

## *Understanding Addictive Behavior*

The word addiction conjures up images of alcohol or substance abuse. These are examples of addiction, but there are also behaviors that may become addictions. Tobacco, gaming, internet use, gambling, sex, and shopping can also be addictive. The path from habit to addiction is typically gradual and leads to continuing a behavior despite its harmful consequences. In other words, an activity that begins as an outlet or a method of comfort can become compulsive, difficult to manage, and interfere with relationships, work, and daily life. What was once a soothing habit assumes more and more prominence and one can feel helpless when trying to control it. It's important to recognize the signs of harmful patterns that can lead to addictive behaviors so that you can turn these around or get help.

### Recognizing the signs of addictive behavior

Here are few examples of addictive behavior according to Psychology Today:

- **Unsuccessful attempts to quit:** Wanting to quit but being unable to follow through
- **Cue-triggered use or relapse:** Cravings brought about by environmental cues (e.g., seeing someone smoking in a movie or hearing ice clinking in a glass)
- **Loss of control:** Knowingly acting against a prior determination to abstain (e.g., consuming a larger portion of dessert after deciding to go on a diet)
- **Desire without pleasure:** Continuing a behavior even when engagement is no longer pleasurable
- **Cross-addiction:** Substituting one compulsive problem for another (e.g., working longer hours to suppress the urge to gamble, playing video games to abstain from sex, etc.)

### Breaking a habit

It's important to note that not all habits are or will become addictions; however, certain behaviors can lead to dependence if harmful patterns aren't disrupted promptly and properly. HealthLine experts offer some advice:

- **Identify your triggers:** Triggers are the first step in developing a habit, so identifying the triggers behind your habitual behaviors is key in moving past them. Start tracking your habit to see whether it follows any patterns.
  - Where does the habitual behavior happen?
  - What time of day?
  - How do you feel when it happens?
  - Are other people involved?
  - Does it happen right after something else?
- **Focus on why you want to change:** Take a few minutes to consider why you want to break the habit and any benefits you see resulting from the change.
- **Enlist support:** If you and a friend or partner both want to break an unwanted habit, try to do it together. Make it a point to cheer on each other's successes and encourage each other through setbacks.
- **Leave yourself reminders:** Use sticky notes or other visual aids wherever the habit behavior happens to help you rethink the action when something triggers you.
- **Prepare for slipups:** Mentally prepare yourself for slipups to avoid feeling guilty or discouraged in those moments. If you do encounter a setback, use it as a learning occasion – be honest with yourself about what led to the slipup and consider whether changing your approach might help you stay more on track.
- **Start small:** Set a goal to change one habit at a time. Take baby steps in addressing the habit, even if it seems too small or easily manageable at first.
- **Change your environment:** Your surroundings can sometimes have a big impact on your habits. If you're trying to break the habit of always ordering takeout because you end up eating too much food or because it's costing you too much money, try replacing the to-go menus on your fridge with printouts of healthy, more cost-efficient recipes you know you'll enjoy. Or, if your goal is to spend less time on social media, place a book or hobby items in plain sight to encourage another activity.

- **Visualize yourself breaking the habit:** Imagine yourself in a triggering environment or situation. After imagining how you might typically react, visualize yourself doing a replacement behavior. This could be something as simple as deep breathing, walking for 2 minutes, or getting a drink of water.
- **Imagine a habit-free future:** Think through or discuss how things might improve for you or your loved one once free from the behavior; consider something to look forward to, something to dream about, or a goal to aim toward that is only possible if a change is made.
- **Give it time:** Some habits may take more or less time to break. If a few weeks have passed, and you feel you haven't made much progress, it can help to revisit your approach. You might also consider seeking help from a mental health professional, especially for habits that are more deeply ingrained in your behavior or cause you a lot of distress.

## Seeking help and support

If you recognize that you or someone you care about is engaging in addictive or harmful behaviors, it's critical to intervene quickly and offer or seek support. Start with these tips:

- **Don't ignore the problem:** Doing so can be interpreted as approval of the behavior and can enable it further.
- **Don't be overly confrontational:** Someone who exhibits addictive behavior can be very protective of their activities and direct confrontation can drive them farther away – from you and any potentially positive change.
- **Look to professionals, including your EAP:** Whether you need help for yourself or a loved one, take advantage of the benefits and services provided by your Employee Assistance Program. Licensed counselors are available 24 hours a day to offer resources, support, and expert guidance. Consultants can also help you research treatment and intervention options available in your community to make sure you or your loved ones get the support they need.

The EAP is a voluntary and confidential employee benefit available to eligible federal employees at no cost.

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