

# Virtual Reality

## The New Addiction

*Jesus Christ warned us that “the love of many shall wax cold.” Our world is filled with stories that confirm this growing phenomenon. Believe it or not, the technologies we are surrounded by can potentially facilitate this by isolating our affections. How are you safeguarding and adjusting your life to assure your affections won’t wax cold? Are you incrementally allowing yourself to slip into the desensitizing and sometimes delusional virtual realities of cyberspace?*

In the second book to Timothy, Paul writes: “This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, Traitors, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; Having a form of godliness [religion], but denying the power thereof: from such turn away. For of this sort are they which creep into houses and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts, Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:1–7).

What Paul is describing are the varieties of *character flaws* and *behaviors* that result from the love of so many *waxing cold*. Unfortunately, our twenty-first century culture provides an enormous amount of additional “tools for addiction” that can be used to trigger or enable the many characteristics Paul lists. So often, because we don’t control these tools of addiction in our lives as we should, they make it easier and more natural for us to fall into these proclivities so appealing to our human nature.

Throughout mankind’s history, there have been many kinds of *enablers*. Sadly, religion has contributed immensely to the abuses humanity has incurred upon himself. But there are many more: alcohol, drugs, sex, pornography, and of course, money. Additionally, there are unhealthy relationships, narcissism, sociopaths, egocentricity, power, fame, popularity, avarice, and greed. There are *intrinsic* items in our lives like clothes, cars, boats, planes, and homes—even our educational level, or perhaps the possession of a weapon. They all con-

tribute to our failure and consequent expression of these characteristics listed in 2 Timothy 3. So many things enable and drive us into *triggering* specific inclinations in our character that far too often lean toward igniting our selfish weaknesses and/or flaws. It’s just the nature of things in the world in which we live.

Many of the “triggers” or “enablers” that surround us have been around for a very long time—since the beginning of mankind’s creation. Surely, we can recognize or think of a variety of catalysts that have *plagued* and *tempted* humanity down through the centuries. However, there is a *new* item that has recently emerged just over the last two to three decades, creating a whole *new type of addiction* with multiple listings of “syndromes” and/or “disorder” labels that has created a whole new type of social disruption. Do you know what it is?

It’s the digital invasion, or more specifically, “Internet addiction,” professionally labeled as Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD).

### Invasion of the Megabytes

There is a very serious concern among mental health professionals that this invasion, with all of the inherent attractions and temptations that come from our curiosities and competitiveness to participate in an endless number of games and to traffic in an unlimited amount of information, will rob us of our connection to the sensitivities *reality* requires. This newly created “cyber world,” with its Internet and prodigious amounts of digital gadgets and apps, is indeed changing our brains as well as our behavior and habits, and has become the newest, most modern

“tool of addiction.”

Clearly, a whole new variety of addictions have emerged—and the fastest among these digital pathologies topping the list is *pornography*. World-renowned Christian apologist, author, and radio commentator, Josh McDowell, said: “The greatest threat to the body of



Christ, to the church, to families, and to the individual Christian is the pervasive, destructive pornography available through the Internet. An insidious intruder is putting your children at risk. It is systematically stalking your children and, sadly, most parents and Christian leaders are oblivious to it.”

Though this is unquestionably true, the fact is, there are *multiple fronts* of attack that we as individuals and families are contending with from this invasive intruder, IAD. A quick comparison of the year 2000 with 2010 illustrates the magnitude of this growing threat and the potential impact it’s had on our lifestyles, mental health, and emotional balance. Notice the *explosive increase* over this 10-year period.

We spent an average of 2.7 hours daily online, compared to 18 hours in 2010; 100 million daily Google searches, compared to 2 billion previously; 12 billion daily emails, compared to 247 billion in 2010; 12,000 daily blogs, compared to 141 million; 0 iTunes, compared to 10 billion downloads in 2010; 0 daily Tweets, compared to 50 million; 0 daily YouTube videos, compared to 4 billion in 2010; 0 people on Facebook, compared to 600 million in 2010. This is an astonishing comparison between the years 2000 and 2010! One cannot deny our lives have been severely changed, and not always for the better! Let me illustrate some of the “fruit” of this new social intruder, IAD.

Just a few decades ago, in order to get the adrenaline high that was obtained solely from things like alcohol, drugs, or sex—it’s a fact that now, one can achieve the same result by simply going online! That’s right—with just one “click,” you can be exposed to a myriad of powerful subjects, images, and/or videos that are potentially lethal in their *addictive attraction*.

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Interestingly enough, an expert in the study of this field, and member of the American Psychological Association, Dr. Kimberly Young, presented a very pointed warning in 1995—that’s right, 1995!—in a paper she authored, titled *Internet Addiction: The Emergence of a New Disorder*. Her early research disclosed, “Marriages, dating relationships, parent-child relationships, and close friendships were being disrupted by excessive use of the Internet. Dependents gradually spent *less time with real people* in their lives in exchange for solitary time in front of a computer.”

This goes to substantiate the *American Journal of Psychiatry*’s opinion that this now appears to be a very common new disorder. And though there has yet to be a confirmed formal diagnostic category, it is anticipated that IAD will be included in the up and coming fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Already, three major categories have been determined: 1) sexual preoccupations; 2) excessive gaming; and 3) email/text messaging. Obviously, those involved with these activities can waste enormous amounts of time online, spending away precious moments from their *real lives* and those who matter most to them, in exchange for the adrenaline high that comes from the *virtual reality* of cyberspace.

According to many of the most recent statistics, our children, young mothers, middle-aged to older married couples, and single people are most vulnerable. Most of these IAD’s manifest in the following digital addictions: cybersex, cyber affairs, arranging dates via services, sexting, cyber bullying, Internet gambling, Internet video gaming, texting, and social media accessing. And the list keeps growing as technology develops and grows.



### So What’s the Risk?

Uniquely enough, even Albert Einstein was concerned back in his day. Notice what he said to look out for and be fearful about: “I fear the day that technology will surpass our human interaction. The world will have a generation of idiots.”

Many who are involved and “online” do not see the risks that lurk within the cyberspace media frenzy. They view it as a convenient way to conduct business, socialize, pass the time away, or just

meet new friends. It is very easy for IAD to cause one to neglect his family, physically and/or emotionally. Marriages can become estranged, especially if the time spent is used for sexting, cybersex, pornography, etc. It can infringe on your career and cause work-related problems, which can



lead to financial issues and perhaps even bankruptcy—especially if compounded by allowing the ease of online shopping and/or gambling to get out of hand.

And most recently, research has proved that personalities can change and one may even take on different personas, adding to identity crisis and personality disorders, especially while online.

Growing evidence is beginning to show that digital addictions can actually change the functioning of the brain, which may result in some possible damage. When IAD becomes obsessive/compulsive, it has much in common with other addictions. Here are four points to consider: *First*, if you are compelled to participate in the activity excessively, then you should take action to reduce your time spent on the device. *Second*, if upon stopping, or unable to use the device, whether I-phone, computer, I-pad, Blackberry, etc., for any length of time, and you become irritable, tense, anxious, depressed, or angry—these are recognizable signs that should be considered as withdrawal symptoms. *Third*, if you are driven to constantly upgrade to a bigger and faster unit, with more variety, apps, memory, etc., this should be a warning sign. The more stimulating the software and games become, you can be assured more time will be spent online. And *finally*, if you are beginning to notice an increase in arguments, lying, reduced achievement, social isolation, headaches, or fatigue—all of this can be an indication that IAD is a legitimate incremental possibility in your life.



However, what is most serious about IAD is what it can do to your pleasure receptors. Like most addictions, because IAD has a similar effect on your “pleasure system” as do other substances, sometimes an increase in pleasure *loss* is experi-

enced—known as “anhedonia”—in the little nuances of our lives. If one’s digital device use is permitted to go on unchecked, and an addictive, excessive habit develops for any length of time, it *may lead* to depression problems. Dr. Archibald Hart has written a very good book on this subject titled, *Thrilled to Death: How the Endless Pursuit of Pleasure is Leaving Us Numb*.

The words of Jesus Christ, our Lord, come with a very contemporary and strong warning about how the “love of many will wax cold” in the last days. As Christians, it is important we balance our lives against all the potential distractions that come in the form of a *multitude* of contraptions—and the world of digital devices is certainly a major trap if we allow it. Clearly, the almost cult-like following Apple has with its products is a testament to the potentially addictive world cyberspace has to offer.

#### **A Balanced Life is the Christian Lifestyle**

Some time ago, my wife and I went to a small local tavern for dinner and drinks. It’s a quaint little pub type of establishment where a lot of the locals go who live in our rural township in Ohio. Upon arriving, we decided to eat at the bar and proceeded to seat ourselves at one of the far ends. I happened to notice that only two others were sitting beside us there. Additionally, I noticed both were using their I-phones for whatever purpose, and were not talking to each other, even though they were a couple.

After some time, the place began to fill up, especially around the bar. I happened to break from the conversation with my wife to notice what I thought was rather extraordinary. There was very little talking—I suppose that’s what caught my attention and interrupted my conversation, now that I look back on it. To my surprise, it seemed most everyone was on his or her I-phones! Those who weren’t, sat quietly while the others attended to their business or interests. They were all together, sitting next to each other, but no one was talking—many were busy, engrossed with their digital devices, texting, reading, or answering email, while others sat patiently waiting for their partner to finish up with the call, text, or email review! I found



this fascinating and quite illustrative of the day and age we're living in.

Since this experience, I can't help but notice how many people simply entertain and/or occupy themselves with virtual reality devices instead of spending quality *real time* with those they love. I'm sure you've noticed, when in public, people checking their email, texting, or answering a call while they're supposed to be engaged in the audience of the person they're with. Humorously, I've heard it said, the primary reason there was a baby-boom generation during the 1950s was because there were no televisions in the bedroom. As comical as that may sound, let me remind you, we not only have television, but a prodigious amount of digital device distractions in the bedroom today that compete with our time for intimacy. And let me remind you, at least for some ethnicities, our reproduction rate isn't even high enough to stay even!

I say this in jest, of course, but the point is made rather plainly. We are surrounded by many distractions that compete for our time spent in the real and actual world with those we love—and if we're not careful, controlled, and actively managing the time we spend on these *devices*, the additional distractions and temptations that come with the *virtual* world will rob us of what little time we have left for our *real* world relationships. That's the point!

We are told in Daniel, in the last days, "many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased" (Daniel 12:4). This describes a very busy time that would demand a great deal of our attention—much like today. Living a balanced life between the material and secular obligations we find ourselves living with, and that of the spiritual and emotional demands a Christian lifestyle requires, isn't an easy task. Yet, our Lord in His prayer, prior to His crucifixion, appealed to the Father, "not that thou shouldest take them [Christians] out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them [Christians] from the evil. They [Christians] are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (John 17:15–16).

Our Lord's expectation of us is that we will be

careful and cautious about the evil that stalks us. Maintaining vigilance about our habits, behaviors, and how we care about others is paramount to our Christian character and way of life. Notice, in the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:19; Luke 8:14), how Jesus makes it clear that the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches and lusts of other things, can and will choke off the growth of His Word, preventing any *fruit of conversion* from us, if we don't control these cares and their effects in our lives.

Like it or not, we have cares, opportunities, and demands upon us in this world. Therefore, we must *discipline* ourselves in the use of our time by prioritizing our life's circumstances and obligations. All I'm suggesting is, the priority we place on the time we have with those we care most about, should be shown in *actuality* in the *real* world rather than sacrificing that time with the *virtual* world. This is what Christ would expect! It's only right, if we really do care for those in our lives.

Now don't get me wrong—surfing the web, texting, reading and writing emails, Tweeting and Facebook, managing your site, etc., is not evil in itself, any more than drinking alcohol is, or missing a Sabbath service or holyday service on occasion. But if it's going to become a major priority and/or habit in your life to over drink, miss Sabbath services, skip out on the holydays, or spend an extraordinary amount of time in the virtual world at the *expense* and sacrifice of our real life's needs, that's when it crosses over and becomes wrong. That is a misappropriated priority.

If we are allowing these technologies to preempt and encroach on our time spent with God and family—that is when these digital devices can become a lethal distraction that can lead to damaging, or outright destroying the relationships that mean so much to us—including our relationship with God. It would be an interesting comparison and assessment to honestly evaluate our time spent with television and other virtual reality technologies with that of our Bible study and family time. Ponder that for a moment and be brutally *honest*



## Did you realize...

- 60 percent of married men will have an extramarital affair.
- 50 percent of married women will have an extramarital affair.
- 57 percent who are online use the Internet to cheat.
- 38 percent who are online engage in explicit online sexual conversation.
- 50 percent talk on the phone with someone they first contacted online.
- 31 percent who converse online are led to an actual sexual encounter.
- 33 percent of 97 million U.S. singles date from online contacts.
- 25 percent of online relationships are romantic in nature.
- 70 percent of Internet users' time is devoted to building romantic/platonic relationships.
- 84 percent of teens own one or more personal media devices.
- 51 percent of teens use the Internet daily.
- Multiple websites for "married couples" to arrange extra-marital affairs now exist.

with yourself.

Maintaining a balance, control, and discipline with these easy-access digital mechanisms is fast becoming a real challenge for many individuals who own these devices. Far too many of us are allowing them to infringe upon our personal living habits, consequently becoming a new habit that negatively impacts our lives.

If not controlled, they are capable of destroying your relationships, "messing with your mind," and possibly changing your personality, causing you to be an "inattentive surf." This is fast becoming a proven fact by the psychological counseling community,

according to growing statistics. The emotional connection to those around us—our husbands, wives, children, grandparents, sisters, brothers, friends, co-workers, etc.—can be at risk if we're not careful with the time we spend in *virtual* reality, compared to *actual* reality.

So, *manage* and *budget* the time you spend in the cyber world. Don't let your digital contraptions control, use, and abuse you—instead, *you* remain in control and use it for the perceived benefits you believe will serve you well! Remember, *you bought and paid for this technology—you own it—it doesn't own you!*



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