

# Pulling digital plug hard to do

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**W**e're wired to wireless technology. So tethered to our electronic devices are we that they've spawned serious consequences, mental health experts and devotees agree.

With convenience comes compulsion and the connectivity-mania is creating manic disorders, including dangerous dependencies. Let's call them e-ddictions.

Increasingly savvy cellphones, enabling conversations, instant access to the Internet and the sending and receipt of e-mails, text messages, videos and photographs are "technology tyrants," Markham family therapist Carrie Fleetwood said.

*'We all need to love and be loved, to have relationships. It starts with that basic need.'*

"Tech devices control and dominate our lives," the Meadowbrook Counselling Associates director said. "It's the monster that lives with us. Technology has caught us off guard and we now have a generalized OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder) in our culture in the sense we're obsessed with the devices."

Canadians send approximately 100 million text messages a day and text message volumes have doubled every year since text messaging was introduced in 2002, the Canadian Wireless Telecommunications Association reported.

The pioneering BlackBerry smartphone has earned its euphemistic CrackBerry moniker, psychotherapist Tracy Richards said.

"Do we have a cyber-addicted generation? The short answer is yes," said Ms Richards, host of CFRB radio's Inspirational Living.

However, it's a stage we have got to go and evolve through.

The big picture is connectivity. Society needs to stay connected, she added.

Opting for private practice after operating a Thornhill wellness centre, part of Ms Richards' portfolio involves counselling clients with addictions. She knows how habit-forming devices, such as her own iPhone, can be.

"I confine it's usage, but admit that I depend on it," she said. "I lasted two weeks without it when it was being repaired. I felt the loss of connectivity. I need to be up-to-the-minute."

Both therapists agree well-documented wireless and Internet fixations can lead to serious problems.

Excessive gaming, viewing online pornography, e-mailing and text messaging have been identified as causes of a compulsive-impulsive disorder, American Journal of Psychiatry contributor Dr. Jerald Block said.

The disorder has become so common, it merits inclusion in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the profession's primary resource to categorise and diagnose mental illnesses, he said.

South Korea, which has the greatest use of broadband

Internet in the world, now considers Internet addiction one of its most serious public health issues, a recent study indicated.

It estimates more than 210,000 South Korean children are affected and in need of treatment and another 1.2 million are at risk of addiction and require basic counselling.

It has been reported nearly 14 per cent of adolescent Internet users in China, or about 10 million people, could be considered addicts. More than 2.5 billion text messages are sent each day in the United States, where the average user send 357 text messages a month, compared to 204 cellphone calls.

The grow-

ing obsession with all things wireless is motivated by humanity's most primordial prerequisite Ms Fleetwood said.

"We all need to love and be loved, to have relationships," she said. "It starts with that basic need. It's done best face-to-face with voices, but it's so easy to text that it's become the lazy way to communicate."

Text communication is isolating but works for many, Ms Richards said.

We all want to have control of our environment and alleviate (negative) variables, she said. Texting does that.

Ironically, wireless connectivity distances and detaches users, particularly young people, the therapists said. There's status in a high volume of Facebook friends, Twitter and text contacts. The result is quantity, not necessarily quality.

When wireless network access goes down, users get jittery, Markham's Courtney Nurnberger, 15, said.

"It's kind of pointless, but it's

## TOO WIRED?

If you answer "yes" to some of these questions, you may have an addiction:

- ▶ Do you feel preoccupied with a wireless device or the Internet?
- ▶ Do you need increasing amounts of time on your cellphone or Internet to achieve satisfaction?
- ▶ Have you repeatedly made unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back or stop Internet or wireless use?
- ▶ Do you feel restless, moody, depressed, or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop Internet or texting use?

Source: Centre for Internet Addiction  
Recovery netaddiction.com

what we all do. It drives my dad nuts. And, yes, when the system is down, I freak out."

The high school student uses text almost exclusively on her smart phone, she said. But being a text fanatic is problematic, she admitted.

"In class it's distracting," she said. "And when kids have a problem, they find it easier to say mean things through texting. I actually don't think there's a solution. Kids will probably text their entire lives. I wish I didn't care about it so much."

Ms Richards' 18-year-old son, Eric Burger, has rarely been without his trusty BlackBerry the past three years.

"It's pretty much in my pocket or hand all the time," he said. "My dad took it away for a couple of weeks. That was pretty bad."

If you're obsessively leashed to your device or the Internet for personal or professional purposes, you need to disconnect, Ms Richards said.

"My advice is for every moment on the device, spend as much time connecting face-to-face with someone, including yourself."



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