

Digital Dynamics: Understanding Technology's Impact on Addiction and Behavioral Health

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Abstract

- **The rapid advancement of technology has significantly influenced the landscape of addiction and behavioral health.**
- This presentation explores how digital platforms, including social media, gaming, and online streaming, shape substance use patterns and process addictions. While technology often acts as a trigger for addictive behaviors, it also presents unique opportunities for intervention and recovery support.
- Drawing on current research and clinical experiences, this session will examine the dual role of technology in addiction—its risks and its potential as a therapeutic tool. Attendees will gain insights into mitigating digital overstimulation, fostering healthier technology use, and leveraging digital resources to enhance client outcomes.
- This presentation aims to equip behavioral health professionals with practical strategies to navigate the complexities of technology's influence on addiction and recovery in the modern age.



Learning Objectives

- **Identify** the neurological and behavioral mechanisms by which technology use can contribute to substance use and process addictions.
- **Describe** at least three digital platforms (e.g., social media, gaming, streaming) that can serve as addiction triggers and explain their psychological impact.
- **Evaluate** the benefits and limitations of using digital tools (e.g., recovery apps, telehealth, online support groups) in addiction treatment.
- **Apply** at least two clinical strategies for helping clients manage digital overstimulation and set healthy technology boundaries.
- **Develop** a plan to integrate digital assessment and intervention tools into individualized treatment plans for clients with co-occurring behavioral health and technology use concerns.

Agenda

- Welcome & Introduction
- Technology & Addiction
- Technology as a Therapy Tool
- Practical Strategies for Clinicians
- Closing and Q & A
- Summary of Key Takeaways

Welcome & Introductions

Who are you?

Why this training?

Any questions you want
answered by this training?

What is your relationship like
with your phone in one word?

- +
 - • *“Our brains can get hooked on the ping of a notification just like they get hooked on a drug – it releases dopamine. So, if you’re finding it hard to put down the phone, it’s not just lack of willpower; real changes are happening in the brain. In recovery, we need to be mindful of that.”*

The Brain & Electronics

- <https://youtu.be/cM-a2qzjcas>



Technology & Addiction: Challenges & Risks | Basic Terms

Digital Overstimulation

Doom Scrolling

Digital Displacement

Algorithmic Exposure

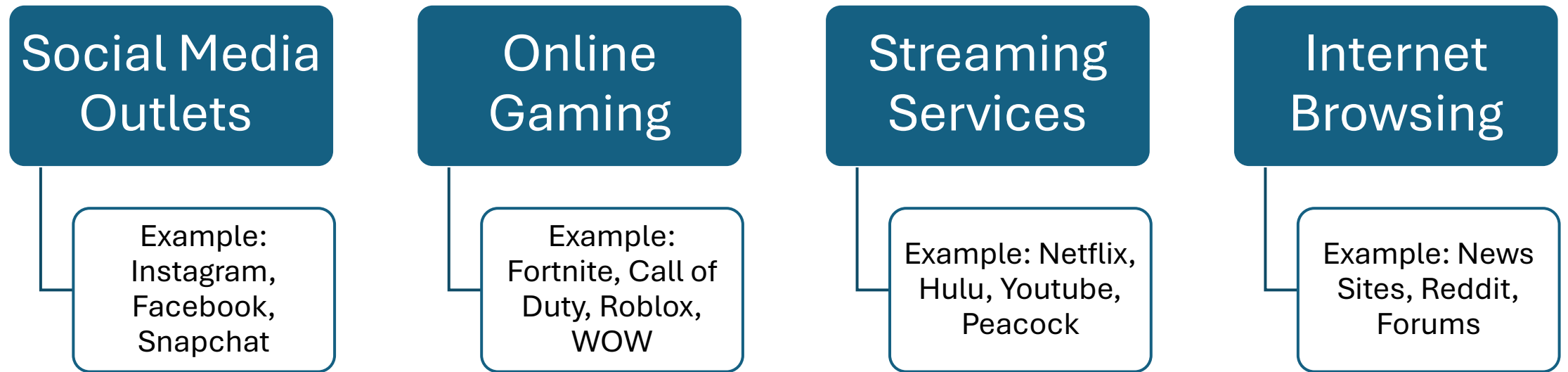
FOMO

Digital Detox

Social Media Fatigue

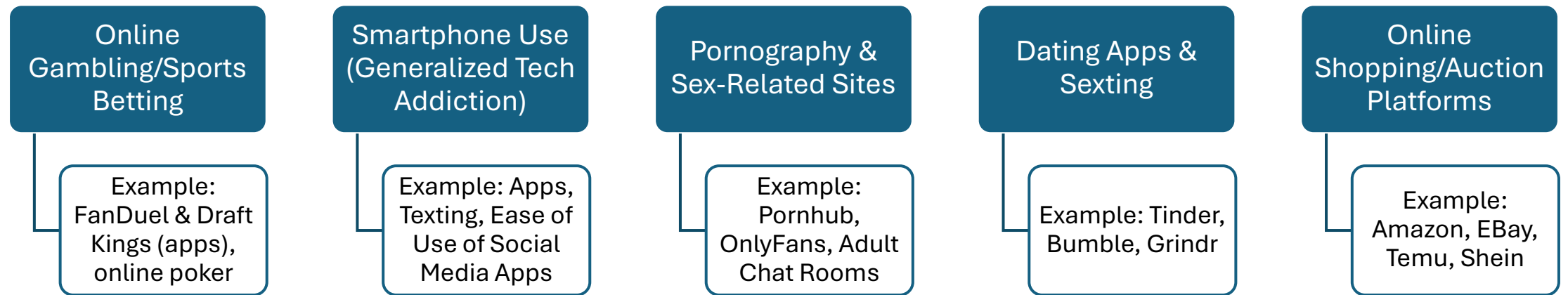


Different Types of Technology & Addictive Feature: Part 1





Different Types of Technology & Addictive Feature Part 2





Consequences of Digital Overstimulation on the Brain



Attention Dysregulation

Dopamine Overload

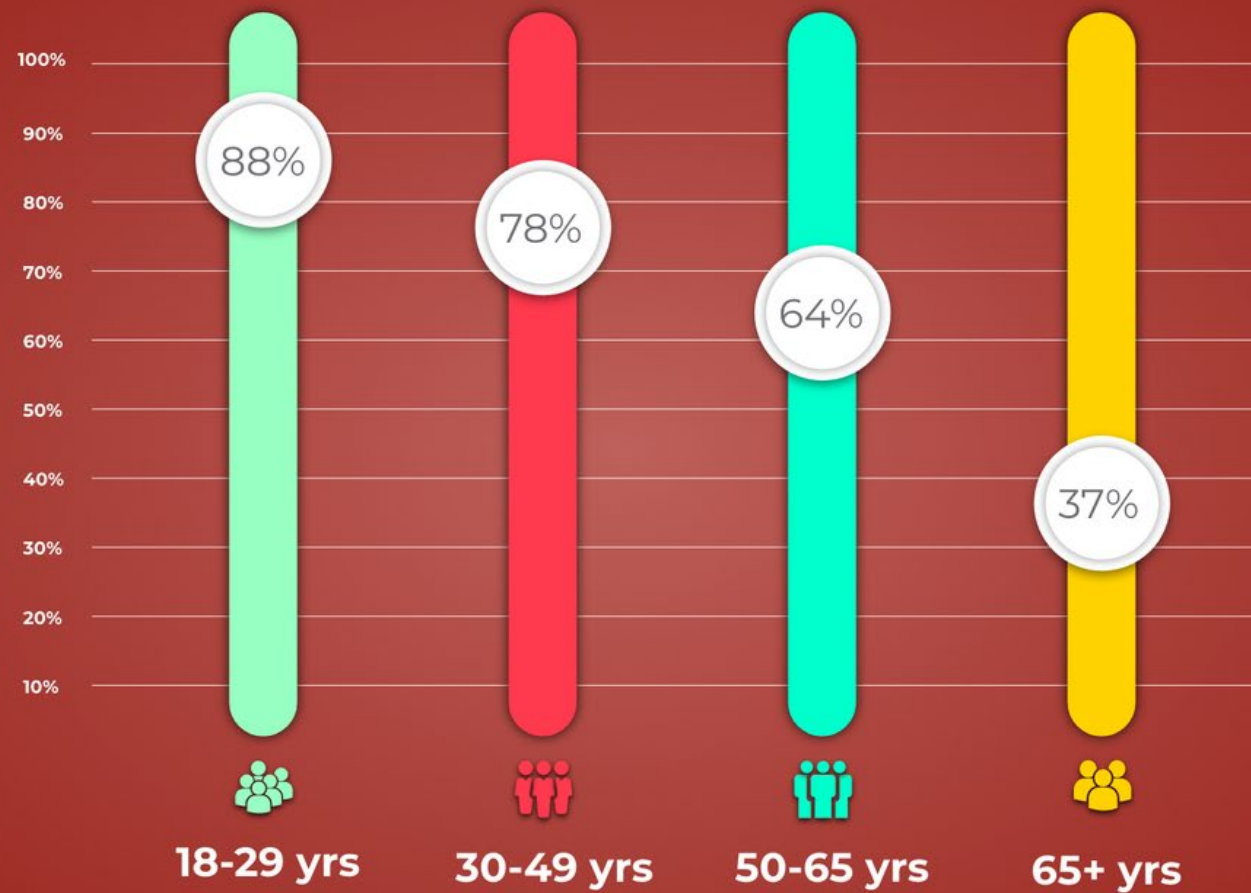
Memory Impairment

Emotional Desensitization



Percent of People Who Use
One Social Media Network

Social Media Use By Age



Age Bracket



Effects of Social Media Use by Age

- Children who spent more than 2 hours per day on screen-based activities had significantly lower language and thinking test scores.
- Teens with more than 3 hours/day of social media use had double the risk of poor mental health outcomes.
- 71% of college students say social media negatively affects their academic performance.
- 45% of adults say social media makes them feel “overwhelmed” or “burnt out.”
- 1 in 3 adults 50+ say social media makes them feel more isolated, not less.



Strategies to Combat Digital Overstimulation

Digital Detox

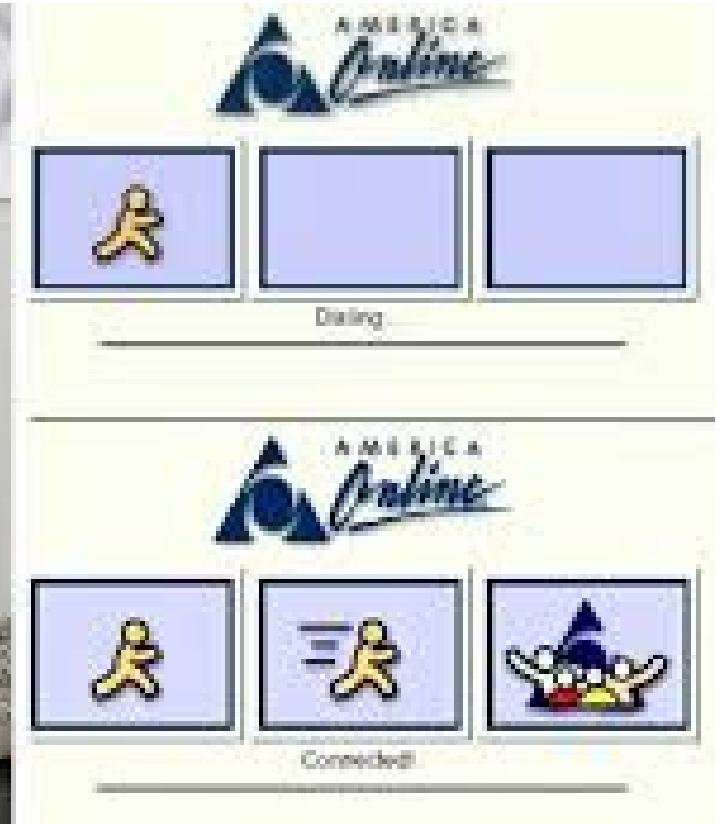
Mindfulness Practices

Structured Screen Time

Engage in Offline Activities

Parental Controls

Vast Difference Decade over Decade



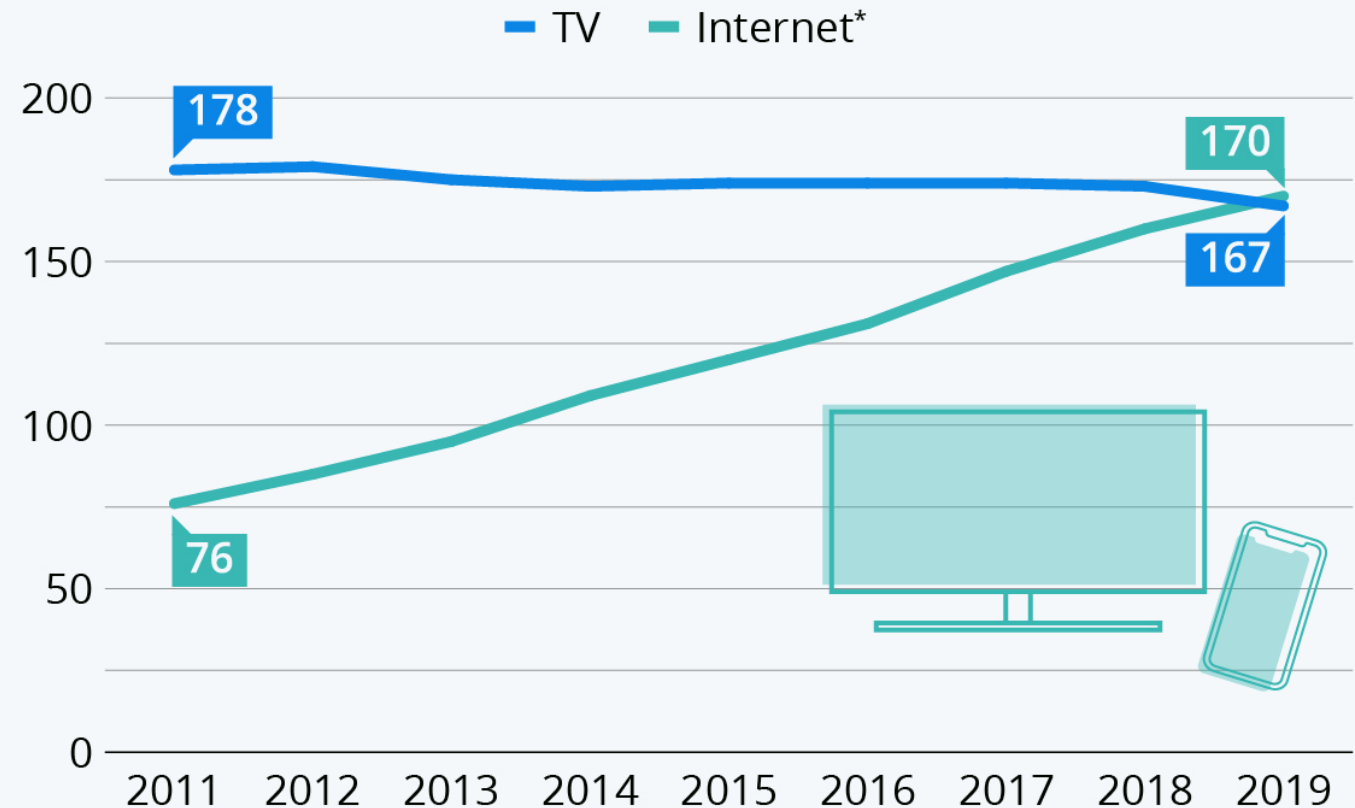
- Dial Up & The "home" of the computer are different, even the way society watches TV is different.

Not the TV?!

- For Decades TV was the #1 in terms of daily media usage
- Total Internet consumption has exceeded TV consumption for the first time in 2024

The End of the TV Era?

Estimated daily TV and Internet consumption per person worldwide (in minutes)



* including desktop and mobile internet usage

Source: Zenith





Case Study

1: Social Media Triggering Relapse

Scenario: *A 28-year-old man in recovery from alcohol use disorder has been sober for 4 months. One evening, while scrolling through Instagram, he sees several friends posting pictures drinking craft cocktails at a reunion. Almost instantly, he experiences a surge of craving – he can almost taste the alcohol. He feels a mix of excitement and anxiety (fear of missing out on the fun). Later that night, driven by the craving, he relapses and drinks.*



Cross Addictions: Technology Related Reminder

Social media overuse

Online gaming

Streaming binges

Online shopping

Pornography or dating apps

Smartphone compulsivity



Case Study 2: Cross Addiction Technology

- **Scenario:** *A 33-year-old woman has maintained recovery from opioid addiction for 1 year. However, in recent months, her family notices she is spending **excessive time playing online games** and on social media – sometimes up to 8–10 hours a day. She describes feeling “void” and bored since quitting opioids and admits the online activities help “take her mind off things.” Over time, she becomes dependent on the digital escapism: she stays up all night gaming, her work performance slips, and she feels anxious when away from her phone. She has effectively swapped one addiction for another.*



Benefits of Digital Tools in Recovery

- During the 2020–2021 pandemic period, many addiction treatment providers pivoted to telehealth – resulting in a **77% increase in tele-mental health availability and a 143% increase in tele-SUD treatment availability** nationwide.
- In early 2021, **57% of outpatient SUD clinics** were offering telehealth services (vs. only ~23% before the pandemic).
- According to the **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 60% of U.S. counties** have no opioid treatment program.
- A 2021 systematic review found that digital health interventions **improved treatment adherence by 22%** compared to standard care alone
- Participation in online recovery communities was associated with a **35% higher abstinence rate at 6 months**, compared to non-users



Digital Tools in Recovery: Mobile Apps

Sober Grid

WEConnect

ReSet and reSet-O



Sober Grid

- Sober Grid is a free iOS/Android app that connects you with other sober people. You are instantly connected to a global sober community in your neighborhood and around the globe. You can build strong sober support networks and inspire others.
- Sober Grid now offers affordable 24/7 Certified Peer Coaches to assist individuals in their recovery. Our peer coaches are trained and certified to help you get sober and stay sober.
- <https://www.sobergridapp.com/>



WEconnect

- Our mission is to be a life-saving haven for those dealing with mental health and substance use challenges. We are devoted to empowering families, workplaces, healthcare environments, and communities through innovative mental wellness strategies, precise outcome data, and dedicated support networks. |
- Born from our co-founders' personal journeys in mental health and recovery, WEconnect's focus is providing real-world support for mental and behavioral health.
- <https://www.weconnecthealth.io/>



ReSET & ReSET-0

- At PursueCare, our vision is to make comprehensive addiction treatment and mental health services accessible to *everyone, everywhere*. We're working to remove the traditional obstacles to treatment that patients frequently encounter.
- At PursueCare, our vision is to make comprehensive addiction treatment and mental health services accessible to *everyone, everywhere*. We're working to remove the traditional obstacles to treatment that patients frequently encounter.
- PDT: Prescription Digital Therapeutics
- Owned by PursueCare - <https://www.pursuecare.com/>

Other Digital Recovery Based Apps



There are a multitude of other "recovery-based" applications.



Applications vary on what they provide and whether they are free of charge or a subscription.



Different web-based meetings are also available.

Digital Recovery Tool Challenges



PRIVACY

- Over 50% of patients with substance use issues had concerns about the privacy of technology-based health tools, fearing personal data could be exposed or used against them.

QUALITY

- A 2020 review found that while a few apps were based on proven behavioral strategies (like CBT or motivational incentives), many others offered unvetted advice or mere habit trackers without therapeutic support.

SAFETY

- A 2021 study by ExpressVPN and the Opioid Policy Institute found that most addiction recovery apps accessed sensitive user data—like location and device info—and shared it with third parties, including Facebook and Google.



Digital Divide

- Tech-based care must be implemented with equity in mind. Otherwise, we risk a scenario where well-connected patients gain extra support from apps and telehealth, while marginalized patients fall further behind.
- 27.7% of Tribal lands and 17% of rural areas did not have high-speed internet .
- Not everyone can afford smartphones or data plans, or they may have to share one device among family members.
- Digital Illiteracy and an inability to operate application platforms.

Over Reliance & Unintended Consequences

01

Over-reliance on digital support might lead to reduced in-person social interaction or an avoidance of underlying issues.

02

There is also the phenomenon of “digital overload” – using too many apps and tools could overwhelm or fatigue a person in recovery.

03

Digital tools are valuable, they should augment traditional supports, not replace human connection.

04

Fun Fact: Mindful use of technology is now an essential skill in recovery planning, to prevent trading one dependency (substances) for another (screens).



Case Study 1: Over-reliance & Illiteracy

- **Scenario:** Marcus, a 29-year-old in early recovery from alcohol use disorder, was encouraged to use a popular recovery app after completing inpatient treatment. The app included a social forum, daily mood tracking, and sobriety reminders. With limited digital literacy, Marcus began engaging with posts from other users discussing relapses and drinking. He followed links to users' social media profiles, where he encountered images and videos glamorizing alcohol use. These exposures intensified his cravings and distorted his perception of recovery norms. Within days, Marcus experienced a relapse.

Strategies for Clinicians

Include Technology in Assessment

- *How much time do you spend on smartphones or online each day? Do you use social media, gaming, or other online activities, and have these ever felt out of control or impacted your life?*
- By normalizing these questions, clinicians send the message that *technology use is an important part of behavioral health*. **For Example:** patients may be more forthcoming about, say, spending nights on YouTube that leave them sleep-deprived (a relapse risk), or about online relationships that enable their addiction.
- *Early identification of a digital component allows for a more comprehensive treatment plan.*

Strategies for Clinicians Continued

- Psychoeducation on Digital Triggers & Balance.
- Clinicians should also educate patients about the impact of technology on addiction and mental health
 - Many patients (especially older ones) may not automatically make the connection.
- ***For Example:*** scrolling Facebook when lonely could trigger substance cravings, or that their seemingly benign gaming habit might be undermining their recovery progress. By sharing basic neuroscience and examples (in accessible terms), we can increase the patient's insight and buy-in.



Integrating Technology into Treatment

- Recommend Credible Technology Tools
 - Clinicians should leverage helpful technology by recommending or prescribing digital tools that align with the patient's treatment plan.
- Collaboration with your patient – **is KEY**
- This seamless blending of digital and face-to-face can make treatment more personalized and data-informed.



Managing Digital Triggers & Cravings



- Trigger Mapping and Digital Environment Audit
- Coping Skills for Cravings in a Digital World; Digital Relapse Plan
- Delay & Displacement
- Healthy Online Spaces
- Role Playing
- Technology Boundary Setting

Promoting Healthy Tech Habits



Tech Hygiene Practices: A 2024 study reported that participants who underwent an electronic social media detox for a short period saw improvements in well-being and reduced addictive behaviors, along with greater self-awareness of their online habits.



Provide a session that goes over behaviors, feelings, and awareness.



Tailor *Healthy Tech Habits*, the same way you would *Healthy Sleep Habits* to aide in your wellness in recovery.



Promoting Health Tech Habits 2



Model & Agreements



Motivational Interviewing Techniques



if a patient's digital addiction is severe. (a true gaming disorder or online gambling), consider specialized treatment referrals – some programs now exist for digital addictions, and support groups .



Strategies for Clinicians

- Stay Informed on Emerging Trends
- Ethical and Professional Boundaries
- Ethics of Indorsement
- Licensing Laws
- Patient Empowerment

Review of Key Points

- Technology's Double-Edged Impact
- Recent Research Highlights
- Benefits Vs. Challenges
- Strategies Moving Forward

Resources for Further Support

- **SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration):** The SAMHSA website offers free resources on digital therapeutics and telehealth. *TIP 60: “Using Technology-Based Therapeutic Tools in Behavioral Health Services”* is a manual providing guidance on incorporating tech into treatment (SAMHSA, 2015). SAMHSA’s **National Helpline** (1-800-662-HELP) is a 24/7 service for finding treatment and also provides information on telehealth options [samhsa.gov](https://www.samhsa.gov).
- **NIDA (National Institute on Drug Abuse):** NIDA’s online “**Advancing Addiction Science**” hub features articles on technology and addiction (e.g., research updates on social media effects, mobile health trials). NIDA has published patient brochures on “Internet, Gaming and Addiction” and frequently asked questions that summarize current research (NIDA, 2021). They also fund the **CTN (Clinical Trials Network)** which often has studies and results on digital interventions for SUD.
- **NIH Behavioral Health Digital Hub:** The National Institutes of Health maintain a digital health portal highlighting evidence-based mobile apps and digital tools for mental health and addiction (for example, the NIH “Apps Gallery” lists tools like reSET-O). This can guide clinicians and patients to vetted applications.
- **CDC and WHO Guidelines:** The Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization have issued statements on healthy screen time and recognizing gaming disorder. WHO’s webpage on **Gaming Disorder** explains the condition and provides guidance for those seeking help

Resources for Further Support

- **American Psychiatric Association (APA):** APA's website has a section for patients and families on **Technology and Addictions**, which outlines what tech addiction is and offers tips for managing use. APA also offers an **Expert Q&A** on technology addiction that can be a quick reference. For providers, APA's Telepsychiatry Toolkit gives best practice advice for online care.
- **American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM):** ASAM publishes white papers and guidelines that increasingly include considerations of digital health. Their 2020 "*Appropriate Use of Telehealth in Addiction Medicine*" guide is a useful resource. ASAM also provides training modules on subjects like "Treating IDU (Internet Use Disorder)" for continuing education.
- **Academic Centers & Publications:** The **Center for Technology and Behavioral Health (CTBH)** at Dartmouth College (an NIH-funded center) produces excellent research and summaries on digital interventions for substance use. Many of their publications (free on their website) can inform evidence-based choices. Likewise, journals such as *Journal of Medical Internet Research (JMIR)*, *Addictive Behaviors*, and *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* regularly publish relevant studies (e.g., meta-analyses of social media addiction prevalence, trials of new apps). Checking their recent issues can keep one up to date.
- **Digital Health Directories:** Resources like **PsyberGuide** or the **One Mind CyberGuide** independently review mental health apps for credibility, security, and effectiveness. Though not addiction-specific, they cover some substance use apps. This can help clinicians find reputable apps to recommend. Another resource is **Digital Therapeutics Alliance**, which tracks FDA-authorized digital therapeutics (including those for SUD).



Future Directions & Technology Trends

- Harnessing Data and AI for Recovery
- Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality Therapies
- Integration with Wearables and Biomarkers
- Addressing New Addictive Behaviors i.e. Addiction and Impulse Control in a Technological World

Closing Reflections

- Balance and Human Connection: In the end, even as we utilize high-tech solutions, the heart of recovery remains human connection, compassion, and resilience. Technology should augment, not replace, those fundamentals.
- A useful analogy is seeing technology as the “*training wheels*” or “*scaffolding*” that can support recovery work – but the person still does the pedaling and steering. As we move forward, let’s keep the focus on helping people lead healthier, fulfilling lives.
- Technology is one means to that end, and when used wisely, it can indeed help heal. The future of addiction treatment is likely to be a blend of digital innovation and timeless therapeutic relationships – a combination that, if we get it right, can significantly reduce the suffering associated with addiction.
- Thank you for engaging with this training, and for your dedication to understanding and improving behavioral health in the digital age.

Thank You!

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and how we
are **Helping
People, Help
People*****

