STUDENTS' CORNER
LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Digital dilemma: Navigating the nexus of nomophobia, phantom vibration syndrome and psychological disorders

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Dear Editor, I am writing to bring your attention towards an apparently innocuous yet increasingly prevalent and worrying phenomenon: phantom vibration syndrome and nomophobia. Phantom vibration syndrome (PVS) is the sensation that one's phone is vibrating when, in actuality, it is not. This tactile hallucination was first referred to as "phantom-pager syndrome" by Scott Adams in 1996". Formerly, these tactile hallucinations were termed as ringxiety, vibranxiety and fauxcellarm until the term "Phantom" which literally means "ghost" made its way in 2012.[1,2]

Nomophobia, or no-mobile-phobia, a psychological condition in which people are afraid of being away from their phones. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-V defines the term Nomophobia "NMP" as excessive and unreasonable anxiety associated with staying away or losing your mobile phone. According to global statistics, there are 5.19 billion cell phone users, of which Pakistani users comprise a staggering 164.9 million as of January 2020. A new addictive epidemic that has plagued people is the overuse of mobile phones of which the main sufferers are young adults due to the modern era of digitalization. This leads to nomophobia in young adults.[3]

Nomophobic behaviour can lead to headaches, eye strain, and neck discomfort, thereby negatively impacting mental health. Phone ringing is generally unacceptable in public spaces; that's why most people keep their phones in vibration mode. The brain has the ability to form memory of each stimulus that it perceives so the physical trace of a vibration stimulus stays in the brain leading to a false sensation of PVS due to overuse of vibration mode. Profound reliance to mobile phone, device infatuation, frequent cell phone utilization in short technological dependence can precipitate emotional disturbances including but not limited to depression, severe anxiety, hypervigilance, social anxiety and insomnia.[4] There is a higher occurrence of hallucinatory illusions in individuals with increased levels of psychological distress. Such perceptual distortions represent a state of vulnerability in the general population.[5]

People with anxiety and psychological disturbances tend to spend more time on their phones as an escape from reality. However, the pervasive use of this coping strategy is unlikely to confer long term benefits, with resultant adverse psychological repercussions. Psychiatric illnesses entailing persistent stress, anxiety or depression may arise due to PVS. Although the manifestation of these mobile phone related conditions do not necessarily indicate psychopathology per se, they may foreshadow impending cognitive impairment and reduction in intellectual capacity.[2] Strategies to combat these situations would include taking the device off vibration mode, observing digital detox, limiting screen time, using technology to beat technology, i.e., using apps that monitor your phone usage, engaging in activities that do not require phone use and raising educational awareness about the potential psychological adverse effects. If psychological symptoms persist, consult a health professional.

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SK & PG: Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work.