

# What Is Process Addiction

Behavioural or process addiction refers to a pattern of compulsive behaviours that involve a lessening of control, persistent seeking, and significant harm even though no psychoactive substance is involved [1].

It is defined by the compulsive nature of certain behaviors that lead to significant harm or distress, persisting over time without reduction. Examples include gambling, shopping, sex, gaming, and excessive internet use. A behavior qualifies as a process addiction when it results in functional impairment or distress, and the individual struggles to reduce it despite adverse consequences.

However, some behaviors should not be conceptualized as behavioral addictions. These include:

1. Behaviors better explained by an underlying disorder: for instance, excessive activity linked to depression or impulse-control disorders.
2. Behaviors where functional impairment is a consequence of a willful choice: such as high-level sports participation, where functional impairment is intentional, and goal-directed.
3. Behaviors that detract from other life aspects but do not cause significant impairment or distress: activities that detract from other life aspects but do not cause notable harm.
4. Behaviors that serve as coping strategies: excessive digital technology use, for instance, might not constitute addiction but can interfere with daily life and have negative consequences.

## Defining & Addressing Process Addictions: Key Challenges

Currently, only gambling disorder is classified as a behavioral addiction in the DSM-5 -TR, while internet gaming disorder is included in the supporting information for further study. The lack of consensus on what constitutes a behavioral addiction, coupled with limited research and a lack of a solid theoretical framework, contributes to the challenges in defining this category. Service providers must be aware of these nuances when assessing and addressing potential process addictions [1, 2]. As with substance addictions, process addictions often result in profound psychological and social challenges, such as difficulty managing stress, fulfilling responsibilities, and feelings of loneliness and isolation. Individuals with these addictions may experience a temporary sense of reward, followed by guilt and remorse [3,4].

## Neurobiological Mechanisms

Research shows that process addictions mirror substance use addictions in their comorbidity, symptom presentation, neurobiological mechanism, and response to treatment [5].

Process addictions include the following three features:

1. The individual fails to resist a particular temptation to perform an act that may be potentially harmful to the person or others.
2. Each process addiction has a specific essential feature that characterizes it.
3. Repetitively engaging in behavioral addiction interferes with the individual's functioning individual or causes them significant distress [5].

People with addictions do not process rewards in the same way as those who do not struggle with addictions. Research shows that for some people, the neurological response to playing video games is the same as it is to addictive substances. Digital technology can activate the reward centre in the brain, releasing excess dopamine and leading to addiction. Using technology too much can also cause changes in the brain, which has negative effects on the cognitive, social, and emotional areas of individuals. For example, children may experience a lack of memory because they are not paying attention to other stimuli [5].

More research is needed to determine the fine line between healthy and problematic or excessive use of digital technology in children and youth. Excessive digital technology use, for instance, warrants further study to understand its impacts and to guide intervention strategies effectively.

## References

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