



CHALLENGE(S)

Youth workers must grapple with the complexity of intertwined gaming and mental health issues, resistance from youth who deny the problem, a shortage of proven treatment models, and fractured support systems. Effectively helping young gaming addicts requires youth workers to be creative, persistent, and collaborative in the face of these significant challenges.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND GENERAL RECOMMENDATION

Gaming disorder often co-occurs with mental health issues like anxiety, depression, ADHD, and social phobia, which may be risk factors for or consequences of problematic gaming. A comprehensive assessment is needed to identify any comorbid conditions requiring simultaneous treatment. An integrated approach combining individual therapy (e.g. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy), family counselling, medication when indicated, and gaming-specific interventions is recommended. Involving a multidisciplinary team of mental health professionals, addiction specialists, and youth workers is ideal. More research is needed to establish clear guidelines, but addressing both gaming and mental health issues concurrently is key for successful outcomes.

STAKEHOLDERS ADDRESSED

- The youth with gaming disorder and any co-occurring mental health issues
- Parents and family members
- Mental health clinicians (psychologists, psychiatrists, counsellors)
- Addiction professionals
- School personnel
- Game developers and the gaming industry

BARRIERS

- Lack of awareness and understanding of gaming disorder and its interaction with mental health among professionals and the public
- Limited evidence-base for integrated treatment of gaming addiction and psychiatric comorbidities in youth
- Difficulty accessing specialized care and coordinating between mental health and addiction services
- Resistance from the youth and family to acknowledging the problem and engaging in treatment
- Potential for relapse into problematic gaming if underlying issues are not adequately addressed

SHORT-TERM GOALS

1. Conduct a thorough assessment to identify gaming disorder and any co-occurring mental health problems
2. Engage the youth and family in psychoeducation(*) about the interaction between gaming and mental health
3. Stabilize any immediate risks and provide symptom relief
4. Develop an individualized treatment plan targeting both gaming and mental health issues
5. Build motivation for change and begin teaching healthier coping skills

(*) Psychoeducation is a therapeutic intervention that involves providing education and information to individuals with mental health conditions and their families about the nature of the condition, its symptoms, causes, treatment options, and strategies for coping and managing it effectively.

LONG-TERM GOALS

1. Achieve sustained remission of gaming disorder and significant improvement in co-occurring psychiatric symptoms
2. Develop a balanced lifestyle with healthy gaming habits and offline interests
3. Improve overall functioning across domains (e.g. academics, relationships, self-care)
4. Prevent relapse by maintaining gains and continuing to practice coping skills
5. Reintegrate into normal developmental experiences and address any impairments

SHORT-TERM ACTIONS

- ✓ Screen for gaming disorder and assess for comorbid conditions
- ✓ Provide psychoeducation and begin motivational interviewing
- ✓ Initiate an integrated treatment protocol combining evidence-based interventions for gaming and mental health issues
- ✓ Involve family members to improve the home environment and address relational problems
- ✓ Consult with other professionals as needed (e.g. psychiatry, school counselors)

LONG-TERM ACTIONS

- ✓ Regularly monitor and re-assess symptoms of gaming disorder and co-occurring issues
- ✓ Teach relapse prevention and maintain therapeutic gains
- ✓ Collaborate with family and school to support healthy development
- ✓ Consider reducing or stopping treatment if necessary
- ✓ Provide referrals and resources for ongoing care as needed

GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE

One of the few residential treatment centres globally offering specialized care for gaming disorder is The Cabin, located in the serene mountain town of Chiang Mai, Thailand. After initially focusing on substance addictions, The Cabin launched “The Edge” an innovative 8-week inpatient rehab program in 2016 to treat gaming addiction in young adult males aged 18-24, primarily from Western countries like Australia, the UK, and US. The program takes a holistic, integrated approach to simultaneously address problematic gaming behaviours and any co-occurring mental health issues like depression, anxiety or trauma that may be fuelling or resulting from the addiction. It combines evidence-based cognitive-behavioural therapy techniques with intense physical fitness activities like Muay Thai boxing, triathlon training led by ex-military personnel, and other outdoor regimens. Individual and group therapy, art therapy, family therapy via an 8-week online program, and comprehensive lifestyle changes are core components. A unique aspect is the complete technology ban initially, forcing clients to build new peer connections and coping skills offline. The program is intentionally small with only 8 clients at a time for a focused, individualized experience. Its program is highlighted as a pioneering model demonstrating how comprehensive, specialized care can effectively address the complex interplay between problematic gaming and mental health. (<https://youtu.be/YyjNS92Fjuc>, <https://www.theedgerehab.com/gaming-addiction-treatment/>).