

## Behavioural addiction basics

One in five Canadians will experience an addiction in their lifetime. While substance abuse is likely what comes to mind when speaking about addiction, many people struggle with another lesser-known type: behavioural.

Myrna Friedenberg, a counsellor with Manitoba Blue Cross's Employee Assistance Program, explains behavioural addiction as "one where the individual becomes overly focused on an activity or experience, not a substance." According to one study, behavioural addictions resemble substance addictions because they share similar symptoms and consequences.

Common examples of behavioural addictions include gambling, gaming, pornography, or sex. But many of our seemingly innocuous daily activities, like using the internet, eating, or even exercising can become excessive and develop into a behavioural addiction.

### Identifying a behavioural addiction

As with any addiction, there are key behaviours to look for. Common indicators of a behavioural addiction include:

- changes in social interaction levels (frequently cancelling plans made with friends or avoiding family members)
- perceived social alienation
- an increase in conflict with significant others
- hiding financial information
- dramatic mood shifts or moodiness
- inability to maintain everyday tasks (for example, not keeping up with life chores, or studies).

There are also signs and symptoms that are more specific to each type of behaviour. Friedenberg breaks down some of the more common examples:

**Gambling, gaming, extreme internet use:** "Individuals may be 'missing' for hours or even days at a time. They may also have large sums of money unaccounted for or even credit card debt. They may become habitual liars and can be extremely evasive."

**Sexual behaviours:** "Individuals may struggle to make and maintain healthy connections with peers and loved ones. They may be hesitant to start an intimate relationship or may become promiscuous. They may also engage in a variety of sexual interactions simultaneously."



**Food and diet:** “The behavioural addictions related to food and diet patterns are complex and multi-faceted. The actual weight of the individual may be less important than the obsessive focus on the activities of eating (what, when, where). For example, the individual may be obsessed with only eating a low-fat diet during the week but then binge on potato chips all weekend. Or they may heavily restrict their diet all day long, and then eat half bag of cookies sitting alone on their couch.”

### Key questions

Identifying an addiction doesn't have to be difficult, and there are questions you can ask yourself that help 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.

### Seeking help

Behavioural addictions are serious disorders and seeking help is important. A great starting point is an honest self-evaluation and the admission that there is in fact a problem. From there an appropriate treatment method can be determined. “The treatment of choice for all addictions is cognitive-behavioural therapy, especially group therapy. Then, individual therapy and self-help groups,” says Friedenber.

Behavioural addictions can be successfully treated and there is hope for recovery. Through our Addictions Management Program, Manitoba Blue Cross members with Employee Assistance coverage can get counselling support from a qualified clinician. The Addictions Management Program is also open to members of the public without Manitoba Blue Cross EAP coverage. Individuals can participate on a self-pay basis; and both self and third-party referrals are accepted.

**For more information call the Employee Assistance Centre at 204.786.8880 or toll-free 1.800.590.5553 or visit [mb.bluecross.ca](http://mb.bluecross.ca). For the Deaf, hard-of-hearing and speech-impaired community, our EA centre can receive VRS calls.**



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