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BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

# Life Balance

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

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## Addiction: Not Just Drugs and Alcohol Beware of Gambling, Sex, the Internet, Even Exercise!

When we think about addiction, we usually think of alcohol, cigarettes and drugs, but people can become addicted to activities too; these are called non-substance addictions or process addictions. They include gambling, sex, the Internet, and, yes, even work and exercise.

### What is Addiction?

Addiction can be physical, psychological or both.

Addiction means a person doesn't have control over whether he or she does something.

Addiction to activities, also called non-substance addiction, is psychological. The addicted person feels overcome by the desire to do the activity. He or she

feels like there is no choice about doing the activity; and his or her life centers on this need.

Like addiction to illegal drugs or alcohol, addiction to activities includes symptoms of increasing tolerance, withdrawal, mood changes, and neglect of social relationships.

Current research suggests that the area of the brain involved and brain chemistry changes are similar in substance addictions and non-substance addictions.<sup>1</sup> We also know that addiction tends to run in families.

### How to Recognize Non-Substance Addiction

**Sex.** Addicts repeatedly act out sexual behaviors that have negative consequences. This can include unsafe sexual activity, cybersex or pornography. These people may have to address past sexual abuse or past sexual relationships, and must address the possibility of HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases.

**Gambling.** This addiction usually becomes apparent when a person spends too much money or time on gambling activities.

**Work.** Being a hard worker

## Watch for Symptoms of Addiction

Regardless of the substance or activity, symptoms of addiction are predictable and become more intense over time. Watch out for these symptoms in yourself or a loved one who you think might have a non-substance addiction.

- Emotional distance from loved ones, sometimes with loss of friends and family relationships
- Anxiety and stress because of the constant fear of discovery
- Financial debt and legal problems
- Shame and guilt as the addict's lifestyle becomes inconsistent with his or her values and beliefs
- Loneliness, resentment, self-pity and self-blame
- Problems at work
- Lying to cover up the extent of addiction

# SEAP

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doesn't mean you don't have balance in your life. People addicted to work, also known as workaholics, have trouble maintaining outside interests or healthy relationships. They may avoid vacations, work while they're on vacation, and regularly miss their children's school events.

**The Internet.** Studies have shown that the Internet can be as addictive as alcohol, drugs and gambling.<sup>2</sup>

Internet addicts spend too much time surfing the web, cannot control their Internet use, and become depressed or anxious when they can't go online.

Internet addiction can happen to children and teens too. Watch for them spending too much time alone, losing interest in activities they enjoy, staying up too late to stay online, and becoming hostile when their Internet access is

removed.

People who don't have strong connections with others are especially prone to Internet addiction, as are people who have other psychological difficulties or addictions.

**Exercise.** Most of us feel pressure to keep our weight down and stay fit. That's okay because we all should exercise enough to benefit our bodies and our minds. But exercising

can become a compulsive habit. If someone neglects responsibilities due to exercise, does several workouts a day, exercises even when not feeling well, or gets very upset when missing a workout, he or she may be an exercise addict.

## Recovering from a Non-Substance Addiction

An addict needs to make recovery a top priority and recognize that it will be a challenge, with the first few months the most stressful. The exact process may vary, based on the addiction, but many steps are the same for any addiction. Counseling and support groups are invaluable, and a therapist trained in addiction can help significantly as well.

The first steps in the recovery process are:<sup>3</sup>

- Acceptance of the addiction and its consequences
- Commitment to change
- Surrender of the need to control the compulsion
- Willingness to learn

from others in recovery and from therapists

In the early recovery stages, a person will experience relief after admitting the secret, then anger and hope. The addict may have an initial worsening of self-esteem, then an improvement, and grief about the loss of a "best friend," the addiction.

These tips can make the road to recovery easier:<sup>4</sup>

- Telling friends and family about the addiction.
- Asking friends and family to be available when needing to talk – especially when feeling a compulsion.
- Asking the therapist

or others who have overcome the addiction to suggest ways to make recovery smoother.

- Not participating in activities where one may be tempted by the addiction.
- When having a relapse, admitting it quickly and asking for help.

Coping with a non-substance addiction isn't always easy. But you don't have to go it alone. UBH is here to help. Call or log on any time for help with any of life's challenges (see Resources).

## Resources

United Behavioral Health

[www.liveandworkwell.com](http://www.liveandworkwell.com)

- Use the search phrase "Addiction" for more information about non-substance addictions.

The information, advice, treatments and therapeutic approaches in this article are provided for educational purposes only and are not meant to be used in place of professional clinical consultations for individual health needs. Certain treatments may not be covered under your benefit plan. Check your health plan regarding your coverage of services. UBH does not recommend or endorse any treatment, medication, or suggested approach, specific or otherwise. Consult with your clinician, physician or mental health care provider for specific health care needs, treatment or medications.

1 Martin, P.R. and Petry, N.M. (2005). Are Non-substance-related Addictions Really Addictions? *The American Journal of Addictions*, 14(1), 1-7.

2 Young, Kimberly S. (2001). Caught in the Net: How to Recognize the Signs of Internet Addiction—and a Winning Strategy for Recovery.

3 Society for the Advancement of Sexual Health. "Concurrent Addictions." <http://sash.net/concurrent-addictions.html>. Accessed August 1, 2010.

4 Kids Health. "Dealing with Addiction." [http://kidshealth.org/teen/your\\_mind/friends/addictions.html](http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/friends/addictions.html). Accessed August 1, 2010.