Gaming addiction; a lonely place.

By Michael Hempseed

Over the past few months I have seen more and more young people with gaming addiction. As a youth worker my role involves making an initial assessment then navigating a young person to the right service. I am having more and more trouble finding help for these young people. I lied in my first sentence, I haven't seen very many young people with gaming addiction, I have had contact with their parents and teachers as they are usually house bound.

Take one young person whose distraught parents contacted me. Their son spent literally every waking moment playing games. He had missed months and months of school, the school were threatening to send round the truancy officers. He became housebound and struggled to leave even his room. His parents did not know what to do. I referred him to one organisation who said we would be happy to go out and see him as long as he came in for an assessment!!! Next I tried to get a GP to go and see him, the only mobile GPs I could find were out of his area! I tried at least 5 free services who bounced him from one organisation to another. In the end I approached a charity to pay for a private counsellor who made home visits. I believe he has shown significant improvement in the past few weeks. I learned that his school and even a number of social services simply did not understand gaming addiction at all. Some will question whether this is an addiction or whether they are just spending too much time on the computer. For me one of the tell-tale signs of an addiction is the extreme anger or violence that is often displayed when parents try and limit their use by taking away the modem or similar items.

When the latest Diagnostic and Statistics Manual was released in 2013 it included in the "conditions for further study section, internet gaming addiction. It is not an official diagnoses but it will probably be one in the next addition. Although I believe just gaming addiction would be appropriate, rather than necessarily internet gaming.

1. Preoccupation or obsession with Internet games.

2. Withdrawal symptoms when not playing Internet games.

3. A build-up of tolerance–more time needs to be spent playing the games.

4. The person has tried to stop or curb playing Internet games, but has failed to do so.

5. The person has had a loss of interest in other life activities, such as hobbies.

6. A person has had continued overuse of Internet games even with the knowledge of how much they impact a person's life.

7. The person lied to others about his or her Internet game usage.

8. The person uses Internet games to relieve anxiety or guilt–it's a way to escape.

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9. The person has lost or put at risk and opportunity or relationship because of Internet games.

Researches are beginning to understand more and more about how internet or gaming addiction affects the brain[1]. Gaming addiction seems to activate the same reward centres of the brain that are affected by say cocaine and gambling addiction. The research is still in the early stages and requires a great deal more study.

For this reflection I wanted to focus on why so many gamers become housebound. While most addicts have some level of anxiety gaming addicts seem to have it much more strongly than other addictions. It is this failure to understand how shyness and loneliness affect gaming addicts that makes help so hard to find. So many of the services I spoke to just assume a person can come in for treatment. I reviewed the work presented at a conference on how shyness and loneliness affect gaming addicts.

http://ncurproceedings.org/ojs/index.php/NCUR2015/article/viewFile/1396/805

The study used 205 participants aged between 18-63. The mean age was 25. The researchers assessed, gaming addiction, shyness, loneliness and social anxiety. The results indicated that shyness and loneliness were associated with gaming addiction, interestingly social anxiety was not strongly associated. There is the age old question of cause and effect, does gaming addiction make people more socially isolated or do socially isolated individuals use gaming as a way to cope. There is a general consensus in the research that socially isolated individuals use gaming as a coping mechanism but it is difficult to be one hundred percent sure.

There needs to be a much greater awareness amongst doctors, teachers, social workers, counsellors and anyone else in a helping profession that extreme shyness is a major barrier to individuals getting help. For many of us meeting a new person can be a bit awkward and slightly nerve wracking. For someone with a gaming addiction, even saying a few words can seem an insurmountable barrier. I have worked with young people with a gaming addiction that struggle to say more than two word sentences.

The good news is that social skills are not a fixed skill set. In most cases you can take someone with poor social skills and help them develop stronger and more positive connections. Traditional counselling is about acknowledging and overcoming negative events and trauma. Youth work is centred around professional relationships. So often young people have said to me that they don't know what to say when they meet new people. There's a great book freely available online called The Complete Book of Questions. I've asked young people to start with the easy questions and try and remember two or three so that they can ask the next person they meet. I've seen some great results, one young person who spent upwards of 12 hours gaming started making friends after he knew more things to ask new people. Gradually over time it is possible to build and improve a person's social skills. In my work with young people, families and professionals I have discovered that there is a huge gap in understanding gaming addiction. Until we acknowledge address factors such as shyness and loneliness in the treatment of gaming addiction people will continue to suffer needlessly. There is a tragic irony in the fact that services can be so hard to access for those with a gaming addiction, which in turn may make them more isolated. In most cases

risk factors such as loneliness or isolation can be easily addressed and a person suffering from this can move forward to a life that involves positive friendships and connections.

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[1] Kühn, S., Romanowski, A., Schilling, C., Lorenz, R., Mörsen, C., Seiferth, N., ... & Conrod, P. J. (2011). The neural basis of video gaming. *Translational psychiatry*, *1*(11), e53.