



Cybersex Use and Abuse: Implications for Health Education

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ABSTRACT

The Internet is increasingly used as an outlet for sexual activity. This literature review explores key definitions, perceived benefits, risks, and consequences of engaging in cybersex, as well as its influence on youth and young adults. The accessibility, affordability, and anonymity of the Internet make it highly appealing to users. Increasing time spent online for sexual activity may lead to cybersex abuse and compulsive cybersex behavior. This poses a threat to relationships, work, and educational pursuits. Chatrooms are especially prominent as a slippery slope to more extreme sexual behaviors. Characteristics of cybersex users do not seem to be divided by subgroups such as gender, sexual orientation, and marital status. There are only limited amounts of research on youth and online sexual activity, but some research suggests that adolescents are engaging in cybersex. Moreover, college students appear to be at particular risk for developing cybersex compulsive behaviors. Increased health education about the dangers of potential cybersex addiction and abuse is needed. In addition, health educators need to add cybersex to their curricula to warn users of potential addiction.

THE WIDESPREAD INFLUENCE OF THE INTERNET

In a world where everything from banking and shopping to education and matchmaking can be found online, it is little wonder that the United States Department of Commerce found that 51% of all U.S. households had access to the Internet.¹ Access to the Internet poses several concerns for mental health professionals. Increased access in individuals' homes adds a new dimension to health and psychological issues when combined with sexually oriented behaviors.² The speed, availability, and convenience of the Internet, in combination with sexually oriented material, create the potential for the "next sexual revolution."^{3(p519)}

Just as not all users of alcohol become alcoholics, most cybersex participants do not experience compulsive problems; how-

ever, cybersex becomes a social concern when individuals spend so much time online that they neglect their relationships, work, school, or other obligations.⁴ In recent years pornography viewing among Americans dramatically increased, largely due to increased access to the Internet.⁵ With the invention of the Internet, the pursuit of sexual stimuli has become more accessible, affordable, and anonymous.^{2,3,6} As of the year 2000, it was estimated that 20 million people visited sexually themed Web sites monthly. This number continues to increase, with sex being the number one searched topic on the Internet.⁵ It is not surprising that cybersex addiction is on the rise,⁵ and college students appear to be at a particular risk for cybersex abuse.⁷

A review of the literature shows that there is much information about cybersex, but that little research is available on the

prevention of cybersex addiction. Currently, most health educators do not address the issue of cybersex in their classrooms, nor do they arm their students or community with information about the potential dangers associated with engaging in online sexual behavior. Considering that cybersex may pose a threat to current and subsequent relationships, the absence of this type of education is significant.⁸ The purpose of this literature review is to:

1. Explore the key terms of cybersex.

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2. Investigate the roles of marital status, gender, and sexual orientation in cybersex behavior.

3. Identify perceived benefits, risks, and consequences for individuals who engage in cybersex.

4. Investigate the influence of cybersex on youth and college students.

5. Identify the role of cybersex education for health educators.

EXPLORING KEY TERMS

Sex Addiction

The existence of sex addiction is still debated among health care professionals. Some believe that behaviors such as gambling, eating, or sex are not in themselves addictive but they are manifestations of other underlying issues. Yet, the term addiction has been used to describe any form of self-destruction.⁹ Carnes defined addiction as a “pathological relationship with a mood-altering substance or behavior.”^{10(p14)} Under this definition, drugs as well as any mood-altering behavior would apply. When sexual behavior is used as a coping device, it is used to alter one’s mood. Compulsive sexual behavior has been documented to alter brain function in a way similar to illicit drug exposure.⁹ Additionally, researchers documented that there can be a “high” produced through sexual behavior similar to that of crack cocaine.¹¹ The use of the Internet for sex, or cybersex, to escape and alter one’s mood fits into this category and is becoming more prevalent in cases of sexual addiction as it is heretofore defined.¹¹

What is Cybersex?

Cybersex definitions have many variations. Some researchers differentiate online sexual activity (OSA) from cybersex. OSA is defined as the “use of the Internet for any activity (text, audio, graphics) that involves sexuality. This includes recreation, entertainment, exploration, support around sexual concerns, education, purchasing sexual materials, [and searching for] sexual partners.”^{2(p131)} Cybersex has been defined as a subcategory of OSA and occurs when individuals use the Internet to engage in sexual expression or sexually gratifying ac-

tivities that may include: looking at pictures, engaging in sexual chat, exchange of sexual emails, and “cybering,” where both parties masturbate while exchanging sexual chat online.²

Other definitions of cybersex include this from Schneider given in 2000 and 2004: “any form of sexual expression that is accessed through a computer.”^{11,12(p208)} In 2004, Cooper and colleagues defined cybersex as “using the...Internet to engage in sexually gratifying activities.”^{2(p131)} This latter definition narrows the former from any sexual expression on a computer, to sexually oriented Internet use only. Another definition, given in 2004, described cybersex as “engaging in sexual self-stimulation while online with another person,”^{13(p1002)} which is similar to “cybering.”² This interaction could be exchanging sexual e-mail, chatrooms, instant messaging, or Web cameras. Finally, cybersex was defined in 2005 as “two or more people engaging in simulated sex talk while online for the purposes of sexual pleasure and may or may not include masturbation by one or more of the participants.”^{14(p132)} Clearly there exists a lack of agreement in the literature regarding a universal definition of cybersex. This discrepancy may lead to confusion and creates challenges in planning and implementing cybersex abuse prevention programs. For example, one program may focus on the Internet while another may focus prevention efforts on pornographic CD Rom purchases. For the purpose of this review, cybersex will be defined as sexual expressions or interactions accessed through a computer.

Defining the Flow Experience

Cybersex abuse, as with other potentially addictive behaviors, initially begins with reinforcement. For cybersex abuse this reinforcement is sexual gratification and release of tension.¹⁵ Sexual gratification is achieved through the flow experience.^{16,17} Flow theory posits that one becomes so absorbed in their online behavior that they lose track of time and of themselves, becoming oblivious to all around them.¹⁸ An individual engaging in cybersex often has a goal

to achieve this flow experience. Flow is obtained through a ritualized experience of surfing for the “perfect pick.” For example, Philaretou, Mahfouz, and Allen found that cybersex participants reported searching until they found the image or movie that was just what they wanted and then masturbated to that specific image.¹⁶ Money defined the construct of a “lovemap” as a cognitive and emotional schema that provides a map or outline for the individual’s preferred sexual relations and actions.¹⁷ This behavior may exist both offline (e.g., phone sex) and online (e.g., chatrooms). When online, the individual customizes his or her perfect pick instead of searching offline in clubs for someone who fits their ideal. Once the perfect pick is found, satisfaction is short-lived and the user then searches for a variation on the theme. For the user there is always something more and he or she is never satisfied.¹⁶

CHARACTERISTICS OF CYBERSEX PARTICIPANTS

Characteristics of individuals involved in online sexual activities differ widely, but there are trends. For example, users must have access to the Internet, and most access it at home. However, in a study of online sexual behavior, Cooper, Delmonico, and Burg reported that 6 out of 100 employees reported accessing sexual material at work.⁷ This included individuals meeting the criteria for sexually compulsive behavior as well as those with no sexual compulsions.

Who Engages in Cybersex?

Marital Status and Cybersex. In one study, researchers found that unmarried individuals were overrepresented among those addicted to cybersex.⁷ Unmarried individuals may be more likely to report cybersex compulsive behaviors because they may be searching for dating relationships. Ross, Masson, Daneback, and Tikkanen surveyed men concerning their online sexual behavior and found that 42.7% were in a committed relationship (i.e., married, or co-habiting) while 54.7% were not.³ Thus, both married and single individuals engage in cybersex.



Gender and Cybersex. Some studies indicate that women are more likely to be involved in Internet chatrooms than are men.^{2,19} Yet, overall men outnumber women in cybersex use.² Researchers found that women are also at risk for developing compulsive cybersex behaviors.¹⁹ In a survey of more than 9,000 Internet users, women made up 14% of the sample, yet they accounted for 21% of the cybersex addicts.⁷ Cooper and colleagues found that even though men are online for sexual purposes more frequently than women, women appear to be more apt to develop cybersex addictive behaviors.^{2,19}

According to a review by Ferree, women are more likely to desire romance and relationships in their sexual experiences, which make 'love' or 'relationship' addictions more prevalent among women.¹⁹ This could explain why women are more likely to visit Internet chatrooms and initiate relationships through the Internet.¹² For example, one study reported that women are more likely than men to eventually meet an online sex partner in person. Schneider found that 80% of women surveyed reported a real-life meeting with their online sex partner.⁴ This may make women who engage in cybersex more likely to be victims of sexual violence. In another study, men reported preferring surfing the Web for their cybersexual activities.² Men did not seem to need the relational aspect as much as women because the visual component of the Web was sufficient. Additionally, twice as many men reported cybersex interfering with their lives than did women.²

Historically, women are considered a sexually disenfranchised group. The Internet and chatrooms offer venues where a woman may anonymously release sexual inhibitions.^{7,19} Women tend to express more guilt after engaging in cybersex than do men. This is illustrated by a comment from a participant in a study done by Schneider, who said, "It is not considered normal for a woman to escape her pain through sex."^{12(p269)}

Sexual Orientation and Cybersex. Both homosexual and heterosexual individuals reported engaging in online sexual behav-

ior. In a study of sexual orientation and cybersex, researchers reported that homosexual and bisexual individuals were overrepresented within the cybersex compulsive group, yet lesbians were underrepresented.⁷ In an online survey, Ross and colleagues studied men's cybersex behaviors. They found that heterosexual and homosexual men reported engaging in cybersex, and that the sexual orientation of their reported cybersex behavior did not necessarily reflect their self-reported sexual orientation.¹⁴

PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF CYBERSEX BEHAVIOR

The Triple-A Engine

The influx of cybersex behavior renders it impossible to ignore the perceived benefits of engaging in this potentially risky behavior. What are the rewards that render cybersex so appealing? Researchers have proposed several mechanisms, one of which is termed the "Triple-A Engine," which suggests that the major benefits of using the Internet for pornography are primarily these three: anonymity, accessibility, and affordability.^{2,6,7} Individuals are able to access the online material from the privacy of their own home without the potential embarrassment or criticism associated with being sighted at an adult bookstore. Moreover, cybersex does not place participants at risk for sexually-transmitted infections (STIs), and is easy to hide from a spouse because there is no physical evidence of the sexual experience.¹¹ In a study by Philaretou and others, make interviewees reported that some of the advantages of online sexual behavior include being able to engage in sexual activity when their girlfriend is not interested or if the user does not have a girlfriend. One interviewee reported that cybersex is better than paying for prostitutes, and that an individual can obtain free sexual material online.¹⁶ Griffiths suggested additional perceived benefits of online sexuality include: convenience, escape, and social acceptability.²⁰ While there are perceived benefits of cybersex use, there exist risks that users may or may not recognize.

RISKS AND CONSEQUENCES OF CYBERSEX INVOLVEMENT

One major risk associated with online sexual behavior is damaging offline intimate relationships. For example, cybersex has been termed, "virtual infidelity."¹⁶ Below is a review of the potentially harmful emotional and physical effects of cybersex.

Risk of Addiction/Compulsion

Many cybersex researchers identified a relationship between compulsive behavior and cybersex in order to explain users' excessive amount of time spent online in sexual activities.^{2,7} Compulsions have been described as the desire to stop or to reduce the frequency of a behavior with the inability to do so.⁶ Sexual compulsion was defined by Cooper and colleagues as an "irresistible urge to perform an irrational sexual act, such as one that will result in negative consequences."^{2(p136)} These conditions exist in some cybersex users' patterns. Researchers agree that online sexual compulsivity refers to a person who is involved with online sexual activity in a continuous way, to the degree that it interferes with aspects of work, social, and/or recreational dimensions of one's life.^{2,6,12} Often there are other aspects of compulsion, such as loss of control or loss of the ability to regulate or stop the intensity and amount of the behavior.^{2,6} In one study, researchers reported the 9.2 percent of the participants reported their cybersex behavior felt out of control (n=7000).² Furthermore, in a study of 9,265 participants, 21 percent of all respondents reported their cybersex involvement jeopardized an area of their life.⁷

Cybersex can provide an avenue for extreme sexual behaviors which are likely to lead to an addictive sexual disorder. Researchers identified that a number of Internet users have preexisting sexual compulsions or addictions, and the Internet becomes a new outlet for the preexisting behavior.^{2,4} Conversely, use of the Internet may also trigger a compulsion for some who would not have a problem with pornography otherwise.^{2,5} Schneider explained that abuse starts out small and seemingly innocent. This then leads to a worsening of



behaviors. For example, one interviewee reported finding it necessary to enter the house before her children so that they did not see their father masturbating in front of the computer.⁴

In one study researchers found a pattern of becoming “increasingly addicted to online pornography.”^{16(p159)} The time spent online started out small and then increased to a typical week of spending 8–12 hours surfing the Internet for sexual material. They desired to stop but reportedly could not. They expressed concern and guilt for their behavior, especially if they were ever discovered by family members. Overall, they reported a lack of control of their behavior. One participant stated that it was like getting “high;” there is the same euphoric feeling and drive for more.¹⁶

How Much is too Much? Cooper, Delmonico, and Burg reported a positive correlation between the amount of time spent online and problematic cybersex that was potentially compulsive.⁷ The Marital and Sexuality Center and MSNBC conducted a survey and found that 6.5% of the male Internet-using population who took the survey reported spending nearly six hours per week in cybersex activities.²¹ Additionally, researchers reported that those who engaged in 11 or more hours per week of Internet pornographic behavior experienced intrapersonal and interpersonal problems in financial, legal, occupational, and recreational areas of their lives.³ A similar study reported a mean of 2.6 ($SD = 5.31$) hours per week spent engaged in online sexual activity within their study sample.² Those who reported spending 11 or more hours per week in online sexual pursuits were nearly 2 standard deviations above the mean in time spent engaging in cybersex, which falls into the range of a clinical disorder.²

Cybersex and Relationships

Cyber relationships likely leave the user unfulfilled. The cyber world and its illusory reality can be a barrier to real intimacy. Participants are sometimes caught up in their fantasies to the extent that the interactions barely resemble a real relationship.¹⁵ In an

editorial, Delmonico explained that online communications fail to involve all of the senses, as in-person relationships do.²² Without stimulating all five senses, the relationship breaks down to a one-dimensional experience which lacks the depth developed in real-life relationships. Interaction in an online relationship is not able to meet the needs of human relationships, and prevents the development of the “sixth sense,” the one that tells us if a relationship is “good” or “bad.”²² Schnarch explained that individuals in cybersex relationships can present themselves however they feel most comfortable, which limits disclosure and leaves the relationship fake and misleading.²³

The Impact on Relationships

Consequences of engaging in online sex potentially affect family members and the individual’s ability to seek and maintain offline intimate relationships. In a study by Schneider, one participant stated that he had “turned off [his] emotions” and “was unavailable to [his] family.”^{12(p260)} Cooper reported that individuals can spend so much time in an online relationship that offline relationships atrophy without the time and attention needed to develop or maintain them. The offline relationship then suffers and often terminates.⁶ One participant lamented, “If I had spent the time and energy on my marriage instead of online, we would have grown together rather than apart.”^{12(p262)} This pattern of obsession with cybersex often leads to problems with intimacy and other psychological problems.^{2,12} Family members in particular tend to suffer from compulsive cybersex use. Schneider reported on individuals in committed relationships with a cybersex addict. Participants reported feeling devastation, betrayal, loss of self-esteem, mistrust, fear, and lack of intimacy with their real-life partner. Others reported feeling sexually inadequate, unattractive, and ugly. The behaviors lead to separation or divorce among 22.3% of the sample; two participants became physically abusive to their husbands, and two reported hospitalization for suicidality.⁴

Behaviors Leading to Cybersex

Chatrooms are a potential risk in cybersex activities. They can be a gateway for other, more risky behaviors, such as offline meetings. Some consider chatrooms a “slippery slope” toward more compulsive sexual behaviors, especially for individuals who are prone to addictions.⁷ Introduction to chatrooms often begins with curiosity, or seeking companionship.²⁴ There, within the cloak of anonymity, participants are introduced to differing graphic and erotic behaviors that alone they might not consider participating in. With support and encouragement from others in the chatroom, they begin to find the new behaviors appealing and even preferable to traditional sexual behaviors. These new behaviors often play out in both online and offline intimate relationships.^{4,24}

In an email survey to partners of cybersex addicts, 30.9% of the surveys reported that cybersex activities were a continuation of other compulsive sexual behaviors that existed prior to Internet involvement.⁴ Other behaviors included phone sex, voyeurism, frequenting prostitutes, going to massage parlors, and involvement in traditional pornography (e.g., magazines, videos, and movies), often since their teen years.⁴ This suggests pornography can lead to other, more extreme behaviors. With the addition of the Internet and its easy access for the younger population, it is more likely that individuals will begin to explore pornography at a younger age. Therefore, mere exposure to online sex is likely to increase the rates of compulsive cybersex behavior simply by increasing the number influenced. As these data indicate, addicts frequently begin their exposure to sexual material a young age.

CYBERSEX AND YOUTH

Because of the negative effect that compulsive cybersex behavior has on users and their family relationships, it is crucial to understand when and how the behavior starts. This will allow better prevention techniques to be implemented. Most studies explain the impact of compulsive sexual



behavior on older adults even though these compulsive behaviors often begin in the teen or young adult years.^{4,5} Therefore, the need to address online sexual behavior of youth becomes apparent.

It is impossible to determine how many youth and children are accessing online sexual material because online behavior is practically anonymous. Adults and children alike can change their age and gender information in chatrooms. Regardless, there has been a rise in the number of children and teens seeing counselors for problems associated with online sexual behaviors.⁵ Because it is illegal for those under 18 to access online sexual material, many minors are reluctant to disclose any such behavior, what benefits they derive, or the extent of their online sexual behavior. Yet, there are studies reporting adolescents engaging in cybersex. Ross, Rosser, and Stanton found that teenage homosexual men reported engaging in cybersex, with the mean age of 16.05 ± 4.85 .¹³ A study done at the University of New Hampshire found that 1,501 Internet users ranging from 10 to 17 years of age revealed the following: One in five received a sexual solicitation over the Internet in the past year, and one in 33 received an aggressive approach, defined as an individual requesting a meeting, calling on the telephone, or sending regular mail. One in four was exposed to unwanted online pictures, and one in 17 received threats or harassment. These adolescents claimed to report less than 10 percent of the sexual solicitations they received to authorities, and reported only 3 percent of unwanted exposure occurrences to authorities.²⁵ An FBI report found that cybersex offenses have a longer lasting effect than other pornographic material, as once the material is online it can be transferred to different users quickly and is very difficult to destroy before it has done harm to many individuals, especially youth.²⁶

Cooper and colleagues, found that college students were overrepresented within the cybersex compulsive group.⁷ Similarly, Ross and colleagues found that study participants' most frequently reported occupa-

tion was "college students" (17%).¹⁴ College students are likely to be dating and are at an age when romantic relationships are part of their lifestyle. There is a need for better education and prevention for people in this age group.

CYBERSEX EDUCATION AND PREVENTION

How can school and community health educators promote cybersex education and prevention? From a community health perspective, local health promotion staff should be speaking to church groups, parent organizations, civic organizations, and local and state governments about the need for prevention programs. These could also be viable outlets to house cybersex prevention programs once community awareness has been raised about cybersex addiction (e.g., public libraries, churches). These community resources could be a way to conduct educational outreach beyond the public schools. However, implementing prevention programs take resources. Advocacy to fund state and local community health programs for cybersex prevention programs is needed. To treat those already addicted to cybersex, programs such as Sexoholics Anonymous and mental health professionals trained to treat sexual addiction are needed in our communities.

For this review, no research-based prevention curriculum on cybersex could be found for any age group. As noted above, secondary and college students appear to be at higher risk than the general population for cybersex use and abuse as well as unwanted sexual advances via the Internet. Additionally, there is evidence that cybersex use, as with other addictive behaviors, typically begins with young people and may escalate into more problematic behaviors with time.^{4,5}

It is estimated by the U.S. Department of Education that 54.3 million children are enrolled in primary and secondary schools in the United States and 17.5 million people are enrolled in post-secondary education settings.²⁷ Therefore, schools are an ideal outlet to reach the greatest number and

most diverse population of youth for health education activities. It is doubtful educators other than health educators will be addressing this issue in the classroom. Just as health educators routinely teach about the signs and symptoms of other abusive and addictive behaviors, we also need to be alerting both secondary and college students to the dangers of cybersex abuse. Based on the research available, these symptoms may include:

- Time: if Internet related cybersex use escalates, especially if they no longer have time for other activities they previously enjoyed.
- Mood: if an individual is using cybersex activities to cope with depression or stress.
- Guilt: if an individual feels guilt or remorse after cybersex use.
- Relationships: if personal relationships are neglected or ignored.
- Responsibilities: if work, family, or academic responsibilities are neglected.
- Concern from others: if an individual's cybersex use is a concern to others.
- Illegal activities: if an individual is breaking the law related to cybersex use (e.g., underage user, soliciting sex from underage users, etc.).
- Loss of control: if an individual has a desire to stop or reduce cybersex use but cannot do so.

To date, no cybersex abuse prevention curriculum materials exists. There are, however, materials on safe Internet use for youth. While safe Internet use is important, there is a need for students to learn that cybersex use can become problematic and even addicting. School counselors should also be aware of the warning signs of cybersex abuse and can therefore help identify children at risk. Should a student be found violating the school policy related to using school computers to access pornography, this should be considered a warning sign and should be addressed by the school. Should a student or his or her parents feel use is approaching compulsion, health educators need to refer students to mental health services, ideally with professionals



who have a background in treating sexual addictions.^{7,12}

If schools do not already have a policy related to cybersex, one should be put into place. Policies may include: supervising students while they access the Internet, installing filters on all school computers to limit cybersex access, having teachers type in search terms for students while online, and delineating disciplinary measures if rules are violated by staff or students. Of course, parental education is needed on the following: tips for safe surfing for children at home, how to discuss the topic of cybersex with their child, and potentials signs of cybersex abuse. Both the school health educator and counselor can take a lead in educating parents about these issues. With any sexuality-related topic, there may be parental or community opposition to adding cybersex prevention to the public school curriculum. Schools will likely need to take steps to raise awareness that cybersex abuse is (1) a growing problem, (2) that it typically starts with young people, and (3) that it can escalate into addiction, similar to other addictive behaviors.^{7,11}

CONCLUSION

The Internet is becoming an increasingly popular way of accessing erotic sexual material and a venue for participating in online sexual fantasies. The lack of consistency in defining cybersex may create confusion for prevention education. Those who have become compulsive users of cybersex wish to decrease the frequency of the behavior, but reportedly cannot.¹⁶ These users seek to obtain a flow experience that creates the euphoria they are seeking. Cybersex users' characteristics spread across genders, ages, marital status, and sexual orientation. Based on current research, women, homosexual, and bisexual individuals were found to be overrepresented in compulsive cybersex groups, and married participants were less likely to report becoming engaged in cybersex activity.² More men are involved in sexual activities online than women, but women reportedly appear to be at higher risk for problematic cybersex behaviors.^{2,19}

Cybersex participants enjoy the privacy that the Internet offers in online sexual experiences. The perceived benefits for participating in cybersex consist of the Triple-A Engine: accessibility, affordability, and anonymity; and not being exposed to STIs.^{2,7,12} Even though some individuals are successful in stopping cybersex behavior, many become compulsive users which can place them on a downward slope that can lead to addiction.

College students are more likely than other occupations to report compulsive cybersex involvement.⁷ Increasingly, youth are participating in cybersex and many underage teens have been exposed to unwanted online sexual solicitations via e-mail or in chatrooms.^{5,25} Earlier education about the potential dangers of cybersex needs to be taught. This may best be served in the schools, and needs to especially focus on teens and young adults, as they are at particular risk for cybersex compulsive behaviors. Just as they educate about drugs and alcohol, health educators need a researched-based curriculum added to their classes to better inform youth and college students about the risks, consequences and warning signs of cybersex dependence.

Further research should focus on the perceived benefits or perceived barriers of college students and their introductions to cybersex. A better understanding of that age group will assist in educating youth and in implementing better education in schools and communities.

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