcile her on-line behavior with the fine young men she was being set up with until she had help in becoming free from her addiction. She writes:

"I have complete Internet access and my own locked office at work. I watched and read whenever I could...I lived in fear that somehow I'd be discovered even though I meticulously erased my browser history every day. I can't take living a double-life anymore..."

(Today, this woman is married to a ben Torah and leading a group of other girls and women on GYE's anonymous phone conferences 4 days a week).

A rebbe and *magid shiur* whose feelings of pain, self-hatred, and hypocrisy were out of control until he learned how to change his life and get treatment. Here is his story:

"I am a rof, posek, Magid Shiur and mechaber sfarim. I have many talmidim. I have been – unsuccessfully – battling this problem for at least 40 years. I read thoroughly the GYE handbook and would like to make the author my Rebbe. 'K'mayim karim al nefesh ayefoh,' this masterpiece has re-instilled a hope within me that maybe I can really be what my talmidim think I am. I pour out my heart to the Aibishter that one day I'll be able to help you rather than enlisting your help. I wish there were words to convey the magnitude of my bracha to you, for your hatzlacha is the hatzlacha of Klal Yisrael. You might wonder why I find it necessary to disclose my status, given that it might cause disgrace or embarrassment for those who truly deserve the title of rebbe or talmid chacham. Please understand that my intention is to help people realize that no one is immune, but teshuvah is possible for everyone as well."

A married woman with several children who

secretly and compulsively carried on cyber-relationships, putting herself and family in grave danger. This woman saw many therapists but was unable to stop until she was directed to experts who understood lust addiction and how to treat it. This is her frightening account of how her life used to be, and how she rose from the depths:

"After a few years of being married and severe bouts of depression, things started to fall through...I got sucked into a terrible on-line world of relationships and disgusting behavior. There were times where I surely put myself, and my family, in danger. During all of this, someone put me in touch with Rebbe 'Guard.' I poured out my soul to him, and instead of being reprimanded and told that I was going to go to Gehenom, I received several emails from him that began, 'Dear Bas Yisroel', 'Dear Precious daughter of Hashem', 'Dear holy neshama'. His emails of care and concern pierced my heart and gave me hope that one day I will be more than an addict looking to satisfy my lust. I started to get involved in the GYE forum and after carefully thinking about my situation, Guard set me up with a GYE sponsor. They even got me in touch with Rabbi Avraham Twerski, which is quite a difficult task. Rav Twerski diagnosed me as having a lust addiction and told me that there is little hope other than a 12 step program... I am just one person and one life that they saved. We all know that if one saves a life, it is as if they saved the entire world. THIS IS GYE!!! By saving me, they saved my kids, my grandkids and so on. If they wouldn't have taken care of me spiritually and mentally, I would no doubt be dead."

Signs of Addiction

It is normal to have strong sexual desires, and Chazal warn us that *Ein Apotropos L'arayos* (Kesuvos 13b). In fact, Chazal tell us that there always will be a minor group of individuals in every community who succumb to sexual temptations (*Bava Basra* 165a and *Rambam Isurei Biah* 22:17-18). Therefore many people may wonder if they are addicts or just people who are having a moral struggle.

Here are some guidelines from the Society for Advancement of Sexual Health:

There is no single type of behavior or even amount of behavior that will indicate you are a sexual addict. The problem is much more complex than can be explained in a few words and if you have been living the life of a sex addict, you know how difficult it is to describe what you are experiencing. The three basic points to consider when you define sexual addiction are:

Do I have a sense that I have lost control over whether or not I engage in my specific out-of-control sexual behavior?

Am I experiencing significant consequences because of my specific out-of-control sexual behavior?

Do I feel like I am constantly thinking about my specific out-of-control sexual behavior, even when I don't want to?

It is these three "hallmarks" that help to define the boundaries of sexual addiction and compulsion... If the three questions are answered "yes," then you may want to seek further help to begin to sort out the complexities of your sexual behavior and find out for certain if sexual addiction is the best descriptor of your problem. (Source: www.ncsac.org)

There are many levels of addiction and various systems of assessing them. From people may have a standard of moral behavior that is stricter than the secular world, but it is not about one behavior per se. Rather, a person knows when he or she is leading a double-life, acting on compulsions and behaving in ways that are antithetical to his or her moral beliefs.

Red Flags

A very important factor that allows persons with Internet addictions to continue in their destructive ways is that, frankly, people want to ignore the tell-tale signs. After all, who wants to believe this kind

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of thing about their spouse, child or employee? Trust your gut and intuition. If you notice secretive behavior around computers or cell phones, late night computer usage, constant excuses and absences from various family responsibilities, or a pattern of erased history on the computer browser, there may be a problem. You do not have to be the police or begin an offensive and embarrassing series of accusations. Rather, speak with love and gently – but firmly – suggest that if what you suspect is true, he or she should seek help via talking to a therapist, a rebbe or by getting in touch with a program such as guardyoureyes.org (write to the GYE helpline at gye.help@gmail.com for support and questions). Everyone should install a filtering and monitoring device on their computer; after all, it is the right and sane thing to do to take reasonable precautions against temptation. (A good website for comparing effectiveness and features of filtering software is <http://Internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/>.)

Treatment

It is beyond the scope of this article to explain treatment for addiction in depth, but here are some general principles to help the reader understand the process and goals of a treatment and recovery plan.

For persons who are involved in compulsive and addictive behaviors, a general rule is that for every out of control and unmanageable external behavior, there is a corresponding out of control and unmanageable inner life problem. For example, when a man is surfing the web all night long, looking at porn etc., after some exploration we might discover he has a learning disability and sits all day in *kollel* not really learning but just faking. He is acting unmanageable and out of control in his expectations of himself, i.e. forcing himself to fit a mold of a scholar, and then relieves his tension via his lust addiction. Or a man may secretly feel guilty and conflicted about his choice of spouse, never really having been attracted to her. He obsesses secretly and is tormented with guilt and shame. He has allowed himself to get stuck in an unmanageable life and then he continues to regulate this unmanageable tension in his sexual behavior. A person can be a workaholic whose business is out of control and soon to be overwhelmed with debt.

The psychotherapy portion of this treatment is to help the person become aware of how and why his life is unmanageable, and then to learn the necessary emotional skills to restore balance. If need be, past traumas may need to be reprocessed in order to reduce emotional reactivity. In addition, the fellowship, encouragement and guidance of Twelve Step Programs and/or other GYE resources, such as their completely anonymous telephone groups, are necessary as well to introduce and reinforce healthy thinking, beliefs and lifestyle.

Concluding Thoughts

Shlomo Hamelech tells us, “*Sheva Yipol Tzaddik v’Kam* -- A righteous person may fall seven times and then arise (*Mishlei* 24:16).” Abaye warns that the temptation to sin is strongest among those with

the greatest potential for good. This statement was not a mere intellectual abstraction, rather Abaye made this statement from personal knowledge as a result of a disturbing event in his life:

One time, Abaye surreptitiously followed a man and woman into an unpopulated area, thinking that they were up to no good. Abaye’s plan was that if they were to begin any immoral behavior, he would intervene and stop them. At a point when they believed themselves to be completely alone, they parted company in a chaste manner with a verbal farewell that was heartfelt and loving. Abaye marveled to himself, “Had I been in their place, I would not have been able to restrain myself!” Abaye became depressed and slumped gloomily against a doorpost, apparently feeling hopeless about his own spiritual state of affairs. The Gemara then tells of a “Certain Wise Old Man” (possibly Eliyahu HaNavi) who helped Abaye recover by offering the encouraging perspective of, “The Greater you are, the Greater Your Temptation.” (See Succah 52a.)

In *Tzidkas HaTzaddik*, Rav Tzadok develops this theme in great detail, tying the creative and powerful force of a great person’s character and mind directly to his heightened capacity for sin. This story is instructive both in its recognition of the very real temptations that Abaye acknowledged, as well as his inability to cope with his feelings of despair. What would have happened to Abaye if the “Certain Wise Old Man” did not comfort him? Would he have given up hope on himself? We cannot know for sure, but this story unequivocally suggests that even a great sage is quite vulnerable to temptation as well as to feelings of hopelessness.

The ideas gleaned from this *Gemara* can help us appreciate, in a real way, what the temptations and struggles are for all people, great and small and how they can be overcome. The *chinuch* message is uplifting and inspiring: If they can do it, so can we! Similarly, the true struggles of the courageous people who have chosen to share their stories of recovery should not be a source of embarrassment or discredit to the Jewish community; quite the contrary, they should uplift and inspire us all.

Important Closing Thoughts from Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski

“I was sent this article to review before it was submitted for publication in our communities. I would like to endorse everything in this article, which is unfortunately true, and the time has come for this kind of article to be written.

Let me go further. The Talmud says that anyone who can prevent a sin from happening and does not do so, is held culpable for that sin. If we have the ability to alert the community about this spiritual cancer and we do not do so, then we share in the guilt of the lives and families that are being ruined. This plague respects no one. There is no immunity.

Unfortunately, the world is becoming more dependent on Internet every day. Filters are important, but they are not the answer.

I am also personally close with the founders of the GuardYourEyes organization and can vouch for their work, which has helped hundreds of *Acheinu B’nei Yisrael* turn their lives around and is so necessary in today’s world. May Hashem save us from *nichshol*.”