

*The Nation; Too wired, techies regroup; Calling their dependence on technology an addiction, some attend retreats near Seattle to take the first step and admit it. Los Angeles Times November 22, 2007 Thursday*

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Calling their dependence on technology an addiction, some attend retreats near Seattle to take the first step and admit it.

**BYLINE:** Stuart Glascock, Times Staff Writer

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**BODY:**

Like many professionals, Mark Stiffler spent countless hours surfing the Internet, typing e-mails and talking on a cellphone. The "wired" life took a toll.

It made him edgy and disconnected. His dependence on high-technology began feeling much like addiction and, like many addictions, this one affected his personal relationships.

"Many of us are wondering if technology is taking over," said Stiffler, who owns a Web development firm.

He isn't alone in his concerns. Recently he joined an eclectic cadre of techies intent on weaning themselves from their dependence on high technology. The group meets for workshops to assess the cost of all that pinging, surfing and blogging -- and to make the changes it feels are necessary.

Perhaps it's to be expected that such a group would form in the Seattle area, the hardware and software mecca that is home to such high-tech juggernauts as Microsoft Corp. and Amazon.com Inc.

The participants don't exactly rage against the gadgets, but they have decided to back off from all things high-tech, said Leif Hansen, founder of Spark Northwest, sponsor of the workshops.

The sessions are held at a retreat center on Orcas Island in the Puget Sound. With its twisting Madonna trees and spectacular vistas, the tranquil setting lends itself to decidedly low-tech reflections.

"I see people very overwhelmed," said Hansen, a Gig Harbor, Wash., theologian and personal coach. "It's a touchy subject. As with any addiction, people are somewhat in denial. Part of it is people really like living in their virtual worlds."

With technology, "we are increasing the ability to reach each other," Hansen said, "but the depth and quality of that reach is not increased."

Some of the exercises used at the sessions are as simple as sitting around a chalkboard, listing questions and then answering them.

Typical questions: Is Internet overuse similar to kleptomania or compulsive shopping? How does technology affect human fulfillment? Where is it going? And about cellphone implants: Would you be first in line or head for the hills?

Other exercises incorporate elements of improvisational theater. Most activities get participants out of their chairs and moving to relate to one another more physically and to use more senses than they would in cyberspace.

At one recent session, Hansen had people stand around different points in the room to represent where they are on a tech-consumption continuum: nonuser, avid technophile or balanced in between.

In another exercise, similar to musical chairs, one person was put in the center of a circle of people and made a statement such as "I like chocolate" or "I spend too much time online and it's affecting my relationships." If anyone identified with the statement, the person had to move to a seat at least two spots away. The hitch is there's one fewer chair than there are people, so the person without a seat winds up in the middle and starts a new game.

"It's a great game of getting to know others, establishing commonalities and differentiating, etc.," Hansen said. "Many surprises come up as well."

Next, the group broke up into pairs to discuss their personal visions and goals and how technology helps or hinders them. They listed the big issues on butcher paper, and they talked.

For at least one day, it was a low-tech, high-touch exploration, taken seriously.

Hansen said the workshops enabled sufferers to work out problems and solutions together. And they serve as reminders that individuals with these issues are not alone.

Hansen sighed and says he feels sad when he sees a couple at a restaurant and both are talking on their cellphones. "But I feel some empathy too, because I've been there," he said, glancing around a Starbucks just south of Seattle that provides WiFi and widescreen TVs.

Not all participants are in crisis. Some just seek thoughtful discussion about how to enhance online and phone relationships.

Nancy White, for one, revels in her super-connected lifestyle. She is a Seattle-based independent consultant who helps corporations collaborate online, often involving workers in different cities. The people she works with don't get to have many face-to-face interactions, but she said she hoped to bring more humanity to electronic communication.

"Many of us have meaningful relationships with people we are not with physically," she said. "Some people are using technology in amazing ways, but are not obsessive about it."

**GRAPHIC: PHOTO: DISCONNECTING:** Leif Hansen, shown at Gas Works Park in Seattle, coordinates workshops in which self-described technophiles look for ways to relinquish high-tech and find a balance between the virtual and real worlds. "I see people very overwhelmed," he said. **PHOTOGRAPHER:**Kevin P. Casey For The Times

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