

Behavioural addiction: A growing concern for mental health practice

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ABSTRACT

Behavioural addiction is emerging as a critical concern in contemporary mental health practice, particularly in the post-COVID context marked by increased digital dependency. Defined by compulsive engagement in everyday behaviours such as gaming, internet use, and shopping, behavioural addictions often persist despite harmful personal, social, and occupational consequences. This article explores the evolving conceptualisation of behavioural addiction, highlighting the absence of consensus on diagnostic criteria and the complex overlap with other mental health disorders. Drawing on models proposed by Griffiths and Giordano, the paper outlines the key diagnostic components and indicators. Evidence from recent studies underscores the high prevalence of behavioural addiction among youth, driven by developmental vulnerability and technological environments designed to maximise user engagement. The article also examines the psychological and social consequences, including anxiety, depression, academic decline, and social isolation. Given the parallels with substance use disorders, interventions such as cognitive-behavioural therapy, mindfulness, and digital detox strategies have shown promise. The role of psychiatric social workers is emphasised, especially in assessment, psychoeducation, and community-based interventions. The paper concludes by calling for policy-level responses, educational reforms, and multidisciplinary strategies to address this growing epidemic, advocating for early intervention and further research into diagnostic clarity and practical treatment approaches.

Keywords: Behavioural addiction, mental health practice

INTRODUCTION

Behaviour addiction has gained importance in the current context of mental health practice, especially in the post-COVID era. Behaviour addiction is characterised by recurrent and compulsive engagement in behaviours irrespective of dire consequences in personal, social and work life. Behaviour addictions are manifested in behaviours such as gambling, gaming, shopping, pornography, internet and social media use.^[1, 2] Most of these behaviours are an essential part of our day-to-day life. The need for the use of technology and the ingrained nature of these behaviours makes it difficult to understand and deal with such concerns.^[3] These behaviours can result in long-term mental health and social issues. The complex nature of behaviour addictions necessitates the need for addressing them, and there is a need for tailored intervention for each of these behaviours.^[4] Research has proven that these

behaviours are prevalent among youth and have a detrimental impact on their mental health.

Defining Behaviour Addiction


The definition of behaviour addiction is complex and poses concerns over the consensus among researchers and clinicians as it overlaps with other mental disorders. The demarcation between normal behaviour and addiction is still unclear and is subjective and culturally determined. The diagnostic criteria are still evolving.^[5,6] The DSM-5 has relabelled Substance-related Abuse and Addictive Behaviours into two subdivisions: substance-related disorders and non-substance-related disorders.^[7] Gambling disorder has been included in the non-substance-related disorders, and internet gaming disorder and non-suicidal injury disorders were listed as conditions for further study.^[8]

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Kardefelt-Winther et al.^[9] operationally defined behaviour addiction as:

“A repeated behaviour leading to significant harm or distress. The behaviour is not reduced by the person and persists over a significant period of time. The harm or distress is of a functionally impairing nature”.

Mark Griffiths identified six core components of behaviour addiction: salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal symptoms, conflict and relapse, domination over thinking, feelings and behaviour of a person.

- Salience: The behaviour takes prominence in the person’s thinking, feelings and actions and demonstrates difficulty in focusing on other aspects of life
- Mood modification: The emotional effect the behaviour has on the individual and often acts as a coping strategy.
- Tolerance: The process whereby increasing amounts of the behaviour are required to achieve the mood-modifying effects.
- Withdrawal symptoms: The unpleasant feeling states and/or physical effects (e.g., the shakes, moodiness, irritability) that occur when the person is unable to engage in the behaviour.
- Conflict: The discord between the person and those around him or her (i.e., interpersonal conflict), conflicts with other activities (i.e., social life, work, hobbies, and interests) or from within the individual him- or herself (i.e., intra-psycho conflict and/or subjective feelings of loss of control) that are concerned with spending too much time engaging in the addictive behaviour.
- Relapse: Despite efforts to refrain from engaging in the behaviour, the individual returns to the previous patterns of the behaviour after a period of abstinence.^[10]

Giordano suggested four Cs for diagnosing a behavioural addiction^[8]

1. Compulsive nature of the behaviour
2. Loss of Control over the behaviour
3. Continue despite harmful consequences
4. Craving or mental preoccupation with the behaviour

Prevalence and Risk Factors

Recent studies have identified high prevalence rates of behavioural addiction among youth. A

systematic review estimated behavioural addiction prevalence at 11.1%, with specific rates including 10.6% for internet addiction, 30.7% for smartphone addiction, 5.3% for gaming addiction, and 15.1% for social media addiction.^[11] Due to their developmental stage and susceptibility to peer influence, adolescents are particularly at risk.^[12,13] Factors contributing to behavioural addiction include genetic predisposition, underlying mental health conditions, and environmental influences such as social media algorithms designed to maximise engagement.^[15,16]

The Psychological and Social Consequences of Behavioural Addiction

Behavioural addictions can significantly impact cognitive development, emotional regulation, and interpersonal relationships. Research indicates that compulsive gaming, excessive social media use, and internet addiction are associated with declining academic performance, strained familial relationships, and increased susceptibility to mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression.^[4] Youth who engage excessively in digital activities are also more prone to other risky behaviours, including substance use.^[5] Additionally, behavioural addictions may exacerbate social withdrawal and contribute to suicidal ideation in extreme cases.^[6]

Classification and Diagnosis

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), currently recognises gambling disorder as the only officially classified behavioural addiction. However, growing evidence supports the inclusion of other compulsive behaviours, such as internet gaming disorder and compulsive shopping, due to their similar neurobiological and psychological mechanisms.^[7,1] These addictions share hallmark features with substance use disorders, including impaired control, persistent engagement despite adverse consequences, and withdrawal symptoms.^[10]

Implications for Mental Health Practice

Understanding the multifaceted nature of behavioural addictions necessitates a comprehensive approach that considers various etiological factors, encompassing neurobiological, psychological, and social influences. The core features of addiction, such as repetitive engagement in rewarding

behaviours, loss of control, persistence despite adverse consequences, and physical dependence, are also evident in behavioural addictions.

The implications of behavioural addiction extend beyond mental health, affecting occupational performance, financial stability, and overall well-being. The integration of technology into daily life complicates treatment approaches, as digital tools are essential for communication, education, and work. Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) has demonstrated efficacy in treating behavioural addictions by helping individuals develop self-regulation strategies.^[16] Additionally, digital detox programs, mindfulness techniques, and support groups have shown promise in mitigating compulsive behaviours.^[17]

Role of Psychiatric Social Work in Addressing Behavioural Addictions

Psychiatric social workers play a crucial role in the identification, intervention, and rehabilitation of individuals with behavioural addiction. Their responsibilities encompass conducting assessments, providing psychoeducation, facilitating therapy sessions, and coordinating with multidisciplinary teams to ensure holistic care. Furthermore, they engage in community outreach programs to raise awareness about behavioural addictions, reduce stigma, and promote healthy behavioural practices.

Policy and Intervention Strategies

Given the rising prevalence of behavioural addictions, there is a critical need for policy interventions and awareness campaigns. Governments and educational institutions must implement regulations that mitigate the risks of excessive digital engagement. This includes restricting online gambling accessibility, promoting digital literacy, and integrating behavioural addiction awareness into school curricula.^[18,19] The role of psychiatric social workers is pivotal in addressing these issues through early intervention, psychoeducation, and rehabilitation programs.^[20]

CONCLUSION

Behavioural addiction is an emerging public health concern that requires immediate attention. As technological advancements continue to shape daily life, the risk of

compulsive behavioural patterns will likely increase. A multidisciplinary approach involving mental health professionals, educators, policymakers, and families is essential to address this challenge effectively. Future research should focus on refining diagnostic criteria, developing targeted interventions, and understanding the long-term consequences of behavioural addiction in different populations. Raising awareness and implementing early intervention strategies are crucial steps toward mitigating the impact of this growing epidemic.

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