

CAUGHT ONLINE

RECOGNIZING PROBLEMATIC INTERNET USE



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INTERNET USE



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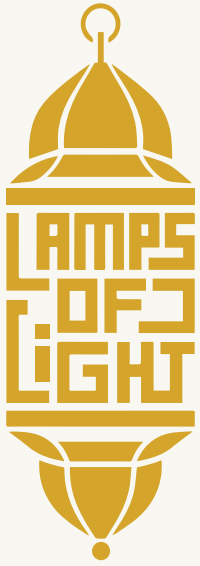


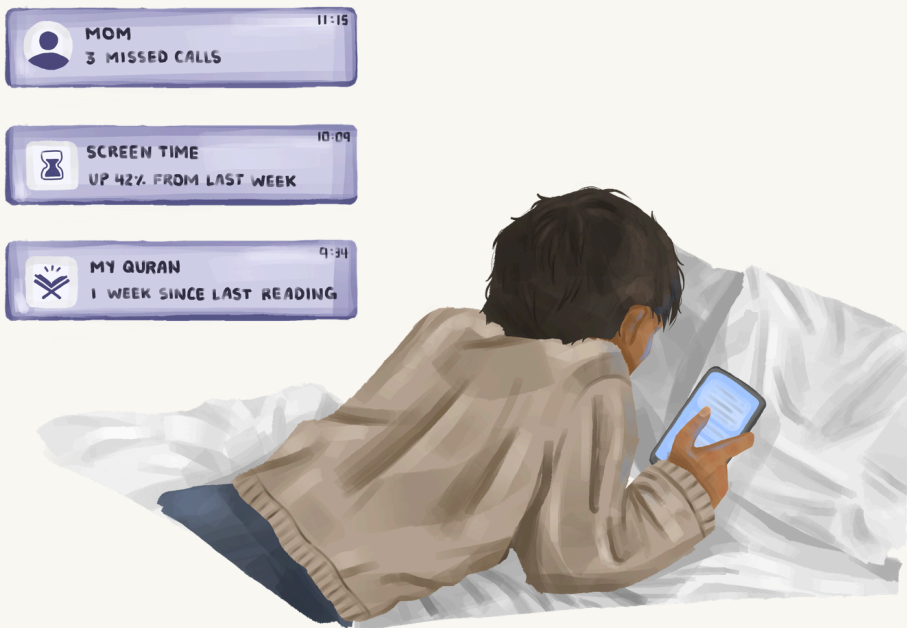
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WHAT IS PROBLEMATIC INTERNET USE?

Open your phone. Scroll for a minute. Now ask yourself an honest question: did you mean to do that, or did your hand just move?

Most of us have had that moment. The internet is woven so tightly into modern life, into our studies, our work, our friendships, our prayers, our errands. Noticing how much we use it can feel a little like noticing the air we breathe. The internet is a tool, and tools are neither good nor bad on their own. But for some people, the relationship begins to tilt and soon hours disappear, responsibilities slip, and sleep suffers.



Researchers may call this internet addiction, which is characterized by excessive or poorly controlled preoccupations that lead to impairment or distress. We refer to this as **“perceived problematic internet use.”** It is a pattern of online activity that a person feels they cannot fully control, and that begins to interfere with their daily responsibilities, their relationships, their support systems, and their spiritual practices. “Addiction” is a clinical diagnosis with specific medical meaning, and the science on whether internet use itself qualifies is still being debated. What is not in debate is that many people, especially young adults, experience their own internet use as a problem. That experience deserves to be taken seriously, whether or not it fits neatly into a textbook category.

WHAT IS PROBLEMATIC INTERNET USE?

WHY WE WROTE THIS PAMPHLET

This pamphlet was created based on a research study conducted by the Lamps of Light Project, which explored the experiences of Muslim college student communities in Southern California and how they perceive their own internet habits. We seek to educate the greater community on these reflections, especially how the internet may affect one's work, relationships, and spiritual practices. It is important to think about combatting these issues as a community, through both prevention and providing interventions for perceived problematic internet use.



We focused on three questions

1. What do internet habits actually look like among Muslim college students in Southern California today?
2. How do these habits affect or relate to their spiritual practices, mental health, and interpersonal relationships?
3. When students struggle with their internet habits or use, do they feel like they can ask for help, and who/where do they turn to for help?

The answers, which you'll find later in these pages, are a starting point for a conversation our communities have not always been willing to have out loud.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

You'll see one phrase repeated throughout this pamphlet: **perceived problematic internet use**. The word "perceived" matters. We're not here to label anyone. We're here to give people the language and the tools to recognize when something in their own life isn't working and to work on finding a way back. Allah's mercy is greater than our worst habits, and the first step out of any struggle is naming it without shame.

So whether you're reading this as a student wondering about your own scrolling, a parent worried about a child, a teacher noticing a pattern in your classroom, or simply someone curious about what the research says, know that you are not alone in asking the question.

WAYS PEOPLE STRUGGLE

There are several ways individuals may struggle with **perceived problematic internet use**. One student loses three hours to short videos and barely remembers opening the app. Another cannot stop refreshing a sports betting site. A third stays up past Fajr playing the same online game for the fourth night in a row. From the outside, these look like different problems entirely (and in some ways they are). But underneath, they share a common engine: digital experiences that are engineered to be hard to put down. In our exploratory study, we explored several of the most common ways Muslim college students in our community report struggling.



SOCIAL MEDIA

The endless scroll is the defining experience of our era. TikTok, Instagram, and X are platforms designed around what researchers call variable rewards. Every swipe might bring something funny, beautiful, infuriating, or important, and you don't know which until you swipe. That uncertainty is the same mechanism that makes slot machines **compulsive**. People describe losing whole evenings without meaning to, comparing themselves to strangers, or feeling worse after using the app than they did before opening it.



ONLINE SHOPPING

The "**buy now**" button is one of the smoothest pieces of design ever created. Marketplaces and fast-fashion sites like Amazon or Shein combine personalized recommendations, urgency cues "**only 2 left!**", and one-tap checkout to turn momentary impulses into instant purchases. People describe buying things they didn't plan to buy, can't afford, and sometimes don't even remember ordering when the package arrives.



ONLINE GAMING

Multiplayer games are a very common, social, and fun recreational activity for younger generations, but they can also be structured to keep players logged in for hours. Games that are often played on platforms like PlayStation, Xbox, or PC like Fortnite for example, include characteristics like ranked matches that punish you for leaving, daily rewards that disappear if you skip a day, and in-game purchases that nudge you to spend. For some, gaming becomes a place to live rather than a place to visit, displacing schoolwork, sleep, prayer, and time with family.



ONLINE GAMBLING

Once confined to casinos, gambling now lives in the pocket. Sports betting apps, online card games, slot-style games, and websites like Stake.com offer the same psychological hooks, anticipation, near-misses, the chance of a sudden win, without the friction of leaving the house. Financial losses can amount quickly, and the secrecy that often surrounds gambling can damage trust within families.

WAYS PEOPLE STRUGGLE



ONLINE PORNOGRAPHY

The internet has made sexually explicit content more accessible than at any point in human history; instantly, privately, and at no cost. For many in our community this is one of the most painful struggles to talk about, layered with shame and silence. The research suggests that **compulsive** use can intensify over time, with people reporting that they need more frequent or more extreme content to feel the same effect, even as the actual enjoyment decreases. We discuss this further in later sections, alongside the question of how communities can talk about it without driving struggling people deeper into hiding.



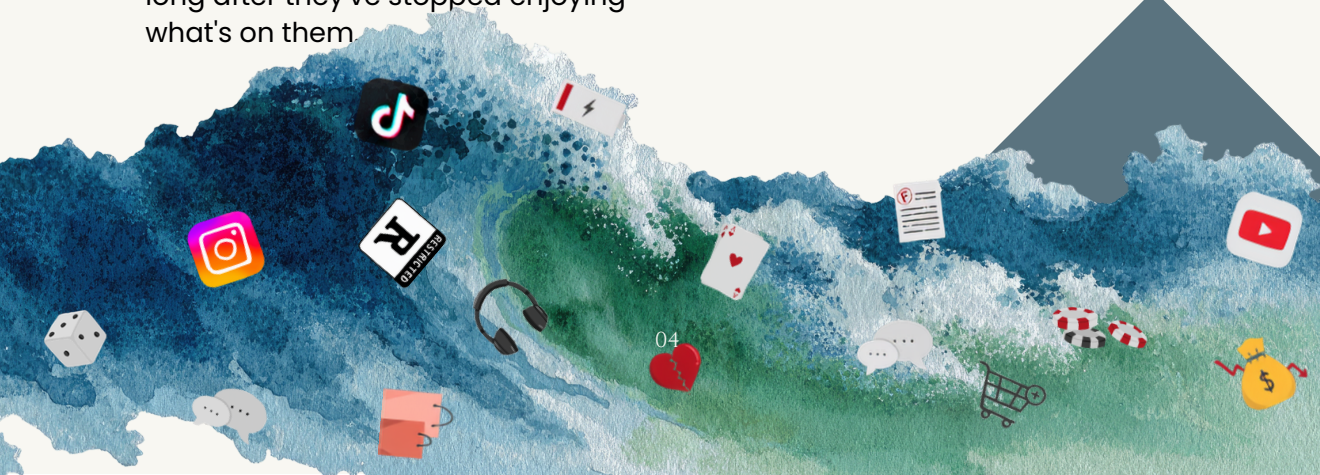
STREAMING & LISTENING

Video platforms and music or podcast apps rarely come up first in conversations about **problematic internet use**, but they appear frequently in the data. Autoplay was invented to remove the small moment of choice between one episode and the next. Because multitasking has become almost expected in the quick pace that embodies life today, music or podcasts have also become a crutch to get responsibilities completed. For some people, a planned half-hour of Netflix to relax routinely becomes a four-hour stretch, pushing back daily responsibilities they had planned for that day.



MESSAGING & CHAT

Group chats, direct messages, and chat communities can be the lifeline of a friendship or the thing that keeps you from ever putting your phone down. The expectation of constant availability, the read receipt, the typing indicator, the unanswered message glowing on the screen, has reshaped what it means to rest. Many people report feeling tethered to their phones long after they've stopped enjoying what's on them.



THE DATA SPEAKS

We surveyed Muslim college students between the ages of 18 and 30 years old in Southern California in order to understand their digital habits and how these might affect their work, academics, relationships, and spiritual practices. We were able to collect 456 responses and analyze 259 responses (N=259). The following are some interesting findings from the data, and illustrate how, through community education of problematic internet use, we can help treat those who struggle within our communities, and prevent similar patterns in future generations to come.

The numbers told us a lot about how students were personally affected. For instance, 26 of 55 students described some kind of negative impact on their well-being, or 14.5% wrote about losing more time online than they meant to. However, the most unique and impactful part of our study was getting to read the students' raw answers.

At the end of our survey, we asked one open-ended question: *Is there anything else you would like to share regarding how internet use has affected you, and what kinds of support do you think would be helpful in your community?* Fifty-five students answered. Four researchers read every response and coded them independently using thematic analysis; agreement was high (96.4%), and the few disagreements were resolved by discussion. What follows is what students said, in their own words.

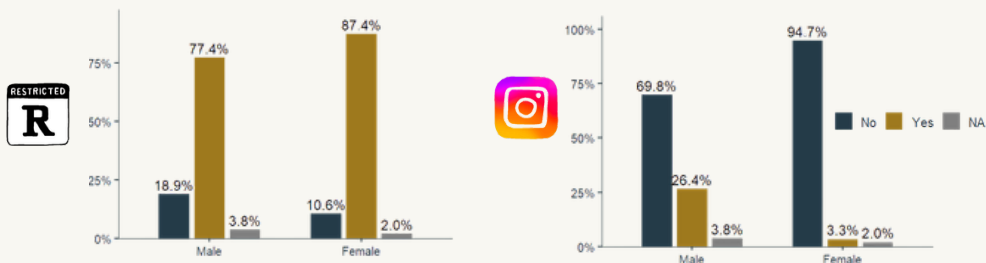
WELLBEING

Nearly half of all responses (47%) named some way internet use had affected students' wellbeing. The most frequent concerns were attention, mental health, and spiritual connection.

"Internet has really affected me because it wastes a lot of the time given to me by Allah and I feel regret and remorse when this happens. I'll tell myself that I will get up in this amount of time and then sit there beyond that 😞"

The mixture of wanting to do better and not being able to was common across responses.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN REPORTED DIFFICULTY CONTROLLING...



Male participants were substantially more likely to report difficulty controlling pornography use (26.4%) than female participants (3.3%), while most female participants (94.7%) reported no difficulty, compared to 69.8% of male participants. In contrast, high proportions of both male (77.4%) and female (87.4%) participants reported difficulty controlling social media use, and although female participants reported slightly higher rates, the difference was not statistically significant.

THE DATA SPEAKS

TIME THAT SLIPS AWAY

The single most common subtheme was **spending more time online than intended** (14.5%). Students rarely set out to scroll for multiple hours, yet many described reaching that point anyways.



"During times when my screen time exceeds thresholds even I thought impossible, I find myself unable to connect with the world around me and appreciate the relationships that I have. It impacts the quality of my prayers and my supplications as well. I don't even know what support is out there."

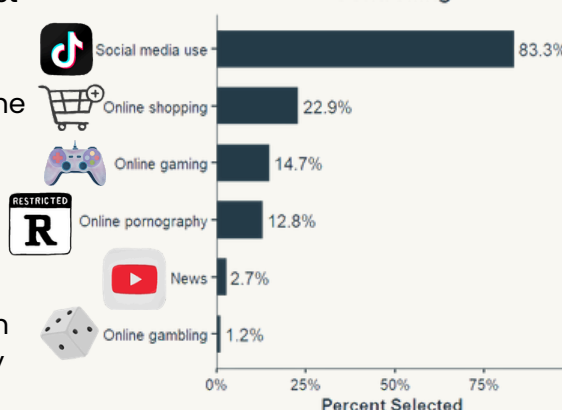
A closely related theme, "impulsivity to scroll" (11%), captured the doomscrolling pattern many students recognized in themselves. The recognition often came with a flat acceptance that the behavior would probably continue.

*"I tend to use **social media apps** for far longer than I anticipate, 'doomscrolling,' and it doesn't achieve anything rather just wastes my time and delays me from doing important work. I don't think I'd seek help because I know it is inefficient I just sometimes do it anyway."*



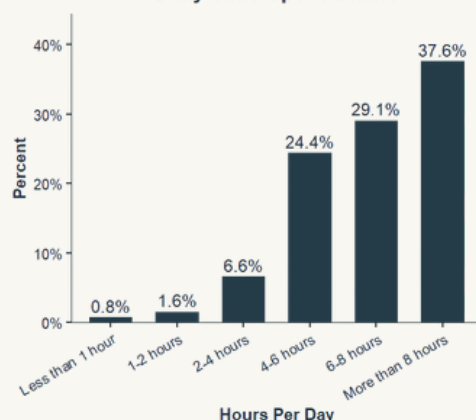
Social media was by far the most commonly reported difficult-to-control activity (83.3%), followed by online shopping (22.9%), online gaming (14.7%), and online pornography (12.8%). Smaller proportions reported difficulty controlling news consumption (2.7%) and online gambling (1.2%), offering insight into which behaviors may be most strongly associated with **perceived problematic internet use**.

Activities Students Report Difficulty Controlling



Most participants reported spending substantial time online daily, with the largest groups reporting more than 8 hours ($n = 97$), 6–8 hours ($n = 75$), and 4–6 hours per day ($n = 63$). Far fewer reported 2–4 hours ($n = 17$), 1–2 hours ($n = 4$), or less than 1 hour per day ($n = 2$).

Daily Time Spent Online



THE DATA SPEAKS

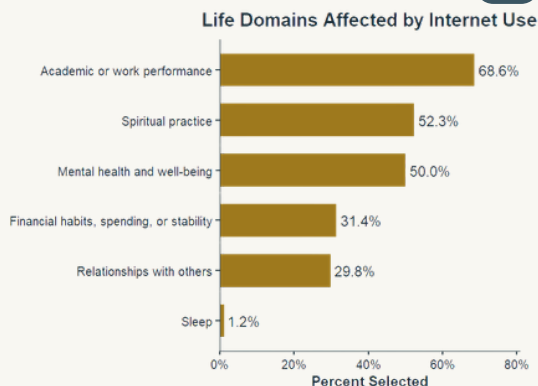
MENTAL HEALTH AND ISOLATION

For 9.1% of responses, the impact had gone further: a serious decline in mental health, often carried alone... not by choice, but because students didn't know where else to turn.

"It can be really really difficult to live a normal life while facing internet use 'addictions.' It's definitely affected my mental health, to the point that I was suicidal. And it affected my work school and social life to the point that I was on academic probation, lost friends, didn't do anything besides the internet use, and also lost physical fitness. It started to resemble depression."

If you or someone you know is struggling, Nuseen offers free, confidential support. 1-866-427-3342

Academic or work performance was the most commonly reported domain negatively affected by internet use (68.6%), followed by spiritual practice (52.3%) and mental health and well-being (50.0%). Participants also reported negative effects on financial habits, spending, or stability (31.4%) and relationships with others (29.8%), while relatively few reported sleep-related impacts (1.2%).

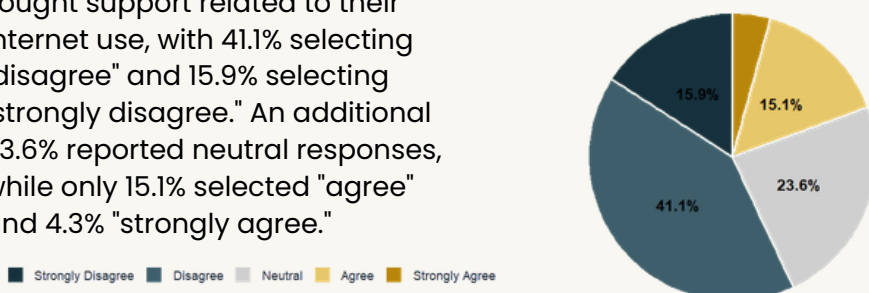


Three other themes appeared often in such responses: the concrete consequences of problematic internet use (23/55), the gap in helpful resources (21/55), and reflections on what healthy (16/55) and unhealthy (13/55) use looks like in daily life.

"The only thing I constantly keep messing up is my pornography addiction. Like if I try to go cold turkey, after a month the desire to watch this haram is extremely strong... For support, I personally don't think I would take support. Unless I give up and stop trying to quit this addiction, I won't seek outside aid. I am someone who would feel much shame from even discussing this but if I have to it would be with an imam."

Most participants had not actively sought support related to their internet use, with 41.1% selecting "disagree" and 15.9% selecting "strongly disagree." An additional 23.6% reported neutral responses, while only 15.1% selected "agree" and 4.3% "strongly agree."

Thought About or Reached Out for Support About Internet Use



THE DATA SPEAKS

THE CONSEQUENCES THAT FOLLOW

Among the heaviest costs students named were financial debt from online gambling and a felt decline in the quality of their religious life (7.3%).

"Internet addiction is real and have affected me in so many positive and negative ways, the negative ways are way more. I went into online gambling and i got into a huge huge debt which i still am trying to pay off."



"Cannot fully memorize the Quran, because being lost in endless scrolling through instagram is very easy and hard to get out of."

WHAT HAS HELPED

Not every response described damage. About 11% described small, intentional changes that had actually worked, which we coded as "intentionality in internet consumption and screen-time moderation." Most did not require new technology. They required a different relationship to the technology already in their pockets.

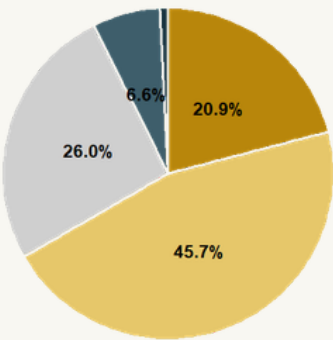
"Keeping my phone further away from me during times when I'd typically scroll has helped a lot. It seems simple but leaving it in my room when I'm home is really helpful or leaving it in my purse at work helps me to just read a book or sit in the silence without constantly reaching for it."

Several students named Islam itself as part of what kept them on course.

"I think hearing how Islamically moderation is very important and laziness is discouraged really helped me stay motivated."

Most participants reported that online Islamic content helped them feel closer to their faith, with 45.7% selecting "agree" and 20.9% "strongly agree." An additional 26.0% reported neutral responses, while relatively few selected "disagree" (6.6%) or "strongly disagree" (0.8%), suggesting that online Islamic content was broadly perceived as a positive influence on religious connection.

Islamic Content Online Helps Students Feel Closer to Faith



Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

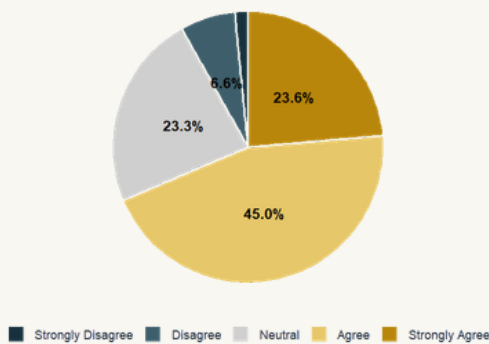
THE DATA SPEAKS

WHAT STUDENTS SAID THEY NEED

When asked what kind of support would help, the answer was less about programs than about tone. Students named shame as the largest barrier and described how community responses sometimes deepen it rather than ease it.

"I feel like even when community leaders talk about online addictions, it's usually in a scolding manner and always looking down upon people who have addictions rather than recognizing it's a community issue and approaching it from a constructive point of view."

Unhealthy Online Habits Are Rarely Discussed in Muslim Spaces



Most participants agreed that unhealthy online habits are infrequently discussed in Muslim community spaces, with 45.0% selecting "agree" and 23.6% "strongly agree." An additional 23.3% reported neutral responses, while relatively few selected "disagree" (6.6%) or "strongly disagree" (1.6%).

Others were direct about what they wanted instead: real resources, accessible help, and for the conversation itself to begin happening in the spaces where they already gather.

"I believe misuse of social media as well as secret addictions should be addressed with support readily available for those looking for help. It is near impossible to end an addiction if you are your only support program."

"I think that talking about these issues more during Friday Khutbas and youth group events would help normalize it and make it less scary."

"I think we are all quite intimately familiar with these struggles, which undermine our shared values of community and communal living/support. I think talking about these issues is important and can be rather easy if framed correctly. E.g., our elders always say 'this and that is because of your phone', so, tell them, 'yes, it is, and some of your struggles can be tied back to it too.'"

These are real voices from your community. They may be sitting in the row behind you at Jumu'ah, or across the table at iftar. Some have stopped reaching out because they tried once and were met with judgment. Others never reached out at all because they don't believe anyone wants to hear it.

The most useful thing this pamphlet can do is make it a little easier for the next conversation to happen, and for the person on the other side of it to listen.

BRAIN & BEHAVIOR

WHY IS IT SO HARD TO PUT THE PHONE DOWN?

The honest answer is that you are a human being with a brain that is designed to seek out rewards, avoid pain, and learn from experience...meeting a technology that is engineered to exploit exactly those instincts.

Before we go further: most of what scientists know about the brain and "addiction" comes from studying substances like alcohol, nicotine, and cocaine.²³ The research on internet use specifically is younger and still developing. What we share below is the best current understanding, drawing on the broader addiction science and the growing body of work focused on digital behaviors.

THE REWARD SYSTEM: A SURVIVAL TOOL, HIJACKED

Deep inside your brain, there is an ancient circuit. Scientists call it the reward system, and its job is simple: when you do something that helps you survive, like eating when hungry, drinking when thirsty, or connecting with people you love, then it releases a chemical called **dopamine**, which essentially tells your brain *Yes, do that again*.¹⁶ This system kept our ancestors alive. It's the reason a cold glass of water on a hot day feels like a small miracle, and the reason you remember where you found a good meal. **Dopamine** is not exactly "the pleasure chemical", it's more like the motivation chemical, the signal that says this is worth pursuing.¹⁶

Now imagine taking that ancient, finely-tuned system and exposing it to a smartphone. A short video that's funnier than expected. A notification that someone liked your post. A win in a game. A sale that ends in 30 minutes. Each one triggers a small **dopamine** release, bigger and faster than the brain typically produces from everyday life. And unlike a meal, which ends, the supply is essentially infinite. There is always another video.

Over time, the brain notices. It adapts. The same activity that used to feel exciting starts to feel routine, then necessary just to feel normal. Researchers call this tolerance, and it's well documented in substance addiction;²⁴ emerging evidence suggests something similar may happen with **compulsive** digital use, though the picture is still becoming clear.¹⁸ What people describe matches what the science predicts: needing to scroll longer, game longer, watch longer, just to feel the same way you used to feel after a few minutes.

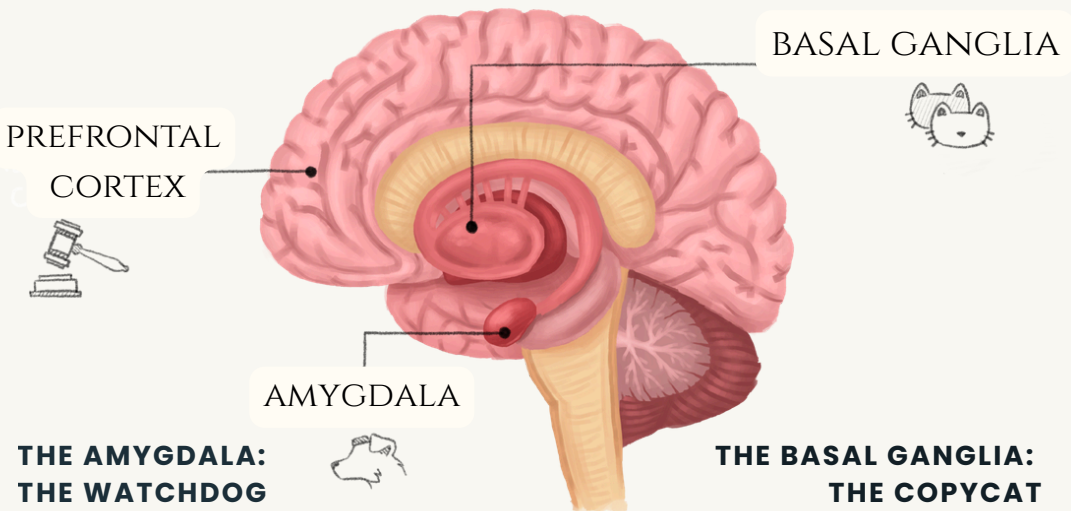
BRAIN & BEHAVIOR

THREE REGIONS, THREE ROLES

Three parts of the brain are especially worth knowing. Think of them as a team that, in healthy balance, helps you live a deliberate life and that, when overwhelmed, can stop working together the way they should.

THE PREFRONTAL CORTEX: THE WISE JUDGE

Sitting just behind your forehead is the part of your brain responsible for planning, judgment, impulse control, and long-term thinking.¹⁴ It's the part that knows you should close the app and start studying. Studies of people with substance addictions have found measurable changes in this region,²³ and some research suggests similar patterns may appear in people with **compulsive** gaming or other digital behaviors, though this work is newer and ongoing.^{3,28} What's clear is that when the reward system shouts loudly enough, the **prefrontal cortex's** quieter voice gets harder to hear. This is why "just use willpower" is such unhelpful advice.



THE AMYGDALA: THE WATCHDOG

This small almond-shaped region processes emotion and stress.²³ When the reward system is out of balance, the **amygdala** can become more reactive: making everyday stresses feel more overwhelming, and making the relief offered by the phone feel more necessary. This is one reason **perceived problematic internet** use so often shows up alongside anxiety and low mood:²⁷ the brain starts using the screen as an emotional escape hatch, and the more it does, the more it needs to.

THE BASAL GANGLIA: THE COPYCAT

This deep brain structure is where motivation lives and where habits are forged.⁹ It's what turns a behavior you chose into a behavior you barely think about. In healthy life, that's a gift. It's why you can drive home without consciously planning each turn. But the same machinery can lock in habits you didn't mean to build. When a behavior repeatedly triggers the reward system, the **basal ganglia** files it away as important, and reaching for the phone becomes as automatic as reaching for the steering wheel.²³

BRAIN & BEHAVIOR

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE FOR DIFFERENT ONLINE STRUGGLES

Different digital activities seem to affect the brain in somewhat different ways. The research is still emerging, but some patterns have been observed:

COMPULSIVE GAMING

Compulsive gaming has been associated with changes in brain regions tied to impulse control and decision-making,³ which may help explain why people describe choosing the next match over sleep, study, or family time even when they sincerely don't want to.²⁸

THE FOUR-STAGE CYCLE

Researchers describe addiction as moving through four overlapping stages.²³ These were developed in the context of substances, but the pattern is recognizable to many people who struggle with their digital habits:

Impulsivity. A pull toward the behavior that's hard to resist, even when you know better. One more video. One more match. One more refresh.

Positive reinforcement. It feels good, so you do it again. Each repetition strengthens the pathway in your brain that says this is worth pursuing.

Negative reinforcement. Eventually, the activity stops being mostly about pleasure. Now you reach for it to escape: boredom, stress, sadness, loneliness. You're not chasing a high; you're trying to feel okay.

Compulsivity. The behavior is now a habit deeper than choice. You may want to stop, mean to stop, plan to stop... and find yourself doing it anyway.

COMPULSIVE PORNOGRAPHY

Compulsive pornography use has been linked to reward-system patterns similar to those seen in other addictions, with users reporting that they need more frequent or more intense material over time to achieve the same effect, even as actual enjoyment decreases.¹¹ This is one of the clearest examples of the tolerance pattern described above.

COMPULSIVE DOOMSCROLL

Heavy social media use has been associated with changes in brain regions involved in emotional regulation and **impulse** control,¹⁷ and with higher rates of depression and anxiety symptoms and sleep disruptions²⁰, though scientists are still working out how much of this is cause, how much is effect, and how much depends on what and how a person uses these platforms rather than simply how much.¹⁷



COMPULSIVE GAMBLING

Compulsive gambling appears to involve a particular kind of trap: the brain regions that should help resist the urge become more activated, not less, when gambling cues appear.⁵ The pull intensifies in exactly the moments you most need to walk away.⁸ Gambling becomes difficult to resist, even despite great financial losses.

If you recognize yourself somewhere in this cycle, remember that the same brain that learned this pattern can learn a different one. So what can you do to help yourself or someone else who is struggling? In the sections that follow, we'll look at the warning signs to watch for, the steps that research and Islam both suggest can help, and how communities and families can support one another through the journey. Just remember, you are not alone in your suffering.

KNOWING THE WARNING SIGNS

HOW DO YOU TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SOMEONE WHO JUST REALLY LIKES THEIR PHONE AND SOMEONE WHO IS GENUINELY STRUGGLING?

The honest answer is that there isn't always a bright line. Heavy use is not the same as harmful use, and a teenager who plays games for four hours on a Saturday is not necessarily in trouble. What matters is the pattern: whether internet use is starting to take more from a person's life than it gives, whether they can stop when they want to, and whether the people who love them are noticing changes that worry them.

Awareness and compassion are necessary in encouraging individuals to seek help without fear of judgement, especially before the problem progresses.



WHO MAY BE MORE AT RISK

Some people are more vulnerable to perceived problematic internet use than others. Researchers have found that people living with conditions such as anxiety, ADHD, and depression report higher rates of problematic internet use than the general population.⁷ The internet often functions as an escape (from a racing mind, from a low mood, from a world that feels overwhelming), and for someone already managing one of these conditions, the relief the screen offers can be especially powerful, and especially hard to put down.

A note of caution here: these are diagnoses that belong in the hands of qualified professionals. This section is meant to help you notice. Not to label, not to diagnose, and certainly not to shame. Recognizing that a loved one may be vulnerable is helpful; deciding for yourself or someone else that they "have ADHD" or "are depressed" without proper evaluation is not. If you suspect an underlying condition is part of the picture, that's a conversation for a clinician.

WARNING SIGNS IN BEHAVIOR

These are the patterns researchers and clinicians most commonly point to. None of them is a diagnosis on its own.

- Mood that shifts with the screen. Noticeable changes in mood that seem tied to internet access, restlessness or irritability when offline, a flat or numb feeling after long sessions, or a near-constant mental loop of "when can I get back to it?"²
- Use that grows over time. A pattern of needing to spend longer and longer online to feel satisfied, or finding it genuinely difficult to stop once you've started; even when you sincerely meant to.
- Hiding or downplaying the time spent online. Closing tabs when someone walks in. Underestimating hours when asked. Lying about what was being watched, played, or scrolled. Secrecy is one of the clearest signals that a person already senses something isn't right.

KNOWING THE WARNING SIGNS

WARNING SIGNS IN BEHAVIOR

WHEN DAILY LIFE STARTS TO SLIP

Beyond mood and habit, problematic use begins to leave fingerprints on the rest of life.

- Schoolwork or job performance suffers. Assignments missed, deadlines blown, focus gone. Studies of college students have found that heavy or **compulsive** internet use is linked to lower academic performance.²¹
- Relationships pull away. Family meals spent looking down at the phone. Conversations cut short. Studies have found that **problematic internet use** is associated with increased family stress and strained dynamics at home,¹⁵ and with weaker interpersonal relationships among college students.¹
- Sleep quality drops. Late-night scrolling pushes back bedtime, blue light delays sleep, and the brain stays activated when it should be winding down. Poorer sleep, in turn, affects mood, attention, and physical health across every age group.¹²

WHEN THINGS HAVE GONE FURTHER

Left unaddressed, these patterns can deepen into something more serious. We mention these not to alarm, but to be honest: avoidance has costs, and the costs grow.

- In marriages and relationships, compulsive social media use has been linked to loss of trust, poor communication, and infidelity.⁶
- In gambling, mounting financial losses can lead to job disruptions and financial instability that ripple out to whole families.¹⁹
- In the most isolating cases, the shame and secrecy around internet struggles can make a person harder to reach. Communication breaks down, arguments grow more frequent, and ties with family and friends can fray or sever entirely.

HOW TO USE THIS LIST

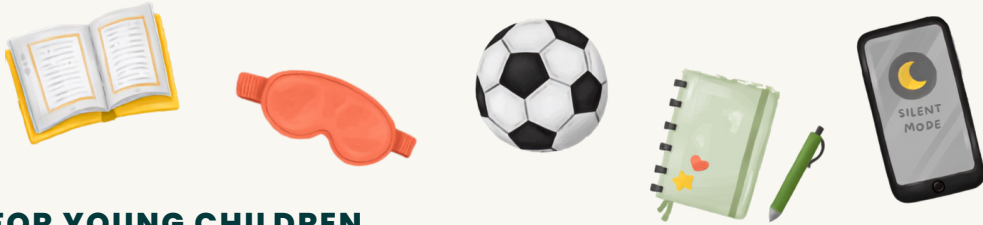
Recognizing a pattern is not the same as being trapped in it. The next section of this pamphlet is on prevention, faith-based reflection, and how to seek help. If you're reading this and recognizing someone you love, lead with curiosity, not accusation. The most helpful thing a worried family member or friend can offer is not a confrontation but an open door: *"I've noticed some things, and I want to understand what's going on for you. I'm not here to judge."* People who struggle in silence often stay in silence because they fear that speaking up will make things worse. Your kindness can be the thing that changes that.



PREVENTION AND HEALTHY USE

BUILDING A HEALTHIER RELATIONSHIP WITH THE INTERNET

Here is the encouraging news: the same brain that learns problematic patterns can learn better ones. People struggling with their internet habits are not stuck. The research on prevention and healthy use is genuinely hopeful, across age groups, across cultures, and across the specific online activities people find hardest to put down. Each stage of life calls for a different kind of support.



FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Creating a daily routine has been shown to have positive effects on children struggling with excessive internet use. Habits as simple as good hygiene, structured free time, and outdoor activities have played important roles in early interventions for children twelve and younger.²⁵ Activities like peer play, sports, and arts & crafts help foster real-world social bonds through face-to-face interaction, and help prevent overengagement with online devices in the first place.²²

Physical activity is more than just exercise and fun. Research has linked it to better self-regulation, sharper executive function, and stronger social skills,²² the very developmental muscles that protect against compulsive use later in life.

FOR ADOLESCENTS

Alongside children, adolescents face their own version of these struggles. During a period when social development is critical, constant stimulation from the internet can quietly cause teenagers to begin withdrawing from family and friends. What starts as a way to relieve stress or pass time can end up making them lonelier. More concerning still, the loss of those social connections, and of the everyday practice of building social skills, creates more conflict with family, friends, and peers, which in turn pushes adolescents to lean on the internet as an escape. The cycle reinforces itself.²⁷

Still, this cycle is not impossible to break. Breaking it requires more than taking screen time away. It requires tackling the root of the issue: giving adolescents real spaces to socialize. When parents, teachers, and community spaces provide safe environments where adolescents can connect with others, the results are visible: stronger social skills, healthier relationships, and better coping strategies for managing stress.^{29, 25}

FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS

By college, the simpler interventions have largely passed. A young adult living independently can't be screen-time-limited by a parent, and shouldn't be. What works at this stage is building a set of life skills that protect against the pull of any **compulsive** habit, not just internet use.²⁵

PREVENTION AND HEALTHY USE

BUILDING A HEALTHIER RELATIONSHIP WITH THE INTERNET

FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS

Researchers studying prevention in young adults have identified four skill areas that consistently make a difference:

1. **Challenging positive outcome expectations.** This involves the self-awareness to notice the moments you reach for your phone. Are you bored? Anxious? Avoiding something? Habit thinks it knows best; however, having awareness lets you intervene.²⁵
2. **Improving coping strategies.** A great deal of problematic use is an emotional escape. Strengthening other tools, such as exercise, prayer, journaling, or talking to a trusted friend, gives you somewhere else to go when the pull arrives, and the screen loses its monopoly.
3. **Improving interpersonal domains.** Emotional intelligence, communication, and social competence are skills, not gifts. They get stronger with practice. They also fill the part of life that compulsive internet use most often hollows out.¹
4. **Following a schedule and regulating free time.** A consistent sleep schedule. Activities that are exploratory, creative, or exciting. A weekly rhythm that includes things you actually look forward to. The internet expands to fill empty time; the surest defense is to make sure your time isn't empty in the first place.²⁵

ISLAMIC USAGE: THE INTERNET AS A TOOL FOR GOOD

There are many purposeful ways the internet can be used in alignment with Islamic values. One study found that da'wah delivered through the internet can significantly influence people's behavior, sometimes more than traditional in-person methods alone.²⁶ The internet, in other words, is a tool. Like any tool, it takes its character from how we use it. The same scroll that wastes an hour can, used differently, deliver a Quran reflection that shapes someone's day.

MUHASABA: THE PRACTICE OF TAKING HONEST ACCOUNT

The Islamic concept of **muhasaba**, self-criticism or self-interrogation, is exactly the spiritual tool this moment calls for. We are asked to take our everyday decisions into account, including our internet use, and look honestly at where we have fallen short. The Quran calls us to this practice directly:

"O YOU WHO HAVE BELIEVED, FEAR ALLAH. AND LET EVERY SOUL LOOK TO WHAT IT HAS PUT FORTH FOR TOMORROW, AND FEAR ALLAH. INDEED, ALLAH IS ACQUAINTED WITH WHAT YOU DO."

AL-HASHR 59:18

This practice is further corroborated by the words of Umar ibn al-Khattab (RA):

"TAKE ACCOUNT OF YOURSELVES BEFORE YOU ARE BROUGHT TO ACCOUNT. WEIGH YOUR DEEDS BEFORE THEY ARE WEIGHED FOR YOU. FOR THAT WILL MAKE THE RECKONING EASIER ON YOU TOMORROW, IF YOU TAKE STOCK OF YOURSELVES TODAY, AND PREPARE FOR THE GREAT PRESENTATION ON THE DAY WHEN NOT A SECRET OF YOURS WILL BE HIDDEN."

Recognizing how our internet use affects this life and the next is the first step toward becoming more conscious of our purpose and our **akhira**. A life pursued for the sake of Allah is filled with peace, and the consciousness of displeasing Him naturally tempers the soul.¹⁰

PREVENTION AND HEALTHY USE

BUILDING A HEALTHIER RELATIONSHIP WITH THE INTERNET

IBN AL-QAYYIM'S FRAMEWORK: QUESTIONS BEFORE AND AFTER

To practically temper our nafs and practice **muhasaba** in our internet use, Ibn al-Qayyim (rahimahullāh) offers a framework rooted in two simple moments: before an action, and after it.

BEFORE REACHING FOR YOUR DEVICE, ASK:

- Is using this better than leaving it?
- Is my intention truly for the sake Allah, or for worldly gain?
- Am I using the internet in a way that brings me closer to Allah? Or is it for temporary pleasure, or for something that would displease Him?
 - *Allowing the soul to act for other than Allah trains it to find those acts easier and eventually beloved, while acts for Allah become progressively harder.*
- Do I have adequate resources to engage with this responsibly?
 - *For example: despite the potential benefits of social media, giving unrestricted access to a child or adolescent may cause more harm than good.*

AFTER USING IT, ASK:

- Did I fulfill my acts of worship as they deserved, with sincerity, gratitude, and awareness of Allah's grace?
- Did I do something that would have been better left undone?
- Even in permissible, ordinary acts, was Allah my intention, or was I just following a habit?



According to Ibn al-Qayyim's framework, every moment becomes a point of reflection, an opportunity to live more purposefully, on purpose.

Prevention is not a single intervention. It is a layered effort: parents shaping a child's earliest habits, communities welcoming adolescents in, young adults learning the life skills that carry them forward, and all of us returning regularly to honest self-examination and mindfulness.

The most important thing a parent, a teacher, or a friend can do is not create the perfect plan, but provide a steady presence. Children, teenagers, and young adults all do better when they are surrounded by people who have noticed them, taken them seriously, and made it safe to ask for help when something has slipped. That is the soil in which healthy habits grow.

HEALING THROUGH ISLAM

THROUGH THE LENS OF MERCY

Everyone has a chance to heal and go through treatment. Allah forgives all sins, while Shaitaan traffics in despair.

What follows in this section is about mercy: the resources our religion has always offered, but that our communities have too often overlooked, for anyone navigating this struggle.

BREAKING THE SILENCE

In our communities, problematic internet use is often hidden with the stigma of shame, and shame keeps people quiet. Sometimes silence is misunderstood as piety. We point to the well-known hadith of the Prophet ﷺ, narrated by Salim ibn Abdullah from Abu Hurayrah:

"ALL OF MY COMMUNITY WILL BE PARDONED EXCEPT THOSE WHO SIN OPENLY. AND PART OF OPENLY SINNING IS THAT A MAN COMMITS A DEED AT NIGHT WHICH ALLAH HAS CONCEALED FOR HIM, THEN MORNING COMES AND HE SAYS: O SO-AND-SO, I DID SUCH-AND-SUCH LAST NIGHT, WHILE HE SPENT THE NIGHT WITH HIS LORD COVERING IT FOR HIM, THEN HE WAKES UP UNCOVERING ALLAH'S CONCEALMENT OVER HIM."

SAHIH AL-BUKHARI 6069

This hadith is sometimes used as a reason to never tell anyone about a struggle. But Imam Nawawi (rahimahullāh) addresses this directly in *al-Adhkar*. The discouragement, he explains, applies to boasting or casually broadcasting sin, not to confiding in someone who can help. In his words, it is encouraged for a person to seek help:

"...IF HE INFORMS HIS TEACHER, OR SOMEONE FROM WHOM HE HOPES, BY INFORMING HIM, TO LEARN A WAY OUT OF HIS SIN, OR TO LEARN HOW TO AVOID FALLING INTO IT AGAIN, OR TO UNDERSTAND THE CAUSE THAT LED HIM TO IT, OR TO RECEIVE HIS SUPPLICATION, THEN THERE IS NO HARM IN DOING SO."

To tell a teacher, an imam, a therapist, or a trusted mentor, for the purpose of healing, is not what the original hadith warned against. The hadith warned against pride and exposure. It did not warn against asking for help.

RUKHSAH: REACHING OUT IS AN OBLIGATION

There is a concept in Islamic jurisprudence called **rukhsah**, or concession. It is the principle that Allah, in His mercy, has provided easier paths in times of genuine hardship. A traveler may shorten their prayer. A sick person may break their fast. A person whose life is genuinely difficult is not commanded to suffer alone for the sake of appearances.

The same principle applies here. When perceived problematic internet use begins to harm a person's daily life, relationships, or faith, managing it in isolation can stop being a private struggle. Reaching out to a sheikh, an imam, a licensed therapist, or a trusted professional is not weakness. In many cases, it is a religious duty. The Quran itself points us toward those with knowledge:

"SO ASK THE PEOPLE OF KNOWLEDGE IF YOU DO NOT KNOW."

AN-NAHL 16:43

HEALING THROUGH ISLAM

THROUGH THE LENS OF MERCY

THREE GROUPS IN EVERY COMMUNITY

When it comes to perceived problematic internet use, our communities tend to include three kinds of people. Here's how we can support and guide them:

1. THOSE WHO ARE IN DESPAIR.

These are the ones who have already recognized the struggle in themselves, and now sit with shame, self-criticism, and the quiet conviction that they have gone too far for Allah to forgive them. To them, the Quran is unambiguous:

SAY: "O MY SERVANTS WHO HAVE TRANSGRESSED AGAINST THEMSELVES, DO NOT DESPAIR OF THE MERCY OF ALLAH. INDEED, ALLAH FORGIVES ALL SINS. INDEED, IT IS HE WHO IS THE FORGIVING, THE MERCIFUL."

AZ-ZUMAR 39:53

It is not about the magnitude of your sins. It is about the magnitude of His mercy. Allah's love is not a subscription that runs out.

2. THOSE WHO JUDGE OTHERS.

These are the ones who see a struggling person and respond with sarcasm, gossip, or contempt, sometimes to feel better about themselves, sometimes from concern that has hardened into cruelty. To them, the Quran is also clear:

"O YOU WHO HAVE BELIEVED, LET NOT A PEOPLE RIDICULE ANOTHER PEOPLE; PERHAPS THEY MAY BE BETTER THAN THEM."

AL-HUJURAT 49:11

Think twice before belittling someone. Only Allah truly knows the weight of a person's heart, their hidden struggles, or the secret good they may carry.

3. THOSE WHO SIT ON THE SIDELINES.

These are the people who have been spared certain kinds of struggle, and who may believe that getting involved in someone else's healing could compromise their own protection. The Prophet ﷺ addressed this directly:

"SEEK OUT YOUR VULNERABLE ON MY BEHALF. FOR SURELY YOU ARE GIVEN YOUR PROVISIONS AND YOU ARE GIVEN DIVINE ASSISTANCE ON THE BASIS OF HOW YOU TREAT YOUR VULNERABLE."

SUNAN AL-TIRMIDHI 1702

Helping does not mean adopting the struggle. It means showing up, through mentorship, a kind word, financial support, or quiet supplication. Our rizq, the Prophet ﷺ taught us, is tied to the care we give the most vulnerable among us. The sidelines are not a safe place, they are a missed opportunity.

Healing is rarely a solo project. The earliest Muslims understood this. They organized themselves into bonds of mutual responsibility, and the people who struggled were not exiled from those bonds but held inside them. That is the tradition we are inheritors of. If you are struggling, reach out to someone who can help. If you are watching someone you love struggle, do not weaponize your own piety against them. Be the open door.



PRINCIPLES OF SELF HELP

ADDRESSING PROBLEMATIC INTERNET USE

There is a three-step process for addressing **problematic internet use** and moving toward the path of getting help. These steps can guide a person toward understanding why they rely so heavily on negative or excessive habits online, and toward finding clarity in healing. The three steps are **conscientiousness**, **commitment**, and **consistency**, and each has a place in Islam as well as in the science of behavior change.



CONSCIENTIOUSNESS (MUHAASABAH)

This is the work of being honest about what is actually happening. In Islam, the practice is called **muhaasabah**, taking account of yourself, and it has been part of how Muslims have approached their own behavior for centuries.

Two inventories help, an internal one and an external one.

Internal: How do you justify what you do? What excuses do you give yourself, in the moments just before reaching for the device or just after putting it down? Are you telling yourself this scroll is a quick break, when in fact the whole day has passed? Are you telling yourself you can stop whenever, when that's clearly not the case?

External: What in your environment is making the behavior easier? The phone on the nightstand. The notifications left on. The friends who scroll together at meals. The empty hours after work or class. Habit does not arise from nowhere; it grows where conditions allow it.

The aim of each inventory is not self-condemnation, but learning accountability.



COMMITMENT (NIYYAH + 'AZM)

Once you have seen the situation clearly, the next step is to decide what you are going to do about it. **Niyyah** (intention) and **'azm** (resolve) are the two halves of this. Intention without resolve can drift away, and resolve without intention can burn you out. Together they support your **commitment** to accountability.

Five questions can help test how solid your **commitment** actually is:

1. *What are you going to do?*
2. *Why are you going to do it?*
3. *Who are you doing it for?*
4. *When are you going to do it?*
5. *Where is it going to take you, and what does arrival look like?*

Once you have answers, the S.M.A.R.T. framework offers a way to translate intention into a plan. Your goals should be:

- **Specific**
 - **Measurable**
 - **Achievable**
 - **Relevant**
 - **Timebound**
- "I will stop wasting time online" is not a S.M.A.R.T. goal. "I will not check my phone for the first hour after Fajr, starting tomorrow, for the next thirty days" is. The first statement is just a wish, however the second statement is a plan.*

"AND THAT MAN SHALL HAVE NOTHING BUT WHAT HE STRIVES FOR."

AN-NAJM 53:39

PRINCIPLES OF SELF HELP

ADDRESSING PROBLEMATIC INTERNET USE

I WON'T GIVE UP.
I WON'T GIVE UP.
I WON'T GIVE UP.

CONSISTENCY

The third part is the longest. There is no single finish line, only the daily practice of doing what you committed to, again and again, until the new habit outweighs the old.

A chain often used in personal-development work is a great example here:

Thoughts → Beliefs → Actions → Roles → Habits → Character

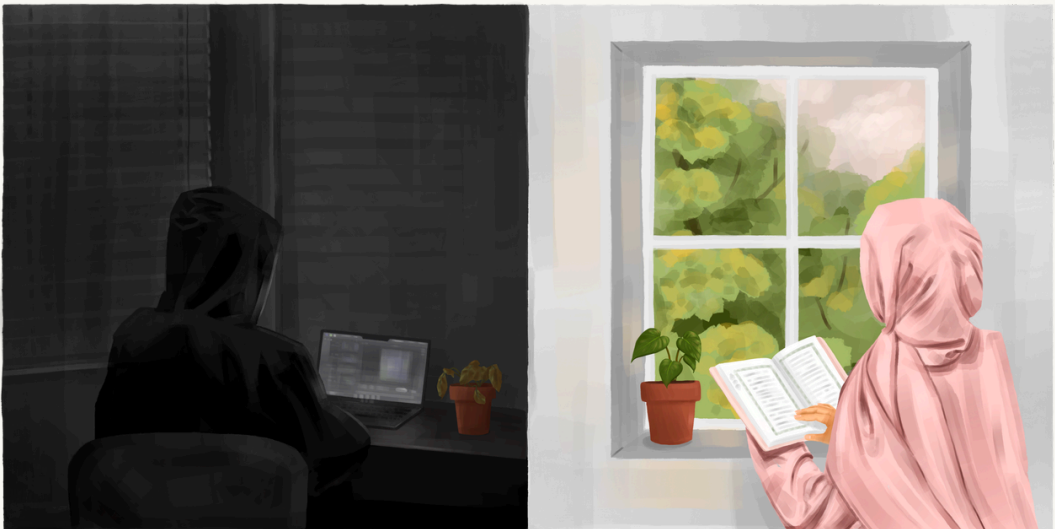
What you think shapes what you believe. What you believe shapes what you do. What you do repeatedly becomes who you are. The chain runs in either direction. Hours of compulsive scrolling, repeated daily, eventually settle into a self that scrolls. Hours of intentional choice, repeated daily, eventually settle into a self that chooses.

The Prophet ﷺ taught this directly:

THE MOST BELOVED OF DEEDS TO ALLAH ARE THOSE THAT ARE MOST CONSISTENT, EVEN IF THEY ARE SMALL."

SAHIH AL-BUKHARI

A small consistent change does more than a large inconsistent one. Five minutes of intentional pause before reaching for the phone, every day, for a year, will reshape the habit. One day of total abstinence will not.



If you are reading this and wondering where to start, start with the first step. Sit with accountability and notice what you notice. Do not try to solve it yet. Just see it.

When you are ready, write your **commitment** down. Tell someone you trust. Make it small enough that you can keep it. Let **consistency**, over time, do its work.

Begin where you are. Begin small. Begin again when you fall short!



Mental health **RESOURCE** Card

LAMPS OF LIGHT PROJECT



<https://lampsoflight.org>

DIGITAL HABITS SUPPORT

AMALY



<https://amaly.org/>

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

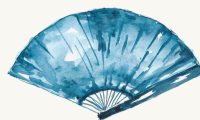
ICNA



<https://icnarelief.org/>

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

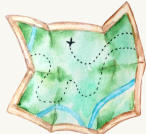
KHALIL CENTER



<https://khalilcenter.com/>

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

SABIL



<https://www.sabil.us/>

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

PURIFY YOUR GAZE



<https://muslimpsychologycenter.com/>

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

QAZIZADA



<https://qazizadatherapyclinic.org/>

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

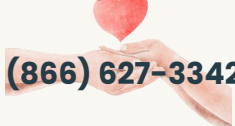
SAHABA INITIATIVE



<https://www.sahabainitiative.org/>

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

NASEEHA



1 (866) 627-3342

<https://www.naseehausa.org/>

MENTAL HEALTH HOTLINE

SUKOON



<https://sukoontc.com/>

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

VOCABULARY

Akhira: Islamic term for "the Hereafter," referring to the eternal life that follows death. An awareness of the akhira shapes how a believer approaches their choices and actions in this world.

Amygdala: Responsible for emotions and stress response in the brain.

Azm: Islamic term for "resolve." A determination in purpose.

Basal ganglia: Drives motivation and reinforcement learning in the brain.

Commitment: To have intention to dedicate oneself to a goal with hard work and determination.

Compulsivity: Inability to stop repeating actions that are disruptive for oneself or others.

Conscientiousness: To take accountability and responsibility for one's actions.

Consistency: The practice of repeating what one has committed, or intended to achieve.

Dopamine: Neurotransmitter in the brain responsible for pleasure, satisfaction, and reward.

Impulsivity: Inability to stop behaviors or thoughts.

Internet gaming: preoccupation with games that are often played on platforms like PlayStation, Xbox, or PC .

Maladaptive thoughts: Unhelpful thought patterns that may affect behavior and mood negatively.

Muhasabah: Islamic term for "conscientiousness." To take accountability.

Niyyah: Islamic term for "intention." A sincere decision to perform an act for Allah.

Online gambling: Gambling virtually through online casinos, slot machines, card games, and sports betting,

Online Pornography: the compulsive viewing or use of online sexual content.

Prefrontal cortex: Responsible for impulse control and decision making in the brain.

Rukhsah: Islamic term for "concession." To ease hardship.

S.M.A.R.T Plan: A Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timebound plan to break negative habits and build positive ones.

Self-reported or perceived problematic internet usage: self-reported survey responses measuring daily hours of use, interference with daily responsibilities, impact on one's spiritual practices and effects on one's relationships and support systems.

Social media: Individuals may use social media compulsively or obsessively, especially through platforms like TikTok, Instagram, or X.

Social withdrawal: Increasing reliance on the internet, causing loneliness and conflicts with others.

Tolerance: When an individual's threshold for an activity or material continues to increase as they consume that material more. The previous amount of the material that engaged the individual is no longer enough, and each time needs to grow in quantity.

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“THE RUNAWAY TRAINS OF OUR TIME ARE THE DIGITAL ADDICTIONS!”

USTADH TABARI ZAHIR

“THE INTELLIGENT PERSON, AS LONG AS HE HAS HIS INTELLECT, MUST HAVE INSIGHT INTO HIS EPOCH- FROM THERE HE OCCUPIES HIMSELF WITH HIS AFFAIR.”

SUHUF NABI IBRAHIM

Have you ever been “caught” online?

Whether you caught yourself scrolling through instagram reels for hours when you should have been doing work, or felt caught in the trap of watching netflix for longer than you should be, many of us find ourselves inexplicably entangled in the digital world these days. The dangers arise when our attachment to our devices and our online escapes begin to fragment everyday life—relationships grow distant, grades suffer, and spiritual duties like salah are no longer prioritized. This booklet navigates the ins and outs of problematic internet use, including data from an exploratory study of what Muslim college students had to say about their struggles online. If you or someone you know may be currently “caught” online, you may find help inside including understanding problematic usage in the brain, what healthy internet use looks like, what Islam says about getting help, resources for support organizations, and much more.

About Lamps of Light

Lamps of Light is a behavioral health organization located in Riverside, California. Our mission is to empower individuals facing trauma, addictions & other disorders through compassionate, customized care. We educate families and communities, combat stigma, and celebrate recovery as a transformative journey. Although we specialize in serving SEMENA communities, we strive to be a beacon of hope and healing for all. We conducted this study and created this educational booklet with the hopes of providing prevention and treatment measures within our Muslim communities, especially within the younger generations that become increasingly impacted by the internet with each passing day. This booklet is a reminder to those who are silently struggling that support exists, and you are never alone in the challenges you may be battling.

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