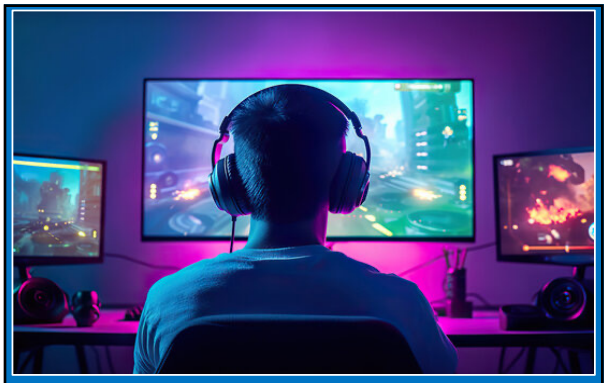

BEHAVIORAL ADDICTIONS IN TEENS

Presented by David Flack, MA, LMHC, SUDP

Integrated Care Conference • June 2025

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Want the slides?

www.davidflack.com/handouts

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Defining Behavioral Addictions

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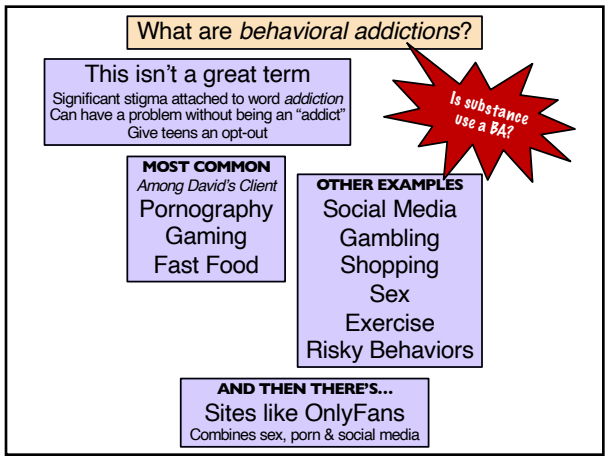

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PREVALENCE

- **Lack of diagnostic criteria makes it difficult to accurately identify prevalence**
- **Wildly varying statistics, some clearly biased or intentionally deceptive**
- **Tech-based BAs have increased dramatically since COVID**
- **Tech-based BAs are relatively new & quickly evolving**

DAVID'S VERY INFORMAL META-ANALYSIS
10-12% of US teens have BAs

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DIAGNOSING BAs

Gambling Disorder DSM-5-TR / 312.31	A persistent and problematic gambling behavior pattern leading to significant distress or impairment
Compulsive Sexual Behavior Disorder ICD-11 / F52.8	A persistent pattern of failure to control intense, repetitive sexual impulses or urges resulting in repetitive sexual behavior
Gaming Disorder ICD-11 / 6C51	Significantly impaired control over gaming, increasing priority given to gaming, and continuation despite negative consequences
Impulse Control Disorders DSM-5-TR & ICD-11	Various specific diagnoses, all identifying difficulty controlling impulses

US insurance companies don't cover ICD-11 codes

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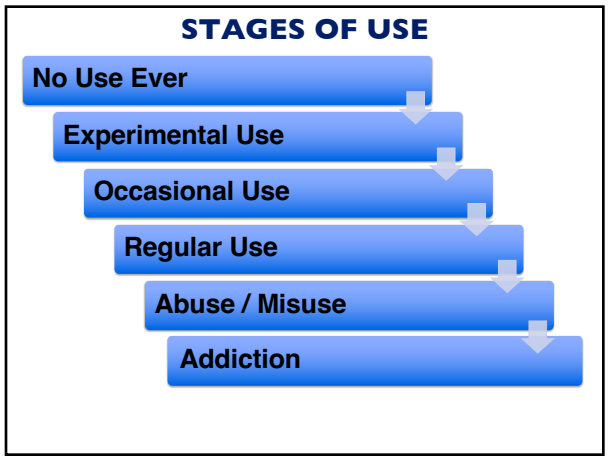
STAGES OF USE
No Use Ever
Experimental Use
Occasional Use
Regular Use
Abuse / Misuse
Addiction

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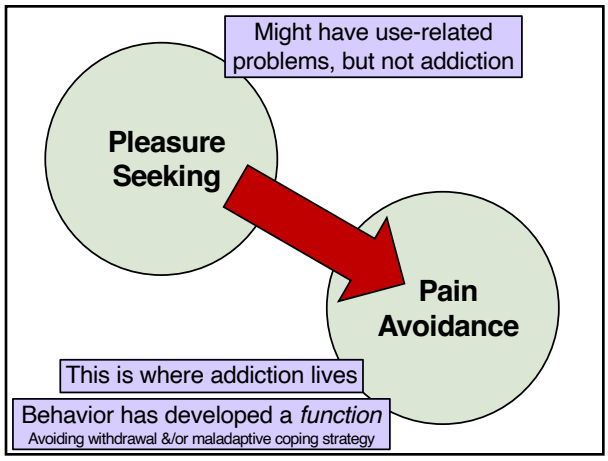
Might have use-related problems, but not addiction
Pleasure Seeking
Pain Avoidance
This is where addiction lives
Behavior has developed a *function*
Avoiding withdrawal &/or maladaptive coping strategy

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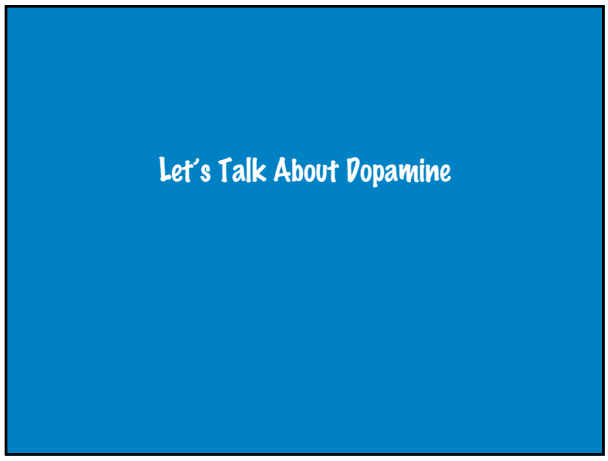
Let's Talk About Dopamine

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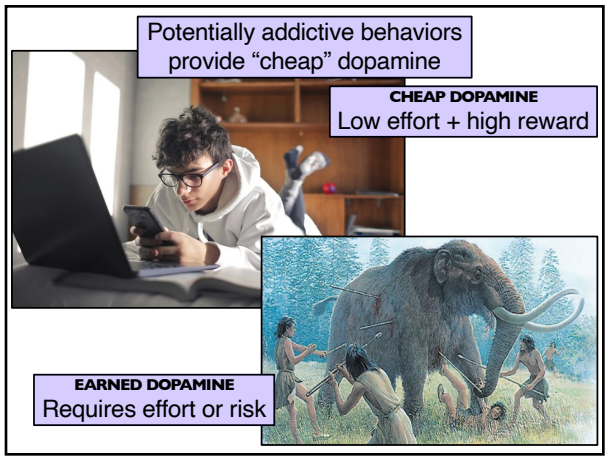

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1: Cheap dopamine doesn't last long, resulting in dopamine crashes & increased dopamine-seeking behaviors

2: Excessive releases of dopamine result in receptors shutting off

3: Receptors shutting off leads to *more* dopamine crashes, increased risk taking & impulsive behaviors

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But Wait, There's More...

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DESIGNED FOR COMPULSIVITY

EXAMPLES
Videogames
Gambling
Social Media
Pokémon Cards

Variable ratio reinforcement
Trading cards, loot boxes, scratch tickets, slots

A FEW OTHER DESIGN CHOICES
Getting "close" to winning
Multi-sensory, immersive environments
In-game rewards, power ups & likes
Fast paced play

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GENETIC CONSIDERATIONS

There is likely a genetic predisposition for BAs

The Dopamine Double Whammy

Individuals who engage in BAs *might* produce less dopamine than most people

OTHER POSSIBLE FACTORS
Inheritable personality traits
Epigenetic vulnerabilities

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REPLICATES SURVIVAL NEEDS
EXAMPLES
Sex
Porn
Food
Fast Food
Shopping
"A zombie apocalypse probably isn't gonna happen, but I'll be ready if it does. And, I guess that makes me feel safer."
Nate, former client
Perceived survival needs can feel as strong as real ones
Behaviors that replicate survival needs lead to especially big dopamine bursts

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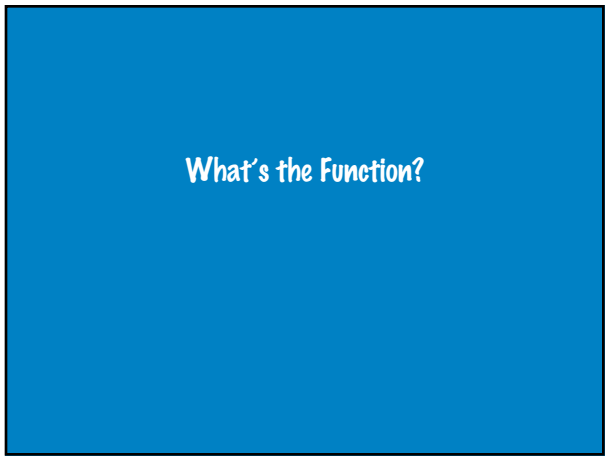
What's the Function?

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Maladaptive coping strategy
Functional, but not effective
Seems to help in the moment
Makes things worse in the long term
Acknowledging the function isn't the same as endorsing it
"When I'm high, I don't think about the past and don't worry about the future. For a little while, my brain shuts up and I can pretend that everything is okay."
Andrew, treatment journal

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UNPACKING FUNCTION

- A strong function makes a behavior *seem* like a survival need
- People will *always* defend their perceived survival needs
- If we don't address function, lasting change is unlikely
- There isn't *always* a function to BAs

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Problematic Pornography Use

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BEFORE WE PROCEED

- Teens view porn
- Some people have strong opinions about this… and that's *not* the focus of this presentation
- We can't talk about porn without acknowledging sex & masturbation
- We can't have clinically useful conversations if policing language
- It's not our job to judge

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A FEW STATISTICS

- About 70% of US teens have been exposed to online porn
- Intentional about 20-40%
- Unintentional about 30-50%
- Male teens more likely to view porn
- Data from one study of online viewing: 66% of male teens, 39% of female teens
- Use increased during COVID

(Jhe, Addison, Lin & Pluhar, 2023)

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Limited scientifically valid data about effects of porn on teens

Most negative outcomes data is based on corollaries or biases (Jhe, et all, 2022)

Example: Adolescent males who view porn be[illegible] sexually aggressive

NO DATA

SOME LEGITIMATE CONCERNS

Unrealistic perspectives on sex & body image
The "numbing of sexuality"
The ethics of porn
Exacerbates mental health concerns
Potential for addiction

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SUD CRITERIA (DSM-5-TR)

Physical Dependence	Impaired Control	Social Problems	Risky Behaviors
• Withdrawal • Tolerance • Cravings	• Using larger amount or more often than intended • Unable to stop or cut down	• Neglecting responsibilities & relationships • Giving up activities that used to be important • Failure to complete tasks at home, work or school	• Using in risky situations • Continued use despite known problems

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APPLYING SUD CRITERIA

Withdrawal
Dopamine crash; Increase in MH symptoms; Irritability

Impaired Control
Viewing longer than intended; Overspending

Tolerance
Less vanilla; Viewing & masturbation becomes uncoupled

Social Problems
SO doesn't like it; Skipping social activities to view

Cravings
Strong urges to view; Decreased ability to resist this urge

Risky Behaviors
Viewing in inappropriate settings

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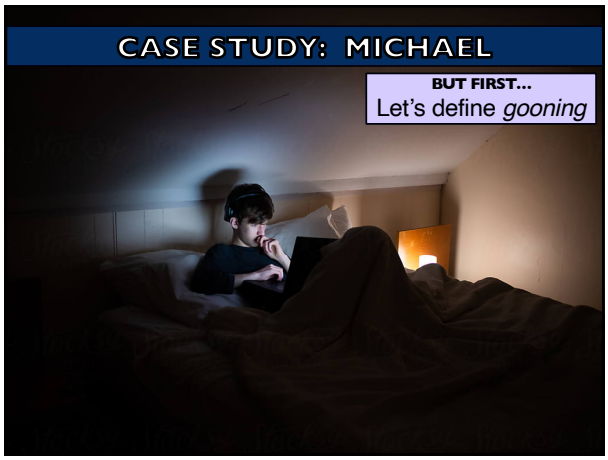
CASE STUDY: MICHAEL



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Three Keys to Change

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KEY #1: ADDRESS FUNCTION

There isn't always a strong function—but when there is, it *must* be addressed

Clients are unlikely to stop maladaptive strategies until they have more adaptive ones
Targets the behavior

"Turn down the volume" on the reason
Targets what's under the behavior

You already know how to do this

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KEY #2: RESOLVE AMBIVALENCE

Simultaneously believing multiple seemingly contradictory ideas

Indicates Contemplation

RESOLVING AMBIVALENCE
Normalize, normalize, normalize
Identify costs & benefits of change
Disrupt rigid thinking
Problem recognition, not solving
Amplify change-talk

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KEY #3: BUILD SOBER SKILLS

Skills specifically intended to help someone get & stay sober

MINDFULNESS IS...
"Bringing one's complete attention to the present experience on a moment-to-moment basis."
Marlatt & Kristeller, 1999

Trauma Informed Mindfulness

We react to urges because we believe they'll never go away

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URGE SURFING

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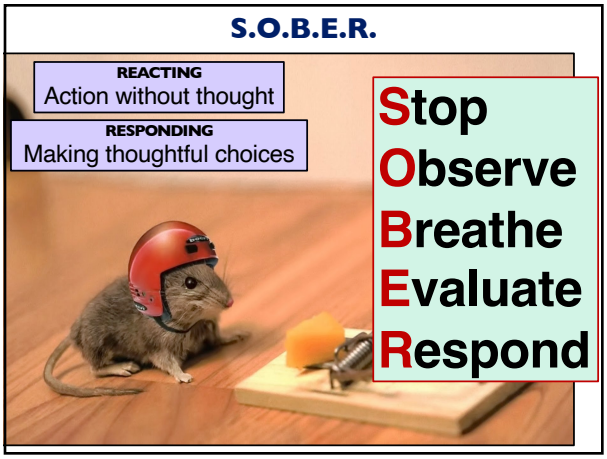
S.O.B.E.R.



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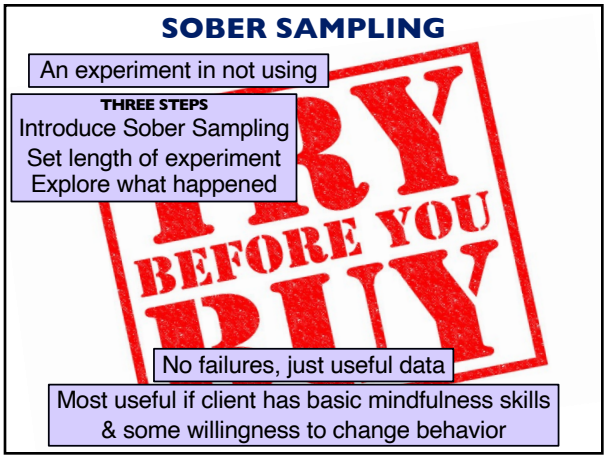
SOBER SAMPLING



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