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## Level Up Your Mental Health with Gaming ✓

David Lindscoog, M.A., R.C.C

More than ever, gaming is part of our life context, especially for youth - though you may be surprised to learn that the average

gamer is 34 years old and has children (1). It is a powerful media capable of telling intricate, artistic, interactive stories; a compelling venue for connection and relationship building; an industry worth hundreds of billions of dollars; and a fact of life that for most of us is rarely more than a few feet away in the form of a mobile phone.

Media attention tends to focus on assumed negative effects of gaming (e.g. addiction, violent behaviour). But too often this veers into fearful overgeneralization. Scapegoating “big bad tech” for the latest societal issue of concern turns out to be common, but rarely stands the test of time. The technical term for this is Moral Panic: “a widespread feeling of fear, often irrational, that something evil threatens the values, interests, or well-being of a community or society” (Wikipedia). Dr. Rachel Kowert, Psych., author of The Video Game Debate, claims Moral Panic deflects resources away from the actual underlying causes of social problems. So, we end up blaming video games for things like violent behaviour when better explanations exist - they are just more complicated

To be clear, problematic gaming does exist - it just represents a fraction of gaming behaviour, (somewhere between 6-11%). Here's what to look for in terms of problematic gaming, according to the World Health Organization:

*continued on page 3*



## Burnout Isn't Just a Workplace Problem ✓

Shawn Marsolais, M.A., R.C.C

Are you finding it difficult to get out of bed in the morning? Are you feeling indifferent about things you once cared about? Are you avoiding

social connections? Are you turning to unhealthy coping strategies? Do you fantasize about getting sick just enough that you can stay home from work for a couple of weeks and do nothing? If you are finding yourself answering yes, yes, yes, you may be experiencing burnout. According to a research study conducted by Mental Health Research Canada in December 2021, over a third of Canadians reported burnout. In addition to the above symptoms, burnout can also result in; excessive fatigue, insomnia, sadness, anger, irritability, alcohol or substance misuse, heart disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, and vulnerability to other illnesses.

Most research has focussed on work-place burnout, but in the book “Burnout: A Guide to Identifying Burnout and Pathways to Recovery” by Gordon Parker, Gabriela Tavella, and Kerrie Eysers, the authors discuss how our caregiving roles and responsibilities at home can also lead to burnout.

When we stop to consider the impact of being a caregiver to young children, elderly parents, or a family member with a complex medical illness, we find that

*continued on page 2*

### Also In This Issue

Medication Free Management of  
Insomnia.....page 4

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## Burnout Isn't Just a Workplace Problem *continued from front cover*

many of the same factors that contribute to workplace burnout also contribute to caregiver burnout:

- Lack of control – You don't feel that you have control when your day is focussed around somebody else's needs.
- Extremes of activity – either too boring or too challenging - Much of your day is spent doing the same tasks you did the day before; feeding, bathing, dressing, toileting, cooking, cleaning, repeat. For loved ones with medical needs, you simultaneously have the emotional toll of witnessing somebody you love physically or cognitively diminishing, and/or experiencing continuous pain and suffering.
- Lack of social support – When you are in an ongoing caregiving role, you have no time to invest in relationships outside of your home responsibilities.
- Work-life imbalance – You feel guilty even considering leaving your loved one for enjoyable activities or self-care. When you do have a block of time, it's difficult to find people to do fun activities with because you have not had time to invest in your friendships. If you have had to stop working in order to care for your family member, you don't have the workplace to provide a break from these responsibilities.
- A heavy workload and long hours – Caregiving has no start or end time; you are working day and night and are constantly on call for whatever needs arise.
- Another factor discussed in the book "Burnout" was that when you believe the work you are doing is important, and maybe even your calling, you have a higher likelihood of burnout than those with a routine monotonous job. This can apply to caregiving as well. It is much more difficult to believe that you deserve a break when you know that the care you are providing is impacting people's lives.

Given that we tend to connect burnout to the workplace, longterm caregivers might not recognize that what they are experiencing is burnout, and that they are at risk for their own medical issues if they are not able to make some lifestyle changes.

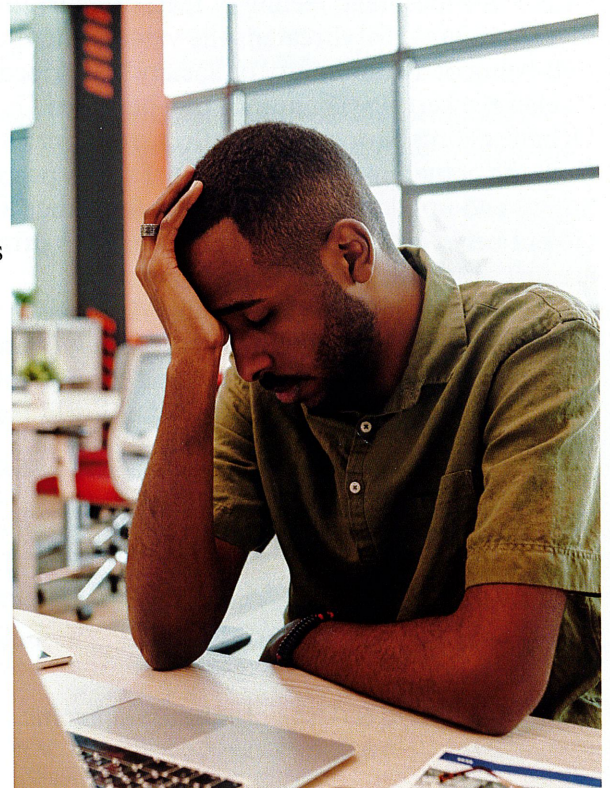
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So now that we know we have burnout, how do we reduce or recover from our burnout symptoms?

In the book "Burnout", the authors suggest a pluralistic model that involves addressing work issues and adopting de-stressing strategies such as;

- Evaluating your options: examining which responsibilities can be delegated, asking for support with challenging tasks, exploring a more flexible work schedule, trading undesirable tasks for enjoyable ones, taking an extended break or vacation.
- Seeking support from your support network or a Counsellor.
- Trying a relaxing activity like yoga, meditation or tai chi
- Getting some exercise to help manage stress and improve your mood
- Getting regular sleep; consistently going to bed and getting up at the same time.
- Practicing mindfulness and being fully present with friends and family.
- Starting a new activity or hobby
- Tackling projects in brief structured periods of time
- Not taking work home or working on weekends, and enjoying free time.

Unlike a disease, there is no medical test to confirm burnout, and there is no medication to cure it. For most individuals it creeps up on them until it can no longer be ignored. That is why it is important to pay attention to the warning signs before your symptoms get to a point of being debilitating. Implementing the suggestions above will also help to prevent experiencing burnout in the first place. It is much easier to prevent burnout than it is to recover from it.





## Level Up Your Mental Health With Gaming

continued from front cover

- Loss of control over gaming (gaming takes precedence over other activities despite clearly negative consequences)
- Significantly impaired functioning (e.g. school, work, relationships)
- A duration of at least a year

If that sounds like someone you know, then it is probably time for them to cut down, and they may need help doing so. Helping them find a therapist who is comfortable talking about healthy and unhealthy gaming habits could make a big difference!

That said, most gaming behaviour is non-problematic (2). It is much more likely that a person's gaming habits fall within a healthy range, and some may even be using gaming as a way to maintain or improve their mental health!

What about the mental health benefits of gaming?

Many studies have shown powerful mental health benefits from gaming, ranging from improved mood to higher GPAs (3). Healthy gaming can benefit emotional and intellectual development, creativity and curiosity, reading and abstract thinking, pain management, self-esteem, and social functioning - especially for neurodivergent players like those with ADHD or Autism.

Research on the positive effects of gaming is growing every year. Indeed, many games are now developed specifically with powerful mental health themes either embedded into their story or mechanics (4).

If you (or your kids) want to get the most mental health impact from gaming possible, I have a few suggestions as a starting point. But because this is such a diverse, exciting, and developing area, the ways video games can positively impact mental health will go far beyond this list. Some therapists are even using gaming in various ways in their work with their clients!

Connection. More than ever before, gaming can be a valuable source of connection, support, and positive relationships with other people. Many games incorporate cooperative elements, and include built-in matchmaking systems to make finding other players as easy as the click of a button. If you have fears about "toxic" gaming communities, know that this is usually limited to certain kinds of competitive games, which are getting better all the time at setting up and enforcing good codes of conduct.

In addition to connecting with other players, many single player games that have an emphasis on roleplaying or narrative elements provide rich opportunities for interacting with interesting and

evocative protagonists and "non-player characters" (NPCs). Like well-written characters in other media, these provide engaging opportunities for empathy, perspective taking, moral decision making, and modeling of many different varieties. The difference with games is that a player can interact with these characters, trying out different choices over time and seeing the impact of their actions play out.

Skill-building. Play is an exercise in skill-building by its very nature. Games are no exception, and provide an opportunity to build and practice some very important ones. Distress tolerance is an important skill that many games encourage through the inclusion of learning curves, challenges, and unpredictable outcomes. Every time a player fails at a game's task, they experience some level of frustration or distress that they must work through in order to progress in their desired direction. Repeated experiences teach a player that frustration, distress, and even anxiety are a normal, healthy, and surmountable part of growth. The independent game *Celeste* is a wonderful example of this.

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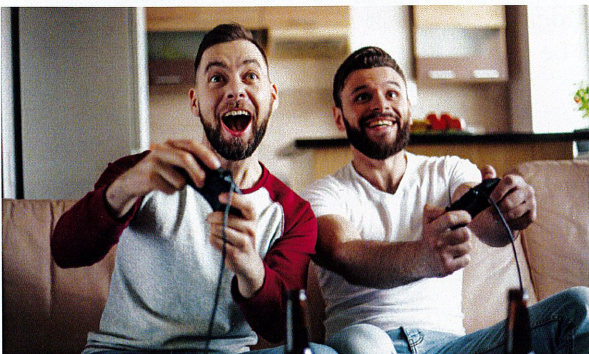
Other skills games are great at cultivating include emotional intelligence (*Life is Strange*, *Persona 5*), creativity (*Minecraft*), organization, executive functioning, time/resource management (*Stardew Valley*), and problem solving.

Stress relief. According to Dr. Stuart Brown, author of the book "Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul," play must appear to be purposeless, all-consuming, and fun. Play is not about productivity, but because it is such a great stress reliever, it makes us more productive overall. Thanks to their playful nature, video games can be a safe space for anything from cathartic stress relief (venting frustration in a healthy way) to a legitimate relaxation and mindfulness practice.

So, next time you or someone you care about fires up their console or PC for a gaming session, consider ways you may be able to bring these benefits more intentionally into their play. If you're a gamer, consider the ways gaming adds value to your life in the form of connection, skill-building, and stress relief - and lean into this! If you're a parent, show interest and ask your kids about the games they are playing, and what they get out of their gaming time. Better yet, play with them! You just might find yourself enjoying a new hobby.

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## Medication-Free Management of Insomnia Anita Natarajan, MD

It's three a.m. and you need to be up by six a.m. to get to work on time. You've tried puzzles, music and warm milk, but nothing is working. The thought of facing the workday with aching muscles, a foggy mind and bags under your eyes is making you more alert and unable to sleep. You accept the fact that you may be awake the entire night.

This scenario is one that most people can relate to. Trouble falling or staying asleep is known as insomnia. The capacity for short-term sleeplessness is a protective mechanism that enables us to avoid danger, but one that can be activated by lesser threats. Occasional insomnia may leave us feeling temporarily frustrated but likely won't affect our quality of life.

In some people, occasional insomnia becomes chronic: the sleep problems occur on three or more days of the week for at least three consecutive months. If the chronic insomnia is associated with emotional distress about poor sleep and a perception of impaired daytime functioning, we now say this person has *insomnia disorder*.

Ironically, the transformation of occasional insomnia into the full disorder is fuelled by the very strategies that people use to help them cope with their initial sleep loss. Examples would be withdrawing socially, or spending a lot of conscious effort to sleep well. As their sleep problems continue, sufferers may establish counter-productive habits that disrupt their sleep system and promote overactivity of their nervous systems at night in bed. The insomnia is perpetuated through a vicious cycle of sleep-related anxiety, ineffective sleep efforts, and insomnia.



It is important to note the difference between *tiredness* and *sleepiness*. Insomnia disorder creates tiredness, which can best be described as the opposite of energy. Tired people feel they don't have the physical or mental energy to do the things they want to, yet at the same time, they can't fall asleep. This is known as being "tired but wired." In contrast, sleepiness is a strong tendency to fall asleep within a few seconds, if given the chance. Excessive daytime sleepiness is not typical of insomnia. If you experience daily sleepiness during meals, meetings, driving or out in public you should see your doctor to rule out other sleep disorders, such as sleep apnea.

Medical and psychiatric problems can cause sleep disruption, which usually resolves when the original condition resolves. If the insomnia persists, the direction of causality may then reverse, such that the sleep difficulties now aggravate the initial health problem. If a person feels that their sleep problems are taking centre stage as the cause for their impaired daytime function, focused insomnia treatment is appropriate.

If you have insomnia disorder, you have probably discussed it with your doctor. Physicians are told to offer patients "sleep hygiene" – which is a list of directions involving controlling many aspects of lifestyle: caffeine, alcohol, scheduling, stress and the bedroom environment. Research shows that sleep hygiene alone is not enough to normalize sleep in those with insomnia disorder. Sleep medications are typically the next step, but these often lose their effectiveness with frequent use.

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-i) is a brief, structured program for treating insomnia disorder. Sleep specialists consider CBT-i to be the first line of treatment for insomnia, before medications. For suitable candidates, clinical trials show a 70-80% success rate for short and long-term improvements in sleep. It is ideally delivered one-on-one, through five to six weekly sessions. People can also gain benefit from CBT-i apps, workbooks, group sessions or online videos. If prescription medication is eventually required, its effectiveness will be greater if a course of CBT-i has been completed first.

If you have only occasional insomnia, sleep hygiene can help you maintain good sleep habits. If you have insomnia disorder, see your doctor or therapist to address potential mental health or medical causes. Consider CBT-i if you feel that your sleep difficulties are the main reason you feel unwell. Then, rest easy knowing that you have invested in an evidence-based program that can help you take control of your sleep, and improve your overall health.

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