

Video Transcript: About Behavioural Addictions Video Series – Episode 1: What if it's not a drug?

What's the first image that comes to mind when I say the word 'addiction'?

Woman on phone: I didn't sleep again last night. I was up all night binge-watching that show.

Some people use the word 'addiction' quite casually. But increasingly today we use the term addiction to describe problematic behaviour. There's not even a drug, such as alcohol, cocaine or heroin involved. Still, people feel cravings, lose control, and feel a compulsion to engage in certain behaviours, sometimes despite serious negative consequences.

We're talking behaviours like sex, eating, gambling, shopping, and internet gaming, to name just a few. Exploring what we'll call behavioural addictions, though there are other names, is what this series is all about.

Hi, I'm Dr. Bruce Ballon, a psychiatrist working with the Problem Gambling Institute of Ontario at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, also known as CAMH. You may be asking, "How can someone be addicted to behaviours if there's no actual drug being ingested?" We'll cover this more in our next episode about the brain.

For now, we can tell you that there are a number of factors that sometimes make it hard for people to stop certain behaviours. This includes chemical rewards that get released in their brains when engaging in behaviours like gambling, shopping, and more. Let's call those biological factors.

There are a host of other factors that each gives us insights into our addictive behaviours. We are particularly interested in psychological and social factors, as well as culture and spirituality. Taken together, they not only help us understand addictive behaviours but they point to effective ways that people with these problems can be helped.

Of course, controversy still exists about whether these are true addictions or not. You might want to take that up with the folks who put together the 5th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. They have put gambling in a new category called 'addiction and related disorders' to reflect the science that some behaviours act just like substance abuse. And people have been turning to the 12-step addiction recovery model originated by Alcoholics Anonymous for a variety of behavioural problems for years.

But regardless of what you call these problematic behaviours, there's something going on that needs addressing now. Do you need to explore the cause of the behaviour and contributing issues, or it can be like a revolving door: the person just turns to the next

addictive behaviour. And what are those contributing issues? What makes one more vulnerable to behavioural addictions?

Well, if we look deep inside, we often find that a person has experienced stress, trauma, addiction to other substances, impulsivity and other mental health issues. Often there are societal issues involved, such as poverty or marginalization. But if some of these behaviours can be quite pleasurable, or even healthy in moderation, how do you know when there's a problem?

Consider: is the behaviour affecting your health, finances, or relationships? Are you starting to miss school or work? Are you spending so much time doing this behaviour that it's having a negative effect on other important parts of your life? If yes, then it's worthwhile to explore. We'll get into more specific addictions in future episodes.

If you or someone you know might need some support, find out more at ProblemGambling.ca.