



## Confessions of an e-mail addict

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Hello. My name is Michael, and I'm an addict. And by addict, I don't mean I love something so much I claim to be addicted; I'm no chocoholic. I'm a back-alley, needle-sharing, just-stole-10-bucks-out-of-my-mother's-wallet-to-get-a-fix junkie. My crack? E-mail. I need hits of it every five minutes. I need it morning, noon and 4 a.m. I need it when I'm in the middle of a conversation, when I'm in the bathroom, when I'm with my son in the park. The more I get, the more I want, and it's never enough.

I'm in deep trouble. And as a university professor of psychology and neuroscience, I know I'm not alone. Many, many people suffer from this same 21st-century affliction. New research out of the University of Chicago, for example, suggests that smokers have a tougher time resisting their impulse to check Twitter (e-mail's close cousin) than resisting their urge to smoke. Sensing the psychological impact of overzealous e-mail use – and most certainly on the company's bottom line – German auto maker Volkswagen recently decided to restrict employees' BlackBerry e-mail use to business hours. A recent New York Times article details a new trend in high-end travel, with the rich and famous paying top dollar for the privilege of staying in luxe retreats that restrict e-mail access.

Like any other addict, my habit is abetted by all manner of gadgets I have lying around: e-mail notification pop-ups on my computers or the shrill telegraph sound on my iPhone. I'm constantly jonesing. And when I see the glorious bold text of a new message, I feel a sense of euphoria.

If you've struggled with a recognized addiction, these words may offend you, minimize your experience even. That's not my intention. Instead, consider me a crusader, an advocate for a new cause.

Although the *DSM-IV*, the diagnostic bible of the American Psychiatric Association, doesn't recognize e-mail

addiction as a real affliction, it's just a matter of time. I experience real physiological distress on receiving new e-mail messages. My symptom list includes increased sweating, heart rate and blood pressure, an acute startle response, and an inability to focus on anything else. The only thing that soothes this aversive biological state is to check the e-mail immediately, at the precise moment it arrives; everything else I'm doing or anyone else I'm talking to can go fly a kite.

Ironically, my e-mail behaviour has been destructive to the main activity it's supposed to support – my work. Instead of reading books and articles, I check and respond to e-mail. Instead of writing, I check and respond to e-mail. I just can't stop checking and responding to e-mail.

Where does all of this leave me? Lacking any conventional treatment for my addiction (and no fancy celebrity-filled rehab to jet off to), I decided to concoct my own detox remedy. I've been fortunate to get the opportunity to go on a sabbatical from teaching, and I decided I would use part of my time (spent abroad) to go on a complete e-mail holiday.

I wish I could report that I withstood the unnatural forces compelling me to check it, but that would be a lie. I ended up justifying to myself why I needed to check at any given moment. My e-mail holiday lasted all of three days.

I don't consider it a complete failure, however. While I couldn't kick my addiction cold turkey, I succeeded in restricting it. I disabled all of those infernal warning sounds and sights on my multifarious computers and devices. I rearranged the icons on my various screens to have my e-mail applications positioned in less conspicuous spots. Most important, I decided to check and respond to e-mail only once every four hours. This has been exceedingly difficult for me to do, but I've been sticking to my regimen – more or less.

I can't fully express how rewarding these small steps have been. Suddenly, I have time to do the things I really want and enjoy, like reading. Oh how I've missed reading. I've also found time to be present, and not mindless, with my family.

Things are better, but I also know how easy it would be to slip back. And I realize how much more difficult it will be once I return home from my sabbatical to face technology's full assault.

But I'm hopeful.

*Michael Inzlicht is an associate professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of Toronto, where he studies issues surrounding self-control. He's currently on sabbatical in Australia.*

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