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In Control: Monitoring Technology Use for Improved Mental Health

The use of smartphones, tablets or other electronic devices is a common and normal part of life for many adults and adolescents. We use technology for our work or school, to connect with family and friends and as an entertainment source, playing video games or watching shows in our down time. Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, virtual technology has become an essential tool, but it is important to monitor its potential impact on our emotional well-being. When it comes to technology having a negative impact on our mood, social media tends to be the main culprit because it often skews one's perception of reality. Studies conducted by the Center for Research on Media, Technology and Health at the University of Pittsburg, have shown that there is an increase in depression and anxiety that correlates to the increase in amount of time spent and how frequently people check their social media accounts. Over-use of social media often leads to: ● Increased feelings of inadequacy, exclusion and isolation. ● Decreased executive functioning skills. ● Poor self-image. ● Exposure to unhealthy (sad, violent or explicit) content.

Before the pandemic, many adults and teens were already struggling with video game addiction. These concerns are growing as use increased during the pandemic. Nielsen found that 82% of global consumers played video games and /or watched video game content during the height of Covid-19 lockdowns. Similar to the increase in TV viewing during the pandemic, Twitch (a platform for video game engagement) more than doubled viewership as hours watched grew from 13 million in January, 2020 to 31 million in March, 2020. While esports, video gaming and initiatives such as #PlayApartTogether created a much-needed distraction and safe, social connection for many during lockdowns, over-use of gaming has also increased reports of addiction and anxiety symptoms and unhealthy sleeping patterns.

Adequate sleep is essential to positive mental and physical health. Late night gaming and social media use have led to poor sleep hygiene. Additionally, the blue light emitted from electronic devices (smartphones, tablets, computers, televisions, etc.) interferes with our body's natural circadian rhythm and disrupts our sleep. According to a study published in the Nature and Science of Sleep journal, the consequences of sleep disruption in adults include: increased stress, somatic pain, reduced quality of life, emotional distress and mood disorders, as well as cognitive, memory, and performance deficits. For adolescents, psychosocial health, school performance, and risk-taking behaviors are impacted by sleep disruption. Behavioral problems and cognitive functioning are associated with sleep disruption in children.

With the increased need for screen time during the pandemic due to work and school from home, it is important to counteract any negative effects with positive changes and behaviors that are within our control. By better monitoring our screen time and creating realistic goals, we can decrease the negative effects of technology on our emotional well-being:

1. Access your phone setting and note the amount of time spent on your screen and in social media apps. Studies suggest 30 minutes.

2. Set a specific time of day to check your social media or play an online game. Then set a timer so that you don't lose track of time.

3. Turn off social media notifications. Research by Dr. David Greenfield at the Center for Internet and Technology Addition has found social media usage releases dopamine in our brains, leading to compulsive patterns of use. Notifications on your phone aid the compulsion to engage.

4. Avoid having your phone or screen at the desk or dinner table. It is important to be mindful and not have distractions during times that your focus needs to be on school, work or the people near you.

5. Be honest and assess the impact that social media or gaming has had on your life. Ask yourself: Have family or friends commented on an unhealthy use? Does your media feed or gaming goals consume your thoughts? How would you feel about deleting your accounts? The stronger reaction you have to these questions signal that you may need to take time away.

6. Avoid Screen Use Two Hours Prior to Bedtime. This is the recommended time that will allow the body to produce normal melatonin levels for a restful night's sleep.

7. Use Blue-Light blocking glasses or an app like Night Filter. If you can't avoid night screen usage, blue light blocking glasses or apps that directly block the blue light can help continue production of melatonin.

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