

Five clues that you are addicted to Facebook

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One day recently, Cynthia Newton's 12-year-old daughter asked her for help with homework, but Newton didn't want to help her, because she was too busy on Facebook. So her daughter went upstairs to her room and sent an e-mail asking her for help, but Newton didn't see the e-mail, because, well, she was too busy on Facebook.

"I'm an addict. I just get lost in Facebook," Newton said. "My daughter gets so PO'd at me, and really it is kind of pathetic. It's not something I'm particularly proud of. I just get so sucked in."

Newton (that's not her real name; she's embarrassed by her Facebook use and requested anonymity) says she spends about 20 hours a week on the social networking site, half the time for work -- she runs an online business -- and half just for fun. She's tried to cut down on her Facebook use but failed.

"I can go a whole day without Facebook," she said. "But I've never made it through an entire weekend."

Although there are no statistics on "Facebook addiction" -- it isn't an actual medical diagnosis -- therapists say they're seeing more and more people like Newton who've crossed the line from social networking to social dysfunction.

"Last Friday, I had three clients in my office with Facebook problems," said Paula Pile, a marriage and family therapist in Greensboro, North Carolina. "It's turned into a compulsion -- a compulsion to dissociate from your real world and go live in the Facebook world."

So how do you know when your Facebook use has turned into a compulsion? You can take Pile's "Facebook Compulsion Inventory" to find out.

Pile and the other therapists interviewed for this article were quick to say that Facebook itself isn't the problem and that the vast majority of its 200 million users probably function just fine.

"I'm on it myself," Pile said. "My daughter just got married, and I got great happiness posting her wedding pictures for all my friends to see."

She says problems arise when users ignore family and work obligations because they find the Facebook world a more enjoyable place to spend time than the real world.

Newton says she checks Facebook first thing when she wakes up, and then she checks her Facebook page as many as seven times while at work, and then she'll check Facebook again when she gets home and one more time before she goes to sleep. If you've been keeping count, that's about 10 times a day.

A single parent, Newton includes "Facebook flirting" with men and meeting up with old schoolmates among her favorite activities.

"One old friend told me he had a huge crush on me in kindergarten, and it tore him apart when we weren't put in the same class in first grade," she said. "When I read that, it was like, wow. I blushed at my computer. I had no idea I was so important to him. It felt very real and warm and dear."

The problem is that it's not real, says Joanna Lipari, a clinical psychologist at the University of California, Los Angeles. She compares Facebook to "The Truman Show," the 1998 Jim Carrey movie about a fabricated world where nothing ever goes wrong.

"Facebook is a fun, pleasant, happy, beautiful world. People only present the crème de la crème of their lives on Facebook. And these people want to be your friends! It's very seductive."

It's especially seductive when real life isn't going so well, Pile adds.

"In real life, people have morning breath, and you have to pay bills with them, and you argue about who's going to change the baby's diaper," she said. "But Facebook is happyland. You don't have to deal with any of that."

Newton says she knows all this and is frustrated at how much time she spends on Facebook, given that she has a job and a child.

"I've thought about going cold turkey, but that would make me so uncomfortable. I know I couldn't do it."

You know you're a Facebook addict when ...

1. You lose sleep over Facebook

"If you're staying up late at night because you're on Facebook, and you're tired the next day, Facebook may be a compulsion for you," Lipari said. neglecting yourself because of Facebook."

2. You spend more than an hour a day on Facebook

Pile says it's hard to pinpoint exactly how much is too much time to be spending on social networking.

"I can't imagine that anyone would need more than an hour a day on Facebook, and probably no one needs more than 30 minutes," she said.

3. You become obsessed with old loves

Reconnecting with old friends is one of the great attractions of Facebook, and there's nothing necessarily wrong with "friending" an old boyfriend or girlfriend. But Pile warns that it can get out of hand very quickly.

"One of my clients met up with an old boyfriend on Facebook. They started spending hours and hours into the night talking to each other on Facebook. She made some really inappropriate comments about how unhappy she was in her marriage," Pile said. "Her cousin saw the comments and told her parents, and the parents told the husband, and now they're in the process of getting divorced."

4. You ignore work in favor of Facebook

"If you're not doing your job in order to sneak time on Facebook, you could have a real problem," Lipari said.

5. The thought of getting off Facebook leaves you in a cold sweat

Sarah Browne, who writes the Guru of New blog, gave up Facebook for Lent last month when she realized that she had a "mild" addiction to the site. She's come up with "Seven Signs You May Be Ready for a Social Media Detox."

Pile has her own quick test: "Try going a day without Facebook. If you find it causes you a lot of stress and anxiety, you really need to get some help."