

Is it addiction?

Addiction is any repeated behaviour, substance-related or not, in which a person feels compelled to persist, regardless of its negative impact on their life and the lives of others. Addiction may keep us from having to deal with emotions, it may give us pleasure when we're low or help us avoid problems in a relationship, or it may have become a habit that we repeat because we feel empty when we don't. We also experience guilt and shame about the behaviour, which makes it difficult to face.

When does normal behaviour become an addiction? This question is difficult to answer because we typically judge behaviours based on our own values or the values of society. What may be viewed as a problem for some may be normal for others, so we need to evaluate behaviour taking into account different opinions about things like alcohol and drug use, shopping, eating, gambling and sex.

Addiction involves:

- compulsive engagement in the behaviour, a preoccupation with it.
- impaired control over the behaviour.
- persistence or relapse, despite evidence of harm.
- dissatisfaction, irritability or intense craving when the object – be it a drug, activity or other desire – is not immediately available.

Compulsion, impaired control, persistence and dissatisfaction or withdrawal – these are the hallmarks of any addiction. Evaluating a behaviour to understand whether it represents an addiction can be done by asking questions that address these four factors.

Key Questions

These questions can be used to assess any type of potentially addictive behaviour. Each response will reflect the values of the person answering the questions.

1. Do you feel that you must engage in the behaviour, that your mind is often or constantly thinking about doing the behaviour?
2. Is the behaviour increasing in intensity or moving to other aspects of life?
3. Have you tried to stop?
4. Do you feel guilt/shame after engaging in that behaviour?





5. Do you keep your behaviour a secret from people who care about you?
6. If your behaviour were known by your workplace, partner or others, would there be problems such as loss of partner, work or legal consequences?
7. After engaging in the behaviour, do you make a promise to yourself that you won't do it again?
8. According to your personal beliefs, is your behaviour wrong?
9. Is your behaviour consistent with your idea of who you are or how others see you?
10. Are there potential legal impacts from your behaviour?
11. Has your behaviour caused negative consequences to yourself or others?
12. Have others commented about your behaviour, expressed concerns or asked you to stop or change your behaviour?

Answering yes to even one of the questions indicates that the behaviour has become more important than it should be. Even if a person would say that it isn't a problem for them, there are values held by society that make certain kinds of behaviour unacceptable or illegal, such as drinking and driving, borrowing money to gamble or child pornography.

Treatment

For change to take place there must be an admission that there is, in fact, a problem. An honest self-evaluation is the beginning of dealing with addiction. Then, a person must be willing to look at their attitudes toward the behaviour, consequences of it and to give up the behaviour that causes problems.

- Ken Barkman, MSW, ACSW

For more information call the Employee Assistance Centre at 204.786.8880 or toll-free 1.800.590.5553 or visit wellness.mb.bluecross.ca.

For the Deaf, hard-of-hearing and speech-impaired community, our EA centre can receive VRS calls.



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