Adaptability in Crisis

A Psychological Perspective

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Digital Detoxification: A Way Forward to Deal with Digital Stress in Pandemic Scenario

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has boosted digitalisation, wherein, people are spending more time on digital platform for various purposes e.g. education, work, recreational activities. Research equates that excessive use of digital activities can induce digital stress, that may lead to increased levels of anxiety, sad mood, screen fatigue, uncertainty and negative emotions like irritability and aggression. There is a significant rise in school refusals, gaming addictions among children and adolescents. For working professionals, the new job settings 'work from home' was an invasion in their personal space and time that created a misbalance in the psychological homeostasis. The senior citizens adaptation to the digital demand posed new challenges. In the post pandemic era maintaining digital hygiene and

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detoxification from digital stress is essential to achieve psychological and physical wellbeing.

Keywords: digital stress, digital detoxification, COVID-19, screen time, fatigue

Introduction

The "*New Normal*" during and after the COVID-19 scenario involved inculcating new habits to deal with uncertainties and challenges posed by the need for social distancing, quarantine and phased work schedules. One of the significant changes witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic is the excessive dependency on digital medium for education, shopping, work settings and recreational purposes. Such digital dependency has become essential to survival in the technology age. Mobile phones initially served the purpose of calling 'on the go', but, with the technological advancement, it has become an alternative of a laptop (Deloitte's consumer survey, 2015). The use of tabloids, smartphones and laptops have witnessed a rapid surge with the sudden closure of educational institutions, offices and shopping hubs.

Given the restrictions, screen time spent on digital devices for working from home, online education, news, social media, home workout, lifestyle and shopping has increased. In the absence of in-person social connection, usage of social media apps has somewhat increased to stay connected with close ones. In a report by Bora (2020), indicated that by the October 2020, social media usage had increased by 12 per cent in the past year. In addition to this, the use of online platforms for entertainment and gaming purposes among children and youth to fill in the void of not meeting playmates physically is another huge change. In a report by Bora (2020), Indian gaming company *WinZo Games* witnessed a 35% surge in its usage. The report further mentioned a marginal increase in female users and noted that the majority of the users were in 25-35 years of age. On the working front, the work from home scenario also increased the screen time for professionals by 2.5 hours to 4.5 hours (Doval, 2020). Qin et al., (2020) found out that during

COVID 19 outbreak adults' screen time was more than four hours while staying at home.

The instances mentioned above are suggestive of how technology driven modalities have occupied our lives and also served as a boon during this pandemic. Nonetheless, it has also created space for physical and mental health problems. Previous studies have speculated links between blue spectrum light (from smartphone lights) and sleep problems due to suppressed melatonin response (Holzman, 2010). In the annual Stress in America survey (2017) conducted by American Psychological Associations, it was reported that about 18% of U.S adults identify technology use as a significant stressor in their life. Many people have developed an internal urgency to reply to all the incoming information, or else something important will be missed (*fear of missing out).* This tendency has also resulted in disruption in biological rhythms as people spend most of their time staying awake and being online (Sharma et al., 2020). The excess digital presence of people in pandemics has also boosted digital stress (Pandey and Pal 2020). According to Salanova et al. (2013), digital stress comprises fatigue, pressure, excessive demands that a person is not able to adequately handle modern and new digital technologies. The dependency on technological tools has not only perpetuated deep in people's lives but has also created lifestyle changes that need constant adaptation. This chapter attempts to explain the concept of digital stress in the post-pandemic phase, understanding its signs and symptoms further will help in managing it better and ultimately, one can achieve digital wellbeing from digital stress.

Impact of Digital Use during Covid: Evidence from Different Age Groups

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and prolonged period of restricted access to everything has created an explosion in the use of digital technology. As various operations changed from offline to online, the screen time or the exposure to digital means increased considerably. Cuello-Garcia (2020) referred to screen time as the amount of time spent and the various activities performed

online using digital devices. For example, screen time includes both using digital devices for work purposes (regulated work hours or educational purposes) as well as for leisure time and entertainment (non-regulated hours of gaming, viewing pornography or usage of social media). In the pandemic phase, digital technology came as a godsend in disguise. However, at the same time, it had a far-fetched impact on the physical and mental health of different populations in society.

Impact on Children and Adolescents

Implementation of lockdown by government authorities in different countries included a complete suspension (the closure) of educational institutions and digital portals were established to impart education in online mode. Despite a plethora of benefits, this came out to be a curse when mindful usages of digital exposure were not being done. The children reported having difficulty following in the classes. They had the option to mute themselves whenever they wished, which affected their ability to sustain attention and maintain emotional stability. A survey conducted by Beech and Anseel (2020) reported about 50–70 percent increase in internet use during the pandemic. The over-usage of digital platforms during the pandemic also gave rise to increased levels of anxiety, sad mood, screen fatigue, uncertainty and negative emotions like irritability and aggression (Rajkumar, 2020). However, anxiety and aggression also increased owing to cybercrimes and cyber-bullying (Lallie et al., 2021). Children and adolescents engaged themselves more in online games, social networking sites and other digital platforms to maintain social connectivity to alleviate boredom, loneliness and anxiety. Research also suggests that during COVID - 19 pandemic, caregivers faced many challenges like shifting to work from home set up, financial constraints, fear of getting infected, and closure of day-care canters. Due to these issues, they could not give full attention, and children were left unguarded during screen time (Montag & Elhai, 2020).

As the lockdown ended and the government is putting an effort to regularize into previous offline routines, the children

and adolescents are now facing difficulties to go back to the older routines. This could be due to the habituation to do the needful in the comfort of their homes. The boundary between the strict and structured environment of the school and the relatively informal and unstructured environment at their home was fused during the lockdown. According to the Save the Children Report (2021), children showed marked stress, anxiety, sleep difficulties, reluctance to engage in social interactions, emotional deregulation, temper tantrums followed by school refusals. Adolescents face considerable difficulty due to compulsive and impulsive use of the internet and having difficulty focusing on the studies, going back to a regularized routine, anger outbursts, irritability which is causing frequent absenteeism in colleges, avoidance to social interaction, procrastination, and other disruptions in social habits. Research suggests that compulsive and uncontrollable use of the internet and gaming apps led to reluctance to go back to previous routines. Increased screen time led to screen fatigue, procrastination, a refusal for activities (going out with friends, playing etc.), gradually regressing them to addiction disorders. (Dong et al., 2020; Kuss and Lopez-Fernandez, 2016)

Impact on Geriatric Population

Due to the pandemic, the geriatric population also was left with nothing but to use digital technologies. This proved to be a barrier for them as many older adults consider technology to be expensive and out of their reach (Greenhalgh et al., 2013) and often give preference to the "old-fashioned" ways of doing things (Peek et al., 2016). Prior research has also highlighted that older people can have trouble remembering how to use new technologies (Peek et al., 2016). A recent study by Lam et al. (2020) showed that about 40% of the elderly population in the United States were inexperienced in using tele-health resources, primarily due to a lack of skills to efficiently utilize the technology (Lam et al., 2020). Studies showed despite the elderly population had the highest number of doctors and hospital visits yearly, but the most access and adoption of tele-

medicine services were done by those aged 20-44 years (Lam et al., 2020). Peek et al. (2016) also found that older adults do not want to be a burden for anyone. As a result, the necessity to access digital services and inability or lack of necessary skills created a discrepancy which caused significant emotional problems including helplessness, loneliness, fear of missing out, fear who will help if they are ill, due to constant dependency for operations of digital platforms they tend to perceive themselves as being a burden followed by fear of being abandoned by their loved ones. All these cumulated to give rise to mental health issues like depression, anxiety and stress. Elderly with comorbidities faced more surge of anxiety and stress apprehending infections (Lam et al., 2020).

Impact on Working Professionals

As the lockdown was enforced, many organizations were compelled to shift to an online mode popularly called "remote working" or "work from home". As a result, many had difficulty maintaining a boundary between their private life and professional life. This caused extension of their working hours without any additional compensation. The overuse of technology and social media caused a threat to the employees' resources and well-being. For instance, using digital communication methods reduced the social support and connectedness received from the workplace. In addition, marathon online meetings proved to be draining, and multitasking between personal life and professional lives added to the injury leading to concentration problems, fatigue, exhaustion, stress, and burnout (Leonardi, 2020). Burnout is a psychological state where an employee experiences emotional fatigue, pessimism, and inefficacy, causing diminished work autonomy (Maslach, 2001; Alarcon, 2011; Aronsson et al., 2017; Hakanen et al., 2006). This can affect an employee's physical and mental well-being (Hakanen et al., 2008; Schaufeli et al., 2009). As the office reopens after a long period of lockdown and employees are expected to report to their onsite duties, they face difficulties in terms of fear of getting infected, maintaining attention, irritability, fatigue, getting habituated with

the continuous office hours and formal decorum to be maintained in the office. It can be speculated that the habituation to work in the comfort of the home contributed to the adjustment difficulties faced, which can create a barrier to adapt to this "new normal"

Managing and Way Forward

As it can be inferred from the above-mentioned account that dependency on technology has its own benefits, but it also comes with social, emotional and physical costs. Digital devices are inevitable in the current and future scenario; however, regulating its usage is extremely necessary to deal with digital stress. A routine based on digital detox practices can be helpful in this regard. In simpler words, digital detox means a disconnection from the digital devices for a certain period of time in the entire day, depending on the requirement of the individual. These practices may include having no smartphone/laptop in one's room during sleep hours or keeping gadgets off or silent during particular activities like lunch and dinner. It might also include defining no gadgets zone in one's home wherein one is supposed to stay away from devices in those particular areas (e.g. garden). Evidence suggests that apps based on digital detox programme have been successful in limiting smartphone use in adolescents during studying or having family dinner (Ko et al., 2016, Radtke et al., 2021). As mentioned in the previous sections problematic smartphone use and excessive online gaming has increased in the pandemic among children and adolescents, a digital detoxification routine can be structured for them as well. It is used in regulating the amount of time children and adolescents spend on their virtual gaming meetings and entertainment. Resistance from children and adolescents to refrain from using smartphones is commonly reported by parents. Some children also report finding it difficult to stay away from the devices and find it more convenient to pass their time. Schmuck (2020), in his research, stated that digital detox apps not only helped children to identify their problematic smartphone use but, also helped them develop self-regulation strategies. In addition to detox strategies, parents need

to communicate the physical and mental health impact of overuse of digital devices, and restructure offline activities to engage children/adolescents in constructive ways.

With the changing scenario working professionals need to adjust their work from home environment as well. Rudnicka et al., (2020) reported that for these professionals to maintain work-life balance, managing productivity and digital self-control were difficult because of distractions and difficulty in setting boundaries. It is suggested that to avoid these stressors, some structural changes in work-home settings are required. A designated workstation at home, which one would use essentially for their professional purpose, can help avoid distractions and building work hygiene at home. In developing work hygiene routine, one must take care of post-work rituals, and set boundaries by avoiding watching videos or engaging in social media between work schedules. Such strategies can help individuals maintain productivity and, at the same time, create a proper work-life balance.

Conclusion

Technology is an inevitable part of our lives, hence developing digital hygiene is crucial for handling stress arising from digital use in post-pandemic scenarios. Besides mental health, the adverse effect of digital use on physical health can be taken care of by maintaining consistent sleep-wake schedules, exercise and having proper meals. It is imperative to understand that the use of the digital platform for everything was the need of the hour in the lockdown phase. Earlier, access to others via the digital world was a necessity, but now when the lockdown phases are over, it seems that a dependency on digital mediums has increased. Thus, effective strategies to counter this dependency and addictive tendencies are required through lifestyle changes.

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This book is a compilation of empirical research and review papers, which focuses on pertinent issues of the current situation. The articles have been contributed by different researchers and experienced academicians from all over the country. The articles are thoroughly based on their original research work presented during the Two Day National Conference titled "Adaptability In Crisis: Psychology, Education And Society" organized by the Department of Psychology, Rajiv Gandhi University (A Central University), Arunachal Pradesh, India on the 17th & 18th of August 2021 through virtual mode.

The objective of the book is to highlight various issues related to the present COVID-19 pandemic to foster better preparedness and adaptability in crisis. The chapters delve on the themes of Physical & Mental Health, Health Care System, Work-Life Balance, Resilience, Coping Skills and Effects of COVID-19 on Mental Health. It consists of selected unpublished articles of diverse aspects of psychological and overall mental health highly relevant on both individual and community levels in every sphere of life. The findings will also contribute to public welfare and policy documentation for the Government.

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