

Dealing with video game addiction

by Matt Gittleman

His eyes are vacant, and his stare is blank
 Lost his job, and has no money in the bank
 Eats junk food, and has crumbs on his shirt
 Doesn't understand how low he's sunk in the dirt
 Waits impatiently for his next session of World of Warcraft
 Has not been outside in days; he needs a life raft
 If his mother could convince him to see someone
 He might escape his virtual prison, and get some sun.

Are these new lyrics from Eminem? Nope. It's an ode to a complicated new behavioral problem that millions of our young men, and some young women, are experiencing. Recently, the American Psychiatric Association has requested more information on the phenomenon of Video Game Addiction (VGA). The evidence of this behavioral disorder is becoming so prevalent among gamers that the APA is thinking about listing it in the next DSM! Does VGA deserve this appellation and diagnosis? I believe it does because I've been treating a number of clients who are hooked on World of Warcraft, an interactive, participatory video game that players experience together in an online forum. Where's the harm in that? Read on.

Let's take a quick look at how we define an addiction:

- 1) A person needs more and more of a substance or behavior to keep him going.
- 2) If the person does not obtain more of the substance or behavior, he becomes irritable and withdrawn.

I can remember when this unwelcome precursor of trouble ahead visited my family. My son, who is now 15 and in complete control of his gaming, would go into a rage when we told him to quit playing with his Nintendo Game Cube. The excitement and lure of these games would make his "virtual life" more exciting than his real life. After all, what kid wants to quit playing Mario Brothers to tackle math homework? When his mother and I sat down to work out a viable solution to this increasingly problematic behavior, we noticed the following warning signs:

- He thought about gaming while doing other activities.
- It helped him avoid stress and procrastinate on his homework.
- He would lie about the frequency and amount of time that he might be playing.
- He would become withdrawn when we took away his ability to game.

Other signs include:

- Playing for increasing amounts of time.
- The gamer is irritable and even angry when not playing.
- Normally enjoyable activities like eating, hanging out with friends, etc., lose their luster.

For those of you who have worked with teenagers and wonder why they appear to be inarticulate and disinterested, I point a finger at all the electronic devices that have invaded their lives in the past decade. Frankly, I'm worried that we are raising a generation of socially withdrawn, inarticulate, impulsive

young men and women. I include girls because I have also seen in session a number of teenage girls who cannot control their text messaging on their cell phones. I often chide the kid and her parents that it would be a lot cheaper to just talk real-time with the other person! So, I'm inclined to expand the category of behavior disorders to include such activities as gaming, cell phone messaging, MySpace overuse, and compulsive computer use.

While I'm sure that this generation will use the computer interface for all manner of communications, I think that it's imperative that we protect them from too much electronic use, while developing and nurturing their communication and relational skills.

My treatment plan focus for dealing with any and all of these issues is twofold. I start by working to empower the parents to be executive decision-makers in their family. It's just as Salvador Minuchin has been saying all these years; parents need to be the executive unit in the family. The internecine battles between parents and children that unfold require both parents to stay united, and quash any triangulation. I've found this piece to be particularly difficult with divorced parents. To meet this challenge, I provide each parent with the following tools:

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CONTINUED ON PAGE 19

ships attached to death. By reading this book, I feel that I am enabled to be more sensitive to each context of death, and feel more confident to speak openly of death with others.

Death, dying, bereavement, gender, and multicultural issues all appear to be subjects that therapists, lay readers, and students alike are reluctant to talk about. For instance, gender and multicultural issues are slowly coming to the forefront of couple and family therapy, but we are still reluctant to even speak of our own impending deaths. Dr. Becvar steps over the uncomfortable line we have created when speaking about death in her poignantly human book on death and bereavement. Whether you are a therapist, student, or are currently living with grief, this book can help you to understand what you are going through and help those around you respond to you in appropriate and healing ways.

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17

- Logs to monitor gaming time and computer use.
- Contract to minimize messaging, with *written, enforceable* consequences.
- Goal-setting worksheets.
- A long list of "real life" fun activities.

As with any addiction, the sufferer has to acknowledge that there is a problem with his or her behavior, and that person must want to change. It's tricky with teenagers to affect this shift in behavior. The parents need to take an active approach to helping their teenager. The silver lining is that the family can find new cohesiveness as change is occurring. I am quite optimistic that all my clients will

eventually recover, and return to a more engaged, social lifestyle. I hope that the APA and the American Medical Association will recognize this affliction as serious enough to justify a listing in the DSM, and subsequent insurance coverage for families with good health plans.

Matt Gittleman, MA, has a private practice in downtown Seattle at 2133 3rd Avenue. He enjoys working with teenagers and their families, specializing in video game addiction and other issues presented by teens' use of electronics. He currently serves as chair of the Associate Member Task Force for WAMFT and can be reached at 206-713-5036 or via email at mgittleman@earthlink.net.

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