

Problem Gambling and Other Behavioural Addictions – summary

Everyone knows about drug addiction. But is it really possible to be addicted to the Internet? Or to binge shopping, overeating, sex, gambling or exercise? The signs are that numerous such habits, whether or not scientists regard them as 'addictions', are set to grow in coming years and could bring social problems with them.

The Foresight project on Brain Science, Addiction and Drugs asked Professor Jim Orford of the University of Birmingham to look at the potential problems of behavioural addiction.

He reported that gambling is by far the best-known non-chemical addiction. In common with chemical addictions, it seems to involve learning and rewards, and individual susceptibility to it may vary with genetic make-up or brain structure. Early exposure to gambling, for example, being encouraged to gamble by adults while in adolescence, is a specific risk factor for problem gambling in later life.

As with addiction to psychoactive substances, habitual gamblers are aroused by cues associated with gambling, such as the sights and sounds of a casino or a betting shop. Many types of harm are associated with gambling, including financial damage from losses and lost employment, harm to families and close relations, and the commission of crime to support a gambling habit.

Other behavioural addictions are less well researched but have many features in common with gambling. Impulsive binge eating is often accompanied by obsessive behaviour and thoughts, deception of close relatives, guilt and shame, and criminal behaviour such as the theft of money to support the habit. Chronic and repetitive shopping, typically for unnecessary items, has similar characteristics. Excessive indulgence in sex or exercise have also been regarded as behavioural addictions.

Treatments

Treatments for problem gambling – let alone other behavioural addictions – lag far behind those for substance-related addiction, although treatments for eating disorders are comparatively well developed. Treatments are often based on a counselling approach which stresses correcting erroneous beliefs about the possibility of successful gambling and strengthening gamblers' social and family networks in the hope of preventing a relapse. Treatment has been delivered at every level from telephone helplines via mutual-help systems such as Gamblers Anonymous to full residential care.

The known extra vulnerability of children to gambling and possibly other addictive behaviours means that education, especially of parents, has a key role in preventing their development. In addition, there are some such behaviours, such as eating disorders, excessive shopping and gambling machine playing, that are especially

prevalent among women, and prevention and treatment strategies should be designed appropriately. Excessive shopping has already been the focus of treatment efforts.

Future problems

The attraction of many such behaviours lies in the rapid rewards that they seem to offer. Thus, the construction of more large shopping malls may offer extra temptation and reward to the excessive shopper, as does the ready availability of credit and the increased social acceptability of debt.

In gambling, an important stimulus is the illusion of control that the player receives and the belief that he or she is exercising skill. Many forms of gambling are designed to give the impression that the player nearly won a major prize.

Technological innovation means that it is now much simpler to provide such rewards. The Internet is designed to allow instant communication and has become a venue for gambling, shopping and the consumption of pornography. More problem eating, especially of attractive but poor-quality foods, is also a possibility.

In addition, users of technology can themselves display signs of addiction, for example, to watching television, playing computer games or spending time online. Counselling services already exist for excessive online use.

Gambling problems are set to increase because the features that make for compulsion are becoming less constrained. Gaming – which is very available, allows continuous play and is short-lived, allowing for quick repetition – is the most likely to lead to addiction. The UK football pools and the National Lottery, which are held only weekly or twice-weekly, are less potentially problematic than continuous forms of gambling such as gambling machines.

In 1998, £42 billion was gambled in the UK, with a net profit of £7.3 billion for the industry. Proposals for more casinos and more ways of betting easily could expand this total considerably. Casinos which offer a complete environment for the gambler, with food and accommodation, are known to encourage more spending on gambling itself.

Online gambling, both by individuals and via linked games, is also set to grow and expand into new platforms such as telephones and interactive TV. New technology has also allowed the development of betting exchanges in which people bet against each other directly, removing the bookmaker from the equation.

Other gambling innovations include the introduction of machines offering fixed-odds betting such as roulette, and the arrival of spread betting, a comparatively complex form of gambling in which losses can be far larger than the original stake.

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