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"Idle hands are the devil's workshop": A qualitative study of video game use by veterans with mental and behavioral health problems

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INTRODUCTION

- Despite efforts to transform mental health care for US veterans and service members, veterans continue to suffer from service-related mental health problems and high rates of suicide.
- Commercial forms of media such as social networking and video games have been shown to have mental health promoting aspects.
- This study sought insights of veterans with mental and behavioral health disorders on how they used video games to improve symptoms of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and substance use.

METHODS

We conducted interviews with 20 veterans aged 25-63 (5 female, 15 male) in the mid-Atlantic region of the US who were receiving mental or behavioral health treatment at a VA medical center and played video games for 7 or more hours per week. The semi-structured interview protocol covered mental health diagnoses, life stressors and social support, military service and video game play habits and experiences. We asked participants their opinions on the use of video games for mental health recovery, both for themselves and for veterans in general.

Authors MCC and AK used open coding of four transcripts to develop codes for an analytic framework, then summarized interview data into an analytic framework matrix.

RESULTS

Most participants identified several ways they felt games relieved mental health symptoms and improved well-being; video games helped participants focus, stay busy, manage moods, and experience feeling successful when life and symptoms were challenging.

[Games are good for] just the distraction to help immediate [alcohol] cravings or to calm [PTSD] symptoms. Motivation – that challenge to beat the next level, and a sense of accomplishment.

RESULTS

Several participants talked about the capacity of games to serve as a tool to replace risky behaviors (i.e. drug use and alcohol abuse) or suicidal thoughts when other strategies did not work or were inaccessible.

I tell guys in recovery and with depression, you just can't just go to meetings, you just can't take medication; you gotta find something to, to fill those spaces in when you got the time to think of—you know, the devil's workshop.

A majority (13/20) of participants enjoyed the social aspects of gaming, including opportunities for camaraderie, teamwork and leadership offered by online or other multiplayer games.

I've met a bunch of active duty infantry guys [online] and we play specific combat games together. We all know the lingo and it's awesome. We kick some serious ass out there.

Several participants were concerned that overreliance on games to cope could lead to additional problems. One veteran discussed his use of games to cope with an unsuccessful job search.

...which caused problems with my wife, because by that time, I'm like, heck with a job, screw it... so the gaming kind of took over, which didn't help me find a job because I didn't want to go look any more, and it caused problems at home because I should have been looking.

CONCLUSIONS

- Behavioral substitution and distraction were the most important benefits of video game play, but some veterans with mental health problems felt that excessive use of games to cope could interfere with important life areas.
- For individuals dealing with cravings, impulsive behavior or suicidal thoughts, games could be a useful therapeutic tool in the recovery process.