



Short communication

Online course on basics of management of behavioral addictions involving use of internet: Observations from the first batch of participants



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ABSTRACT

Problematic internet use has been reported to be high among school students. An online course was developed with an aim to strengthen the capacity of school teachers and counsellors on early identification, detection and intervention for behavioral addictions involving use of internet. The current report presents the observation from the first batch of participants of this course. Of the 28 teachers and counselors who expressed interest by enrollment in the course, a total of 15 participants provided both the pre and post course evaluation forms. The preliminary findings suggest that the online course is feasible, acceptable and effective in strengthening the capacity of school teachers and counsellors on behavioral addictions involving use of internet.

1. Introduction

Behavioral addictions involving use of internet are some of the most commonly reported and researched behavioral addictions of the recent times. These behavioral addictions involve a excessive and problematic pattern of use of internet for one or more activities including social media use, gaming, video viewing among others. Problematic internet use has been reported to be high among school students in a survey conducted as part of the Cyber Awareness Programme in India (Balhara et al., 2018a). Other reports from the Asian countries have also explored the interaction of problematic internet use of professional life and interpersonal issues (Balhara et al., 2018b, c; Shrivastava et al., 2018; Smcharoen et al., 2018; Grover et al., 2019; Jamir et al., 2019).

These findings supported the need to strengthen the capacity of school teachers and counsellors in early identification, detection and management of behavioral addictions among students. School teachers and counselors are well placed to leverage their position in order to deliver the screening, early intervention and preventive interventions for behavioral addictions involving use of internet to school children.

The Behavioral Addictions Clinic (BAC) at AIIMS, New Delhi has been established with a mandate to offer clinical services, research, capacity building and policy guidance on behavioral addictions (Balhara et al., 2017). An online course was developed with an aim to strengthen the capacity of school teachers and counsellors on early identification, detection and intervention for behavioral addictions

involving use of internet (accessible at <https://sites.google.com/view/endedtc-aiims/online-courses/basic-course-on-behavioral-addictions-involving-internet-use?authuser=0>). The current report presents the observations from the first batch of participants of this course.

2. Methods

A basic level online course on Behavioral Addictions involving Use of Internet was developed. The course is targeted at the teachers and counsellors and is aimed to strengthen the knowledge, skills and attitude of the participants on the theme of behavioral addictions involving internet use. The teachers and counsellors can leverage their close association with children, adolescents and emerging adults to translate the learning into practice. The specific learning objectives of the course are: to understand the concept of behavioral addictions; to understand the concept of problematic internet use; to learn how to screen and intervene for presence of problematic internet use; to learn approach to prevention & management of behavioral addictions involving internet use. The course is offered through a Learning Management System (LMS) and includes use of video presentations, online quizzes, online assignments, multimedia discussion board, group work, journal activity, suggested readings, and online real time face-to-face sessions. The course of offered over a 10-week period and is free of charge to the end user. The participants are expected to invest around 90 min every week. A certificate of completion is offered at the end of course

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provided the participants have complete all the assignments in the stipulated time. Those who fail to complete the weekly assignments are not given access the further content.

Pre and post course evaluation is done to assess the impact of the course on the knowledge, skills and attitude of the participants (total of 30 questions). The various domains covered included concept of addiction, problematic internet use, principles of screening and motivation enhancement, common errors while working with students, interventions and referral for behavioral addictions. Also, feedback is gathered at the end of the course from those willing to offer the same using Visual Analog Scales (scored 0–10). The feedback is gathered on the different domains including content, structure, content delivery and time requirements.

The data were analyzed using SPSS ver 21. The pre and post evaluation scores were compared using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. A p value of less than .05 was taken as statistically significant. Also, the feedback scores were presented using descriptive statistics.

3. Results

Of the 28 teachers and counselors who expressed interest by enrollment in the course, a total of 15 participants provided both the pre and post course evaluation forms. All but one of the participants were females.

There was statistically significant increase in knowledge ($p = .001$), skill ($p < .001$) and confidence ($p = .016$) of the participants on the theme of behavioral addictions involving use of internet. The participants reported a significant increase in their capacity to screen ($p = .011$), offer brief intervention ($p = .002$), and offer referral services ($p = .003$) for cases of behavioral addictions involving use of internet.

The evaluation of the feedback on the online score revealed high scores on various aspects related to content, content delivery, time requirements as well as various aspects of the course presentation (Table 1).

The mean and median scores (on a scale of 0–10) of the participants on possibility of putting the learning into practice were 9.13 (SD 1.80) and 10 (range 3–10), respectively. The mean and median scores (on a scale of 0–10) of the participants on likelihood of recommending the course to someone were 9.33 (SD 1.79) and 10 (range 3–10), respectively.

4. Discussion

This report presents observation from the participants from the batch of an online course on behavioral addictions involving use of internet.

e-Health, as defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO), is the use of information and communication technologies for health purposes (WHO, 2019). There are many e-Health tools that can be used for treatment, prevention, management of physical and mental health

Table 1
Average scores for the feedback on various aspects of the online course.

	Median	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
LMS	10	3.00	10.00	9.2667	1.79151
Audio visual aspects	10	3.00	10.00	9.2000	1.82052
Journal activity	9	3.00	10.00	8.6667	1.87718
Group activity	9	3.00	10.00	8.1333	2.19957
Multimedia discussion board	9	3.00	10.00	8.6667	1.95180
Weekly work load	10	3.00	10.00	9.0000	1.96396
Time requirements	10	3.00	10.00	9.2000	1.82052
Query handling	10	3.00	10.00	8.6000	2.41424

promotion with or without the support of human, which finally leads to promotion of healthy behaviours and reduction of health problems (Karami and Hafizi, 2016). With advancements in digital and mobile technologies, eHealth and mHealth have become rapidly growing option for the promotion of mental health and well-being.

Digital technology offers a unique opportunity to establish, offer and scale up health intervention to a large section of the population and relatively lower cost. Not only such digitally driven interventions are feasible, but these have been found to be effective in randomised controlled trials. Moreover, these digitally based intervention are easy to scale up, are long lasting and require relatively low cost once established. There are no published reports on use of eHealth tools for strengthening capacity for early detection, identification and management of behavioral addictions involving use of internet.

The currently available preventive strategies against behavioral addictions include primarily general recommendations (Griffiths and Meredith, 2009). These recommendations have also not been tested for effectiveness. Teachers and counsellors are in a unique position whereby they interact with a large group of the children, adolescents and emerging adults. Problematic internet use has been identified as a cause of concern in students (Balhara et al., 2018a, d). Since they are in an ongoing contact with the children, adolescents and emerging adults, they are in a position of great strength to identify the emerging gaming disorder in them. Also, the pre-existing channel of communication and rapport between teachers and counsellors offers a unique opportunity to engage the students in meaningful way in context of behavioral addictions. The teachers and counsellors can not only be engaged in early detection and screening of behavioral addictions among students, but they can also play a crucial role in offering intervention to them. Teacher and counsellor driven early detection, screening and intervention models have been found to be effective for various health related behaviours including risky alcohol use, smoking, poor diet, physical inactivity, sedentary behavior and unhealthy sleep patterns (Champion et al., 2017). Hence, it is possible to tap this existing resource for early detection, screening and intervention for behavioral addictions involving use of internet as well.

The observations from the first batch of the participants suggest that the participants gained significant benefits on the knowledge, skills and attitude on behavioral addictions involving use of internet. Also, the course led to a significant increase in their capacity to screen, offer brief intervention and referral services for cases of behavioral addictions involving use of internet.

One of the concerns is that out of the 28 participants only 15 completed the course. This is likely to be due to the stringent requirements of completing the weekly course work in the stipulated time. This could be of the challenges, although the weekly time commitment expected put of the participants is around 90 min and the participants can complete the assignments at a day and time of their choosing during the week. Poor retention rate remains a cause of concern for online courses. It has been reported that between 40%–80% students drop out of online classes (Bawa, 2016). One of the major challenges was to orient the participants to the LMS and it was the first time that the participants were using such a platform. Some of the participants found it challenging to use the multimedia share board. It took them some practice to get used to posting their comments as the platform was new to them. Also, the course required the participants to engage in discussion on specific themes. This meant that the participants were dependent on others' posts and hence some of the participants who were ready with their work had to wait till the others could also post their work on the platform. It was also demanding on the course administrators when the participants chose to submit their work close the submission deadline and then faced some technical difficulties like uploading the course work.

The current report presents findings from the first batch of participants. The suggestions from the participants have been incorporated to make the course more user friendly. It is planned to carry out the

evaluation of the online course using a more structured study design. This shall offer more definitive evidence on the effectiveness of the course. The course platform is also being used to develop an online course on gaming disorders that shall be hosted at Behavior- a digital platform that has been developed with support from the World Health Organization- Regional Office for South East Asia (WHO SEARO).

5. Conclusion

The preliminary findings suggest that the online course is feasible, acceptable and effective in strengthening the capacity of school teachers and counsellors on behavioral addictions involving use of internet.

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