

Cyber junkies can unplug at US retreat

August 21 2009, by Glenn Chapman



Boys are pictured playing video games. The first US retreat for Internet addicts has opened its doors, welcoming a teenager that was captive to World of Warcraft online role-playing videogame.

The first US retreat for Internet addicts has opened its doors, welcoming a teenager that was captive to World of Warcraft online role-playing videogame.

The 19-year-old boy went from pursuing quests in Azeroth to bottle-feeding baby goats and building a chicken coop as part of a reStart Internet Addiction Recovery Program at a rural five acre spread in the state of Washington.

"We are a cold turkey place; no technology," reStart psychotherapist Hilarie Cash told AFP on Thursday.

"A gamer is not going to be allowed to game any time they are here because it is the gaming that is their drug of choice."

Cash and therapist Cosette Rae opened the Internet addiction retreat in July as a live-in center for re-connecting cyber junkies with the land of the living.

"We are not anti-technology," Cash said. "It is about helping people addicted to technology get through the withdrawal and help their brains get wired back to normal and connected to the world in a positive way."

Internet and [videogame](#) addictions have been a growing problem during the past decade as technology became increasingly pervasive in people's lives, according to the psychotherapist.

"The problem is worsening," Cash said. "More kids are being raised from the earliest days with technology. If allowed to spend too much time there, their development is not balanced."

The reStart rehab program includes teaching skills such as starting conversations and reading [body language](#).

Videogame addicts typically need to be reprogrammed to be conscientious about everyday tasks such as bathing, cooking, and household chores, according to reStart. They also need tutoring when it comes to dating.

"The typical gamer is somebody who has fallen way behind in social skills and lacks confidence," Cash said.

Videogames are designed to immerse players' in fantasy worlds and hold their attention with intermittent rewards such as new powers for characters and storyline revelations.

"Games are really designed to keep people hooked," Cash said. "Those that stay hooked are people really vulnerable for whom the world is painful or scary."

Computers and the Internet are also parent-sanctioned refuges for children eager to escape hard knocks that are usually part of growing up.

"Childhood can be difficult for anybody," Cash said. "You have lots of kids who are shy, or have miserable home lives, or low self-esteem or are struggling in school. These are all kids drawn to the safety of a screen."

Children that spend too much time in the company of computers or videogame consoles can grow into socially mal-adjusted adults, according to reStart.

The retreat has beds for six patients. A 45-day stay costs 14,500 dollars plus cash for daily expenses such as renting camping gear for wilderness adventures.

ReStart has a 12-step program, similar to those for alcohol or drug addicts, for recovering cyber junkies.

"The idea here is teaching people how to be moderate in their behavior and stay oriented to the real world," Cash said.

The center also treats Internet addicts as out-patients, with typical patients ranging from 18 to 28 years old with "extensive exposure to porn, but not much to sex."

The retreat's premier patient is being nudged back into running with the aim of reacquainting him with his body and the physical world.

He has discovered a love for animals and cares for a puppy, baby goats and chickens at the retreat.

"He is thriving, and his social skills are improving by leaps and bounds," Cash said of the retreat's first live-in patient. "He is finding himself very successful with the young women he encounters."

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Citation: Cyber junkies can unplug at US retreat (2009, August 21) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-08-cyber-junkies-unplug-retreat.html>

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