

Tech addiction spreads far beyond youth and video games: counsellor

By Brock Weir

If you like to stay connected via social media or like to unwind with a video game or two, there is no harm in that, unless, of course, there is.

If there are consequences in your everyday life due to a 'need' for being constantly connected, however, there could be a problem.

Technology addiction is an issue which has become increasingly recognized and accepted in years, according to addiction counsellor Brian Irving, who is spearheading the new Technology Dependency Support Group, which is beginning this Thursday, December 6, and running for four Thursdays facilitated by Aurora's Eating Disorders of York Region's Riverwalk Wellness Centres.

Mr. Irving, who is laying the groundwork to starting a similar support group in the Innisfil area in the near future, says people tend to see technology addiction as a typical teen spending hours on end playing shoot 'em up video games, or whiling away their lives on Facebook or Twitter. Recent studies, however, indicate this is far from the reality of the situation.

'Addiction to technology is the sort of stuff that is relatively new in being recognized,' says Mr. Irving. 'When we look at addictions, we're often looking at substance use, gambling, and that sort of thing, but the idea now is to be able to provide service for this growing area of concern, not only for young people but adults too.'

'There is a big misconception that it is always related to video games and younger people, but recent stats show that 40 to 60 per cent of people with technology addictive types of behaviours are above the age of 25.'

These studies go on to indicate that women tend to be particularly 'socially connected' through their cell phones, Facebook, and email. Simple, free-to-play online games are also a big draw for women, whereas men trend towards massive multiplayer online games and competitive shooting games.

'In the last six months there have been more studies released on how females are connected to tech addiction because it is relatively new in its acceptance and recognition,' Mr. Irving adds. 'It shows the level of acceptance for technology. These days in our society we have to be connected with email, and other programs and it is hard to pull that away. In addition we also have to look at how to manage that addiction and not just abstain [as opposed to addressing] substance abuse.'

In working with people with technology addiction, Mr. Irving says it is often an even split of people who recognize there is a problem with their own behaviour versus others recognizing the problem in their friends and family members. Education, particularly for family members, is essential in learning what is normal and what is not. Just because you're on Facebook regularly doesn't mean you are necessarily addicted, he adds, but if there are negative consequences in the world around you because of it, you need to start looking at how it is playing into your life.

Earlier this year, provincial statistics indicated that 78 people were killed on Ontario highways due to distracted driving, while 57 deaths were connected with impaired driving. That, he says, is a particularly telling statistic showing how pervasive IT addiction can be.

'We get sucked into a false connection, these false relationships, these abstract ways of dealing with relationships and a lot of times it is dealing with getting people back in touch with real, interpersonal relationships,' says Mr. Irving of how to approach IT addiction versus simply turning off. 'It is also getting them back in touch with themselves, in touch with their emotions, what they are going through, and looking at things like anxiety. If people have an underlying anxiety or depression issue, the tendency is to isolate and pull away. Things like video games and social media are a great way to stay somewhat connected, but not really.'

'I have had many young fellas that spend 12 to 15 hours a day playing online video games and though some work and time we are able to cut that back. When they realise there is a life outside that game, that there are relationships outside that game, that there is a sense of accomplishment and wellbeing outside that virtual world, they make a lot of headway and changes in that behaviour.'

For more information on the Technology Dependency Support Group and Riverwalk, call 905-886-6632 or visit www.edoyr.com/support-programs.