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Special Feature Article

Harm Reduction Approach for People Suffering from Gamimg Disorders: Awareness-raising Activities Learned from Patients and Families

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Abstract

The concept of harm reduction has expanded and is now proposed as a generic term for all efforts aimed at reducing the negative effects (adverse health, social and economic effects) caused by substance use and behavioral habits. According to a Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) survey in 2013, an estimated 4.21 million people were addicted to the Internet, including those with gaming disorders. Regarding harm reduction in gaming disorder, King, D. L., et al. argue that forced restriction and monitoring of game use show limited effectiveness, instead advocating moderate game use while maintaining activities and social connections that hold value in the real world. Our hospital established an "Outpatient Consultation Service for Internet Excessive Use and Withdrawal" in 2017 as part of our prevention and awareness-raising activities based on harm reduction. In some households and educational settings, there are situations in which patients are given strict goals such as "no games" by those around them, and have games taken away when they fail to meet the goal. We are working to break away from such a "punishment model" and to change attitudes. We hold training sessions for teachers and school nurses at junior high schools, high schools, and universities, and give lectures to parents and students during health talks. In collaboration with the Hokkaido Board of Education, we have also created educational pamphlets and held

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workshops on how to deal with Internet-dependent children and students at the Hokkaido School Counselor Research Council and other forums for the purpose of early intervention. In addition, we have been conducting educational activities such as introducing the voices of patients and their families through interviews with newspapers and magazines. In this presentation, I would like to introduce these activities with actual examples of how to respond to and interact with these patients, and give my personal opinion.

Keywords: gaming disorder, harm reduction, awareness-raising activity

Introduction

Growth of the information society continues to accelerate, with Internet usage spreading rapidly in recent years. According to the Communications Usage Trend Survey[15] reported by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) in 2022, the percentage of the Japanese population using the Internet reached 83.4%, with usage exceeding 90% across all age groups between 13 and 59 years old. In daily life, people benefit greatly from the Internet through email, gaming, and information-gathering. However, problems related to excessive Internet use are on the rise, and their various impacts on daily life are becoming increasingly apparent.

Internet addiction disorder was first proposed in 1995 by Goldberg, I.K., et al. as "a state of excessive dependence on the Internet that interferes with or impairs daily life."[18] Addictive disorders are broadly classified into three types: (i) substance-related addictions (alcohol dependence, drug dependence), (ii) behavioral addictions (gambling addiction, pachinko addiction, shopping addiction), and (iii) relational addictions (sex addiction, interpersonal relationship addiction). British psychologist Griffiths, M.D., et al., indicated that Internet addiction falls under behavioral addiction.[19] Although these phenomena are widely recognized by the general public and scholars, a standardized definition has not been established due to the overlap of heterogeneous factors depending on the purpose and context of Internet use.

Furthermore, in recent years, the validity of the term "Internet addiction" as a single psychological construct has been criticized.[4] In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) attempted to establish diagnostic criteria for "Internet Gaming Disorder

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(IGD)." However, as of 2013, it was classified under the section "conditions for further study," and due to a lack of evidence (research findings) and data, it did not result in formal diagnostic criteria.[1] Conversely, in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), gaming disorder was officially adopted as a diagnostic term starting in 2022.[11]

The diagnostic criteria in ICD-11 state that the condition is "characterized by a pattern of persistent or recurrent gaming behavior, whether online or offline, as evidenced by: (i) impaired control over gaming; (ii) increasing priority given to gaming to the extent that it takes precedence over other life interests and daily activities; (iii) continuation or escalation of gaming despite negative consequences. The pattern of behavior is severe enough to cause significant impairment in personal, family, social, academic, occupational, or other important areas of functioning."

Additionally, regarding the duration of symptoms, it notes that "for a diagnosis to be made, gaming behavior and other characteristics must typically have been present for at least 12 months; however, the required duration may be shorter if all diagnostic criteria are met and symptoms are severe." Since it has been officially adopted as a diagnostic category in ICD-11, it is expected that this condition will attract increasing attention. However, in DSM-5-TR published in March 2022, it remains classified as a "condition for further study,"[2] and given the discrepancy between ICD and DSM, this remains an area where building global consensus is still a subject of debate.

I. Problems Associated with Excessive Internet Use

Excessive Internet use has a significant impact on various aspects of daily life. For students, the impact on academic life is particularly marked: by staying home and spending most of their time online instead of attending school, their studies suffer, grades decline, and they become even less inclined to go to school. This leads to a vicious cycle in which Internet use becomes increasingly excessive. When listening to their stories, it is clear that many are facing problems in the real world, such as difficulties with friendships, family environments, or academics, and they often turn to excessive Internet use and immersion in the online world as a means of escape.[16] In the online world, there is no one to admonish them with "Go to school" or "Study," and they can easily satisfy their need for self-affirmation by achieving high scores in games, which earns them praise from fellow gamers. They escape

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from their real-world selves, which are struggling with various problems, and seek to live as their ideal selves in the online world, where they can achieve self-actualization, thereby fueling their dependence on the Internet.

Furthermore, excessive Internet use has a marked impact on daily life. Because they are so focused on the Internet, their daily routines become disrupted, they skip baths, skip meals, stay up all night, and fail to clean their rooms. Furthermore, it causes significant psychological changes. Interpersonal problems arise, such as finding social interaction burdensome and avoiding others, or losing emotional control and becoming easily angered. This can lead to a situation that constitutes a mental health crisis. Furthermore, it is considered to have various serious effects on growth and development. Specifically, this includes physical ailments caused by skipping meals or an unbalanced diet, decreased physical strength due to lack of exercise, sleep deprivation, reversed day-night cycles, and sleep disorders.[6)]

Because the Internet offers enjoyable experiences and a wonderful lifestyle unlike anything they have experienced in the real world, many students become obsessed with it. Parents often have no idea what their children are doing in the online world. However, when they witness their children spending long hours online, skipping school, neglecting their studies, and leading disorderly lives, they repeatedly warn or scold them out of anxiety and concern regarding excessive Internet use. This, in turn, leads to deterioration of the home environment and family relationships. According to a survey on the lives of young people conducted by the Cabinet Office[12)] targeting those aged 15 to 39, the number of people with social withdrawal is estimated at 500,000, and Internet addiction has been identified as one of the causes.[17)]

II. Treatment for Excessive Internet Use

Regarding treatment for gaming disorder, various interventions have been proposed, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, cognitive therapy, psychosocial education, and group psychotherapy; however, the gold standard for treatment has yet to be established. Sakuma, H. et al. demonstrated that a 9-day "self-discovery camp," a Japanese version of a therapeutic residential camp for adolescents with IGD, is effective in reducing gaming time and improving self-efficacy[13)]; however, there are many challenges regarding whether this can be consistently implemented in general hospital clinical settings. Several reasons have been cited for this, including the fact that definition of the

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disorder has been vague, the ultimate goal of treatment varies from person to person, and research on treatment has only just begun. Among these, the concept of "harm reduction" has been proposed as a recent trend in addiction treatment. Originally a concept that emerged from the treatment of substance use disorders, Harm Reduction International (HRI) defines it as "policies, programs, and practices whose primary aim is to reduce the adverse health, social, and economic consequences of substance use, even if the amount used does not necessarily decrease. It involves preventing or mitigating health harms caused by a particular behavior through behavioral change or other means."

In today's information-driven society, most people exchange emails for work and use the Internet to conduct research or create documents. Computers are also used in school classes, making it unrealistic to completely disconnect from the Internet. Therefore, with the goal of harm reduction, we propose the following: "If online games cannot be paused midway and prevent studying, switch to games with clear breaks," and "It is acceptable to play games on weekends, but avoid doing so on weekdays."[7)]

Furthermore, regarding harm reduction for gaming disorder, King, D.L., et al. suggest that while imposing forced restriction and monitoring on gaming use has limited effectiveness, it is important to engage in activities that foster social connections and provide value in the real world, as well as practice moderate gaming use.[9)]

For example, for people who have become socially withdrawn, a condition often seen in severe cases of Internet addiction, efforts are needed to help them return from the online world to real-world society and build relationships there. To achieve this: (i) the individual must first recognize the problem; (ii) they must reflect on what they are losing as a result of their current behavior, why they have come to use the Internet so much, and the trigger that led to their Internet addiction; (iii) reflect on their daily life, such as how much time they spend online, and create a specific action plan to manage their time; (iv) use this action plan to understand their daily rhythm (e.g., school, club activities), and objectively assess their situation, such as whether they are sleep-deprived or have inverted day-night cycles; and (v) seek out teachers, hospitals, support groups, and others who can provide support in their real-life environment.[5)]

III. Clinical Engagement Based on Harm Reduction

Teine Keijinkai Hospital (hereinafter referred to as "our hospital") is a

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regional medical support hospital (670 beds) located in western Sapporo. Since 2017, the Department of Mental Health at our hospital has operated a consultation service for excessive Internet and video game use. With a team consisting of one psychiatrist specializing in addiction and one certified public psychologist, we provide medical care for many junior and senior high school students and their parents. In the case of junior and senior high school students, they rarely seek treatment voluntarily; instead, it is often the parents who take the initiative to bring them in. In such situations, we conduct a thorough medical interview and assess any coexisting psychiatric symptoms. This is because, if there are coexisting psychiatric disorders, pharmacotherapy can be effective, and treating these conditions appropriately can also lead to successful treatment for Internet addiction.

In addition to this approach, it is crucial to carefully assess the underlying factors behind the student's immersion in gaming. In our assessment, we place the highest priority on distinguishing whether the patient: (i) is engrossed in the games themselves, leading to excessive use that impacts real life (so-called primary gaming disorder), or (ii) is facing various difficulties in real life, such as strained parent-child relationships, financial problems, or interpersonal issues, and is using games to escape these problems or as a refuge (secondary gaming disorder). It is crucial to gather information from patients and their parents, focusing on the background and circumstances that led to their immersion in gaming or the Internet. Most patients who visit our hospital fall into category (ii): they are almost always immersed in gaming or the Internet as a result of difficulties in their real lives, and few have mental disorders. For this reason, we always request that parents accompany the patient to the appointment and conduct the examination with a focus on the relationship between the parents and child. Many parents, troubled by their child's excessive Internet use, resort to measures such as usage restrictions or punishment. However, it is necessary to explain that simply restricting smartphone use, taking away Internet access, or scolding the child for breaking promises will not resolve Internet addiction.

At our hospital, in parallel with psychiatric consultations, a Certified Public Psychologist advises parents on how best to interact with their child. At the initial consultation, most parents adopt a critical attitude toward their children. In many cases, this stems from the parents' own personal struggles, which contribute to friction between the

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parents and child. Therefore, in counseling sessions led by Certified Public Psychologists, we believe that it is essential to address not only parenting concerns but also the parents' own anxieties and worries, with the goal of improving and rebuilding the parent-child relationship.

This is because when parents develop the emotional capacity to empathize with their child's struggles and emotional wounds, the child feels a sense of security from their parents and becomes more motivated to tackle their own challenges. Furthermore, through concrete actions, the child gains confidence by overcoming obstacles on their own. Even if they cannot overcome a challenge immediately, the sense of security provided by their parents enables them to try again. We believe that this process not only boosts the child's self-esteem but also enhances the parents' confidence in their parenting, thereby fostering the rebuilding of the parent-child bond.

The Certified Public Psychologists at our hospital also serve as school counselors. However, in educational settings, there are cases where the child does not come to school due to school refusal, making face-to-face counseling impossible. Even in such situations, we believe that starting with advice for parents and working to improve the parent-child relationship is an effective form of support for Internet addiction.

In this way, through the consultation process, we encourage parents to reflect on their past approach to their child and, based on that, consider why their child has become so engrossed in the Internet. In consultations regarding Internet addiction, we place marked importance on not treating it as solely the child's problem, but rather on involving parents in the process of reflection.[14] Thus, rather than treating Internet addiction as solely the child's problem and leaving the resolution entirely to the child, it is essential for both parents and the therapist to work together to provide support and share the challenges identified. Furthermore, while showing understanding for the difficult environments and situations the child faces in real-life school and social settings, such as a decline in self-esteem and other challenges, it is crucial to provide support that prevents them from running away from these real-world problems or escaping into the online world. We encourage each individual to consider their own personal treatment goals and work together to move toward them. Throughout this process, positive reinforcement and support for their efforts are essential to foster a sense of self-achievement, the belief that "if I try, I can do it," and boost their self-esteem.

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As self-esteem grows, confidence develops, and they begin to show a willingness to work hard on tasks in the real-world that they had previously avoided. As they experience success in the real world and build new relationships, they often gradually distance themselves from the online world and return to reality.

IV. Prevention and Awareness-raising Activities in Educational Settings

Recently, gaming and Internet addiction have garnered significant attention within educational institutions. Consultations from these institutions are on the rise, and we sometimes receive requests to outsource problem-solving, such as inquiries about medical treatment or medication, due to the sense of helplessness they feel. It is considered that the preventive education conducted in schools plays a role in this sense of helplessness.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), in an effort to enhance drug abuse-prevention education in schools, states in "The Fifth Five-Year Drug Abuse Prevention Strategy" (adopted on August 3, 2018, by the Drug Abuse Prevention Promotion Council) that "Drug abuse prevention seminars should be incorporated into school health plans and held at least once a year in all junior high and high schools, and efforts should be made to hold them in elementary schools as well, depending on local circumstances." Drug abuse prevention seminars are held to raise awareness about drug abuse issues and, as part of the "No! Absolutely No!" campaign, to educate students with the aims of preventing drug use — completely — and eliminating abuse. Consequently, in educational settings, instruction focuses on preventing addiction by ensuring students do not use substances that can lead to dependency in the first place. The same applies to video games and the Internet; these are often portrayed as inherently harmful, with emphasis placed on their negative effects on health and society, and they are viewed as leading to school-related problems such as neglecting studies or truancy due to excessive use.

To prevent these issues, many educational approaches focus on strengthening regulations and management of video game and Internet usage time and enforcing compliance among children. If these rules are not followed, school punishments such as "confiscation" are used, attempting to prevent addiction by teaching children "through pain," as described by Baldwin, J.[3] However, as mentioned earlier, it is clear that in today's information society, it is difficult to prevent children's video game and

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Internet addiction using a "punishment model," such as completely prohibiting Internet use or punishing them if they fail to keep their promises.[8] Therefore, at our hospital, we are conducting awareness-raising activities for educational institutions to promote guidance aimed at harm reduction rather than a "complete Internet ban" as a more realistic intervention method. We emphasize that attributing problems in school life solely to excessive use of games or the Internet, and tightening control by focusing only on making them stop, will worsen relationships with children and further intensify their addiction.

With this in mind, as part of our awareness-raising activities for educational institutions, we collaborate with the Hokkaido Board of Education to create leaflets on Internet addiction for parents and children and students, and we give lectures to school nurses and faculty members. We also conduct lectures for parents and students within schools and provide awareness-raising activities regarding understanding and responding to excessive Internet use. In our lectures at educational institutions, we particularly emphasize to school staff the importance of empathizing with the students' struggles in school and home life, the underlying factors contributing to their excessive gaming and Internet use, and encourage them to provide support aimed at enriching the students' real-life experiences. We strive to carefully explain that there is much that can be done in educational or therapeutic settings before resorting to medical treatment. Furthermore, as this article is a report on our practical efforts, evaluating the effectiveness of this approach in the future remains a key challenge.

V. Impact of COVID-19

Due to the spread of the novel coronavirus starting around 2020, the number of consultation requests at our hospital's outpatient clinic increased. Many of these consultations involved parents expressing concern about their children's gaming and internet usage, which had increased as children spent more time at home due to school closures. There were also numerous cases where issues in parent-child relationships, problems that were either unseen or ignored before the pandemic, became unavoidable due to factors such as parents working from home. As families spent more time together, leading to overcrowding within the home, intra-family conflicts[10] were exacerbated, and in many cases, family problems became more apparent than they would have been under normal circumstances. We also observed cases where children became even more engrossed in gaming as a means of

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escaping these newly exposed family problems, ultimately leading them to seek medical consultation.

From the perspective of primary and secondary gaming disorders mentioned earlier, while the spread of COVID-19 certainly had an impact, the fundamental nature of the problem, that gaming disorder stems from underlying family issues and difficulties in daily life, remains unchanged. In treatment, it is crucial to carefully address the patient's difficulties in daily life.

Conversely, new changes resulting from the spread of infection were also observed. As remote classes became actively implemented in schools, children who had been refusing to attend school were able to earn credits while staying at home. In many cases, advancing to the next grade, which would have been difficult under normal circumstances, became possible. As we build a post-COVID-19 society, I believe that remote learning and other forms of instruction using digital devices, which offer marked convenience, would be useful to continue as part of our social infrastructure.

Conclusion

With gaming disorder now an official diagnostic category, we anticipate a steady increase in consultations and treatment requests. With an anticipated increase in referrals across various settings, including general psychiatrists, child psychiatrists, and pediatricians, there are also scattered cases where practitioners struggle to respond, seeking specialized treatment methods and approaches. However, engaging with patients using a harm reduction approach does not require special techniques; rather, it is fundamentally the same as the basics of psychiatric care in that it involves working closely and thoughtfully with children and their parents.

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