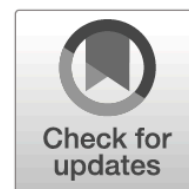


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LETTER TO THE EDITOR



Online Gaming During the COVID-19 Pandemic in India: Strategies for Work-Life Balance

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The novel coronavirus-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has brought the entire world to a relative standstill, affecting millions of worldwide at the time of writing (June 24, 2020) (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). With the absence of an effective vaccine, public health measures have been implemented by governments worldwide, such as quarantine, closing workplaces (including schools and businesses), and spatial distancing (Nussbaumer-Streit et al., 2020). To combat the spread of COVID-19, the Indian government implemented nationwide lockdown measures and self-isolation policies. In the Indian context, ‘lockdown’ refers to individuals staying at home while completely restricting the movement of the population inside and outside of specific areas except for essential activities (health visits, purchasing for essential items, and providing essential work) (Lippi et al., 2020). As a consequence, the measures have led to occupational disruption and psychological distress for many individuals.

One area that has been relatively unaffected during the pandemic is the gaming industry, with user engagement growing considerably during this period (Javed, 2020). For example, *WinZo Games*, an Indian-based gaming company, have reported three times more user engagement and 30%

higher traffic in online mobile gaming. Around 35% higher usage has been observed in multi-player modes in comparison to single-user modes, a trend also found elsewhere (Bora, 2020). Similarly, *Paytm First Games*, an Indian mobile-based online gaming platform, reported an almost 200% increase in the user base during the pandemic, with 75,000 new users (Ahaskar, 2020). During the lockdown period, there was also an increase in user engagement in online gaming among those aged 25-35 years and a marginal increase in female users (Bora, 2020). Gaming has been reported throughout the day, with a peak gaming time from 8pm until midnight (Bora, 2020). The reason for the increased uptake in Indian gaming is because many people are now housebound and there are few leisure activities that individuals can participate in. To date, online gaming has played a supporting role in public health efforts to enforce effective spatial distancing during the pandemic and has been supported by the World Health Organization's collaborative campaign (#PlayApartTogether) with the online gaming industry encouraging individuals to stay at home and limit the spread of the virus (Maden, 2020).

Research evidence suggests that most engagement in gaming is of positive benefit (Griffiths, 2019) and that the benefits can be educational, physical, and therapeutic (Griffiths et al., 2017). Gaming can also help in developing cognitive skills such as reasoning, spatial awareness, and problem-solving (Bowen, 2014; Nuyens et al., 2019). However, excessive gaming for protracted periods can be problematic for a minority of individuals. The research evidence suggests that problematic gaming is associated with psychosocial problems such as lack of sleep, low school well-being, concentration problems, impaired life skills, and poor self-control (Männikkö et al., 2020). Extreme engagement in online gaming is also strongly associated with poor academic performance among school-going children and adolescents (Terry & Malik, 2018).

The literature suggests that multiple factors are associated with problematic gaming such as personality traits (Şalvarlı & Griffiths, 2019), anxiety (Adams et al., 2019; Männikkö et al., 2020), entertainment achievement and escapism (Männikkö et al., 2017), game genre (Mihara & Higuchi, 2017; Na et al., 2017), and sensation-seeking behaviors (Hu et al., 2017). It has also been speculated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, some individuals may develop an increasing pattern of gaming to relieve psychological distress (King et al., 2020). According to a recent Indian study, gaming behavior increased among college students in the lockdown period (Balhara et al., 2020). Also, due to the lockdown and subsequent occupational and/or educational disruption, individuals may have much more free time and/or maybe easily distracted from working at home due to temptations such as online gaming. Subsequently, there is a need for well-balanced and effective strategies to support physical and psychological well-being (King et al., 2020).

Humans usually follow a structured routine or a set of routinized behaviors. These routines can provide life satisfaction and bring more significant meaning to one's life (Heintzelman & King, 2018). Given the apparent considerable increase in online gaming and the occupational disruption it may cause for some individuals it is important to maintain an occupational balance during the COVID-19 crisis. The proposed model of lifestyle balance by Makuska and Christiansen (2008), suggests five aspects (i.e., health and physical safety; having rewarding and self-affirming relationships; feeling interested, engaged, challenged, and competent; creating meaning and positive personal identity; and organizing time and energy to meet personal goals). These are briefly looked at in turn, in relation and gaming and occupational balance.

Many factors, such as good nutrition, exercise, safety practices, adequate sleep, managing stress, and avoiding addictive substances, all these can have beneficial effects on health (Matuska & Christiansen, 2011). Given the significance of spatial distancing and nationwide lockdown in India at the time of writing, participation in a variety of activities across various mediums is needed to maintain psychological well-being. Engaging in gaming can be time-consuming and has been associated with increased consumption of sweet drinks (Turel et al., 2017), but maintaining a healthy diet is essential. Also, excessive online gaming is associated with physical inactivity, obesity, musculoskeletal problems (pain in hands, wrist, neck, and back), and visual problems (Ayenigbara, 2018; Zirek et al., 2020). At present, there is much uncertainty as to what will happen regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the ever-changing characteristics of the virus (Lippi et al., 2020). This is causing immense psychological distress and fear among some individuals all over the world (Ahorsu et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Pakpour & Griffiths, 2020; Xiang et al., 2020). Such psychosocial effects can lead to emotional distress, anxiety, depression, substance use disorders, and behavioral addictions (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). Subsequently, engagement in gaming can be a healthy way to relieve stress and modify mood (Lee et al., 2017), especially during times of crisis. However, excessive engagement in gaming and unhealthy coping strategies can prove challenging in developing a healthy daily routine. Here, we recommend following strategies to maintain occupational balance in times of challenge due to lockdown following COVID-19 pandemic.

- (1) *Manage stress effectively* – Stress management has a key impact on health and well-being, it is important to incorporate healthy coping strategies such as regular exercise, deep breathing, yoga, or meditation, in daily routine to decrease stress and elevate mood. It is vital to pay attention to the body signals, having personal time, space and reflecting.

Engagement in gaming reduces stress but it is imperative not to use this to the neglect of all other stress-relieving activities.

- (2) *Get adequate sleep* – Essential sleep hygiene is essential and can be helped by maintaining a sleep diary for duration and time of sleep. Individuals should (i) have a specific time they go to bed, (ii) avoid gaming before bedtime, (iii) ensure electronic gaming devices are not kept in the bedroom, and (iv) should make sure the bedroom is noise-free with dim light. Adequate sleep is important for psychological well-being and physical functioning. Optimizing circadian rhythm and managing the sleep-wake cycle contributes to enhanced energy levels.
- (3) *Engage in physical activity* – Gaming can often displace physical activity, so it is very important to engage in physical activity to elevate mood and maintain health. Physical activity is an important outcome of health and well-being. Engaging in outdoor activities, walking, gardening, jogging, and any other activity that can be done in a safe and spatially-distanced way. To avoid prolonging engagement in gaming, individuals need to set time restraints for gaming, incorporate frequent breaks, stretch, maintain good posture with a straight back, keep the head and neck upright, and consciously blink eyes.
- (4) *Engage in good nutrition and eating habits* – It is very common to snack while gaming. Snacking healthy food is important, and gamers should eat meals at regular meal times (and not skip meals), and like sleep, monitor their eating behavior.
- (5) *Have rewarding and self-affirming relationships* – Good social support and emotional support can be protective factors for maintaining an individual's good health (Reblin & Uchino, 2008). Furthermore, positive relationships and social support predict life satisfaction (Siedlecki et al., 2014). However, problematic online gaming is highly

associated with cyberbullying and aggression (McInroy & Mishna, 2017), which can have a major impact on an individual's offline social relationships. Forming or renewing real social relationships is necessary. In the modern busy work schedule, individuals often find it hard to spend quality time with their family and socialize with friends. Capitalizing on the current situation, given that a significant proportion of the world's individuals are confined to their homes, for some it is an ideal time to reconnect with family and strengthen existing friendships. This can be done both in and outside of online gaming (Griffiths, 2020). Moreover, having a socially supportive environment has been associated with psychological well-being. Family time is important, having conversations, engaging in offline games, participating, in household chores can also help reduce stress and further strengthen relationships. For children and adolescents, parents need to monitor a child's game time and encourage more engagement in offline activities.

(6) *Engage in challenging activities* – Work is an important way of interacting with the environment, fulfilling roles and responsibility, and developing mastery, which increases the sense of competence and self-efficacy. Participating in online gaming can also enhance positive emotions and bring about happier moods (Russoniello et al., 2009) by feeling entertained (Männikkö et al., 2017). However, problematic online gaming is highly associated with low social competence and self-esteem (Kuss & Griffiths, 2012). Therefore, it is important for individuals to invest in exploring new leisure activities and skills and/or restarting old ones to be engaged and productive. As mentioned earlier participation in an array of physical activities, social activities, as well as cognitive based activities with the component of a just right challenge will be helpful. Exploration and

participation in meaningful and gratifying activities such as painting, gardening, puzzles, and other activities should be encouraged.

(7) *Create meaning and positive personal identity* – To create meaning and positive personal identity, individuals engage in a wide range of activities. During the pandemic, it is recommended that individuals be mindful when participating in gaming. Online gaming provides a platform to create a unique identity. For instance, in role-playing games, the player is free to choose gender, race, background, physical appearance, and skills. The gaming industry has designed games and avatars, and some gamers form deep attachments to their game character (King et al., 2010). However, for a minority, there is a risk for developing Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) where the individual can experience physical, emotional, and self-identity disturbances (Stavropoulos et al., 2019). Even though gaming provides an opportunity to escape the present reality, it is recommended that individuals find meaning and identity in their everyday events. The COVID-19 crisis has given many individuals sufficient time to reflect on their career, goals, inspiration, motivations, and drives. Consequently, participating in a variety of activities (including physical, creative, cognitive, and expressive activities) to maintain psychological well-being and overall health is highly recommended.

(8) *Organizing time and energy to meet personal goals* – Due to the current pandemic, millions of individuals are facing an occupational (or educational) imbalance. For some, this will cause stress associated with infringement on personal freedom, complete disruption of structured routines, and engagement in activities susceptible to behavioral addiction (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). In addition, the allocation of time for day-to-day activities can become challenging and may cause occupational (or educational) disruption for

individuals (Whiteford, 2000). Individuals who engage in excessive gaming will find the activity time-consuming, leading to less available time to engage in other activities. This could lead to delaying or completely avoiding necessary activities. When these routines are disrupted due to excessive engagement in online gaming, it may lead to occupational and/or educational imbalance inducing stress, anxiety, and various mental health issues (Brown & Hollis, 2013). This occupational imbalance or disruption can further lead to occupational and/or educational deprivation, paving the way to associated mental health issues. It is recommended that individuals make a more active choice of time use. Engagement in a variety of goal-directed healthy habits (which can include gaming) and maintaining positive relationships (which can be with others in and outside of gaming) is essential. It is important to plan a routine, use planners, keep a record of time spent on gaming, and using apps such as digital well-being and timers. Appropriate time use is highly related to individual well-being.

Final thoughts

As lockdowns are eased in India and elsewhere, the minority who have used gaming as an unhealthy coping mechanism (where there is an over-dependence on gaming as a means of escapism from reality), may give rise to mental health issues. For some, the impact of the pandemic may lead to the persistence of excessive gaming and result in negative consequences. Mental health experts such as psychiatrists, psychologists, occupational therapists, and social workers must continue to monitor the psychosocial needs of individuals and deliver the needed psychosocial support wherever and whenever they can (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). The general population, especially vulnerable groups, requires the utmost mental health care during this pandemic. Early

identification of the vulnerable population should begin as early as possible to help overcome the mental issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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