

Shrink Rap: Confessions of a BlackBerry Addict

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Karen confesses to me she's addicted to her BlackBerry: "I can't keep my thumbs off it - it's controlling my life! I use it to avoid talking to people face to face. I don't have to return as many phone calls or do so many meetings. My use of the English language has gone to hell. Everything I write now is in child-like phrases with terrible spelling. My thumbs ache from typing.

"I get anxious at the thought of missing something at work. I'm constantly checking for e-mail. No matter when I get a message, I feel compelled to answer it immediately. I tell myself I'm just moving at the speed of business. But I know it's just a good excuse for my addiction.

"I'm embarrassed to admit this, Doctor, but I've been guilty of 'drunk Berry.' I've dashed off some erotic stuff to guys when I'm plastered. And yes, I've flirted with men when I wanted them to think of me in the middle of a meeting or late at night. Sometimes I've even sent something a bit lewd just to shock them."

The BlackBerry is the top-selling PDA, with more than 3.65 million users. A symbol of status, fitting in and feeling important, the device is something many say they can no longer imagine living without. But like all things that can cause a buzz of emotion, the BlackBerry has addictive qualities. There's something about "always on" connectivity that makes users feel the need to constantly check the device and to respond immediately. There is online talk of rehabilitation programs like BlackBerry Anonymous to address the addiction.

Back to Karen: "When it was broken for a week, I got increasingly antsy and irritated without it. Same kind of withdrawal I had when my cable modem was down for more than a couple of hours. When it buzzes at 2 or 3 a.m., I wake up just to check it.

"If I'm out on a date and the 'Berry goes off, I'll interrupt my conversation to see what's happening. Guys look at me like I'm nuts. I know it's rude. I'll be playing with it below the table and can't hold eye contact for more than ten seconds. I've been known to check it between sips of wine or in the women's restroom. And the toughest thing to admit is that I've even taken it into the bedroom during sex. That's when it hit me I'd gone too far."

As with most addictions, users tend to deny the hold the device has over them. If you're spending too much time on your 'Berry, try turning it off for a few days. Experiment with using only your cell phone and your computer for staying connected. If you can't/won't do this experiment, it's a good indication that you may be overly dependent on it. At the very least, turn it off when you go home. Try inhibiting the knee-jerk reaction to immediately read and answer an e-mail.

The downside of being always connected - whether through cell phone, lap top, wireless adapter, BlackBerry, or even an iPod - is that we come to depend on that stimulation to alter our mood. Under the guise of being more productive, we use these digital toys to stave off boredom, loneliness, anxiety, and silence. We would rather be chatting mindlessly on the cell or thumbing gratuitous messages on the "CrackBerry" than listening to our own thoughts. While we may convince ourselves we're more in touch with the outside world, the truth is that we end up less in touch with ourselves.