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3



UNDERSTANDING GAMING ADDICTION

UNDERSTANDING ADDICTION

Short guides to understanding addiction and mental health

UNDERSTANDING GAMING ADDICTION

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Video games are a great form of entertainment. You can enjoy gaming on your phone, computer or using a games console, and many feel that it is a great way to spend time with friends, or an easy way to relax after school, college or work.

For lots of people, gaming is an enjoyable hobby that can be enjoyed in addition to socialising and other hobbies. However, for some, gaming can start to feel addictive. A gaming addiction might make you feel like all you want to do is game, and stopping can feel very difficult, or even impossible. In this article, we will look at what gaming addiction is, how to reduce the risk of it occurring, and how to cope with any feelings of addiction you might have.



WHAT IS GAMING ADDICTION?

Gaming is a popular hobby, with experts estimating that over 90% of children aged 2 to 17 play video games. Most children and teenagers enjoy video games for the thrill or challenge they provide. For many, gaming is also associated with a buzz of achievement or excitement. However, in around 9% of young gamers, addiction can occur.

Gaming addiction is similar to other forms of addiction, including alcohol or substance addiction. It is characterised by constantly wanting to be gaming, thinking about gaming when you can't play, and ignoring other parts of your life to focus on gaming. Gaming addiction is also known as video game addiction or computer game addiction.

The gaming industry has grown since the 1950s, and it is now easy play against yourself or others on a computer, console, smartphone, and even by playing games embedded in social media sites. This increased access to gaming means that it is possible to game from any location, including at home, at school and in most public spaces. Whereas in the past it might only have been possible for individuals to game at home at certain times, nowadays, gaming can take place 24/7. This increased access means there are no longer natural barriers to stopping, such as going to school, and so you may start to feel that gaming is taking over multiple aspects of your life.

Sadly, gaming can increase the risk of anxiety, social phobias, depression and poorer performance at school. It is therefore important to recognise the signs of unhealthy gaming behaviours, so that you can take steps to prevent or manage gaming addiction should it occur.

THE SYMPTOMS OF GAMING ADDICTION

If you are concerned about gaming addiction, you may have noticed the following symptoms or signs:



- Thinking about gaming all the time, and desperately wanting to game when you can't
- Feeling grumpy, irritable, frustrated or restless when you're not gaming
- Feeling that you can't stop playing or reduce the amount of time you spend gaming
- Neglecting your schoolwork or homework in favour of gaming

- Seeing less of your friends because you would rather spend your time gaming
- Stopping hobbies to spend more time gaming
- Becoming socially isolated because your focus is on spending as much time as possible gaming
- Playing in secret, for example in the middle of the night
- Lying to family or friends to downplay how much time you spend gaming
- Ignoring personal hygiene needs such as showering, or missing meals, because you don't want to lose time gaming
- Feeling tired from staying up late to game
- Getting headaches or sore eyes from spending a lot of time in front of a screen
- Noticing pain in your fingers, hands or wrists from using a controller (repetitive strain injury).

Having one or two of these signs does not mean that you have an addiction to gaming. However, if you have noticed some, or all, of the above signs, it is important to seek advice from a healthcare professional to either prevent an addiction from forming, or to help you manage your gaming addiction.

WHAT CAUSES GAMING ADDICTION?

In comparison to other forms of addiction such as alcohol or substance misuse, gaming addiction has only been recognised more recently. It is thought to be a form of behavioural addiction, in which the reward centres in the brain are stimulated by video gaming. The desire to feel this pleasant reward sensation over and over drives a person to continue gaming, even though it may be having a negative impact on other areas of life.

The chance of unhealthy gaming behaviours occurring is higher in those who game for longer periods of time, as well as in those who are more impulsive or struggle with social skills.



HOW DO I RECOGNISE GAMING ADDICTION?

Recognising gaming addiction in yourself can be harder than spotting it in others. If you have a gaming addiction, you may have noticed:

- You spend increasing amounts of time playing computer games
- You are struggling to manage the strong, near-constant urge to game
- When you are not gaming, you experience unpleasant feelings of irritability, frustration or craving, which usually resolve once you can game again
- You feel snappy or irritable with others following an unsuccessful gaming session
- You become preoccupied with a gaming activity, making it difficult to make important decisions or focus on real life



- You create new routines to increase the amount of time you can spend gaming
- Your friendships or relationships are breaking down
- Other things in life feel less important than they used to, such as schoolwork, hobbies or friendships
- You have increased the amount you spend on purchasing the games, or spend more money within the games themselves
- You start to notice that you feel low or have a depressed mood.



It can be hard to accept that you might have an addiction to gaming, and many people find it hard to see for themselves that they might have a problem. It can be helpful to ask yourself four questions to work out if you might be gaming in an unhealthy manner.

1. Has gaming taken over from other areas of your life, such as friendships, your social life, or your schoolwork?
2. Do you feel like you have to play, rather than wanting to play for enjoyment?
3. Does gaming help you to cope with a different problem, such as feeling lonely, isolated or depressed?
4. Has anyone close to you said that they think you are gaming too much?

If you answer yes to any of these questions, you should seek support and advice from a parent, teacher or healthcare professional.

HOW CAN I AVOID BECOMING ADDICTED TO GAMING?



Many teenagers enjoy gaming, and there are ways to continue this hobby while reducing your risk of developing a gaming addiction. To prevent a gaming problem from occurring, you may find the following ideas helpful.

Set a time limit for each session, and stick to it

Online casinos and betting shops should have a feature that allows you to request self-exclusion. You may choose to request this at any time, but should certainly consider it if you feel that your gambling is becoming out of control. You can select how long you want to be prevented from gambling, and then the company will not let you gamble until the time limit is up. This is a great feature for taking matters out of your own hands, and making the mature decision to take a break.

Do not play every day

If you want to avoid feelings of addiction, you should be strict about how often you game. Playing two or three times a week is acceptable, but you should avoid playing on consecutive days.

Keep up with your other activities

Although gaming can quickly become a big part of your life, you don't want it to threaten the other activities you previously enjoyed. Maintain your musical or sporting hobbies, continue to socialise with your friends, and spend time with your family in the same way that you always have.

If you notice that gaming is starting to take over, try to take a step back and reassess how much time you dedicate to gaming.

Go screen free at night

Set a curfew for finishing a gaming session. Your curfew may depend on your normal bedtime, but is recommended that you do not use a screen in the hour before you go to bed. Stopping gaming by 9pm is advisable.

Having your phone in your bedroom at night will make it easier to succumb to the urge to game in bed. To reduce your risk of gaming into the early hours, put your phone in the kitchen so that you are not tempted to game when you should be resting or sleeping.

Create a strict budget

If you are spending money buying games or making in-game purchases, set a strict, sensible limit for each week that is affordable for you. Once the money has gone, do not spend any more.



Listen to others

If family or friends raise concerns about your gaming, try to be open to hearing what they say. It can be very difficult to spot addiction in yourself, but if others are worried, it may be that your gaming has started to take on an addictive nature. Reassess how often, and for how long, you are gaming, and whether you have any of the signs of gaming addiction.

HOW CAN I COPE WITH A GAMING ADDICTION?

If you think you are addicted to gaming, there are steps you can take to manage the addiction.

Aim for abstinence

Like many forms of addiction, the recommended management of gaming addiction is to abstain from the activity. Trying to reduce the amount of time you spend gaming is unlikely to help an addiction, as your urge to feel the pleasurable reward of gaming will override the boundaries you attempt to put in place.

Just as someone with a history of alcohol addiction will find it very difficult to stop at one alcoholic drink, someone with a gaming addiction will find it almost impossible to spend just one hour gaming.

You may need to seek support from a mental health charity, or request individual or group therapy, to cut gaming out of your life.



Seek help from your doctor

Although gaming addiction is a newer phenomenon than other addictions, it can be managed in a similar way. Your doctor may refer you for cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), a talking therapy that helps you to understand your addiction and begin addressing behavioural impulses and patterns. CBT teaches you to manage your thoughts and how you feel about gaming, so that you can begin to take control of your gaming habits and make healthier choices.

Medical professionals may also recommend that you are referred to an addiction or mental health specialist for further support.



Speak to family or friends

Discussing your concerns with those close to you can provide the support you need to abstain from gaming. If friends and family are aware of your concerns, they can also be proactive in including you in everyday activities or inviting you to social events that will distract you from your phone or console, making it easier to resist the urge to game.

I HAVE A FRIEND WHO MIGHT HAVE A GAMING ADDICTION. WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP THEM?

If you think a friend may have a gaming addiction, it can be hard to know how to begin a conversation about it. It is important to remember that if your friend has become addicted, then the best way to help them is to be there for them emotionally and practically. The following actions may be helpful for you and your friend:



- Start a conversation by expressing concern about the amount of time your friend is spending gaming
- Ask your friend if they have any concerns about their gaming habits
- Suggest that they seek help from their family, a teacher, doctor, counsellor, or another health-care professional
- Discuss their feelings around cutting down or abstaining from gaming
- Continue to invite them to social activities or any clubs that they used to attend
- Suggest new hobbies you could try together.

Try not to take it personally if your efforts are met with resistance. You should not feel responsible for helping your friend manage their addiction on your own. Instead, seek advice from your friend's parents or a teacher to ensure your friend receives the help they need.



I THINK MY CHILD MIGHT HAVE A GAMING ADDICTION, WHAT ARE THE SIGNS?

If you are concerned that your child may have an addiction to gaming, you may have noticed that they display the following:

- A preoccupation with gaming whereby they may not be interested in doing anything but playing games on a computer, console or on their phone
- No longer going to clubs, or giving up hobbies they used to enjoy
- Becoming emotional or aggressive when you criticise their gaming, or suggest that they should cut down or stop
- A drop in school performance or academic achievement



- An increase in irritability, frustration or aggression
- Becoming withdrawn from family life, or reducing the amount of time they spend socialising with friends
- Lying or trying to deceive you regarding the amount of time they spend gaming
- Frequently spending money on games, asking you for money to fund their gaming, or stealing money from family or friends.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF MY CHILD HAS A GAMING ADDICTION?

If you are concerned that your child may have a gaming addiction, they are likely to be resistant to stopping gaming. However, you can start a gentle conversation about how gaming makes them feel, and whether they would be inclined to reduce or stop gaming. Starting an open, honest conversation may alleviate some of the secretive behaviours your child may be exhibiting. They may also find it helpful if you can support them in continuing with social activities or hobbies that provide a healthy break from gaming.

However, due to addiction, your child may respond negatively to your attempts to help, as they will view these as a threat to their desire and need to game. If your child has a gaming addiction, you will likely require the help of a professional to support your child in abstaining from gaming.





If you have concerns about gaming addiction, you should seek advice from:

- A doctor, counsellor or another healthcare professional who may refer your child for cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) or another form of addiction treatment
- Your child’s teacher or another professional at their school
- A mental health charity or an addiction specialist.

FINAL THOUGHTS

An addiction to gaming can affect your social life, performance at school, finances, and relationships with others. It is possible to overcome this type of addiction, but you may benefit from seeking support from friends, family or a counsellor to give yourself the best chance of stepping away from gaming for good.



YSPI Crisis Information:

ineedhelp.ie

www.rutlandcentre.ie/addictions-we-treat/gaming

www.psychguides.com/guides/video-game-addiction-symptoms-causes-and-effects

www.video-game-addiction.org/what-makes-games-addictive.html



HELP AND ASSISTANCE

If you are concerned about yourself, friends or family you should contact your GP or Out of Hours Service immediately.

You can also get immediate support and information 24/7 by

 **FREETEXT HELP TO 50015**

Texting 50015 is free of charge from any network and you can text this number even if you have no credit. This service is fully confidential and YSPI has no information on mobile numbers that use the FreeText service



For information on:

- Emergency Contacts
- National Helplines
- Local Support Groups
- Directions to your nearest GP or out of hours clinic
- Directions to your nearest safe place or refuge

 **WWW.INNEEDHELP.IE**

Always call 999 if someone is seriously ill or injured, and their life is at risk.

Gardaí / Ambulance / Fire call 999 or 112

ABOUT YOUTH SUICIDE PREVENTION IRELAND

Youth Suicide Prevention Ireland was founded in 2007 as there were no national charities focusing specifically on the problems and issues of youth suicide and self-harm in Ireland. We now provide a range of services aimed at mental health awareness and suicide prevention amongst teenagers.



Our main programme is **“Let’s Talk About Mental Health”** (www.letstalk.ie). This is a programme for students, teachers, parents and those who work with young people in schools, colleges, GAA clubs and youth organisations around Ireland.

Let’s Talk About Mental Health is a comprehensive mental health awareness and suicide prevention programme for ages 16+. As part of the programme we also provide a video workshop presented by John Sharpson that any organisation can book through our website at www.letstalk.ie/video.php.

We provide a wide range of free information including our “Let’s Talk About Mental Health” magazine delivered to schools and organisations as well as the “Coping With” series of mental health guides.

We also operate a 24/7 FreeText Crisis Information Service and fund a Youth Crisis Counselling Service at www.youthcrisiscounselling.ie.

Full details are available at www.yspi.ie



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UNDERSTANDING ADDICTION

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