

# Screen-free time

Tools and resources for educators  
and professionals in school settings



## WHY IT'S EASY TO LOSE CONTROL AND OVERUSE SCREENS?

### THE INTERNET AND PLEASURE SEEKING

Whereas physical addictions (for example alcohol) are well known, the concept of behaviour as an addiction (for example Internet use) is more recent. However, studies have shown that all addictions are caused by a deregulation of the “reward circuit” we all have in our brains. This circuit is at the heart of our mental activity and guides all our behaviours. The role of these areas of the brain is to reward vital functions such as eating, drinking and sleeping through a pleasant feeling. By meeting these needs, we are ensuring our survival and that of the species.

Consequently, our brains are built to search for pleasure, specifically dopamine, called the feel-good hormone. The development of an addiction also involves the release of this hormone. The more dopamine is released, the more the pleasure felt will be intense and the greater the risk of developing an addiction. Exposure to online activities triggers this pathway and releases dopamine. However, the brain adapts and regular exposure to online activities produces less and less pleasure.

Therefore, we need to increase the amount of time spent on online activities or their intensity in order to trigger increasing quantities of dopamine to experience the same feeling of pleasure as before. This reaction, commonly referred to as tolerance, explains why it is easy to develop the impulse to go online often and why a feeling of boredom can occur when we're not connected (see Figure 1). At first, a person goes online in order to experience pleasure, but it later becomes a question of avoiding a feeling of unease. The person becomes a slave to online activities!

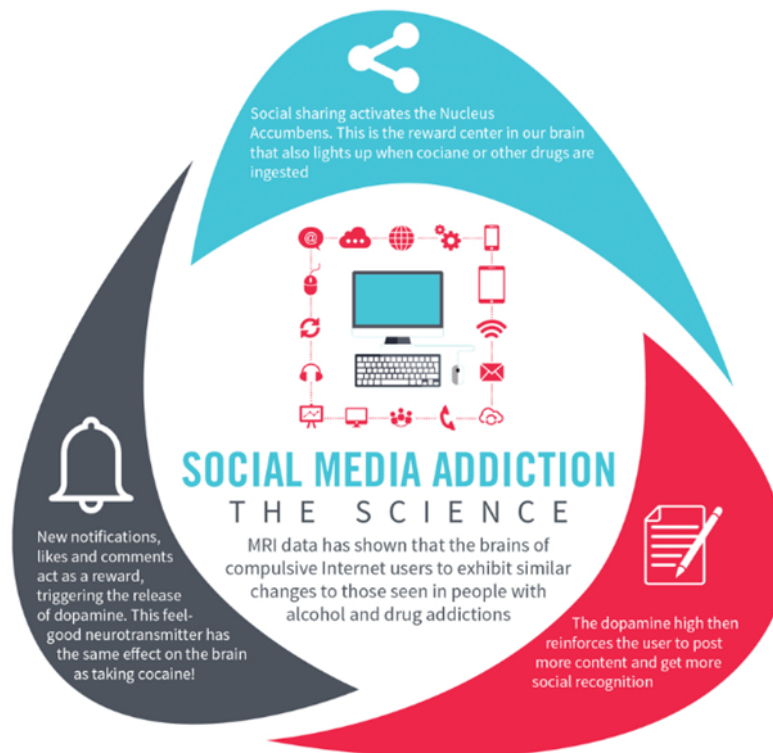
### THE POWER OF ATTRACTION OF THE INTERNET

Website and app developers use our natural search for pleasure as well as our curiosity to maximise our interactions with their products. To achieve this, teams of experts in human motivation combine all the elements needed to develop the perfect recipe to hook users: achievable goals, frequent positive feedback, social approval, continuous progress, unpredictability, unexpected sounds, captivating colours, etc. They master these elements so well that it becomes virtually impossible to resist the urge to go online (check emails, surf the web, go on social media, etc.).

Moreover, the Internet is governed by the rule of **three As**:

- **Accessible:** many possibilities, at all times, always present
- **Anonymous:** allows us to hide or change our identity
- **Affordable:** low-cost entertainment

Thanks to its promises of new connections, socialising and entertainment, it is easy to understand how a healthy person can become hooked to their dose of the Internet.



## THE PERVASIVENESS OF THE INTERNET

By always being connected, we can feel FOMO (fear of missing out): the fear of missing an event or something interesting. Social media bombards us with status updates, instant messages, and photos that give us a glimpse into our friends' lives. For some, instantly knowing everything that is going on creates the habit of constantly checking social media, at the expense of what they are in the middle of doing. Every check produces a little dopamine boost, and every scoop produces a bigger one. Social media sites even use this fear to their advantage by showing us what we missed when we haven't logged on in a while. This pushes us to log on more often and to feel uneasy at the idea of not having social media. By trying to be everywhere at once, we risk missing out on what is right in front of us, because there is always a chance we will be interrupted by the possibility of something better.

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