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Behavioral Addiction

Is the Internet causing a dramatic increase in behavioral addiction?
Posted Mar 16, 2017


Isaac Vaisberg began playing World of Warcraft while he was a student at Worcester Academy, a prestigious boarding school near Boston. The game became an obsession, his “sole means of socializing and his sole release.” It would take two stints at ReSTART, the world’s first Internet addiction center, for him to regain his health. He now runs a CrossFit gym in the Seattle area.

According to Adam Alter, a professor in the School of Business at New York University and the author of Drunk Tank Pink, Vaisberg is one of millions of Americans who are suffering from a behavioral addiction. Marked by a deep attachment to a harmful experience from which it is extremely difficult to abstain, behavioral addictions, Alter asserts, produce the same brain responses as drugs and alcohol. In Irresistible, he connects the dramatic increase in behavioral addiction to the rise of the Internet, social media, and video games – and suggests some remedies.
Alter is an engaging (and tech savvy) writer. He explains how businesses design their technologies to “hook” customers – and reviews recent social science studies that assess the impact of the time we spend in front of screens. Unfortunately, Alter does not provide a precise definition of behavioral addiction or explain why Internet use was not included (along with gambling) in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, published in 2013.

Alter applies the term “addiction” to many, many activities. “Goal addicts,” he writes, are perfectionists who sacrifice immediate well-being for the prospect of long-term success. Smartwatches and fitness trackers, he indicates, foster “addictive exercise tendencies” by outsourcing decision making about arbitrary targets to devices “and discouraging you from paying attention to your body’s internal exhaustion cues.” We also addicted investment bankers, Alter asserts, have abandoned “the intrinsic motivation for anything but personal gain.” NPR listeners were “addicted” to Serial, a twelve-part podcast about a high school student who may have killed his ex-girlfriend. Near the end of Irresistible, Alter suddenly declares that “not all addictive experiences are bad.”

At times, moreover, Alter’s analysis is internally inconsistent. A substantial percentage of Vietnam veterans shed their heroin addiction, he says, because “they escaped the circumstance that ensnared them,” returning to an America without jungles, gunfire or the chop of helicopter blades. But elsewhere he notes that “addiction is always on the cusp of being rekindled,” that it’s impossible to completely escape its after effects.

To counter the mania for metrics (fed, among other devices, by Fitbit), Alter recommends the Facebook Demetricator, which makes it impossible to check the number of likes or friends a person has. But in advocating “systems” instead of “goals,” he suggests that a cartoonist draw one cartoon a day – and a writer write five hundred words. And Alter seems to endorse LiveOps, a call center used by several corporations, which has a dashboard for each worker containing the percentage of calls that produce sales and awarding trophies and badges for reaching certain sales milestones.

Even if many of the behaviors in Irresistible are “only” harmful (and “half the developed world” is not addicted to something), it is worth emphasizing that the solutions proposed by Alter are useful. He advocates no screen time for toddlers and a two hour per day limit for teenagers. He advises connecting the screen world to the real world of children rather than passive viewing. He proposes replacing a bad habit (smoking or nail-biting) with a better one (nicotine gum or playing with a stress ball). He cites studies that a change in language – from “I can’t use Facebook” to “I don’t use Facebook”) – can work. He points out that hiding an iPhone at night, rather than placing it near the bed, can reduce sleep deprivation.
Alter also gives a shout-out to a few apps designed to modify behavior. An alarm clock called SnūzNLūz automatically deducts a small amount of money and donates it to a cause you dislike, every time you hit the snooze button. WasteNoTime blocks your browser when you exceed the daily time limit you set for a social media site. At Odenplan Metro station in Stockholm, melodies encourage commuters to take the stairs rather than the escalator. A virtual reality game called SnowWorld, where players throw snowballs at penguins, mastadons, and snowmen, while listening to Paul Simon songs, distracts burn victims from excruciating pain.

Most important, Alter reminds us “that behavioral architecture isn’t just a tool for doing less of the wrong things; it’s also a tool for doing more of the right things.”