

research snapshot

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Unhealthy attachment and coping are linked to addictive behaviours in adolescents

What this research is about

Attachment theory proposes that having a secure and healthy attachment in close relationships (e.g., parents, friends) can help people to develop healthy ways of coping. On the other hand, unhealthy attachment in close relationships has been found to increase the risk of developing problems with behavioural addictions.

This is because behavioural addictions can be thought of as unhealthy ways of coping. If people do not feel secure and loved in their relationships, they likely have low self-esteem and avoid sharing feelings with those close to them. As a result, they may develop an addiction as a way to cope with stress in life. It is known that people who gamble to cope with negative emotions are more likely to develop gambling disorder. Although previous research suggests that attachment and coping are associated with behavioural addictions, it is unknown whether coping explains the link between unhealthy attachment and behavioural addictions.

This study examined the associations between attachment, coping, and three behavioural addictions: gambling disorder, video game addiction, and problematic internet use.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited 472 students (13-21 years old) from nine high schools and vocational centres in Álava, Spain. The students were asked to complete a variety of measures. The Inventory of Parent and Peer attachment assessed each student's attachment to their mother, father, and friends. Healthy and unhealthy ways of coping were measured using the Coping Strategies Inventory. Gambling disorder was

What you need to know

Among a sample of 472 students from Spain, unhealthy attachment in close relationships was associated with gambling disorder, video game addiction, and problematic internet use. In particular, unhealthy attachment to father was associated with all three behavioural addictions. Students with behavioural addictions were more likely to use unhealthy coping strategies, especially problem avoidance. Coping strategies partially explained the link between unhealthy attachment and video game addiction, and problematic internet use, but not gambling disorder. In other words, students with an unhealthy attachment in their close relationships were more likely to use unhealthy ways of coping. This could lead them to retreat to video gaming and Internet use, and develop an addiction.

assessed using the South Oaks Gambling Screen for Adolescents. The Video Game-related Experience Questionnaire measured video game addiction, while problematic internet use was measured using the Internet-related Experience Questionnaire.

What the researchers found

Unhealthy attachment to mother was associated with video game addiction and problematic internet use. Unhealthy attachment to father was associated with all three behavioural addictions, including gambling disorder. Unhealthy attachment to peers was associated with video game addiction.

Healthy attachment to mother, father, and peers was associated with healthy coping strategies. In

particular, there was a strong relationship between peer attachment and social support. Healthy attachment was negatively associated with social withdrawal, which is a form of unhealthy coping. These results suggested that students who had a healthy attachment in their close relationships were able to use more healthy coping strategies, such as seeking social support. On the other hand, students with an unhealthy attachment relied more on unhealthy ways of coping.

In general, unhealthy coping strategies were associated with gambling disorder, video game addiction, and problematic internet use. In particular, problem avoidance was associated with all three behavioural addictions. Self-blame and social withdrawal were associated with video game addiction and problematic internet use. In other words, students who used more unhealthy coping strategies were more likely to engage in behavioural addictions.

Coping strategies partially explained the relationship between unhealthy attachment and video game addiction and problematic internet use, but not gambling disorder. In the case of video game addiction, students with an unhealthy attachment to their mother or father were more likely to use social withdrawal and less likely to use social support to cope. Students with an unhealthy attachment to their peers were more likely to use social withdrawal. In turn, the use of unhealthy ways of coping could lead them to retreat to video gaming and develop a video game addiction. Similarly, in the case of problematic internet use, students with an unhealthy attachment to their mother or father were more likely to use unhealthy ways of coping. This in turn could lead them to become addicted to internet use.

How you can use this research

The results of the study could be useful for school principals, counsellors, and policy makers to help design intervention programs for children and adolescents. Specifically, students could be taught how to develop healthy attachment in close relationships and healthy ways of coping. This might

reduce their need to turn to behavioural addictions as a way to cope with negative feelings.

About the researchers

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Citation

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