

Alex

Addicted to an app?

Alex is a highly qualified consultant in a multinational company that specialises in digitalisation and biotech. He is approaching the peak of his career, and is eager to fully take advantage of the opportunities that he is getting. Alex is single. Until a year ago, he lived with his high school sweetheart, but they felt they had grown apart. She accused him of being both absent and dominant at the same time, he thought she was complaining too much and was too shy in public. When Alex was younger he was a fanatic pingpong player, even making it to the German selection. Alex dreams of early retirement. He hopes to move to Portugal and maybe give some diving classes as a job on the side.

As part of the multinational company's health strategy, all employees receive an email at the beginning of a new year. It contains motivating ideas for a healthier life. Some of them concern nutrition, weight, physical exercise or reduction of tobacco and alcohol consumption. Several apps are listed that can support the employees. Alex and his colleagues find out about an app that measures physical activity and with which you can set up competitions with your friends. They decide to do a month-long challenge. They all sign up for the app. Points are gained by simple activities, such as walking and cycling (calibrated to body weight, gender, age and a few more variables), but bonus points are awarded for 'high intensity workouts'. In order to prevent cheating, the app registers movement, heartbeat and perspiration. The winner (the one who achieves the most points) will be crowned 'beast of floor 7' and rewarded with a dinner in a michelin starred restaurant. Every day the results are displayed on a large screen in their meeting room, and of course everyone can follow the competition on their own mobile device. Alex is a highly competitive character. He enjoys the game very much and is quickly among the first three – the other two are Paula, a fanatic crossfitter, and Sue, who used to do triathlons. Alex suspects that the app is biased in favor of women, but he refuses to lose to two 'girls'. He structures his day in a way to collect as many points as possible (starting to neglect other responsibilities). He really wants to win but notices that he is falling behind.

So, he decides to get up at night for some high intensity workouts between 3 am and 4 am to collect more points. This racks up a huge amount of points, because the more intense the workout, and the more rest before and just after training, the more points Alex is awarded. An obvious downside is that he is lying wide awake and heavily perspiring in his bed at 4 am. However, within days he overcomes a point gap that he thought had become insurmountable. In the end, he wins.

Discussion

When is a pattern of behaviour an addiction? When do apps harm rather than benefit the user by supporting addictive behaviour? When asked, Alex will probably tell us that the app helps him to put his own choices and wishes into practice, that he wants to win, and is willing to pay some costs to achieve his goals. Maybe Alex is indeed doing 'fine', this will partly depend on if and how he proceeds to use the app after the pressure of the competition is gone. However, his daily functioning seems clearly affected, and even if for Alex the competition was just a game, it seems plausible that apps that inspire this kind of behaviour pose at least some sort of risk. There are social and psychological risks, referred to above, but in addition training as intensely as this can be dangerous, in terms of for example overtraining and dehydration, especially if the person involved is not a professional athlete that is assisted by a team of experts.

One question this raises, is whether app developers, or even policy makers have a duty to take addictive behaviours and their accompanying risks into account.

LITERATURE

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