Compulsive and Problematic Internet/Video Game and Technology Use Among Young People: A Parental "Call of Duty"
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The relationship between the Internet, video games, mobile technology and mental health continues to be a hot-button issue. With ever-increasing numbers of children, teens and adults carrying smartphones, laptops and tablets, access to the online universe has never been so open.

Although many of us are able to balance technology in these areas in a responsible way, the ability to manage this unprecedented access to information and immediate gratification poses a major challenge to others. Poor management of the technology can lead to problems at home, school, work and in relationships, especially among young people. Growing numbers of parents are becoming increasingly concerned that they are losing their children to "screens."

But while the vast majority of young people appear to be able to play video games in a recreational and healthy way, there are certain groups of youngsters who show major problems trying to balance video game playing with other areas of their life. Hardcore gamers understandably resent the implication that they are "addicts." Just because someone has a recreational passion for playing amazingly vivid and engaging video games does not make it a problem.

But many kids get so drawn into the world of multi-user online games that they have a hard time setting reasonable limits and can spend upwards of 5-10 hours a day (sometimes more) playing, all the while neglecting important school, social and family obligations. This is where the problem can begin.

To be fair, young people aren't the only ones misusing technology. Many adults and parents find themselves staring at their smartphones and tablets when they should be making eye contact with their friends, family members and colleagues. Parents in need of a "break" are increasingly using laptops, tablets, and smartphones as technological pacifiers for their toddlers and young children. And couples may find themselves having more arguments over how excessive use of technology—checking work emails remotely, social networking, playing games—interferes with their relationship.

What is going on?

In this article, I will share what I have learned over the past couple of years as a psychologist, specifically relating to the individuals and families who have come to me for help with significant behavioral and emotional issues that came about due to excessive and problematic use of technology. I have worked with too many families who did not see the problems coming, so my aim is to help parents better understand what to look for so they might prevent issues from escalating.

But before we go any further, I want to clarify a couple of things. First, as of the writing of this article, there is no official psychiatric diagnosis of "Internet Addiction" or "Video Game Addiction." Thus, I prefer to speak of these issues in terms of "problematic," "excessive," or "compulsive" technology use (Heron & Shapira, 2003; Meerkerk, 2009). These terms avoid the label "addict" while they describe a behavior that still warrants concern.

Second, I want to disclose my own stance on technology. In my opinion, the devices we have at our disposal today are extraordinary! The "phone" I carry in my pocket is not only a portable computer with Internet access, it's a camera, a camcorder, a music player, a portable movie theatre, a news/book/magazine reader, and a GPS device! It also allows me to communicate in a multitude of mediums, with small and large audiences, via texts, tweets, social networks, email, and even through live video broadcasting! I can turn it into a scanner, a mobile banker, an alarm clock, a language translator, and even a flashlight! I'll stop there. You get the point.

As you can gather, I am PRO-technology. I use my smartphone every day in countless ways that have made my life easier and more productive. But I also must admit that there have been situations when I used my phone at the wrong time, in a rude way, and in a way that disconnected me from others, rather than to stay connected and present with the people around me. I think most of us, if we're being honest, would admit the same.

So, here's one root of the problem: the same device that is such a power for good is also capable of stirring up social, emotional, interpersonal, academic and, in some cases, even legal problems. For some people, these issues can be remedied rather easily. For others, it's not so easy.

What separates those of us who can "survive" the night putting away our smartphones when we walk in the door from those who become paralyzed with anxiety and plagued with obsessive thoughts about what we might be missing?

What separates those kids who can turn off their game consoles without a hitch, fully understanding they need to eat, shower, and complete their homework from those who continually request 10, 15, 20 more minutes, who engage in heated yelling matches with their parents, and who become verbally and sometimes even physically aggressive when their parents ultimately decide to unplug the device?

The answer is we don't know all the answers yet. However, we do have clues about some of the factors that lead to such problems. While more research is certainly needed, below I share what I have learned in my clinical experience:

Here are TEN things I think every parent should know:

1) Video game playing can be a healthy form of recreation. Like everything else, it's healthier when we engage in it with <u>moderation</u> and <u>balance</u>.

2) Just because someone "loves" a certain game and enjoys playing it, does not mean they are "addicted" to it. Again, think about moderation and balance. We should be careful not to use the term "addicted" lightly or we run the risk of trivializing addiction and creating more confusion about what is actually taking place. Parents: be careful not to call your son or daughter "addicted" in a mean way. They will tune you out just as you tend to tune out people who treat you rudely. If you feel your child is spending excessive amounts of time using technology, sit down and have a respectful conversation about their behaviors that worry you (see #5).

3) I have observed that people who are depressed, anxious, frustrated, angry, socially uneasy, bored, and lonely—or some combination of these—tend to spend excessive time engaged with online technology and/or video game playing and have more problems associated with their usage. It is not clear whether excessive use of technology causes these symptoms or whether it becomes a way to "self-medicate" (i.e., regulate feelings) when a person is already feeling socially anxious, stressed out, depressed, bored or angry. Either way, if you notice that these symptoms are lingering and the amount of time on the technology is getting out of hand, it may be time to seek help.

4) While it may feel good in the moment, excessive use of video games/online devices is not an ideal long-term coping strategy. Many teens who are "hooked" will say the following types of things: "At least I'm not using drugs," or "At least I'm not out doing bad things that other kids are doing." While these statements may be true, if their technology use becomes more than just a temporary escape, it can create more problems that just add more stress (see #5). Burying oneself in a computer or video game is passive and avoidant. We ought to teach our children how to cope with their problems in active and assertive ways.

5) The typical problems I have noticed in connection with problematic use of technology include: major drop in grades or work productivity; neglecting important responsibilities (at home, with friends/family, at school); increase in arguments with close family/friends; increase in irritability and anger when access to the technology is limited or cut off; constantly thinking about the technology when access is limited or cut off; major loss in sleep due to excessive use; and using the technology to escape having to deal with something uncomfortable (e.g., intense emotions, relationships, school work).

6) People with major social anxiety and/or poor social skills tend to gravitate towards excessive video gaming and Internet use. Most likely, this is due to the anonymous nature of connecting with others online. It may be easier and less anxiety provoking to engage in conversations and interacting socially "over the web" than it is "eyeball to eyeball." Unfortunately, when less time is spent interacting in "live" social situations, people can become more socially anxious, which may make them more likely to avoid social situations in the future. Over time this can increase social isolation, which could trigger or exacerbate

symptoms of depression. Some people feel very self-confident in the "virtual" online world, but when they are in a room with other people they may feel nervous and suffer lower self-confidence.

7) Students who have either a diagnosed or an undiagnosed learning disability also tend to gravitate towards excessive technology use. A pattern I commonly see is the following: The parent of a bright student calls me, describing a notable decline in their child's academic performance, an increase in social isolation, a decrease in social activities they used to engage in, and an increase in arguments about excessive use (of video games/Internet). This typically occurs as the student's workload becomes more challenging—e.g., when coursework that requires reading and writing becomes more demanding (often between 9th, 10th and 11th grades). The student becomes frustrated and uses the Internet and/or video game as a means of coping and escaping their frustration. Unfortunately, the time they could be using to study and get extra practice is spent unproductively using an electronic device. To make things more confusing for parents, the very computer the student uses for school work is the same computer that offers so many tempting online distractions. It's important for parents to be compassionate yet firm with their children here. Way too often, I have noticed parents berating and criticizing their children for their excessive online use (which the parents, by the way, put in their hands) without clearly explaining and enforcing clear limits. Compassion will help a parent have a more productive conversation with their child. Establishing and enforcing limits that are clear and reasonable will send the message that the parent is being responsible and competent in taking care of their child's well-being.

8) While we clearly have a lot more to learn about the mechanisms, course and addictive properties of problematic video gaming and technology usage, I believe it's important to set limits and intervene as early as possible. When students' grades and productivity are thrown off track by the time they are in high school, it undermines their ability to get back on a good academic or vocational path. Apathy towards working and/or going to college sets in and, as the challenges and demands increase, motivation and desire to overcome the challenges drops. If a parent sees a problem, it can't hurt to call consult a professional. It doesn't mean your child will be forced to take medication. And it does not mean your child is "crazy." These are two barriers I have noticed often prevent parents from seeking help for their children. It has pained me to see bright, young college students who failed out of school (even Ivy League schools) due to excessive video gaming and Internet use. For the parents, it's a worse pain, both emotionally and financially. The longer a parent delays taking action, the more off track their child will be, and the harder it will be for them to get their life back in order. So if you see what you think may be a problem, it can't hurt to make a phone call.

9) Parents need to take more responsibility for talking with their children about the responsibilities that come with the devices they put in their childrens' hands. Who pays for the device? Who pays the monthly usage fees? Most kids and most

teenagers do not. An electronic device is a privilege, not an entitlement. Too many kids are given these devices as if it is an inalienable right. Privileges can and should be earned and removed according to whether the person is being responsible and appropriate. This is how life works. Parents have an opportunity to teach their children this valuable lesson with technology devices. If you are a parent and you complain about how much your kids use technology, ask yourself this: Would you buy your child a mini-fridge, put it in their bedroom, and then stock it every week with a case of beer and then complain about the fact that they drink too much?

10) Parents should set firm limits on technology time usage and should not hesitate to remove the privilege if used irresponsibly (just like the car keys). If a child becomes aggressive when the parent attempts to enforce such a limit, it may be an indication that professional help is needed. In this case, I wouldn't blame the technology. It may be that the child has a developmental or psychiatric condition that makes it harder for them to regulate their emotions. It may be that the parent has a hard time setting and enforcing limits. Or it could be a combination of the two. Either way, help is out there. Parents should seek the help if they feel it is warranted.

As video games have turned into online social-networking and multi-user worlds, and as Internet-related activities have gone increasingly mobile, children, pre-teens and teenagers have been faced with an unprecedented challenge during this Age of Technology. Whether it is on a desktop or laptop computer, a tablet or a smartphone, our children have more access today than ever before to "immediate gratification" machines. These machines provide a lot of pleasure and thus they have addictive qualities that may be hard for some people to limit. They are remarkable and easily accessible alternatives to boredom and loneliness.

They are also great distractors from uncomfortable feelings, such as depression, anger or social anxiety. They provide ways for young people to "get out" even if they cannot or are anxious to leave their house. In short, they are great "escape" machines. But keep in mind there is a difference between wanting to escape for a while, and needing to escape because you don't have the skills, the patience, the tolerance, or the ability to cope with a situation.

So, Moms and Dads, we have an enormous task in front of us, as we all continue to adapt to the technological changes that seem to be occurring at the fastest pace ever in history. As a warm up, I challenge you to challenge yourselves and your children to take a weekend break from technology. Yes, a total break. Two days. No screens. Find something fun to do together. Talk to each other. Exercise together. Play games together. Experience what it feels like to be "off the grid." Engage in "real" life. Can you do it?

Finally, I challenge you to consider the following as part of your **<u>Parental Call of Duty</u>**:

- Your <u>RESPONSIBILITY</u> as parents to keep up with the technology, to know what your kids are doing online, and to know the signs to look for in your children when there may be a problem.

- Your <u>OBLIGATION</u> to let your kids know what are acceptable and unacceptable ways to use technology.

- Your time to <u>TAKE CHARGE</u> of the technology rather than let the devices take charge of you and your children.

- Your <u>COMMITMENT</u> to engaging your children in ways that don't involve an electronic device.

- Your <u>DUTY</u> to protect your greatest resource. It's your call.