

By Richard Ategeka

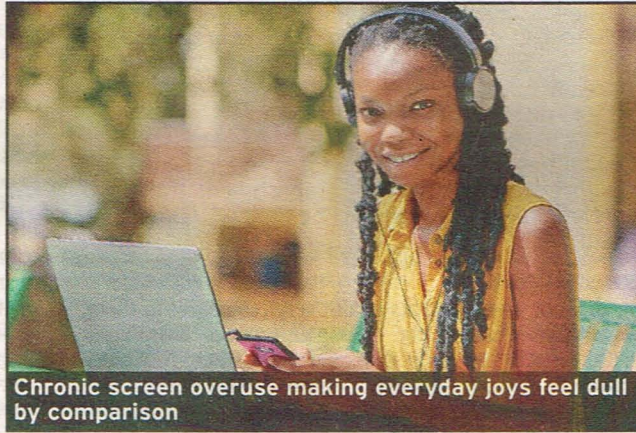
Children often learn more from what they see than from what they are told. When parents are constantly glued to their phones, children quickly follow suit, imitating the habits and behaviours placed before them. In many ways, digital addiction is learned at home.

There was a time when Ronald Aheebwa, 16, a student of Mpanga Secondary School in Fort Portal city did not realise how deeply the internet had woven itself into his daily life. Aheebwa would pick up his phone to check a message and minutes later, scroll aimlessly through social media.

"I would jump from one video to the next. Even when I put the phone down, the urge to pick it up again lingered," he narrates.

Aheebwa would tell himself that this was normal since work happens online, news breaks online and social life has moved online. But slowly, the screen began to dictate his attention, sleep patterns and mood. The turning point came when he consciously tried to cut back and realised how difficult it was – addiction had

Beat screen addiction, connect with people



set in.

BREAKING THE CYCLE

Aheebwa says tearing away from the screen required deliberate effort. He began setting limits, keeping his phone away during meals and switching off non-essential notifications.

"I made time for offline activities and intentionally left my phone behind when spending time with family

or reading," Aheebwa says, adding that change did not happen overnight. "But gradually, the Internet's grip on me loosened."

Similarly, Davis Wasswa, 24, recounts how screen addiction crept into his life. He owned his first laptop at the age of 10 in Primary Four at St Peters Nursery and Primary School in Nsambya, Kampala in 2012.

"It was a gift from my father and at the time, I knew little



Prolonged screen exposure affects brain regions responsible for self-control and emotional regulation.

about using the device for education. The laptop meant only one thing: Gaming," he says.

Games like *Mad Raid* and *Down the Hill*, quickly became his daily routine. What began as innocent entertainment soon grew into something far more consuming."

Wasswa would play the games, until dawn, not because he was not tired, but he had loaded a night internet bundle and did not to "waste it." Sleep felt secondary to maximising online time.

HOW ADDICTION GROWS

Moses Ssemakula, a clinical psychologist at the Integrative

Centre for Mental Health Uganda, says with wider access to the Internet and digital media, children are being exposed to screens at much younger ages, increasing the risk of developing unhealthy and addictive patterns of use.

Screen addiction occurs when a child uses digital technology excessively to the point of dependence. Ssemakula notes that neuroscience provides clear evidence of the impact of chronic screen overuse on the developing brain.

"Chronic screen overuse alters the brain's reward circuitry. Dopamine floods from likes, wins and scrolling novelty desensitises the

system, making everyday joys feel dull by comparison," he says.

Ssemakula notes that prolonged exposure also affects brain regions responsible for self-control and emotional regulation.

"The prefrontal cortex, responsible for impulse control and emotional regulation, struggles to keep up. Over time, this can lead to mood swings, irritability and a diminished capacity to tolerate boredom or distress," he explains.

Ssemakula advises that children be provided with supportive environments at both school and home to prevent addiction.

Schools can raise awareness about the consequences of excessive screen time while offering alternative activities like sports, clubs and coping strategies that reduce reliance on digital devices.

Ssemakula stresses that the most influential factor in managing children's screen use lies at home. "Parents play a vital role in screen time reduction," he explains.

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