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## Article

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### Needing the 'Net

**SEATTLE, Washington.** About a year ago, Ben Alexander was spending nearly every waking moment playing the hugely popular online game World of Warcraft. As a result of his preoccupation with the game, the young man—who had always earned good grades in school and had dreamed of becoming a biologist—flunked out of college. Ben had an addiction to a video game, and he was in desperate need of help.

"At first it was a couple of hours a day," said Ben, now 19. "By midway through the first semester, I was playing 16 or 17 hours a day."

Ben first sought help from a program that treated people suffering from substance addiction, but it wasn't a good fit. He then completed a 10-week outdoors-based program, but he felt he still had little control over his habit. Finally, Ben began searching for a facility that specialized in the treatment of gaming addiction, and that's when he found the reSTART Internet Addiction Program at a newly opened center near Seattle, Washington. The program aims to treat pathological Internet use. It is designed specifically for people who are obsessed with video games, texting, Facebook, eBay, Twitter, and other technology-based diversions.

Similar treatment facilities are common in other countries, where this type of addiction is taken very seriously, but the Seattle facility is the first residential treatment center for Internet addiction in the United States. Patients live at the five-acre (two-hectare) center for the duration of the 45-day reSTART program.

"We've been doing this for years on an outpatient basis," said reSTART co-founder Hilarie Cash. Cash was introduced to Internet addiction in 1994, when she had a patient whose video game habit had led to the loss of his marriage and two jobs. "Up until now, we had no place to send them," Cash said of her patients who suffer from computer addiction.

Ben, the new center's first patient, spends his days attending counseling and therapy sessions. When not in sessions, he stays busy doing household chores and working on the facility's grounds. He also exercises, goes on outings, and even bakes cookies. These activities are designed to help him sever his ties with the virtual world and learn skills that are more useful in the real world.

According to therapist and reSTART co-founder Cosette Dawna Rae, Internet addicts miss out on real conversations and real human development. Their hygiene, their home, and their relationships often suffer, she said, and they don't eat right, sleep properly, or get sufficient exercise.

Some potential effects associated with Internet addiction are extremely serious. They range from job loss to car accidents for those who are continually texting while driving. Some people have died after playing video games for days without a break. These deaths generally stem from a blood clot associated with being inactive for extended periods of time.

Addiction warning signs include being preoccupied with thoughts of the Internet, using the Internet longer than intended, and spending increasing amounts of time online. Other warning signs include repeatedly making unsuccessful efforts to restrict Internet use and neglecting relationships, school, or work in order to spend time online. Headaches, severe pain in hands and wrists, and changes in weight are also warning signs. Some people suffering from Internet addiction lie to conceal the extent of their Internet use. Some admit to using the Internet to escape problems or feelings of depression.

Experts have speculated that Internet addiction is actually a symptom of other conditions. Therefore, they say, treatment should take a holistic approach.

Dr. Ronald Pies is a professor of psychiatry at SUNY Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, New York. "From what we know," he said, "many so-called 'Internet addicts' are folks who have severe depression, anxiety disorders, or social [problems] that make it hard for them to live a full, balanced life and deal face-to-face with other people. It may be that unless we treat their underlying problems, some new form of addiction will pop up down the line."

Whether the reSTART program will prove effective in the long run remains to be seen. One foreseeable problem is that Internet technology is so widespread that avoiding it can be nearly impossible in today's world.

For now, however, Ben feels that the program has helped him. "I don't think I'll go back to World of Warcraft anytime soon," he said.

*The Associated Press contributed to this story.*



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*Some people become addicted to video games, texting, Facebook, eBay, Twitter, and other technology.*

Hilarie Cash, of reSTART, says that three of the following symptoms suggest Internet abuse. Five or more of the following symptoms suggest Internet addiction.

- Increasing amounts of time spent on Internet
- Failed attempts to control behavior
- Heightened euphoria, excitement, while on Internet
- Craving more time on Internet, restless when not there
- Neglecting family and friends
- Lying to others about Internet use
- Internet interfering with job or school
- Feeling guilty or ashamed of behavior
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Weight changes, backaches, headaches, carpal tunnel (pain or weakness in the hands, wrists, or fingers)
- Withdrawal from other activities

### Dictionary

**addiction** (*noun*) state of being dependent on something to the point that you can't live without it

**holistic** (*adjective*) concerning the whole system, rather than its individual parts

**obsessed** (*adjective*) focusing on one idea more than others, to an extreme degree

**psychiatry** (*noun*) a field of medical study that deals with the prevention and treatment of mental disorders