addictive behaviors

Addiction is the craving and loss of control over the use of a substance or activity, even when the substance or activity causes problems in one’s life. Some experts believe that underlying all addictions are dysfunctional cravings for power/control, sensation and/or security.

When we hear the word addiction, usually chemical substances come to mind. However, there are activity addictions, also referred to as process addictions, which can be just as damaging. These are characterized by repetitive, compulsive behavior(s) performed intentionally, but not voluntarily. Performing the behavior and not performing the behavior cause increased anxiety. Some common activity addictions include:

- Gambling
- Working
- Eating
- Exercise
- Shopping/spending
- Internet, computer, video gaming
- Staying in unhealthy relationships

Recognizing Addiction

Anyone can develop an addiction, and some people have more than one addiction. Ask yourself (and answer) a few questions about some typical experiences and behaviors of addiction.

1. Does the activity or substance create excitement and pleasure that is followed by depression, anxiety, guilt or shame?
2. Do you feel a need to participate in the activity or to use the substance at increasingly greater levels to achieve satisfaction?
3. Do you constantly think about the activity or substance?
4. Do you have a loss of control over the behavior, i.e., fear that once you start you can’t stop?
5. Do you experience frequent emotional highs and lows?
6. Does the behavior interfere with or damage your interpersonal relationships?

It is believed by some that addictive behavior may be associated with certain personality type(s), family influences, genetics and environmental, situational influence and that we all have the ability to develop dependencies or addictions.

Nature has supplied us all with the ability to become hooked—and we all engage in some addictive behaviors to some extent.

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Characteristics of Various Activity Addictions

The Gambler
- Gambles to feel good
- Experiences “highs” when winning and extreme “lows” when losing
- Borrows or takes out “secret” loans to use for gambling
- Increases bets to “catch up”

The Food Addict
- Crash diets constantly
- Intentionally vomits after meals
- Exercises compulsively
- Uses weight as measure of self-worth
- Uses food to hide anger, loneliness or rejection

The Workaholic
- Feels guilty when not working
- Has difficulty getting involved in activities other than work
- Is uneasy on vacation; works instead of relaxing

The Shopaholic
- Treats shopping as a primary leisure activity
- Hides or lies about purchases
- Feels nervous or guilty after a shopping spree
- Pays off credit using credit

What Can I Do About My Addiction?
1. Admit that you have a problem.
2. Don’t substitute one addiction for another.
3. Talk with someone you trust.
4. Seek professional help.

What Can I Do if a Relative or Friend Has an Addiction?
1. Offer understanding and support.
2. Don’t blame yourself.
3. Talk with a professional.

This information is not intended to replace professional care. Please call your EAP if professional care is needed. The EAP offers assessment, counseling and referral to appropriate resources.