

'Screen time' causing, exacerbating childhood psychiatric disorders
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'Screen time' causing, exacerbating childhood psychiatric disorders

Annette Rothman, Reno Gazette-Journal Opinion Published 7:00 a.m. ET Dec. 8, 2018 | Updated 10:09 a.m. ET Dec. 8, 2018

U.S. teens now spend 6 hours, 40 minutes per day using screens for entertainment. Fifty percent report they feel "addicted" to their devices.



(Photo: Getty Images/iStockphoto)

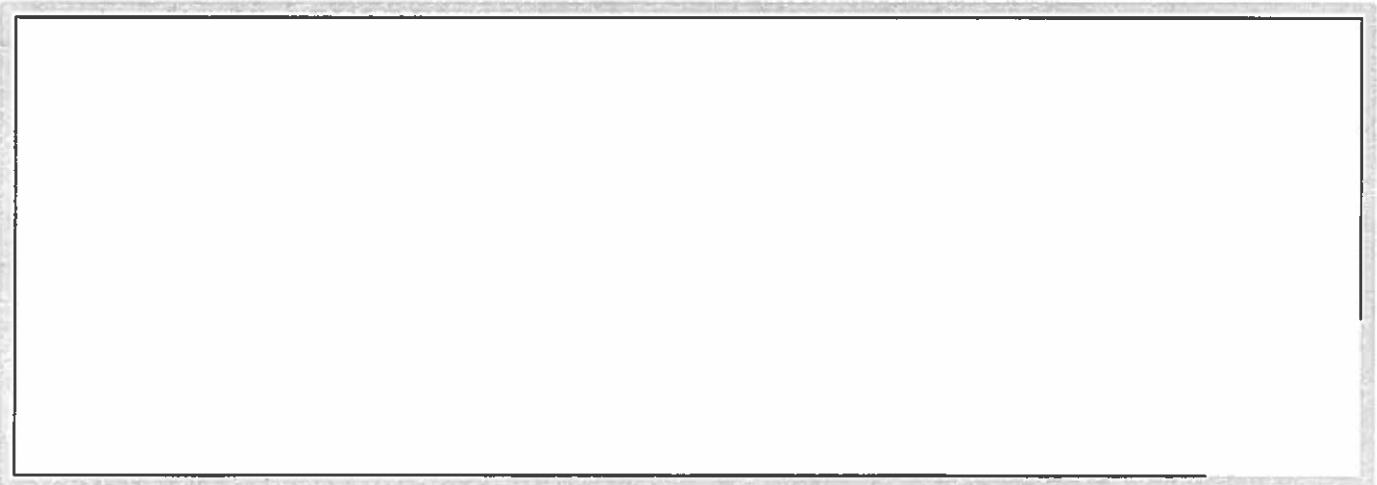
Working in the world of child and adolescent psychiatry as an advanced practice nurse, I frequently hear about symptoms of irritability, anger, isolation and poor sleep from my patients. These symptoms are common to many childhood psychiatric disorders. These disruptive symptoms baffle parents, teachers and clinicians alike, and can lead to incorrect diagnoses for these children with dysregulated moods.

I have been a steadfast believer in the importance of good diet, exercise and adequate sleep as being elementary steps one can take to improve moods. I now also consider the fourth tenet for youth mood regulation to be limited electronic screen exposure.

Excessive screen time stresses the brain, and electronic devices of all types have taken over our modern everyday life by storm in an insidious manner. The typical U.S. teen now spends 6 hours, 40 minutes per day.

(https://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/uploads/research/census_researchreport.pdf) using screens for entertainment. Fifty percent of U.S. teens say they feel "addicted" to their devices. (<https://www.cnn.com/2016/05/03/health/teens-cell-phone-addiction-parents/index.html>)

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Recently, I saw a 12-year-old male in my office who presented with symptoms of isolation, nightmares, anxiety, anger, academic decline and poor sleep. What followed my evaluation was a discussion about how electronic devices tend to produce mood disturbances. Excessive screen time can disrupt the production of melatonin (<https://www.sleep.org/articles/how-lights-affect-sleep/>), which helps to regulate sleep-wake cycles. Light at night has been linked to depression and/or suicide in numerous studies.

Typical gaming and social media interfaces induce stress reactions with hyperarousal, provoking a "wired and tired" state (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/mental-wealth/201103/wired-and-tired-electronics-and-sleep-disturbance-in-children>). Gaming interfaces desensitize the brain's reward system and release the "feel-good" chemical dopamine (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-compass-pleasure/201110/video-games-can-activate-the-brains-pleasure-circuits-0>). Dopamine is critical in regulating focus and moods. Brain scans have shown that those playing video games are similar to those using cocaine (<https://www.livescience.com/17033-gamer-brain-reward-system.html>).

Screen time overloads the senses

Screen time overloads the senses, fractures attention and depletes mental reserves. Emotional meltdowns can then become a coping mechanism. And lastly, excessive screen time reduces time for "green time" — physical activity outdoors in a natural setting, which can reduce stress and restore attention.

"Pervasive design" is the practice of combining psychology and technology to change behavior. Pervasive design is increasingly employed by social media and video gaming companies to pull users onto their sites and keep them there for as long as possible. Several Google and Facebook executives (<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/dec/11/facebook-former-executive-ripping-society-apart>) have voiced their concerns about social media sites negatively affecting human psychology.

Utilizing an "electronic fast" for children in my practice has shown drastic improvement in psychiatric symptoms. I suspect those without underlying psychiatric disorders may show an even more marked improvement. As parents/guardians of children, please consider the negative impact screen time may be impacting your child.

Annette Rothman is a pediatric advanced practice registered nurse who has practiced child/adolescent psychiatry for 19 years. This column first appeared in the Reno Gazette-Journal. (/story/opinion/voices/2018/12/05/screen-time-causing-exacerbating-childhood-psychiatric-disorders-rothman/2221571002/)

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