

'Tech addicts' seek solace in 12 steps and rehab

December 26 2018, by Martha Irvine



In this Monday, Dec. 10, 2018, photo, Robel, an 18-year-old tech addict from California, leaves a barn after helping feed animals at the Rise Up Ranch outside rural Carnation, Wash. The ranch is a starting point for clients like Robel who come to reSTART Life, a residential program for adolescents and adults who have serious issues with excessive tech use, including video games. The organization, which began about a decade ago, also is adding outpatient services due to high demand. (AP Photo/Martha Irvine)

The young men sit in chairs in a circle in a small meeting room in suburban Seattle and introduce themselves before they speak. It is much like any other 12-step meeting—but with a twist.

"Hi, my name is," each begins. Then something like, "and I'm an internet and [tech](#) addict."

The eight who've gathered here are beset by a level of tech obsession that's different than it is for those of us who like to say we're addicted to our phones or an app or some new show on a streaming [video service](#). For them, tech gets in the way of daily functioning and self-care. We're talking flunk-your-classes, can't-find-a-job, live-in-a-dark-hole kinds of problems, with depression, anxiety and sometimes suicidal thoughts part of the mix.

There's Christian, a 20-year-old college student from Wyoming who has a traumatic brain injury. His mom urged him to seek help because he was "medicating" his depression with video games and marijuana.

Seth, a 28-year-old from Minnesota, used video games and any number of things to try to numb his shame after a car he was driving crashed, seriously injuring his brother.

Wes, 21, an Eagle Scout and college student from Michigan, played video games 80 hours a week, only stopping to eat every two to three days. He lost 25 pounds and failed his classes.

Across town there is another young man who attended this meeting, before his work schedule changed—and his work places him squarely at risk of temptation.

He does cloud maintenance for a suburban Seattle tech company. For a self-described tech addict, this is like working in the lion's den, laboring

for the very industry that peddles the games, videos and other online content that long has been his vice.



In this Monday, Dec. 10, 2018, photo, Robel, an 18-year-old tech addict from California, left, helps Hilarie Cash load hay to feed the horses at the Rise Up Ranch outside rural Carnation, Wash. The ranch is a starting point for clients like Robel who come to reSTART Life, a residential program for adolescents and adults who have serious issues with excessive tech use, including video games. The organization, which began about a decade ago, also is adding outpatient services due to high demand. Cash is a psychologist, chief clinical officer and a co-founder at reSTART. (AP Photo/Martha Irvine)

"I'm like an alcoholic working at a bar," the 27-year-old laments.

"The drugs of old are now repackaged. We have a new foe," Cosette Rae says of the barrage of tech. A former developer in the tech world, she heads a Seattle area rehab center called reSTART Life, one of the few residential programs in the nation specializing in tech addiction.

Use of that word—addiction—when it comes to devices, online content and the like, is still debated in the mental health world. But many practitioners agree that tech use is increasingly intertwined with the problems of those seeking help.

An American Academy of Pediatrics review of worldwide research found that excessive use of video games alone is a serious problem for as many as 9 percent of [young people](#). This summer, the World Health Organization also added "gaming disorder" to its list of afflictions. A similar diagnosis is being considered in the United States.

It can be a taboo subject in an industry that frequently faces criticism for using "persuasive design," intentionally harnessing psychological concepts to make tech all the more enticing. That's why the 27-year-old who works at the tech company spoke on condition that his identity not be revealed. He fears that speaking out could hurt his fledgling career.

"I stay in the tech industry because I truly believe that technology can help other people," the young man says. He wants to do good.

But as his co-workers huddle nearby, talking excitedly about their latest [video game](#) exploits, he puts on his headphones, hoping to block the frequent topic of conversation in this tech-centric part of the world.



In this Dec. 9, 2018 photo, a 27-year-old self-described tech addict poses for a portrait in front of a video game store at a mall in Everett, Wash. He asked to remain anonymous because he works in the tech industry and fears that speaking out about the negatives of excessive tech use could hurt his career. "If we get to a point in the tech industry where I can use my name and show my face in cases like this, thence've gotten somewhere. That'll be a turning point." (AP Photo/Martha Irvine)

Even the computer screen in front of him could lead him astray. But he digs in, typing determinedly on his keyboard to refocus on the task at hand.

The demons are not easy to wrestle for this young man, who was born in 1991, the very year the World Wide Web went public.

As a toddler, he sat on his dad's lap as they played simple video games

on a Mac Classic II computer. Together in their Seattle area home, they browsed the internet on what was then a ground-breaking new service called Prodigy. The sound of the bouncy, then high-pitched tones of the dial-up connection are etched in his memory.

By early elementary school, he got his first Super Nintendo system and fell in love with "Yoshi's Story," a game where the main character searched for "lucky fruit."

As he grew, so did one of the world's major tech hubs. Led by Microsoft, it rose from the nondescript suburban landscape and farm fields here, just a short drive from the home he still shares with his mom, who split from her husband when their only child was 11.

The boy dreamt of being part of this tech boom and, in eighth grade, wrote a note to himself. "I want to be a computer engineer," it read.

Very bright and with a head full of facts and figures, he usually did well in school. He also took an interest in music and acting but recalls how playing games increasingly became a way to escape life—the pain he felt, for instance, when his parents divorced or when his first serious girlfriend broke his heart at age 14. That relationship still ranks as his longest.



In this Monday, Dec. 10, 2018, photo, Psychologist Hilarie Cash walks on a forest path at a rehab center for adolescents in a rural area outside Redmond, Wash. The complex is part of reSTART Life, a residential program for adolescents and adults who have serious issues with excessive tech use, including video games. Disconnecting from tech and getting outside is part of the rehabilitation process. The organization, which began about a decade ago, also is adding outpatient services due to high demand. Cash is chief clinical officer and a co-founder at reSTART. (AP Photo/Martha Irvine)

"Hey, do you wanna go out?" friends would ask.

"No, man, I got plans. I can't do it this weekend. Sorry," was his typical response, if he answered at all.

"And then I'd just go play video games," he says of his adolescent "dark days," exacerbated by attention deficit disorder, depression and major social anxiety.

Even now, if he thinks he's said something stupid to someone, his words are replaced with a verbal tick - "Tsst, tsst"—as he replays the conversation in his head.

"There's always a catalyst and then it usually bubbles up these feelings of avoidance," he says. "I go online instead of dealing with my feelings."

He'd been seeing a therapist since his parents' divorce. But attending college out of state allowed more freedom and less structure, so he spent even more time online. His grades plummeted, forcing him to change majors, from engineering to business.

Eventually, he graduated in 2016 and moved home. Each day, he'd go to a nearby restaurant or the library to use the Wi-Fi, claiming he was looking for a job but having no luck.

Instead, he was spending hours on Reddit, an online forum where people share news and comments, or viewing YouTube videos. Sometimes, he watched online porn.



In this Dec. 8, 2018 photo, young men gather to talk after a 12-step meeting for Internet & Tech Addiction Anonymous in Bellevue, Wash. The meeting is run much like other 12-step meetings for addicts, but the focus is video games, devices and internet content that has become a life-harming distraction. The Seattle area has become a hub for treatment of extreme tech use. (AP Photo/Martha Irvine)

Even now, his mom doesn't know that he lied. "I still need to apologize for that," he says, quietly.

The apologies will come later, in Step 9 of his 12-step program, which he found with the help of a therapist who specializes in tech addiction. He began attending meetings of the local group called Internet & Tech Addiction Anonymous in the fall of 2016 and landed his current job a couple months later.

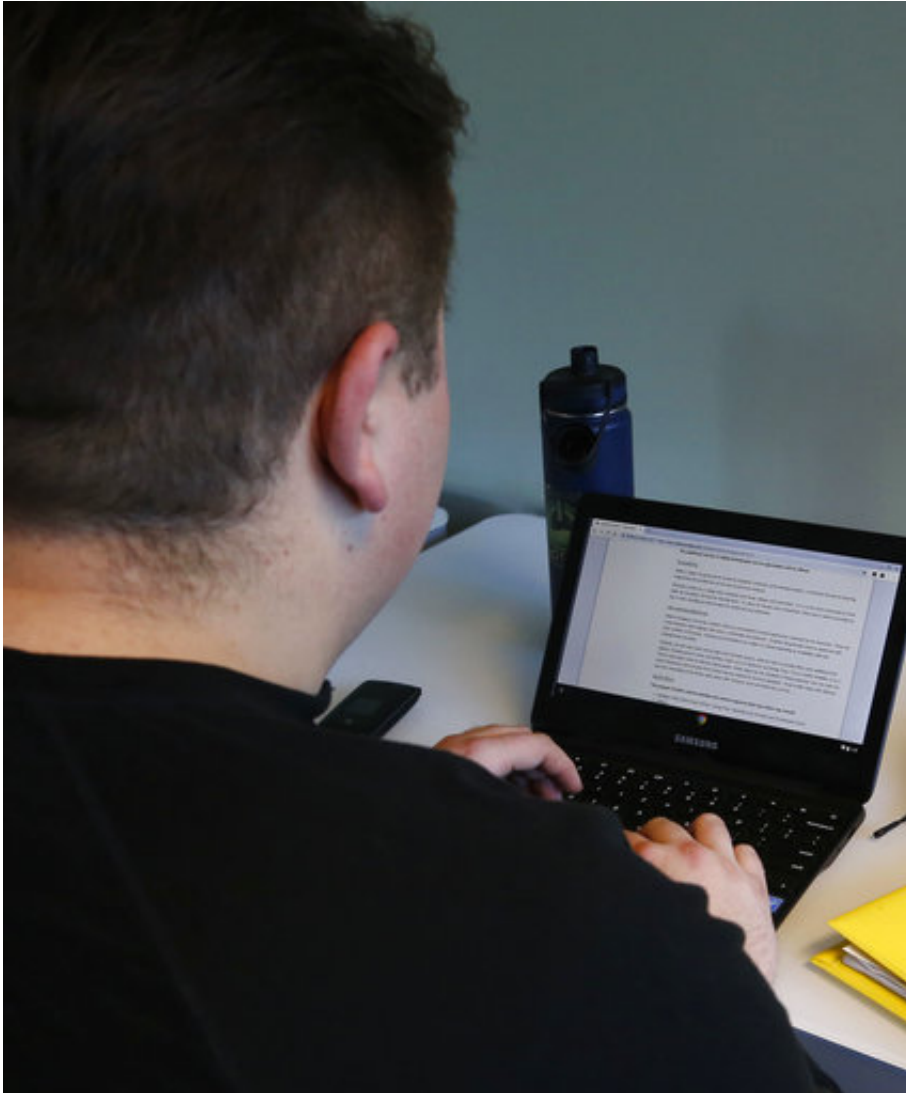
For a while now, he's been stuck on Step 4—the personal inventory—a challenge to take a deep look at himself and the source of his problems. "It can be overwhelming," he says.

The young men at the recent 12-step meeting understand the struggle.

"I had to be convinced that this was a 'thing,'" says Walker, a 19-year-old from Washington whose parents insisted he get help after video gaming trashed his first semester of college. He and others from the meeting agreed to speak only if identified by first name, as required by the 12-step tenets.

That's where facilities like reSTART come in. They share a group home after spending several weeks in therapy and "detoxing" at a secluded ranch. One recent early morning at the ranch outside Carnation, Washington, an 18-year-old from California named Robel was up early to feed horses, goats and a couple of farm cats—a much different routine than staying up late to play video games. He and other [young men](#) in the house also cook meals for one another and take on other chores.

Eventually, they write "life balance plans," committing to eating well and regular sleep and exercise. They find jobs and new ways to socialize, and many eventually return to college once they show they can maintain "sobriety" in the real world. They make "bottom line" promises to give up video games or any other problem content, as well as drugs and alcohol, if those are issues. They're also given monitored smartphones with limited function—calls, texts and emails and access to maps.



In this Monday, Dec. 10, 2018, photo, Jason, a 24-year-old tech addict from New York state, works on a laptop in Bellevue, Wash., at the headquarters of reSTART Life, a residential program for adolescents and adults who have serious issues with excessive tech use, including video games. Jason came to reSTART several months ago because excessive use of video games had become a problem. "I knew I'd have to change or I'd end up killing myself," said Jason, who is now living independently, has a job and is able to use some technology. He plans to start his first pre-med class, biology, in January. (AP Photo/Martha Irvine)

"It's more like an eating disorder because they have to learn to use tech," just as anorexics need to eat, says Hilarie Cash, chief clinical officer and another co-founder at reSTART, which opened nearly a decade ago. They've since added an adolescent program and will soon offer outpatient services because of growing demand.

The young tech worker, who grew up just down the road, didn't have the funds to go to such a program—it's not covered by insurance, because tech addiction is not yet an official diagnosis.

But he, too, has apps on his phone that send reports about what he's viewing to his 12-step sponsor, a fellow tech addict named Charlie, a 30-year-old reSTART graduate.

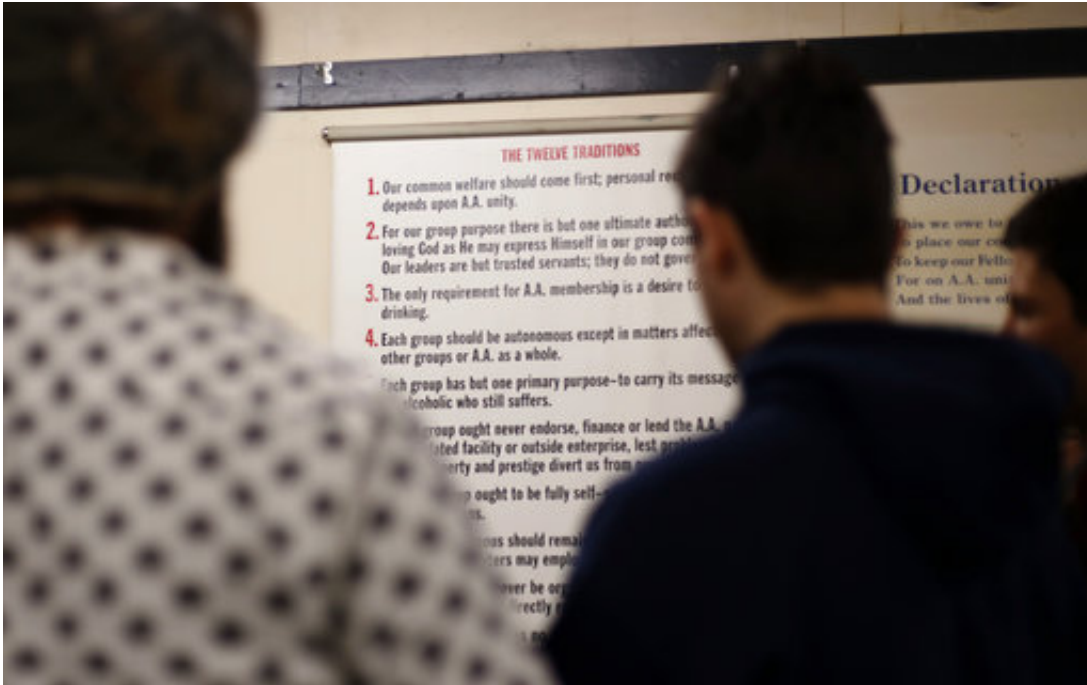
At home, the young man also persuaded his mom to get rid of Wi-Fi to lessen the temptation. Mom struggles with her own addiction—over-eating—so she's tried to be as supportive as she can.

It hasn't been easy for her son, who still relapses every month or two with an extended online binge. He's managed to keep his job. But sometimes, he wishes he could be more like his co-workers, who spend a lot of their leisure time playing video games and seem to function just fine.

"Deep down, I think there's a longing to be one of those people," Charlie says.

That's true, the young man concedes. He still has those days when he's tired, upset or extremely bored—and he tests the limits.

He tells himself he's not as bad as other addicts. Charlie knows something's up when his calls or texts aren't returned for several days, or even weeks.



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"Then," the young man says, "I discover very quickly that I am actually an addict, and I do need to do this."

Having Charlie to lean on helps. "He's a role model," he says.

"He has a place of his own. He has a dog. He has friends."

That's what he wants for himself.

More information: Internet & Tech Addiction Anonymous:
www.netaddictionanon.com

reSTART Life: netaddictionrecovery.com

Children and Screens: www.childrenandscreens.com

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