



Understanding Behavioural Addiction

Recent research suggests the human brain can react to certain stimulating behaviours and activities — like gambling, eating, gaming and shopping — in a similar way that it may respond to certain addictive drugs. Both can trigger the positive reward system in the brain, including flooding it with the ‘feel good’ neurotransmitters such as dopamine, resulting in people wanting to repeat certain activities over and over again.

Even though these addictive behaviours may have a negative impact on the individual’s emotional, physical and financial wellbeing, they can become so established and ingrained over time, that they become obsessive. People who are affected can even experience a kind of withdrawal, including feelings of agitation, irritation and trouble sleeping, when they try to stop the repetitive behaviour. Some behavioural experts refer to these kinds of obsessively repeated activities as ‘behavioural addictions’.

Possible signs of a behavioural addiction

Unfortunately, addictions of all kinds are all too often associated with denial. No one likes to admit that they indulge in compulsive behaviour that controls their lives. Here are some signs that you might be affected by a behavioural addiction:

	You sometimes put yourself, your family, your health and/or your financial wellbeing in danger in order to indulge in the behaviour.
	You indulge in the activity or behaviour, such as shopping, internet surfing, gaming, gambling, sex etc., much more than other people do. You also suspect that other people do not experience such a ‘high’ when they engage in such activities.
	You indulge in the activity to such an extent that it interferes with your daily life and functioning.
	You repeatedly try but you can’t stop the behaviour.
	You experience anxiety, irritability or panic when you can’t indulge in the activity.
	You sometimes don’t really enjoy the repetitive behaviour but you feel you have to do it.
	You experience obsessive or constant thoughts about the activity or behaviour.
	You keep the behaviour or addiction a secret from your friends and family.

While behavioural addictions shouldn’t be viewed lightly and can have serious consequences for the individual concerned, they should not be seen as a personal failing. They should rather be viewed as a psychological condition that can, with the necessary personal commitment and support, be successfully addressed and treated. A variety of therapeutic interventions and support resources is available to assist the individual to address these kinds of addictions.

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