Dear Alice,

I became quite the hermit after high school graduation, and noticed myself being a terrible internet junkie who spends hours online.

I realized this was making me feel really irritable after about a year of it, so I started visiting old and new friends last week, and plan to do so this week as well. I'm trying to limit myself on the internet to one hour a day or avoiding it completely.

I'm a young fellah, very able bodied, and I know this. I want to know more of what's out there. I need ideas of how to keep myself moving and build up enough momentum to get out of the small rut. You only live once, right?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Fire up your computer's browser, and a world of shopping, music, games, news, and friends is just a click away. Online, we're continually "plugged in" to the virtual world but also oddly disconnected from the "real" life. As you describe, too much of the internet can take away from other aspects of life and for some can develop into an issue. It sounds like you've already taken the initiative to rein in your Internet habit. You'll be happy to know there are several ways to help folks who want to get offline.

There is no official diagnosis for internet addiction, but some mental health professionals believe that compulsive internet use is a common disorder. Internet "addiction" seems to come in different forms that focus on excessive gaming, gambling, email, instant messaging (IM), cyber relationships, or other virtual preoccupations. According to experts at Texas State University, signs that you may have a problem with internet use include:

- Losing track of time while online or spending more time online than you planned
- Feeling angry, tense, or depressed if you can't access a computer
- Insatiable desire for more computer equipment or software or more time online
- Lying to friends, family, or coworkers about how much time you spend online
- Logging on to as a way to avoid other problems
- Neglecting regular activities like chores, sleep, hanging out with friends, exercise, or sex

As you've already done, recognizing that you have a problem is the first step towards taking
control of your internet use. Visiting friends and limiting your time online are good strategies to keep away from the keyboard. Here are some other suggestions you may find helpful:

*Keep track of time.*
To start out, you may want to use a journal to keep track of how much time you spend online. For example, each time you log on make a note of how long you spend online. How much time do you spend on IM, email, games, or other websites? A journal can help you get an accurate picture of the extent of your internet use. Is there a particular day or time that you chat a lot, like late at night or on weekends? You can also use the journal to record and compare time spent on other daily activities (school, work, meal, sleeping, etc) versus online. Armed with this information, you can set realistic goals for reining in your internet use.

*Make a plan.*
If you want to cut down your internet use, there’s no need to go cold-turkey. Your plan to limit time on the web to an hour a day is a good start. To reach your goal, you may want to schedule a particular time for when it’s ok to log on, for example one hour after dinner. You may even want to set a timer at the opposite side of the room. When your time’s up, you will have to get up from the computer to turn off the alarm. Alternatively, you could schedule your internet session before another appointment or commitment so you have a concrete reason to sign off on time.

*Stay busy.*
To avoid get caught in the Net, think of other fun ways to occupy your time. Do you enjoy playing a sport, reading, or cooking? Perhaps now would be a good time to pick up new hobby or skill. If you miss the chatting aspect of IM, think of other ways to connect with people. For example, you could send a letter to a friend the old fashioned way or make a regular phone date with a relative.

*Reach out to friends and family.*
Your instinct to reconnect with friends is right on point. internet junkies may feel cut off from friends and family in their real lives. Cultivating real-world relationships has several advantages. Foremost, hanging out with friends can give you a deeper sense of connectedness and camaraderie that may be fleeting or artificial online. Having fun with your friends may also put a spring back in your step and help you feel less irritable. As an added bonus, spending time with friends in the flesh will fill up your day and leave less time for you to go online.

People who want to change a particular behavior often find that it's helpful to talk with a counselor or therapist. During your visit, you and the counselor can talk about the psychological aspects of your internet use and strategies for reducing your time online. If you are not at Columbia, ask your health care provider for a referral for a counselor or therapist who has experience with compulsive behavior and/or internet abuse.

It may take time to get out of the IM rut, but you’re off to a good start. You recognized that excessive internet use can make you feel irritable and isolated, and took steps to log off. Hopefully limiting your time online and hanging out with friends will help you unplug and unwind!

Alice!
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Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [12]
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