



Julián Melgosa

Behavioral Addictions: A Growing Trend

The matter is serious. Christian students from principled families, enrolled in Adventist schools and colleges, and attending church regularly, are at risk for addiction. Not only the danger of substance addiction, but addicted to acceptable and accessible commodities such as food, the Internet, or games. Those of us working with young people in educational settings have often encountered promising and good-hearted young adults who struggle with behavioral addictions. If provided with a non-judgmental environment, they pour out their frustration with tears and halting words. They talk about their inability to quit or reduce their behavior; they feel sorry for themselves and afraid for their future. As an educator, my heart breaks for them as I see them wanting to be free from this trap, do well in their classes, please their parents and teachers, and succeed academically and professionally. Their desired goals are blocked by a seemingly insurmountable behavioral barrier.

Behavioral addictions, defined as persistent and recurring problematic consequences that occur due to the practice of a particular addictive behavior,¹ are a difficult and sensitive topic with many ramifications. Teachers, principals, and other school personnel often encounter this problem without warning and consequently feel unprepared to interact positively with children or young adults who struggle. Some dismiss the problem, or even ignore it, hoping that this is a developmental hiccup that will go away with time. Some hasten to send messages of disapproval and surprise—“Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned?” (Proverbs 6:27, NIV),² or ask: “How could you get into this mess?” But the truth is that these young people don’t know why they got into the mess. Instead, they desperately need to know how to get out of it.

How? Instead of looking at the past or searching for the reasons, affected youth need opportunities to talk to someone who listens and is willing and ready to offer assistance. They need our

prayers, and they need us praying with them—ongoing prayer, embedded in the daily routine. They also need a hopeful vision. Teachers, principals, parents, and friends can remind them, with full conviction, that God understands them and promises a bright future, even if it is painful now—“The God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast” (1 Peter 5:10). They need to be assured that they can rely on their heavenly Father: “Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me” (Psalm 50:15). Promises like these will

encourage young people in their struggle with behavioral addictions, especially those receptive to Scripture.

They also need a clear demonstration of love and support. “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment” (1 John 4:18). Parents, teachers, school staff, and friends may feel afraid—and, of course, the individual trapped in the addiction also feels frightened. But, by the grace of God, we have to remind ourselves that love drives out fear. They need love, and they need support.

Are prayer, a hopeful view, and plenty of love and support sufficient? They can be in a number of cases, but many others require additional intervention. As this special issue shows, behavioral addictions are complex enough to necessitate skilled help. And that is why teachers and principals, parents, and friends often need to insist that the affected young person obtain treatment from a mental-health specialist with specialized knowledge and experience to treat the individual successfully.

This special issue of the *JOURNAL* is devoted to the important topic of behavioral addictions, sometimes referred to as non-chemical addictions. Our church has historically prepared young people to avoid addiction to alcohol, nicotine, and other drugs, and overall, it has done a good job.³ However, behavioral addictions have caught educators by surprise, and this kind of addiction has be-



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come a significant risk with a sizable incidence in Adventist schools, colleges, and universities.⁴ The authors present an overall description of the most common behavioral addictions, their effects on conduct, and the subsequent difficulty of breaking habits that produce obsession, compulsion, and withdrawal symptoms when not used.

The articles presented in this issue discuss the topic from a variety of perspectives. My lead article provides a definition and scope for understanding behavioral addiction. Austin C. Archer explains the neurobiological and spiritual implications, and Tron Wilder and Steven Baughman propose school-wide strategies for addressing the issue. And for each of the most common forms of behavioral addiction found in Christian educational settings, various authors explain how they emerge and can be addressed: food [Leslie R. Martin and Shelley S. McCoy], Internet games [Linda L. Ivy], Internet use [Mary E. Varghese and Carlos Fayard], pornography [Brad Hinman], and exercise [Tammy Bovee and Amanda Gunn].

It is our intention that this issue serve as an instrument to help education personnel become more informed about the topic of behavioral addictions and provide a good introduction to each form of addiction. Beyond that, it offers suggestions about providing support, care, and taking action when the reader finds a student in need. Above all, this issue recommends that we prepare to refer students to the most qualified professional available. With divine guidance and proper training, education personnel can receive a clear understanding of this growing problem, obtain inspiration on how to help those who struggle with addiction and the empowerment to act on behalf of those who need help.

Julián Melgosa, Ph.D., is Associate Director of Education at the General Conference Department of Education in Silver Spring, Maryland, and also serves as the Associate Editor for the International edition of *The Journal of Adventist Education*. Dr. Melgosa trained as a teacher and psychologist at the University of Madrid, Spain, and completed his doctorate in educational psychology at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. He has worked as a teacher, school psychologist, professor of education, pro-

fessor of psychology, and counselor in Spain, England, the Philippines, and the U.S.A. Dr. Melgosa has written a variety of widely distributed applied psychology books for the lay community. His interests include the interface of psychology and religion/spirituality, mind-body interactions, and the factors affecting successful aging. The JAE staff express heartfelt appreciation for the many hours Dr. Melgosa devoted to selecting topics and authors, providing input on article content, and promptly responding to the editor's questions during the planning and production of this issue.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. American Psychiatric Association, *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).
2. Scripture quotations credited to NIV are from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*. Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.
3. Adventist Recovery Ministries, North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists: <http://www.adventistrecovery.org/article/33/resources/addiction-resources>; Health Ministries: <http://healthministries.com/search/node/addiction>; Substance Abuse Special Issue, *The Journal of Adventist Education* 76:2 (December 2013/January 2014).
4. This statement is based on conversations with mental-health and education professionals, and the fact that students enrolled in Adventist schools also represent the general population in which an increase in behavioral addiction is occurring worldwide. Studies exist addressing the prevalence of behavioral addiction in several countries. For additional information, see Steve Sussman, Lisha Nadra, and Mark Griffiths, "Prevalence of the Addictions: A Problem of the Majority or the Minority," *Evaluation and the Health Professions* 34:1 (March 2011):3-56; Daria Kuss, Mark D. Griffiths, and Jens F. Binder, "Internet Addiction in Students: Prevalence and Risk Factors," *Computers in Human Behavior* 29:3 (May 2013):959-966. *Behavioral Addictions: Criteria, Evidence, and Treatment*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Academic Press, 2014), Kenneth Paul Rosenberg and Laura Curtiss Feder, eds., is an edited compilation of studies of the incidence of behavioral addiction in various countries. See also Alexandre B. Laudet et al., "Characteristics of Students Participating in Collegiate Recovery Programs: A National Survey," *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment* 51 (April 2015):38-46; and Samuel R. Chamberlain et al., "Behavioral Addiction—A Rising Tide?" *European Neuropsychopharmacology* (August 2015): doi: 10.1016/j.euroneuro.2015.08.013.

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