

Australian Vice: our worst addictions revealed

The New Daily

May 12 2015

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We are getting better on some of the baddest of bad habits, but the perils of the internet loom.

“Addictive behaviours are among the greatest scourges on humankind.”

That is the explosive opening line of a new study which has compared the worldwide prevalence of these compulsive bad habits for the very first time.

The big four – alcohol, smoking, illicit drugs and gambling – were chosen by the authors as their focus, and for good reason.

“Tobacco and alcohol use are by far the most prevalent addictive behaviours and cause the large majority of the harm,” the authors said.

We know they’re bad; we still dabble. The good news is we seem to be using these big killers less.

Fewer Australians are problem drinkers (3.7 per cent) compared to the UK (12.1 per cent) and the US (7.8 per cent), the study published in the journal *Addiction* found.

We are also lighter smokers than the British, with 20 per cent of us having a puff in the last year, compared to 22 per cent in the UK.

But our illegal drug use seems to be comparatively high.

Just over a tenth (10.3 per cent) of Australians smoke cannabis at least once in a 12-month period, compared to 5-7 per cent in the UK. And three per cent of us take ecstasy, compared to between 1.1 and 1.7 per cent in the UK.

The perils of the web

In this modern digital age, we struggle with new bad habits bordering on the addictive.

“There are other behavioural conditions, such as compulsive shopping, compulsive looking at your iPhone at every opportunity to see who sent you through a message, and internet-based gaming, which potentially also would meet that same criteria of becoming compulsive and causing problems” said lead author University of Adelaide Associate Professor Linda Gowing.

“We would’ve included those sorts of behaviours that meet the criteria of addiction if data had been available on them,” Professor Gowing said.

Increasingly, compulsive gaming and internet use have joined the “broad spectrum” of behaviours that classify as addiction, said Network for Internet Investigation and Research Australia (NIIRA) president Dr Philip Tam.

Heavy video game usage by a minority of mainly young males seems to be the biggest problem, with such symptoms as affected sleep, poor school or job performance, depression, anger, aggression and even hospitalisation Dr Tam said

“As with all other addictive-type behaviours, there is a spectrum of severity,” he said.

“Many do not see themselves as having a problem, thus do not access the treatment they may need.”

While not yet recognised as full-blown disorders, we should still be mindful of these “new trends” of digital vices such as online pornography, said Turning Point director Professor Dan Lubman.

But the “big four” are still the most harmful and the most costly to the community, Professor Lubman noted.