

Minutes – Pyle Middle School Counseling Advisory Committee (CAC)
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Digital Distractions: An Interactive Discussion with an Adolescent Psychiatrist on the Healthy Use of Digital Technology

Guest Speaker: Clifford Sussman, MD

Dr. Sussman is a practicing psychiatrist for children, adolescents, and young adults in Washington, DC. He has significant experience working with patients suffering from digital addictions and has developed an animated YouTube video series entitled “Do My Kids Have Internet or Gaming Addiction? (...Do I?),” which can be found on his website, www.cliffordsussmanmd.com

There is currently not an official psychiatric diagnosis for digital addiction, although there has been a recent call for more research into internet gaming disorders. Treatment options are limited, and there is a shortage of support groups.

Symptoms for digital addiction manifest themselves like other addictions: brains light up as if it were a drug. All psychiatrists are trained in treating addiction, but few specialize in digital or gaming addictions. Dr. Sussman’s practice has a waiting list, so he does outreach presentations to educate the community.

Addiction - using something (alcohol, drugs, gambling, social media, video games, etc.) despite the activity having a detrimental impact on the addict’s life, including: social problems (relationships); academic problems; physical or mental health problems

What Makes Digital Technology Addictive?

1. Variable ratio reinforcement (first discussed by B.F. Skinner) – interval for reward is random (makes people keep trying). For video games this can be achieving different outcomes; for social media, this can be getting responses to a posting
2. Mastery – achieving higher levels as you get better at an activity
3. Socializing with anonymity
4. Escape from reality to a virtual world where problems can be put aside and time seems to slow down

5. Immediate gratification – digital technology is easy access and the mood change is immediate

Impact on the Brain

Stimulation produces dopamine giving the user a “high”

As digital tech use increases, dopamine tolerance is developed, so it takes more activity to get the same high. After prolonged use, dopamine receptors in the brain get overwhelmed, and the brain will eventually shut down receptors in order to conserve energy.

Prolonged use builds a tolerance, so pleasure is diminished and the user’s ability to realize pleasure is reduced. Users become easily bored and irritable or depressed if removed from the activity. (These receptors can be rebuilt with detoxification.)

Kids with ADHD, autism, anxiety, depression, or drug addiction are more likely to develop a digital addiction. Since autism is a social disorder, digital technology becomes a form of social connection that the child may not otherwise have.

Treatment

Abstinence – easier but can be impossible (sometimes achieved via boot camps or wilderness programs). Tricky part is reintegration back into the tech world.

Harm reduction – harder but not impossible (setting limits that all parties agree to; requires user to acknowledge problem and want help)

Digital detoxification – get off screens for one month to allow dopamine receptors to be rebuilt. Reintegration can be difficult and will depend on individual; user must be monitored closely.

General comments

Fear of missing out (FOMO) and peer pressure contribute to overuse of digital technology.

Technology in the classroom and use as an educational tool is a two-edge sword. Keep computers in a public space and turn off the cell phones during homework time and at night. Neuroscience research has indicated that constant multi-tasking (such as flipping back and forth from online

homework to social media or gaming) can impair the brain's ability to focus and irreparably reduce attention span.

Don't over-shelter or protect your child if digital distractions start causing a problem in other parts of his/her life (e.g., excuses about missed school work, etc.). The child needs to see the impact of the distraction.

Best to have a set of rules that all parties agree and adhere to. It is important for parents to model good behavior for digital technology. If the parent is always online or checking their phone, the kid will do that too.

Structured activity (sports, music lessons, etc.) where the student does not use technology is good.