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The dark side of the lockdown video gaming boom

Amid a lockdown-driven surge in the popularity of video gaming, a new study has highlighted the adverse effects of excessive play.

[In a peer-reviewed longitudinal study](#), a group of international researchers, including [Dr Halley Pontes from the University of Tasmania](#), have examined the long-term effects on players' psychological wellbeing. The researchers investigated a cohort of more than 1,000 gamers aged between 17 to 21 years, recruited before the COVID-19 pandemic, and assessed participants' levels of gaming engagement, self-esteem, social support and life satisfaction three times, at six-monthly intervals.

After analysing the results obtained, the researchers found strong evidence suggesting that engaging in excessive and addictive gaming had detrimental effects on players' psychological wellbeing. More specifically, players who exhibited addictive-like patterns of video game engagement showed significantly lower levels of self-esteem, social support and life satisfaction, even when accounting for the effects of parental education and family income.

These results align with other similar longitudinal studies showing that video game addiction [is a strong predictor of anxiety, depression, and social phobia](#) in adolescents two years later.

According to Dr Pontes, this new study shows that “playing video games excessively contributes to long-term decreased psychological wellbeing and mental health effects”.

“The [World Health Organisation decision](#) to include Gaming Disorder as an official mental health disorder in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) is justified as numerous gamers worldwide struggle to effectively regulate their gaming activity.”

In Australia, [about two-thirds of the population plays video games](#), with the average adult reporting having played video games for 12 years. Demand has increased exponentially as the lockdown forced people to stay at home, [and in recent weeks, the gaming industry has reported record sales](#).

The increase in demand for and engagement with video games may be explained by the recent calls from various organisations recommending individuals to play video games to help them cope with the challenges of COVID-19. The World Health Organisation has launched the [Be Active campaign](#) that includes playing video games as a strategy to stay healthy at home. In the United Kingdom, the [Games for Carers initiative gave NHS staff members free access to video games for their work during the pandemic](#).

Dr Pontes further noted that it is likely that “playing video games during the lockdown will not necessarily boost gamers’ health and wellbeing if the activity is not engaged judiciously”.

Dr Pontes is from the School of Psychological Sciences at the University's College of Health and Medicine.

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