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BlackBerry or CrackBerry?

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For many, the BlackBerry has become a must-have gadget, a wireless hand-held computer that can send e-mails, surf the Net and make phone calls. Heavy users often refer to themselves as “CrackBerry” addicts, referring to the highly addictive form of cocaine. The surreptitious glance downward, head bowed, to check for e-mail during meetings is commonly referred to as the “BlackBerry prayer.”

While many users believe their BlackBerry makes them more efficient, some researchers – and some spouses – say the wireless devices offer their owners new ways to distract themselves, often annoying others in the process. And industry analysts estimate that billions of dollars in revenue are lost each year due to cyber-slacking on the job.

A recent study conducted by Rutgers University claims that the BlackBerry is fueling a rise in Internet addiction, with sufferers able to survive only a few minutes without checking for new mail. According to Dr. Gayle Porter who led the research, the effects of becoming addicted to the device can be “devastating.” She adds, “Employers provide EAP programs to help workers with chemical or substance addictions. Addiction to technology can be equally damaging to a worker’s mental health.” It can also create new social problems in the workplace when employees become withdrawn, and fearing face-to-face contact, prefer only online communication rather than working collaboratively as a team or actively participating in real life meetings.

Dr. Kimberly Young, licensed psychologist and author of *Caught in the Net: How to Recognize the Signs of Internet Addiction—And a Winning Strategy for Recovery* (John Wiley & Sons), the first book to examine Internet addiction, suggests a simple five-step plan to break the CrackBerry cycle of addictive behaviors:

1. **Admit the problem.** Technology is a grand seduction. You can easily fall into the trap of “screen-sucking;” i.e., constantly checking your BlackBerry for messages then mindlessly surfing the Net or reviewing old messages before getting back to work.
2. **Repeat the mantra: “There are no e-mail emergencies!”** If it is a true emergency, really, someone will call you. They will find a way to get in touch. Yet we tend to treat all e-mails as urgent. You need to ask yourself, “Is focusing on my BlackBerry really more important than completing a workplace task in progress or spending time with family?” The answer is probably “no.”
3. **Tally up the cost.** What really happens when you check your BlackBerry? For just a minute, you turn your attention away from your task at hand. Then, it might take you 10 minutes or more to refocus on what you were doing—if you manage to get there at all. Stay focused on the real world. The virtual world can wait!
4. **Fight tech with tech.** It’s time to take back control. Unsubscribe to all unnecessary electronic publications you receive. If your BlackBerry buzzes or flashes when you receive new mail, turn off that feature. You’ll begin to check messages when *you* want to, not because you’ve been conditioned to do it.
5. **Hide the gadgets.** Make strategic decisions on how to invest your time with technology so that it is serving you rather than you serving it. Put the BlackBerry in a drawer when you get home and turn it off. Don’t keep it in your pocket where it is easily accessible.

To learn more about Dr. Young’s publications and ideas, go to www.netaddictions.com/. And if you feel that technology is impeding your interpersonal relationships or job performance, we invite you to contact us at your Employee Assistance Program to discuss the situation and review possible solutions.

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