



11. Mental Health and Digital Media Overuse

It is not uncommon for digital media overuse or addiction to coexist with other mental health concerns (e.g., depression, anxiety, ADHD). Like the classic “chicken or egg” philosophical question, it may be difficult to always determine whether digital media overuse/addiction is causing the mental health issues in an adolescent, or if digital media overuse is exacerbating or escalating preexisting psychological issues. Regardless of which came first, it is important to support teens by addressing both the mental health issue and digital media overuse/addiction simultaneously.

Dual diagnosis is a term that means a person has a mental health disorder and a substance use disorder simultaneously. Other names for dual diagnosis include *co-occurring disorders* and *comorbidities*. Co-occurring disorders are common and involve both addiction and another mental health concern. Optimal treatment involves addressing both issues at the same time and may include behavioral therapy, medication, support groups, or in-patient care.¹

Diagnoses specific to compulsive behaviors related to digital

media overuse have only recently been adopted in the World Health Organization’s International Classification of Diseases (ICD11) and include Gaming Disorder and Compulsive Sexual Behavioral Disorder (CSBD);² however, research is finding compulsive digital media overuse behaviors are common co-existing concerns in therapy and psychiatry for mental health conditions and can lead to higher rates of depression and anxiety,^{3,4,5,6} sleep disturbances,^{7,8} and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD).^{9,10} Digital media overuse also is prevalent with those on the Autism spectrum (ASD),^{11,12,13} and can trigger or exacerbate ADHD symptoms,^{14,15,16} influence body image concerns, eating disorders,^{17,18} and trauma.¹⁹

If your child is struggling with digital media overuse/addiction, they may also have a co-occurring mental health concern or vice versa. A professional mental health provider can conduct assessments to help determine the mental health needs of your child.

Some mental health concerns that may occur with digital media addiction/overuse are listed below:

Anxiety Disorders: Anxiety is a normal stress reaction. Mild levels can be beneficial in some situations. It can alert us to dangers and help us prepare and pay attention. Anxiety disorders differ from normal feelings of nervousness or anxiousness and involve excessive fear or anxiety.

Depression: Depression (major depressive disorder) is a common and serious medical illness that negatively affects how you feel, think, act, and perceive the world.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD): People with obsessive-compulsive disorder have obsessions (persistent, recurring, unwanted thoughts and urges) and compulsions (repetitive behaviors or mental acts) that the individual feels driven to perform in response to an obsession.

Sleep Disorders: Sleep disorders (or sleep-wake disorders) involve problems with the quality, timing, and amount of sleep, which result in daytime distress and impairment in functioning.

Eating Disorders and Body Image Issues: Eating disorders are behavioral conditions characterized by severe and persistent disturbance in eating behaviors and associated distressing thoughts and emotions. They can be very serious conditions affecting physical, psychological, and social function.

Substance Use Disorder: Substance use disorder (SUD) is a complex condition in which there is uncontrolled use of a substance despite harmful consequences.

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD): Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is one of the most common mental disorders affecting children. Symptoms of ADHD include inattention (not being able to keep focus), hyperactivity (excess movement that is not fitting to the setting), and impulsivity (hasty acts that occur in the moment without thought).

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex developmental condition involving persistent challenges with social communication, restricted interests, and repetitive behavior.

Trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a psychiatric disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event, series of events, or set of circumstances. An individual may experience this as emotionally or physically harmful or life-threatening and may affect mental, physical, social, and/or spiritual well-being.

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