

The Impact of Digital Addiction on Mental Health

Razykova L. T.

Head Associate Professor, Samarkand State Medical University

Mamedova K.

5th year student, Chuvash State University

Abstract: The impact of digital devices on mental health has been actively studied since the early 1990s, and moderate use of the digital environment was recognized as positive in this regard. However, in the 2000s, it was proven that the increasing use of digital networks is detrimental to mental health.

The concept of digital technology addiction and the concept of their excessive use have been proposed. The terminology of mental health changes under the influence of the digital environment is in the process of formation, there is no unification. None of the concepts provides a clear interpretation of the etiopathogenesis of disorders observed when using digital devices.

Keywords: Internet-associated disorders; Internet addiction; problematic use of technology; medicine.



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INTRODUCTION

The modern generation of children and young people perceive information technology as an integral attribute of their lives, allowing them to communicate not only in real but also in virtual space, regardless of the location of the subjects of communication, their age, gender, social status, at any time of the day, via mobile devices with access to the Internet. Today, digital devices are used for business, obtaining information, education, entertainment, interpersonal communication in social networks (VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc.). With the advent of Face book in 2004, 4/5 of teenagers aged 13-16 in the UK became its users [1].

Currently, Facebook has about 1.6 billion active users worldwide, of which 34.5% (or 552 million people) are young people aged 18-29. In 2018, the Instagram platform accounted for 55% of young people aged 18 to 24 [2]. The most popular platforms among Russians are YouTube, VKontakte (19 million subscribers, 1/4 of whom are minors), and among messengers, WhatsApp and Viber [3], which allow you to constantly stay in touch in real time.

Between 2000 and 2017, the time spent in virtual space increased more than 5 times — from 3.3 to 17.8 hours per week. According to 2014 data, the prevalence of smartphones as the most effective means of accessing the digital environment ranged from 41% in China to 84% in South

Korea. In the United States, from 2008 to 2018, the number of users of instant messengers (Viber, WhatsApp) and video content (Youtube, etc.) increased more than 5 times.

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The presence of this influence has been recognized for quite a long time, since the 1980s, but more has been studied in terms of physical impact (electromagnetic fields, impact on the senses, the musculoskeletal system, the consequences of physical inactivity).

The impact of information flows themselves (their content and intensity) on mental health has been studied to a lesser extent. The scientific vision of the impact of digital technologies on mental health has undergone significant evolution, although this topic arose only in the last decade of the last century [3–6].

In the 1990s, mainly the positive effects of the introduction of digital technologies for the social integration of children and adults were discussed. First of all, the high speed of dissemination and copying of digital information, ease of implementation and a pronounced impact on mental functions for the purposes of treatment and rehabilitation were meant [7–10]. Social networks provide safety, comfort of communication and absence of stigmatization. This is especially important in areas where the availability of psychological and psychiatric care is reduced due to remoteness or, more recently, due to anti-epidemic measures for COVID-19.

Digital Addiction and Its Impact on Mental Health

In recent decades, the development of information technology and the widespread use of the Internet have become an integral part of everyday life. However, as a result of this phenomenon, a new form of addiction has emerged — digital addiction, which is the excessive and uncontrolled use of digital technologies. Digital addiction covers a wide range of behaviors, including endless scrolling of social networks, gambling addiction, dependence on online communications and information overload. This phenomenon not only affects personal and social relationships, but also has a profound impact on a person's mental health.

1. What is digital addiction?

Digital addiction is a condition in which a person experiences a constant attraction and desire to use digital devices (smartphones, tablets, computers) and online platforms (social networks, video games, surfing sites, etc.) to the detriment of their physical and mental health. Signs of digital addiction are:

Loss of control over time spent on the Internet.

Psychological discomfort in the absence of access to digital devices.

Feeling anxious or depressed when a person is unable to use the internet or gadgets.

Neglecting important responsibilities, social life, and real relationships.

In most cases, addiction develops gradually and unnoticed by the person, but its consequences can be very serious.

2. Psychological and emotional consequences of digital addiction

Digital addiction is not limited to physical aspects such as eye fatigue or sleep disturbances. It has profound psychological and emotional consequences that can significantly affect a person's life.

a. Stress and anxiety

One of the most striking signs of digital addiction is chronic stress and anxiety associated with constant presence in the online space. Modern people, especially young people, often worry about not being able to stay in touch or missing something important on social networks. Fear of missing out on an important event or comment (FOMO - Fear of Missing Out) has become a real problem for many, especially among teenagers. This causes a feeling of anxiety and nervousness that becomes chronic.

In addition, constant “being connected” causes information overload, which reduces the ability to concentrate and restore internal balance. Switching from one source of information to another becomes an unconscious process, but ultimately leads to mental exhaustion.

b. Depression and low self-esteem

Digital addiction, especially associated with active use of social networks, contributes to the development of depression and low self-esteem. People often compare themselves with idealized images of other users who post only positive moments of their lives. This can cause a feeling of failure, loneliness and isolation, especially if a person feels that his life is not as bright and successful as the lives of others.

Negative comments, cyberbullying and criticism online can also aggravate emotional problems, leading to deepening depressive states and psychoemotional disorders.

c. Sleep disorders

One of the most common consequences of digital addiction is insomnia. Excessive use of gadgets, especially before bedtime, leads to disruption of the normal sleep cycle. Screen devices emit blue light, which suppresses the production of melatonin, a hormone responsible for regulating sleep. As a result, a person may not fall asleep for a long time or wake up at night, which affects the quality of sleep and mental health in general. Lack of adequate sleep contributes to the deterioration of cognitive functions, increased irritability and a reduced ability to cope with daily stress.

3. Cognitive problems

Digital addiction can have a significant impact on human cognitive functions. Constant use of gadgets, multitasking (simultaneous execution of several tasks) and multitasking on the Internet lead to a decrease in the ability to concentrate on one task and maintain attention for a long time. This negatively affects memory, as a person increasingly relies on search engines and the Internet, forgetting the need to remember important information.

In addition, the Internet space stimulates the brain with a constant stream of news, messages and images, which leads to information overload. The brain begins to get tired from continuous switching between tasks, which impairs the ability to deeply analyze and think. This leads to intellectual exhaustion and a decrease in overall cognitive activity.

4. Social Consequences

Digital addiction also has a destructive impact on personal relationships. People who spend too much time online often begin to ignore real-life communication with loved ones, friends, and colleagues. This can lead to social isolation, lack of real-life communication, and even alienation in families.

Virtual interactions become preferable for such people, as they allow them to avoid real emotional clashes and do not require responsibility for their words and actions. However, this way of communicating deprives them of the opportunity to develop the social and emotional skills necessary to build deep and fulfilling relationships in real life.

In addition, families and couples where one or both partners suffer from digital addiction often face conflicts. Reduced time spent together and dissatisfaction in relationships become the causes of quarrels and divorces.

5. How to cope with digital addiction?

Psychologists and specialists offer several effective methods for combating digital addiction in order to restore balance in life and improve mental health.

a. Limiting Screen Time

The first step to getting back to normal is recognizing the problem and setting clear boundaries for the time spent online. Using special time-tracking apps or setting screen time reminders can help reduce the amount of digital time.

b. Digital Detox

A digital detox is a method of temporarily stopping using gadgets and social media for a certain period (from a few hours to a few days). This break helps reduce stress levels, restore focus and emotional state. It can be a great opportunity to re-evaluate your addiction to digital technologies and find new forms of self-expression and relaxation.

c. Developing Face-to-Face Communication Skills

In order to compensate for the lack of real communication, it is important to actively develop skills for face-to-face meetings and interactions. It is important to find time to communicate with loved ones, engage in group activities, hobbies that promote not only social but also emotional connection.

d. Psychological Support

If digital addiction has become serious, it is important to seek help from a psychologist or psychotherapist. Professional counseling can help to understand the underlying causes of addiction and learn new strategies to cope with emotions and stress without resorting to constant use of technology.

Conclusion

Digital addiction is a pressing issue in modern society that makes life difficult for many people, especially young people. It has a negative impact on mental health, including the development of stress, anxiety, depression, and cognitive problems. However, it is important to remember that digital addiction can and should be fought. Maintaining a balance between virtual and real life, recognizing the problem, and using effective control methods will help maintain mental health and improve the quality of life. Ultimately, it is important to remember that technology should serve us, and not the other way around.

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