



March 2012

Issue No. 85

OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

# *IN SIGHT* for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

## TIME TO DISCONNECT?

We live in an amazing time when we can reach out and virtually touch someone, obtain information in seconds, and communicate without limits. Over the past ten to fifteen years we have seen a rise in the use of the Internet, cell phones, smartphones, digital music players, text-messaging, wireless devices, mobile entertainment, online gaming, camera phones, online social networking, and numerous other ways of communicating, being entertained, and staying “connected.”

Sadly, it may be in the “connection” that we run the greatest risk of losing our ability to have healthy attached relationships. We can become overloaded by technology and suffer consequences in our relationships. We can also derive an enormous benefit from technology and our ability to use it in a healthy manner. The key is developing healthy ways to manage that technology.

### Is It an Addiction?

Can we become addicted to technology? That’s debatable. More research is needed before labeling technology as an addiction. It may be more accurate to view problems with technology as an “overload” causing potential consequences. However, if we consider the overuse of cell phones, the Internet, or other forms of technology, we can find some parallels to dependency on substances such as alcohol or drugs.

My colleagues and I have witnessed the effects of technology overload on patients in a treatment setting. Before coming to treatment, career-driven women and men may have spent hours each day on their computers, cell phones, or other handheld devices, at the expense of their family or friends and

their own healthy choices such as relaxation, exercise, and sleep. Patients entering treatment commonly hide their cell phones or attempt to bring in laptops. Our patients also demonstrate problems with Internet gambling, Internet sexual behaviors, and a reliance on various communication devices. An informal survey of patients found that 85 percent of them believe they could not professionally or emotionally function well without their “tools of the trade.”

This feeling of uneasiness when denied access to technology is not unique to patients in a treatment setting. Take, for example, the BlackBerry system outage in April 2007. When the network went down, thousands of concerned users called the company expressing frustration over missing messages. Users described extreme anxiety, fear of missing messages, phantom vibrations, and anger that they couldn’t communicate.

We have become so accustomed to the luxuries of technology that we may be forgetting how to play, have personal connections, and use coping skills in face-to-face interactions. We can see demonstrations of this disconnect from relationships on a daily basis. Through these disconnections, we are perhaps running the greatest risk of harming our attachments to relationships and other people.

### How Much Technology Is Too Much?

The following warning signs may indicate that you need to reevaluate your use of technology:

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● **You need your connection . . . now!** You panic or become irritable when you can't get cell phone service, your Internet connection is down, or your cable or satellite feed is not working. You find that when you cannot access the Internet, use your cell phone, or access other technologies, you experience distress.

● **You lose track of time or have technology blackouts.** You consistently lose yourself in the Internet world, intending to spend an hour and looking up to discover it has been four hours. Or you use your BlackBerry so much that the term "crackberry" has meaning for you.

● **Your relationships suffer.** You spend less time participating in personal activities, or limit your time with friends and family to attend to your e-mail or return phone calls. You frequently miss appointments or are late because you got caught surfing the Internet, checking e-mail, or talking on your cell phone. You use text messages, e-mails, and voice-mails when a face-to-face interaction would be more appropriate.

● **You can't leave home without it.** You can't take a vacation without bringing four different charging devices for all your gadgets and gizmos. Your car needs extra batteries to power all of your devices. When your cell phone ear piece becomes a permanent part of your wardrobe, that's a problem.

● **Your family or friends ask you to stop, but you can't.** You find you spend more time communicating on the phone or via e-mail than you do in person (e.g., sending e-mail or texts to your spouse while in the same house). The Internet becomes a more powerful draw than spending time with family or friends or other favorite activities. You become irritated when others complain about your use of technology.

● **You take risks using technology.** You text-message while driving, talk on the phone extensively while driving, or use the Internet in situations that could have consequences. You spend excessive time using the Internet at work for reasons other than work purposes.

● **Even after experiencing consequences, you continue your behavior.** Getting in an accident while on the cell phone or family members' complaints about the lack of attention does not change your behavior.

## Relationships Suffer from Technology Overload

Even with limited research on how technology impacts our relationships, we intuitively know that the overuse of technology can harm our relationships and affect our families and friends.

Research and various studies have demonstrated the importance of attachment to other people on how well we cope with life, feel safe in relationships, and manage stress. Furthermore, we know that children who suffer from attachment disorders struggle with trust, superficial relationships, poor peer relationships, lying, fear of intimacy, shame, and feeling alone.

Take the example of a father and son at a baseball game. A home run ball heads toward the stands. The father, talking on his cell phone, makes a half-hearted attempt at catching the ball. He does not catch the ball, and the son appears dejected. The father never stops his phone call. What could have been a bonding moment was derailed by the father's inability to disconnect from technology. Observing people on a daily basis, it is easy to recognize how lost we have become in our own worlds. Talking on the phone, returning messages, playing games, listening to music on headphones that block out the world, and other examples illustrate how easy it is to escape.

Of course, technology has enormous benefits that assist us on a daily basis. Cell phones help us keep up with family, friends, and business and assist us in an emergency. The Internet is a wonderful resource filled with knowledge and endless learning opportunities. Evidence shows that video games can improve various motor skills and problem-solving skills. The hope is that we can apply technology with a healthy balance and set limits.

## Set Technology Limits

The challenge for each of us is to assess how much control technology has over our lives. Is there a clear line between work and home? Can you turn off the phone or stop checking e-mail?

After you assess your use, which may require feedback from others, set some limits. What is a reasonable amount of time to surf the Internet? What are your rules for returning e-mail? What will happen if

you do not respond immediately? In setting limits and rules, you may develop ways to better attend to your family and friends. The father talking on the cell phone at the baseball game could return calls at the end of the game instead of throughout the game. Ultimately, being present in relationships with family and friends should include both body and mind.

Setting limits on what we communicate via text-messages or e-mail is also helpful in developing healthier relationships. It is not appropriate to end relationships, fire people, or express anger via text message or e-mail. An important aspect of building healthy relationship coping skills is communicating your feelings in person. We can learn to healthily use increasing technological advances if we set limits, develop rules, and attend to our relationships.

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