

## **Characteristics of Behavioral Addiction**

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The topic of addiction has been frequently portrayed in various forms of media, particularly in the context of drugs and substance use. However, non-substance related addictions can also take prevalence in individuals in the form of behaviors. Such behavioral addictions that are more commonly observed are seen with gambling, phones, gaming, and shopping. A lesser recognized behavior, maladaptive daydreaming, also shows a high propensity to being an addictive behavior. Despite lack of research surrounding the behavior of maladaptive daydreaming, such a habit exhibits similar properties as those of substance related addictions, and may be constituted as a disorder in itself.

### **Behavioral Addiction**

#### **Features of Behavioral Addictions**

Behavioral addictions often arise from habits that coalesce into greater priorities. They become obligatory means, from which, an individual becomes addicted to “the behavior or the feeling brought about by the relevant action” (Alavi, 2012, par. 3). The foundation underlying behavioral addictions, as with any addiction, is the dependence on a substance or activity (Alavi, 2012). Based on this information, any source could be considered to potentially become addictive. However, to reach a formal diagnosis, “functional impairments must be present at work, in social relationships, or in other social situations” (Alavi, 2012, par. 9).

#### **Commonalities with Substance Related Addictions**

The characteristics of behavioral addictions reveal several similarities with substance related addictions. First, there is a similar foundational dependence on a particular activity or substance that gradually interferes with an individual’s daily and social functioning. Individuals often utilize behavioral and substance related addictions as methods “to regulate emotional distress” (Somer et al., 2020, p. 3). Alavi’s research indicates that patients with behavioral addictions experience symptoms related to addiction, including: cravings, loss of control, and withdrawal (2012). Further characteristics of addiction are commonly witnessed in behavioral addictions such as: salience, euphoria, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse (Alavi, 2012). Salience denotes an overpowering of an individual’s life as a result of an addictive activity. Euphoria refers to the pleasurable sensation, or ‘high,’ that may arise from taking part in an addictive activity. Tolerance describes the act of participating in an addictive activity in a more elevated manner of quantity or duration, in order to experience the same pleasurable sensation. Withdrawal refers to the unpleasant effects that are present after discontinuing an addictive activity (Myers & DeWall, 2016). Conflict is in reference to the conflict that arises as a result of the addictive activity—whether it is with others or with oneself. Relapse is the continued engagement with an addictive activity after having made an attempt to halt such engagement. These criteria present the various effects of addiction, which can be applied to both behavioral and substance related addictions.

#### **Maladaptive Daydreaming**

Maladaptive daydreaming is defined by Somer as “extensive fantasy activity that replaces human interaction and/or interferes with academic, interpersonal, or vocational functioning” (Somer, 2002, as cited in Bigelsen et al., 2016, p. 255). Daydreaming in itself is performed by

everybody, as part of one's daily mental activity. This act becomes maladaptive in its prolonged and excessive usage, which results in negative effects to one's daily life and functioning. Maladaptive daydreaming also differs from regular daydreaming in its engagement with conjunctive movement, like "pacing or rocking" (Bigelsen et al., 2016, p. 255), and utilizing music to initiate the behavior (Soffer-Dudek, 2020). In Bigelsen's research, maladaptive daydreamers [MDers] were found to spend a significantly greater time daydreaming than non-maladaptive daydreamers, with "MDers reporting spending 57% of their waking hours in fantasy activities compared to 16% of the hours for non-MDers" (Bigelsen et al., 2016, p. 261). Most frequently, the content surrounding the dreams of maladaptive daydreamers revolved around "fictional characters or historical figures" (Bigelsen et al., 2016, p. 261). Ultimately, the results from this research indicated a hindrance to an individual's life with "MDers reporting that their daydreaming caused interference with their life goals in 63% of the time, while non-MDers reported this problem only 6% of the time" (Bigelsen et al., 2016, p. 262). These statistics are evidence of how maladaptive daydreaming may cause a significant impact to an individual's everyday functioning. However, the direct pathway of how maladaptive daydreaming arises is not yet determined. While a theory has been presented that maladaptive daydreaming is a form of coping with "aversive early life experiences," maladaptive daydreaming has also been present in individuals without such experiences (Bigelsen et al., p. 255). During Mason's research, a patient who had been experiencing maladaptive daydreaming had "underwent a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) procedure," from which "the test showed great activity in the ventral striatum, the part of the brain that lights up when an alcoholic is shown images of a martini" (as cited in Bigelsen et al., 2016, p. 255). It has been shown that "the ventromedial prefrontal cortex is an important hub in the network representing the utility of goals while the ventral striatum plays a key role in maintaining reward-based learning flexibility" (Perales et al., 2019, pp. 772-773). This reward-based learning system may be in reference to forms of classical conditioning and positive reinforcement. Classical conditioning is a process of learning by association, wherein, two or more stimuli become linked and one anticipates events (Myers & DeWall, 2016). Positive reinforcement leads to the increase in behavior as a result of present desirable stimulus, which, strengthens a response (Myers & DeWall, 2016). In considering maladaptive daydreaming, such extensive behavior may have been learned through the process of associating the act of daydreaming with pleasurable reward. The pleasure that may arise in the act of daydreaming could lie within preferable dream content leading to satisfactory experience and feelings, that also avert from feelings of stress. Thus, when faced with an onset of stress, one may associate maladaptive daydreaming with a sense of pleasure, which can result in an individual learning to utilize maladaptive daydreaming as a way to cope.

Maladaptive daydreaming is not currently classified as a disorder. Such a behavior may be utilized as a coping mechanism, but there has been little research done to predict the future course of this behavior, or even in suggesting appropriate treatment—which are valuable principles in determining proper classification of such behavior (Myers & DeWall, 2016).

## **COVID-19**

A recent study explored the relationship between the COVID-19-related isolation and quarantine with maladaptive daydreaming (Somer et al., 2020). The study surveyed 1,565 people to attempt to determine the psychological consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on both the general population as well as individuals with pre-existing mental health conditions and addictive disorders (Somer et al., 2020). The study describes how "up to 38% of the general

population affected by the pandemic restrictions seem to have experienced psychological distress,” such as heightened “fear and anxiety,” and increased feelings of uncertainty (Somer et al., 2020, p. 2). Given that an increased use of alcohol and other substances have been shown in connection to COVID-19, there may be a link between “the current pandemic and elevated substance and non-substance abuse” (Somer et al., 2020, p. 3).

The study focused on maladaptive daydreaming in reference to isolation and quarantine restrictions in place for COVID-19. The results revealed that maladaptive daydreaming activity was heightened during enforced isolation periods: “MDers [Maladaptive Daydreamers] who self-isolated or self-quarantined reported more time spent in DD [Daydreaming], experienced intensified DD, and had a stronger vividness experience and urge to DD” (Somer et al., 2020, p. 5). In accordance with the high levels of stress, worry, and “disruption to routine” that arose with the COVID-19 pandemic, maladaptive daydreaming may have been utilized as a way of coping (Somer et al., 2020, p. 6). There are various methods of coping with the stress of COVID-19, with another study indicating that respondents “distracted themselves by surfing the internet, listening to music, being active in meditation and prayer, and seeking social support” (Somer et al., 2020, p. 3). Using maladaptive daydreaming is an avoidant strategy of coping, which can be shown to further increase anxiety and depression (Somer et al., 2020). Since the pre-lockdown period, “probable MDers” had reported a number of psychological differences in correspondence to the lockdown, including: “lower life satisfaction, more worries about the future, more obsessions, compulsive habits, depression, mental exhaustion, emptiness, as well as lower happiness” (Somer et al., 2020, p. 8). These experiences attribute to the general stress of the pandemic, and could potentially lead an individual to utilize various forms of coping methods, including, maladaptive daydreaming.

## **Conclusion**

### **Perceptions**

Behavioral addictions can be of similar psychological severity as substance use addictions. Prior to my introductory studies in psychology, I had been mildly aware of addictions. Most of this awareness was centered around drug and substance related causes, as depicted in media. Television shows like “My Strange Addiction” exacerbated the topic of non-substance addictions. These types of shows often shed light on these behaviors in an unflattering manner intended to ‘entertain’ a given audience. This often results in a failure to highlight the extremity of the situation, in which individuals are experiencing inhibiting disorders. For the most part, I had acknowledged other behavioral addictions, such as addictions to shopping or gambling; however, these topics do not seem to garner as much attention in comparison to drug-related addictions. The prevalence of drugs in the media is so heavy that I have had moments where I truly forget that addictions can take form without the involvement of a substance. It seems that there is a strong association to drugs and substances surrounding the topic of addiction, and just the mere mention of the word may raise a particular perception in one’s mind—a perception that is mostly facilitated by over-exaggerated, and sometimes glamourized, depictions in the media. As a result, the word “addiction” may be immediately attached to drugs and substances, almost as its defining characteristic. Such a perspective is false, as addiction rather refers to the compulsory feelings and cravings toward a substance or behavior. In the present time, there is often a failure to recognize addictive behaviors, since non-substance related behaviors may be falsely perceived to be less severe. Additionally, the present culture may even

encourage excessive behaviors, such as work and exercise, under the guise of “work hustle” and current beauty standards. Thus, these behaviors, like working and exercising, can potentially lean toward an addictive tendency if such behavior is socially or culturally encouraged. A distinction should be made here, however, that an addiction is an uncontrolled compulsion for a behavior despite knowing of adverse consequences (Myers & DeWall, 2016). So, if one follows the “hustle” culture of work, such action does not necessarily outline or guarantee a subsequent addiction. It is important to clarify that not every behavior that may be excessively acted on is an addiction.

I feel that before this research and course I had certainly fallen into a category that associated the word “addiction” with a particular drug or substance. I’ve definitely gained a greater sense of addictions and how they are defined, including non-substance related behaviors. I would be interested in seeing more studies being done around maladaptive daydreaming, as well as a follow-up to Somer et al.’s 2020 study after the COVID-19 pandemic when isolation and lockdown periods lessen further. It would be interesting to compare levels of maladaptive daydreaming after the pandemic to the ones that were reported during it, and to further analyze the possible addictive associations with the behavior (such as, would MDers feel a greater difficulty in getting back to pre-pandemic routines? Would there be a greater sense of stress in trying to ensure time and space to engage in maladaptive daydreaming? etc.).

## **Findings**

The overall findings from the given research show that behavioral addictions may exhibit similarities to drug and substance related addictions. These similarities are not definitive, as there also remains several dissimilarities between behavioral and substance related addictions.

In regard to maladaptive daydreaming, such a behavior may signal a propensity to behavioral addiction. Participating in excessive forms of daydreaming have shown to interfere with daily activity, alluding to an addictive nature. Recent findings have also shown that individuals who were prone to experience maladaptive daydreaming, have been further inclined to engage in such behavior as a result of the COVID-19 lockdowns. Within the same study, it was also found that smartphone use and internet gaming behavior had increased during the COVID-19 lockdown (Somer et al., 2020). However, it remains unclear if such usage can be classified as addictive behavior, since, many individuals are simply utilizing their phones and internet as methods of curing boredom during the extensive amount of free time they now have. It is important to clarify a difference between an excessive behavior and addiction, and that is, mainly, addiction becomes a severe negative interference in one’s life, despite one’s knowledge of such consequences. In this regard, daydreaming itself is of no consequence. But, when it gradually becomes an obligation as in maladaptive daydreaming, this is when the negative effects of addictive behavior can be witnessed.

Ultimately, behavior such as maladaptive daydreaming is not officially recognized as a disorder. The DSM-5 so far only lists the behavioral addictions of gambling and gaming as disorders (Somer et al., 2020). The literature that exists on maladaptive daydreaming is quite limited, as of now. More research must be done on behavioral addictions, especially in relation to maladaptive daydreaming, in order to come to a conclusive stance on the relations of such behaviors as disorders and their relationship to drug and substance related addictions.

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