**Fatal addiction**

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LAST week the alleys of Lahore`s Sil(andriya colony witnessed a mass murder: a man identified as Rana Bilal first shot hiselderbrotherandthenturnedhisgunon his sister-in-law. When his mother and sister tried to intervene, he shot them both as well. With the others dead and his mother critically wounded, Bilal turned to his employee, Zaid Tariq, who fled this charnel house to find safety.

As Tariq hid in the second floor bathroom of a neighbouring house, Bilal calmly reloaded his gun and followed him to his hiding place through the narrow alleys of the neighbourhood and killed him by firing three shots. He then walked out onto the street and opened fire randomly at passersby, and in the video of the scene he can be seen moving, firing and reloading with absolute calm and certainty, even stopping to pick up empty shell casings from the ground, all the while dressed like a character from the video game he obsessively played: the famous mobile phone game PUBG. It was while he was reloading that locals and police managed to overpower him, after which he was taken into custody.

It was his family`s attempts to cure him of his video game addiction, claimed Bilal during interrogation, that led him to commit this atrocity. `I was a world-famous superstar [on PUBG1,` Bilal told the police, saying he had killed his family because they sold his PUBG account in an effort to get him to stop spending his days on a virtual battlefield despite his belief that he had `millions of rupees` in his gaming account.

Bilal, whose wife divorced him a few weel(s back, also blamed his family for turning his wife against him, using his gaming addiction as a pretext.

It was certainly addiction that led to this crime, but not addiction to PUBG. Bilal was also a regular user of crystal methamphetamine, known as `ice` on the street. One addiction fed the other, and Bilal claims he used meth in order to stay awake for long periods of time in order to play his game.

Thanks to these dual addictions, the boundaries between reality and fantasy blurred for Bilal, a common effect of chronic meth use. And, as is also far too common with meth addicts, this led to psychosis and violence.

To understand why this happens, we must first understand how meth works: when we engage in any pleasurable activity be it listening to music, meeting friends or (if you`re so inclined) engaging in exercise the `feel good` hormone called dopamine is released in the brain as a `reward` to us for doing something fun.

Using meth floods the brain with dopamine to the extent that, in that moment, noother feeling can match the euphoria you experience. No other high, regardless of how it is achieved, can ever compete with the way meth makes you feel. And the effects are long-lasting: unlike other stimulants, like cocaine, that also artificially induce the brain to produce dopamine, the effects of meth can last for days because the body does not metabolise or absorb meth the same way it does other similarly acting drugs. In effect, a meth user, thus, can operate in a sustained hyperactive state for days on end with the result that when the high wears off, the subsequent crash is impossible to withstand, leading to repeated use with ever-increasing dosages due to the rapid resistance that the body builds up.

While this explains why it is so easy to become addicted to meth, and so hard to beat the addiction, what explains the psychosis? Meth directly interacts with and affects those parts of the brain that manage and regulate impulses and emotions like fear, aggression and the body`s natural `fight or flight` responses. Since meth typi-cally overstimulates these areas of the brain, this leads to increased paranoia and aggression and can in many users lead to hallucinations and full-blown delusions which, when coupled with paranoia, result in fantasies of persecution and the belief that others are conspiringagainst you.Put allofthis together and you get an idea of what afflicted Rana Bilal and led to his murdering his family.

Unfortunately, it seems that such incidents may become all too common in the near future as meth use in Pakistan is only increasing, especially among students who are introduced to it as a means of staying up all night and studying. Since 2012, when the first meth lab in Pakistan was accidentally discovered in Karachi (because it blew up), production and consumption of meth has increased exponentially.

To add to this, Pakistan is also now a transit country for meth produced in increasing quantities in Afghanistan, thanks to the discovery that extracts from the indigenous ephedra plant can be used to manufacture a key component used in the production of meth. All this in turn means that we are on the cusp of an epidemic that may well be worse than the heroin addiction epidemic that swept over us in the years of, and immediately following, the Afghan war. The writer is a joumalist.

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