

Chapter 22

Screen Time Addiction: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

Navigating life without the Internet in recent times is nearly unimaginable. It makes tasks like information gathering, socialization, and financial transactions accessible right from the comfort of one's home. However, amongst the host of benefits it provides, there are many problematic and potentially damaging aspects as well. It is not uncommon to lose track of time on unproductive online activities and ignore real-world responsibilities and commitments. In its most severe form, this preoccupation with online activities is often called screen time addiction. The present chapter explores the risk factors that aid the development of screen time addiction. It looks at the impact that screen time addiction can have on academic life, interpersonal relationships, and mental health among children and teenagers since they are most likely to develop screen time addiction. It also recommends tackling screen time addiction through preventive and therapeutic interventions.

INTRODUCTION

The internet has made its way rapidly into most homes globally. There are many aspects that make the Internet a boon to humanity. It offers an extensive repertoire of information made available at one's fingertips, the ability to perform financial transactions without entering a bank, the option of connecting with others from any part of the world and also the added benefit of keeping oneself entertained on the go. Unfortunately, all the benefits and conveniences provided by the Internet have come at a price. While it does offer a host of benefits that make it immensely appealing, attention must also be paid to its addictive properties. The prevalence of excessive Internet usage has been observed by nearly everyone, not just mental health professionals or researchers. People have observed their children, spouses, friends and employees spiral uncontrollably towards the abuse of the internet. Internet abuse is also often referred to as Problematic Internet Usage (Davis, 2001), Internet addiction, Internet dependence, or even screentime addiction since the Internet is often accessed through various screened devices such as

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laptops, smartphones or tablets. For the purpose of this chapter, these terms would be used interchangeably as they are often used to refer to the same condition.

Internet addiction or abuse is a behavioural condition that involves excessive or compulsive use of the internet or digital devices, to the point where it interferes with daily life and causes distress or negative consequences. It is very similar to substance abuse or addiction as it is often characterized by excessive dependence on virtual content, disregard towards scholastic or vocational responsibilities, ignorance of familial duties and the tendency of lying about internet usage habits. Often, individuals that abuse the internet, use it as a coping mechanism to escape from reality. These symptoms are also accompanied by withdrawal symptoms as well as tolerance towards internet usage (Young, 1999). These symptoms lead to disastrous consequences in the lives of the person. These include financial issues, social isolation, sleep disturbances, academic and vocational problems, as well as physical and mental health-related issues.

Dr. Kimberly Young has done extensive work in the field of Internet Addiction. She has conducted numerous research studies on the topic and has also developed the “Internet Addiction Test (Young, 1998) which gives a fairly accurate depiction of an individual’s level of addiction to the Internet. She has also focused her attention on the advancement of therapeutic interventions specifically catering to overcoming Internet Addiction.

Dr. Young has identified the following types of Internet Addiction (Young, 1999):

- Cyber-Sexual Addiction (addiction to pornographic content)
- Cyber-Relationship Addiction (addiction to social media or chatting)
- Net Compulsions (addiction to online shopping or gambling)
- Information Overload (addiction to database searching)
- Computer Addiction (gaming addiction)

Although every individual who owns a device with access to the internet will have the propensity to extend their screen time usage, some individuals may be more prone to developing a dependency or addiction to the internet. Risk factors for the development of internet or screentime addiction include difficulty coping with real-life stressors, inadequate social and interpersonal relationships, or pre-existing mental health issues. These factors can push an individual to use the internet as a way to escape from the present instead of facing it, making this behaviour a maladaptive coping strategy.

Age and Screentime Usage

Individuals that grew up using technological gadgets do not feel anxious about using these gadgets as much as the older generations. Thus, they are more comfortable spending extended amounts of time in front of small and big screens. This age group ranges from millennials to Gen Z. Additionally, not every age group uses the internet in similar ways. Due to the increased global reach of the Internet, people of all ages are found to be using the Internet to its complete capacity. The differences between age groups and Internet usage are more qualitative than quantitative. As people from all age groups are using most platforms presently, the difference in internet consumption encompasses how exactly each age group uses various virtual platforms.

It must be noted that the way the internet impacts children may also be vastly different as compared to how it impacts teenagers. It is not uncommon for parents to introduce their children to technological gadgets at an early age, either as a recreational or an educational tool. Children and even toddlers are

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