

Addictions

According to Walters (1999), addiction can be defined as, 'the persistent and repetitious enactment of a behaviour pattern' (Gross, 2005, p. 125). Without doubt, drug addiction is not a modern phenomenon. Throughout history, people have used chemical substances to induce altered states of mind and to reach enlightenment or spiritual understanding. For example, the Aztecs in Mexico took *peyote*, an edible cactus with hallucinogenic properties, for religious reasons, and to protect themselves against evil spirits. However, although peyote was taken ritualistically, its use still probably led to addiction. During the 19th century in Europe, more than one Romantic poet experimented with, and became dependent on, opium.

It is important to recognize that although addictive behaviour is often associated with the abuse of chemical substances like drugs and alcohol, it is not necessarily confined to these. Many writers seem to agree that it can include compulsive shopping, eating, playing video games and chatting on online social networks. Although drug dependency and impulse control disorders, such as obsessive texting, may be considered similar, it could be claimed that there is a major difference. Whereas drug abuse involves ingesting substances that have a direct effect on brain function and cause physiological as well as psychological harm, behavioural addictions have only psychological and social consequences.

A fuller definition of addiction than Walters' can be found in *Internet addiction: fact or fiction?* by Griffiths (1999), who considers the extent to which the six main dimensions of addiction can be applied to modern compulsions. He defines these elements as:

- salience – the central importance of the activity to an individual's life;
- mood modification – the pleasure derived from the activity;
- tolerance – the need to dedicate increasingly more time to the activity to gain any satisfaction from it;
- withdrawal symptoms – negative emotions which result from having the activity denied;
- conflict – the extent to which the addictive behaviour interferes with other social activities; and
- relapse – the tendency to return repeatedly to the compulsive behaviour pattern.

Griffiths (1999) questions whether excessive use of the Internet is truly an addiction to the medium, or a means of achieving other satisfactions.

Taking all the case study and survey evidence together, it can be argued that excessive usage in a majority of cases appears to be purely symptomatic (i.e., the Internet is being used as a tool to engage in other types of rewarding behaviour, like being in a relationship). (op. cit., p. 249)

As reported by Block (2008), this analysis is largely supported by recent research carried out in South Korea, in which it was found that 86% of Internet addicts are afflicted by other psychiatric disorders.

However, it must be noted that a decidedly different view has been adopted in China, where research has identified massive levels of Internet addiction. At a recent conference, Tao Ran, Ph.D., Director of Addiction Medicine at Beijing Military Region Central Hospital, revealed that '13.7% of Chinese adolescent Internet users meet Internet addiction diagnostic criteria – about 10 million teenagers' (Block, 2008, p. 306). These extraordinary figures have led the Chinese government to introduce innovative ways to control online gaming for young people, details of which were published in an article in the *People's Daily* (2007).