

Lack of social media fix can lead to withdrawal, experts say

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(Photo illustration by Val Katzenstein)

Some might not be able to tear themselves away from Facebook or Twitter long enough to read this story.

If that's you, you probably should keep reading.

Yes, there is such a thing as a Facebook addiction. Twitter, too. And it's growing. So much so that it's present in up to 70 percent of the cases Joe Canevello handles as clinic director at Connections Counseling & Consulting in Crystal Lake.

So much so that studies have compared it to the addictions experienced by alcoholics and drug addicts.

A day without Google? Without the Internet? Withdrawal.

"I compare it to more like a gambling addiction," said Canevello, a marriage and family therapist and divorce mediator. "You get that kind of buzz."

Similar to a buying addiction, there's a spot in the brain triggered, a neurological process of excitement associated with an Internet addiction, he said.

"It's the same feeling we get when we fall in love," he said.

But, like anything, too much of a good thing can be, well, not good.

"You can overdo water, too, and exercise," Canevello said. "It's a matter of using it as it can be useful and not beyond that."

Because for obvious reasons, the Internet, Google, Facebook, Twitter ... they definitely can be useful. Most would agree with that. (Aside from those who can't stand social media, but they've probably stopped reading by now.)

Either way, it's not going away.

It's become the go-to topic for business workshops. People have built careers around teaching others how best to use social media.

The personal and business reasons that people are drawn to it seem to have become more intertwined than ever before.

Facebook is up pretty much all day as Jaki Berggren works as manager of group sales for the McHenry County Convention & Visitors Bureau. Part of her job is to post statuses for the bureau's Facebook page and to keep an eye on area events and activities and share those, as well.

The bureau has used Facebook for the past year and a half and has about 700 fans.

"I know that people probably see the Facebook post and may possibly go to a concert or buy a ticket for the Raue Center or go see a movie at the drive-in because they didn't realize there was a drive-in [until they saw it on Facebook]," she said.

Personally, Berggren uses Facebook to keep in touch with family and friends and seek advice.

Without Facebook, she probably wouldn't recognize many of her cousins, aunts and uncles if she ran into them on the street.

"We live far away from each other, but I feel like I know them more than I ever would have if there wasn't Facebook," she said.

She has created a group for her son's Cub Scout troop where parents keep up-to-date on meetings and checks in with her Bunco friends through their group page.

"It's just a really great way to reach out to people, get input and ideas, and it's kind of my little break from the day every once in a

while just to go on there and see what people are up to and share pictures," she said.

Could she go without it?

She does – on purpose.

"There are times where I'll leave the house and leave the iPhone behind, and remove myself from this so I can immerse myself in my life," she said. "Otherwise, it's always there."

That's the key, Canevello said, setting limits. Choose an hour or so at a time to use it. Stay connected to the outside world. Go to a music store, a movie, a newsstand. Play sports, go for a bike ride or take a vacation where there's no Internet access, Canevello suggested.

"Remember that it's a tool," he said.

You know you might have a problem when the Internet is getting in the way of your other relationships, he said.

It's hard enough to lose weight or quit smoking for many.

"Imagine the difficulty if you're not really interested in changing this, and you have the addictive trait," Canevello said.

You first have to recognize that it's a problem. And it's typically only a problem for those who already are inclined toward addiction, those who suffer from anxiety, insecurity, depression or are feeling isolated, Canevello said.

Even those who make a living on social media admit it's addictive.

"Most of us are capable of restraining ourselves so we can act appropriately and give ourselves balance," said April M. Williams of Algonquin, founder of CyberLife Tutors, which offers personal branding and marketing through social networking.

"I don't think it's a huge problem for most people," she said. "If you're going to be addicted, if it's not that, it's something else." In the long run, she said, the benefits social media can provide by allowing small businesses to compete effectively with big-name businesses outweigh the possible negatives.

Still, Williams said, people can use the sites improperly.

"I see someone playing [the Facebook game] Farmville and see they've been playing for hours and hours, and I wonder if that person has got a life, anything else going on in the world," she said. Younger people have to be careful about the pictures, comments and statuses they post because that's the first place job recruiters look these days, she said. Even strong political and religious beliefs shared regularly on social media can turn people off, she said.

Williams spent a couple of days last month on a boat in Alaska with no Internet access.

She admitted it wasn't easy.

"Being without it can be a real challenge," she said, especially because for her, it's a business necessity.

Marla Pendergrast, who advises clients on social media programs and marketing through Robin F. Pendergrast Photography in Crystal Lake, tells clients to check Facebook regularly.

"When customers post on your Facebook page, you want them to feel you're responsive to their ideas or requests for input," she said.

"You don't want to miss that week of staying connected to your customers."

It can be addictive, she said, but there are ways to prevent an addiction. Schedule it like a meeting.

"Give yourself a window to work with, like between 8 and 9 in the morning, as opposed to having Facebook on all the time," she said.

The same goes for personal use. And if that doesn't work, seek treatment, Canevello said.

"It's like anything else. How do I modify this behavior? What am I missing out on? Set reasonable Internet goals, and then alter your patterns," he said.

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