In the Shadows of the Net:
Understanding Cybersex in the Seminary

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Case Example

*Don could hardly believe what he was saying to his spiritual director. The descriptions of what he was doing on the Internet seemed as though he was describing someone else. He wondered how things had gotten so out of control. In the past, he had struggled with pornographic magazines, but nothing compared to how he was struggling with cybersex on the Internet. Don’s social life was minimal. His grades were suffering. He knew he couldn’t continue to lead two lives. In one life he was the model citizen and a good student. In the other, he was lost in an electronic world of lust for nearly four hours every day. He watched his pornography use turn from somewhat manageable to out of control. As he disclosed his problem to his spiritual director, he realized how much worse things could get if he didn’t confront the problem.*

Introduction

Like so many others, Don underestimated the impact the Internet could have on his sexuality and his life in general. Just a website here, a sex chat there, a pornographic email, newsgroup posting, or participation in file sharing – it all seemed so innocent and innocuous. Then one day commitments are being sacrificed, loneliness and isolation are a daily reality, and controlling the behavior is a thing of the past. Obsessed with finding that one image, that one conversation, or that one person who holds the key to happiness and fulfillment, life spirals out of control. Hours pass as you seek the ultimate high – perfect sex on the Internet. The pursuit is illusive however, since the Internet feeds fantasy, not reality. The relationships formed are pseudo-relationships requiring little emotional investment and can be terminated with the click of a mouse.

Fortunately, in Don’s situation, he talked to someone. He broke the secrecy and isolation and sought help because he recognized how quickly the electronic world consumed him. Unfortunately, there are millions of others who do not recognize the danger until it is too late. Their lives and the lives of those around them are shattered.
This article introduces the basic concepts of cybersex, and discusses the implications of cybersex in seminary formation. Although cybersex compulsivity is a relatively new and unexplored field, what is known may be helpful in identifying, preventing, and intervening with seminary students such as Don, who feel they are out of control with cybersex behavior.

Statistics

Although research regarding Internet behavior is unwieldy, best estimates suggest there are nearly 250 million users who sign on regularly to the Internet (Nielsen Netratings, September, 2003). There are approximately 100,000 websites dedicated to child pornography, with millions of visitors paying billions of dollars to access their drug of choice – cybersex (Grove & Zerega, 2002). No group of individuals is unaffected by online sexuality, including the Christian community. For pastors, 51% reported that cyberporn was a temptation, while 37% reported it being a current struggle (Gardner, 2001). One of every seven calls to the “Pastoral Care Hotline” is related to Internet pornography (Focus on the Family, 2003). Clergy reporting problems with cybersex tended to younger and report spending about 12 hours a week online in sexual pursuits (Gardner, 2001).

The Internet is a way of life for younger generations. Just as television is an integral part of our society, microcomputers and high-speed Internet connections have moved into homes, schools, and public places, allowing access to millions of pages of information to millions of individuals.

The Basics: How, Who, and Why?

Accessing Cybersex
There are many ways to access cybersex on the Internet. Leaders and helping professionals who have a basic understanding of the multiple methods of access will be more helpful to those struggling with Internet sexuality. This basic knowledge allows faculty advisors, spiritual directors, and others to ask pertinent questions using the language of the Internet. Delmonico and Griffin (in press) presented the various methods for accessing cybersex on the Internet:

- **World Wide Web** – The most common form of access to the Internet is via the World Wide Web. Internet browsers (e.g., Netscape, Internet Explorer, Opera, etc.) allow the user to view webpages that may contain pornographic text, sounds, or images. Many people equate the World Wide Web with the Internet, but in fact, it is only one method of accessing information on the Internet.

- **Newsgroups** – This area serves as a bulletin board where individuals can post and read text or multimedia messages, such as pictures, sounds, and video.

- **Email** – Email can be used for direct communication with other individuals or groups of individuals. In the case of cybersex, the message may be a sexual conversation, story, picture, sound, or video. Often individuals meet in other areas of the Internet and then begin communicating via email.

- **Chat Rooms** – Both sexualized conversation and multimedia can be exchanged in chat rooms. Casual users are familiar with web-based chatting such as Yahoo Chat or America Online (AOL) Chat. Most web-based chats areas have sections dedicated to sexual chats. However, the largest chat based system is the Internet Relay Chat (IRC), an area largely unfamiliar to most casual users. In addition to text-based chatting, IRC contains a number of chat rooms specifically dedicated to the exchange of pornography through “file servers.”
• **Videoconferencing / Voice Chatting** – The use of these areas is rapidly increasing. As technology improves and connection speeds increase, the use of the Internet for “live” cybersex sessions will become commonplace. Videoconferencing, combined with voice chat represents a high tech version of a peep show and obscene phone call mixed into one.

• **Peer to Peer File Sharing** – Software packages such as Napster® and Kazaa® have made file sharing a popular hobby. Casual users of this software know its use for exchanging music files, but any file can be “shared” on the network. Many of the files on these networks are pornographic in nature. These pornographic files are numerous, easily found and can contain illegal child pornography. In fact, one study reported that 42% of all Kazaa requests were for either adult or child pornography (Brown, 2003).

• **Online Gaming** – Online destinations such as MOOs and MUDs encourage participants to take on various characters and play out their roles in a game-like setting. A portion of these game areas are sexually charged and offer places for participants to engage in sexual conversations. Some individuals become compulsive with the fantasy, role-playing aspect of these games, whether sexual or not.

How an individual accesses cybersex is one aspect of assessing the problematic use of the Internet. However, not all cybersex users are equal. The next section will discuss the various categories of cybersex users.

**Cybersex User Categories**

Carnes, Delmonico, & Griffin (2001) presented the Cybersex User Categories (figure 1). The model is not empirically created, but rather theoretically based on a variety of research surveys and clinical evidence. Several other models of conceptualizing the types of online users exist, most of which address similar categories
of users even though they may use different words to describe the groups.

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Insert Figure One About Here

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In one of the largest studies of Online Sexual Activity (OSA), Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg (2000) found that the majority (80%) reported little or no consequences in their lives and did not report any significant life area in jeopardy due to cybersex use. While one could argue these individuals may be denying or minimizing the impact of cybersex, it should be stated that not everyone who engages in OSA does so at a pathological or problematic level.

Lisa was married for eight years. Her and her husband Jason had two children, and they were happy. However, they felt that the romance and intimacy had left their relationship. One night, while logged on to the Internet, Lisa suggested her and her husband search for ways to enhance the sexual relationship. Together they chatted with other couples about ways to improve their sex life. They shopped for new sexual toys that might re-ignite their sexual spark. They even viewed some soft-core pornography sites to get some ideas for sexual positions and behaviors that might be appealing to each of them. They approached their sexual life with new understanding and enthusiasm.

Although there may have been other ways for Lisa and Jason to explore their sexual relationship, little apparent harm came from exploring via the Internet in a safe, private environment. Many individuals use the Internet for sexual information and exploration. In fact, 70-75% of adolescents reported using the Internet to get sexual information (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001). Albeit preferable for teenagers talk to parents, or other trusted adults, research demonstrates this seldom happens. For adolescents who know where to find accurate information, the Internet becomes an
avenue for accessing reliable sexual information rather than relying on inaccurate peer
anecdotes. Since many seminary students are in late adolescence/early adulthood, they
are often at a critical juncture in their sexual development. At this stage of development
there are numerous questions about their body, spirituality, and sexual relationships. For
some, the Internet may be a healthy way to explore sexuality in a safe environment, for
others it may present a dangerous area of exploration. While it is not possible to predict
who will become a problematic user of cybersex, the user categories help identify the
predisposed and lifelong sexual compulsives who would certainly be at higher risk than
other categories.

*Discovery group.* The discovery group includes those who have never had any problems
with sexual fantasy or behavior until they discovered sex on the Internet. Sex on the Internet
fostered the development of their compulsive behavior they may not have otherwise experienced.
Although this group is rare, it does exist, and little can be done to predict problematic cybersex
for the “Discovery User.”

*Predisposed group.* The predisposed group is composed of individuals who have had
some history of problematic sexual thoughts or fantasies, but have the coping mechanisms in
place to keep their sexual urges and behaviors under control. The Internet fosters the
development of an already existing, out-of-control sexual fantasy or urge that may not have
developed into actual problematic behavior without the Internet. The case of Don (from above)
is a good example of a predisposed user. He admitted he had a history of fantasy, urges, or
behaviors involving pornography in the past.

*Lifelong sexually compulsive group.* The lifelong sexually compulsive group is composed
of those who have dealt with sexually compulsive behavior throughout their life, and the Internet
simply becomes one additional way of acting out their inappropriate sexual behaviors. This
group often has well established patterns of problematic sexual urges, fantasies, and behaviors
and a history of ritualized sexually problematic behaviors. Some individuals in this group may
see cybersex as a “safer” way of acting out their problematic sexual behaviors since it may
reduce their direct contact with others. This may happen for a short period of time, but in many
cases, individuals in this group will eventually return to sexually problematic behaviors offline.

Understanding who uses cybersex is only one part of the equation. The
following section discusses some possibilities for why individuals become compulsive
with their Internet sexuality. Delmonico, Griffin, and Moriarty (2001) proposed the

*CyberHex of the Internet* to explain the powerful attraction of the Internet.

• **Integral** - Integral suggests the Internet is nearly impossible to avoid. Even if a
cybersex user decided to never use the Internet again, the integral nature of the Internet would
make that boundary nearly impossible. The reality is that most individuals have jobs that require
Internet access. In addition, public availability, the use of email, and other activities like
shopping and research make the Internet a way of life that is integrated into our daily routines.

• **Imposing** – The amount of general information found on the Internet is staggering.
This is true of sexual material as well. The Internet provides an endless supply of sexual material
7 days a week, 365 days a year. The amount of information, and imposing nature of marketing
sexual information on the Internet contributes to being drawn into the world of Cybersex.
In the Shadows of the Net

- **Inexpensive** – For a relatively small fee, $20 to $40 per month, one can access an intoxicating amount of sexual material on the Internet. In the offline world such excursions can prove to be extremely expensive and cost prohibitive to many. The Internet overrides the cost prohibition.

- **Isolating** – Cybersex is an isolating activity. Even though interpersonal connections may be made during the course of Cybersex, these relationships do not require the same level of social skills, interaction, or basic intimacy that offline behaviors require. The Internet becomes a world into itself, where it is easy to lose track of time, consequences and real life relationships. The isolation of cybersex often provides an escape from the real world, and while everyone takes short escapes, Cybersex often become the “drug of choice” to anesthetize negative feelings associated with real life relationships.

- **Interactive** - While isolating in nature, the Internet also hooks individuals into forming pseudo-relationships. These pseudo-relationships often approximate reality without running the risks of real relationships – emotional and physical vulnerability and intimacy. This close approximation to reality can be fuel for the fantasy life of those who experience problems with their cybersex behaviors.

- **Intoxicating** – This is the phenomenon that occurs when you add together the first five elements of the Cyberhex. This combination makes for an incredibly intoxicating element that is often difficult for many to resist. The intoxication of the Internet is multiplied when Cybersex is involved since behaviors are reinforced with one of the most powerful rewards, sex.

**Cleric Common Characteristics**

Jasper felt he was called to serve God as a priest at age 14, only two years after having been sexually abused by an older male neighbor. Even though he was now only 21 years old, he had always dreamed of having a parish of his own one day so that he could lead others towards God. Because he knew he would take a
vow of celibacy, he never experimented with romantic relationships and had set a boundary with himself to not explore his own sexuality. After several years in seminary, Jasper struggled with sexual fantasies and masturbation, but was always able to manage them. One day, while researching for a paper in school he found an extremely explicit pornography site on the Internet. The flood gates opened and within weeks he found himself spending several hours each day searching for online pornography. Jasper reassured himself that he was just curious that he would soon be back to ‘normal’. After several months of compulsive masturbation and internet sex, his behavior escalated into urges to find a prostitute and act out sexually. No one knew that Jasper was in danger...he had managed to keep his double life a secret.

Cooper, Delmonico, and Burg (2000) reported nearly 70-80% of individuals reported keeping the amount of time they spend online secret from others in their lives. If this is true for the lay population, think of how much more protected the secrets of a seminary student must be. Whether they have taken a vow of celibacy or not, sexual issues are often difficult to discuss, let alone individuals who are in a profession that is often regarded as holy and asexual.

Laaser (1991) and Davies (2003) highlighted certain characteristics of clergy that make them vulnerable to sexually addictive behaviors. These characteristics may also apply to sexually acting out on the Internet. Laaser’s and Davies’ characteristics are combined and listed below:

* Hope that their ordination would reduce the shame they feel in their lives

* Are codependents, who seek approval from others, and get their needs met by gaining widespread approval by pleasing parishioners

* Are in significant denial regarding their sexual issues. The consequences for clergy are more profound when it comes to sexual indiscretions

* Often have well entrenched rigid judgmental thinking that is buttressed by their theology

* Often have a great deal of unexpressed anger
* See themselves as shameful, bad, or unworthy
* Use sex to take care of their emotional needs

There are often predisposing factors that lead to the development of these characteristics. Some of these predisposing factors are:

* Survivors of childhood sexual, physical, or emotional abuse/abandonment
* Highly rigid and disengaged families
* Rigid spiritual formation from family or others in authority (spiritual abuse)

Consider the above case of Jasper. Jasper’s own sexual abuse as an adolescent may have delayed his sexual and emotional development. While God certainly could have called Jasper to ministry, Jasper may have sought ordination in response to the shame and guilt he felt around his sexuality. Jasper’s lack healthy exploration of his sexuality may also have contributed to delayed development. When Jasper discovered Internet pornography he felt unable to control his urge to explore. In an analogous way, Jasper went from being sexually anorexic (Carnes, 1997) to sexually bulimic. Jasper began to increase the risk involved with his sexual behavior, and began fighting the internal struggle to move online behavior to offline sexual encounters with prostitutes. Without intervention, Jasper is extremely vulnerable to continued sexual escalation both online and offline.

It is important to note there is no magic formula to determine which clergy are at risk and which are not. There are many clergy who have been abused in childhood and come from disengaged families that are not vulnerable to sexual acting out. However, the predispositions combined with the close interpersonal contacts, isolation (retreats, prayer, private meetings with parishioners, etc.) can certainly make clergy more vulnerable.
What Seminaries Should Know and Do

First and foremost, seminaries should be familiar with the warning signs of cybersex behaviors. The use of the Internet Sex Screening Test (ISST; Delmonico, 1997) may be useful for students who are vulnerable to cybersex behaviors. More important, however, is the willingness to discuss sexual issues and ask questions about a student’s computer/Internet use. Questions such as “Do you intentionally visit sexual sites on the Internet?” or “Do you use online chat rooms as a way to relieve feelings of isolation and loneliness?” may be a good starting point with those suspected of having difficulty with their Internet behavior. Several things often stifle this type of questioning. First, lack of awareness that there may be a problem with the Internet, and second, lack of a desire to discuss sexual issues as part of spiritual formation. In addition, occasionally the spiritual director may have a similar problem with compulsive use of the Internet and not want to draw attention to themselves by asking these types of questions or engaging in self disclosure. Whatever the reason, it is important for seminaries to educate themselves about how cybersex can significantly interfere with spiritual formation and prepare a curriculum or intervention strategy to deal directly with this issue.

Rafferty (2003) suggested several ways to address broader Internet problems with clergy and in the seminary. These suggestions can easily be adapted to include Cybersex and cyberpornography.

First, Rafferty (2003) suggested that seminary admission offices not be timid about asking direct questions regarding the applicants’ use of the Internet. Specifically, questions regarding Cybersex could also be included in such an interview. Addressing the issue in the admissions process lets the applicant know the seminary is aware of such problems and may make it easier for the student to come forward if faced with such problems now, or in the future.
Second, Rafferty (2003) noted that seminaries should include the moral and ethical use of the Internet and computer. He wrote “students need an intellectual basis from which to evaluate the diverse potential of the Internet, both positive and negative.” (Rafferty, 2003, p.30)

Third, seminary students should be educated as to the potential consequences of the use of the Internet. In particular, Cybersex users could benefit from such consequence awareness and victim empathy education. Many times users of Cybersex see their behavior as a victimless act, when in fact, there are often many victims involved.

Next, seminary leaders should be educated and aware of various Cybersex issues, including the warning signs, potential interventions, and available community resources for those struggling with Cybersex. This is particularly important since college students are often more vulnerable to Cybersex for several reasons. For example, they have easy access at the university; they are required to research more information online and spend more time online; students use it to contact family and friends; and are often at a critical stage in their sexual development. Many college aged students use the Internet to explore sexuality and may begin to substitute the online world for the real world, often with a negative impact on their social skill development.

Finally, Rafferty (2003) suggested that seminaries create acceptable use policies (AUP) that specifically designate proper and improper use of the Internet. These policies should address sexual use of the Internet and outline consequences of any infraction of the AUP. The Information Technology department at the seminary should conduct periodic checks to ensure that faculty, staff, and students are adhering to the policies set forth in the AUP.

Conclusions

Sexually compulsive use of the Internet is a concern for individuals of any age, gender, or profession. The cleric profession is not exception. The first step is admitting that cybersex
behaviors can be a problem for pastors and students in seminaries. Most spiritual sectors have difficulty dealing directly with sexual issues, so increasing awareness and developing a healthy willingness to address the issue of Cybersex may be the biggest hurdle to helping those who struggle.

Using the above mentioned Cybersex user categories, the cyberhex, the Internet Screening Test, and suggestion adapted from Rafferty (2003) will prove to be the best course of action for seminaries concerned about sexual use of the Internet by its students.

Although cybersex is an unpleasant and often embarrassing issue to address, seminaries who address it appropriately will reap the benefits of sexually healthy pastors who can pass their knowledge and awareness on to those they serve.
References


Figure 1. Cybersex User Categories
Figure 2. CyberHex