

The Psychology of Technology

Part I

John Suler, a professor at Rider University wrote the following about the psychology of cyberspace:

“It's well known that people say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn't ordinarily say or do in the face-to-face world. They loosen up, feel more uninhibited, express themselves more openly. It's a double-edged sword. Sometimes people share very personal things about themselves. They reveal secret emotions, fears, wishes, or they show unusual acts of kindness and generosity. On the other hand, the disinhibition effect may not be so benign where individuals explore the dark underworld of the internet, places of pornography and violence, places where they would never visit in the real world.”

Suler called this phenomenon the "Online Disinhibition Effect." Suler went on to say this about the online disinhibition effect.


“What causes this online disinhibition? What is it about cyberspace that loosens the psychological barriers? Several factors are at play. For some people, one or two of them produces the lion's share of the disinhibition effect. In most cases, though, these factors interact with each other, supplement each other, resulting in a more complex, amplified effect (p. 323).”

The elements of the Online Disinhibition Effect are summarized below:

You Don't Know Me – This factor is fueled by the layer of anonymity the Internet offers users. When individuals feel anonymous they are more inclined to engage in behaviors they would have otherwise never considered. The nature of the Internet creates a sense of anonymity for the user.

You Can't See Me – Although related to anonymity, this factor refers to the feeling of invisibility that Internet users often experience. Individuals feel as if they are invisible and therefore believe they can neither cause nor receive consequences as a result of their online behavior. The opportunity to be physically invisible amplifies the disinhibition effect.

See You Later - The Internet provides a time delay where individuals can be more thoughtful about their communication, often leading to a deeper expression of thought and feeling. Although this is not necessarily a negative effect, it is a disinhibited one nonetheless. Another dimension of the “See You Later” concept is the fact that when online interactions create discomfort, you can easily escape such situations by exiting the conversation or deleting the text, almost as if it never existed.



It's All in My Head – This concept relates to the idea of projection. In the absence of sensory and non-verbal cues, individuals may assign personal attributes to the unknown virtual partner. The line between our projected fantasy and reality is blurred allowing individuals to say and do things they would not consider in the real world. At that moment, reality *is* one's imagination.

It's Just a Game - Individuals often see the virtual world as one in which the rules and norms of everyday offline living are not applicable. Once they turn off the computer and return to their daily routine, they believe they can leave the online game and their online game-identity behind. Internet users may feel they should not be held responsible for what happens in the make-believe, play world that in their mind has nothing to do with reality.

We're Equals – A person's status is unknown to others online and may not have the same impact as it does in the face-to-face world. Everyone, regardless of status, wealth, race, gender, age, etc., starts off on a level playing field. This lack of hierarchy on the Internet has its advantages; however, hierarchies play an important role in our society, including the division between adults and children, which can be easily downplayed in the online world.

Suler, J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *Cyberspsychology and Behavior*, 7, 321-326.

Online Disinhibition Effect Assignment

Take each of the elements of Suler's Online Disinhibition Effect and create a collage, picture, song, rap, poem, etc.... You may want to feature the elements that are most relevant to your online sexual offense behavior. There is no "right way" to do this project. The only requirement is that you pair the words you use with some type of imagery, picture, songs, etc.

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Part II

In addition to the Online Disinhibition Effect, Delmonico, Griffin, and Moriarity (2001) developed a model known as the “CyberHex.” The Cyberhex is a six-sided figure where each side represents a different facet of the Internet that when combined together create an almost “hex” or trance-like state. These facets include: Interactive, Intoxicating, Isolating, Integral, Inexpensive, and Imposing. The Internet is the only communication medium that brings together so many attractive features. The synergy created through the interaction of the cyberhex factors makes the Internet more seductive than any other medium.

Isolating – Technology is isolating. Even though interpersonal relationships may be made when using technology, these relationships do not require the same level of social skills or interactions that offline behaviors require. Technology becomes a world into itself where it becomes easy to lose track of time, consequences, and real life relationships. The isolation and anonymity of technology often provides an escape from the real world, and while everyone takes short escapes, technology often becomes the “drug of choice” to anesthetize and escape into a world that feels very anonymous.

Integral – Technology has become integral in our lives such that it is nearly impossible to avoid. Even if an individual decided to never use technology again, the integral nature of technology would make that boundary nearly impossible since the majority of individuals need technology for work, banking, job hunting, etc. Technology has become an integral and integrated part of our daily routines.

Inexpensive – For a relatively small fee, or for no fee at all, one can access a immense amount of material (sexual and non-sexual) using technology. In the offline world, such excursions can be extremely expensive and cost prohibitive to many. Technology overrides that cost prohibition.

Imposing – The amount of general information found through technology is staggering. This is true of sexual material as well. Technology provides an endless supply of sexual material 7 days per week, 365 days per year. The amount of information and the imposing nature of sexual information on the Internet contributes to being drawn into the world of cybersex and problematic online sexual behavior.

Interactive – While isolating in nature, technology also “hooks” individuals into forming pseudo-relationships. These pseudo-relationships often approximate reality without running the risk 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 online sexual behavior.

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. It can become compulsive and can feel addictive. This intoxication of technology is multiplied when cybersex is involved since behaviors are reinforced with one of the most powerful rewards - sexuality.

The combination of these factors and the online disinhibition effect, along with the lure and reinforcement of sexuality, creates an ideal venue for problematic online sexual behavior.

Cyberhex Assignment

Read over each of the six descriptions above that comprise the *CyberHex*. Consider each carefully as they relate to your own online sexual behaviors, including your online sexual offense behavior.

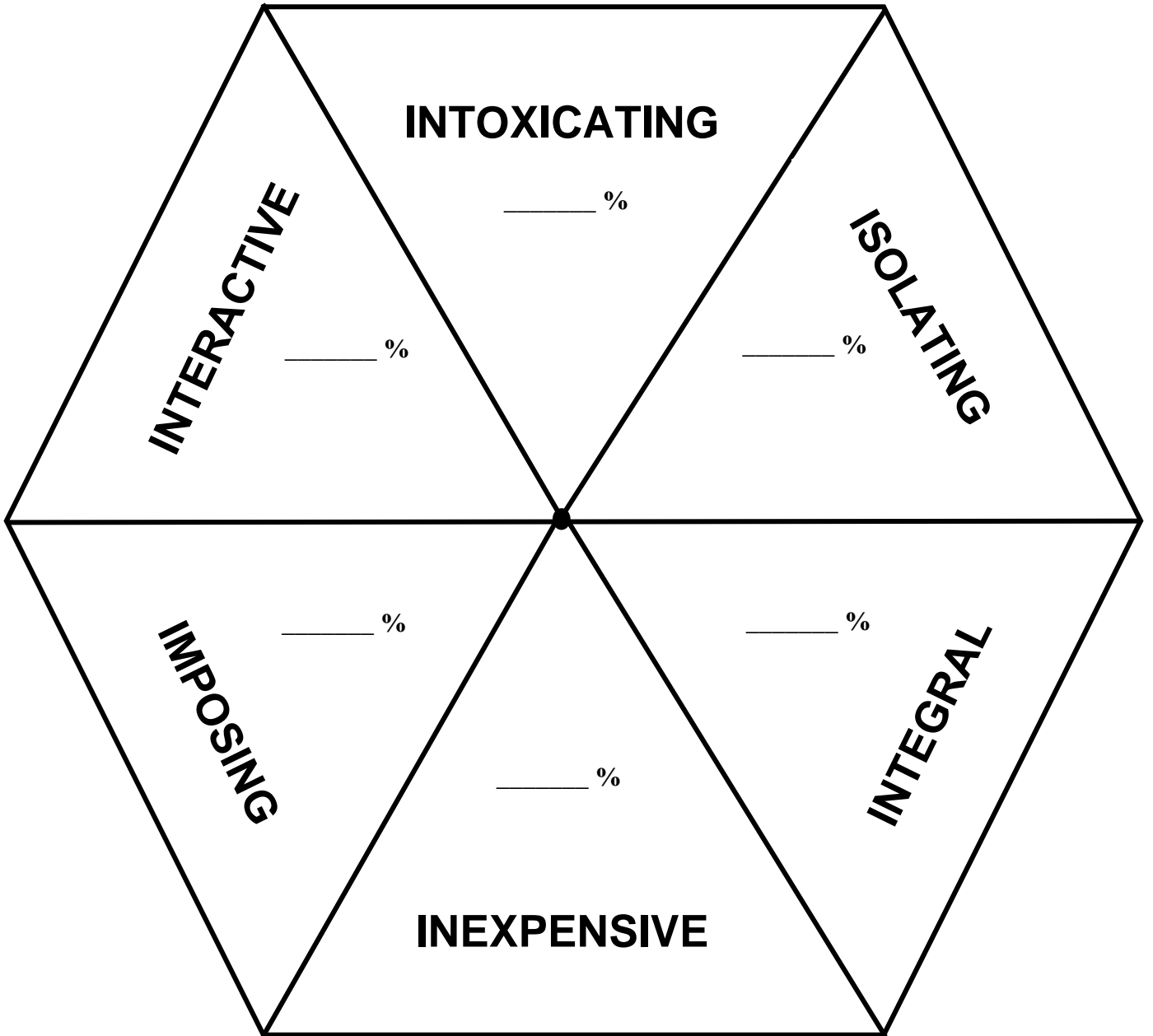
Place a number into each cell of the *CyberHex* indicating the percentage that particular cell played in YOUR online sexual behavior, including your online sexual offense behavior. For example, if you believe that “Isolation” is your biggest motivation for engaging in problematic online sexual behavior, then you might assign that cell 50% or more. Some cells may have a zero in them, while others may be close to 100%. The numbers in the cells should add up to 100%.

When you have completed placing percentages into the *CyberHex* it will provide you with a clearer picture on your motivation for engaging in problematic online sexual behavior. There are often multiple reasons for engaging in a behavior, and this exercise will help you more clearly identify which areas seem to be most appealing to you.

Once you have a better understanding of the appeal, you should then list the various things you do to manage your problematic online sexual behavior. For example, deciding to only use technology when around others or deciding never to use technology in the middle of the night are great management techniques **IF** isolation was a key factor in the *CyberHex* for you. However, if isolation was not a critical factor, perhaps these management techniques are ineffective and unnecessary. The key is to match up your management techniques, that is, the things you do to prevent a lapse/relapse, with those things in the *CyberHex* that have you hooked into problematic online sexual behavior in the first place.

There is no magic answer to this exercise. Each individual will end up with different numbers and different strategies for managing their cybersex use. Therefore, we encourage you to share your insights and *CyberHex* exercise with your therapist, your group, your probation officer and other trusted individuals, just to be sure you are seeing the full picture. It often helps to talk through these exercises with someone, rather than just write them down. It is not a good idea to use your partner/significant other as your trusted individual, as this tends to set up a problematic dynamic in relationships. You may decide to share this exercise with your partner/significant other but do so with the help of your therapist.

This exercise can be a step in developing an effective relapse prevention plan for your problematic online sexual behavior.





The Psychology of Technology Part III “Food for Thought”

1. Which of the specific elements of the Psychology of Technology (Online Disinhibition Effect/Cyberhex) most influenced your online sexual offense behavior and your online sexual behavior in general?
2. Explain how the Psychology of Technology influenced your sexual offense behavior and your online sexual behavior in general?
3. Do you feel like the Psychology of Technology was the only reason for your online sexual offense behavior? What % would you attribute to the Psychology of Technology?
4. What is your plan for managing the Psychology of Technology when you are using technology in the future? Be specific! You may want to consult your therapist and/or support group.