



Vol. XXII, No. 2
SUMMER 2019

Habit versus Addiction

by Crystal Taylor-Dietz, Psy.D.

It is not uncommon to wonder if a behavior we are engaging in or witnessing is a habit or an addiction. This question can become particularly complicated when the behavior does not involve substance use. In a society where technology usage is increasing across all ages, questions and concerns about internet addiction have grown quickly. While internet use is often a typical aspect of ministerial responsibilities and can be important for evangelizing, it can also be

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harmful when used in compulsive ways. Understanding what addiction looks like for substances and activities, such as internet usage, is necessary for knowing when therapeutic interventions may be needed.

Habit

Many people engage in regular behaviors that they may consider habitual. A habit can be defined

as “a behavior pattern acquired by frequent repetition that shows itself in regularity or increased facility of performance” (Merriam-Webster).

With this definition, a routine morning jog would be considered a habit since the behavior would be repetitive and with time, an individual would likely experience greater ease while jogging than they did initially. Habits can be helpful and even beneficial; for example, exercise keeps us physically healthy and reduces stress. However, habits can also include behaviors that are negative and could lead to addiction if not changed.

Addiction

Addictive behaviors can be defined as “repeated involvement with a substance or activity, despite the substantial harm it causes, because that involvement is/was pleasurable and/or valuable” (mentalhelp.net).

According to American Addiction Centers, Inc., this definition can be broken down into four parts. The first part highlights the inclusion of both substances and activities. Substance addiction can include any substance consumed in the body, such as illicit drugs, abuse of prescription medications, or nicotine. Addictive activities can include behaviors such

as gambling, over-spending, internet use (pornography, video gaming, social media), sexual behaviors, and overeating.

The second part refers to the “substantial harm” that is a key factor in diagnosing addictions. Substantial harm would be any negative consequence that impacts the person and/or others in her/his lives. An example of substantial harm via an activity would be repeatedly choosing to watch pornography instead of engaging in intimate, in-person connections. Many people are unaware that their behavior is causing harm, though others may be able to identify the negative consequences of their actions.

The third important part of this definition of addiction is the emphasis on “repeated behavior despite substantial harm.” This phrasing means that the individual with an addiction will repeatedly engage in the addictive behavior even after frequently experiencing negative consequences. For example, if someone is repeatedly reprimanded at work for being tardy due to late night social media use, yet she continues the behavior to the point of losing her job, then the behavior has likely reached an addictive level.

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Case Study Samuel

by Crystal Taylor-Dietz, Psy.D.

Samuel is a 23-year-old Caucasian in his first year of theology at a diocesan seminary. He was always involved with video games and considered gaming a hobby. Since entering seminary, he found that playing video games lessened his anxiety about his academic performance and making friends with fellow seminarians.

Samuel would typically play video games for two hours in the evenings after classes and dinner. However, during the spring semester, he found that he would often plan to play for only an hour, but end up spending three hours or more a night engaged in video games that also had an online chatting element.

These difficulties made him worry about his grades, causing an increase in his anxiety.

Behavioral Changes

As a result of the long hours, Samuel was often late for Mass, and on occasion, would sleep through it. In addition to playing daily video games, he often talked about the games and his excitement about reaching new levels. This led to some teasing by his peers. During Lent, Samuel attempted to cut out video games, but was feeling depressed and highly anxious after stopping, so he went back to playing them after five days. During finals, he was forced to ask for extensions on two of his papers due to poor time management.



Naming the Concern

Around this same time, Samuel's spiritual director, Fr. Paul, recognized his increased anxiety and inquired about what was happening. Samuel shared that he tried to cut-back his video game usage, but as a result, was finding it hard to "wind down" at night and was not sleeping well. He also reported that he found it hard to concentrate on his work. These difficulties made him worry about his grades, causing an overall increase in his anxiety. When asked how much time he was spending gaming, Samuel minimized the extent of time and only reported an hour of use at night.

His spiritual director did not feel that the time frame sounded significant, so he encouraged him to pray about it but did not express any concern about the hour of nightly video gaming. However, during finals week, Samuel became tearful during a meeting with Fr. Paul and shared with him that he had not been honest about the amount of time he was spending on the games, and as a result of his usage, was significantly

behind on his assignments. Fr. Paul told Samuel he was concerned about his over-reliance on gaming and recommended he see a therapist to explore whether underlying emotions or needs are factors.

During spiritual direction, Fr. Paul also discussed the ways in which areas of challenge in his spiritual life were possibly contributing to his video game usage. Although initially hesitant, Samuel agreed to undergo a brief assessment by a psychologist trained in addictions. This assessment found he met the criteria for an internet addiction and the evaluation recommended therapy.

Control Management

After six months of individual therapy and spiritual direction addressing the emotional and spiritual voids that his use of video gaming was seeking to fill, albeit unsuccessfully, Samuel was managing his video game usage in a healthier way. He learned healthy coping skills for managing his anxiety and cut back to only spending an hour or two on the weekends playing video games with

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Samuel, *continued*

others who were physically present with him. In addition, he gained insight into the ways in which online video gaming was serving to fulfill his desire for social connection through the conversations with others who were playing virtually. However, he was not actually developing intimate relationships, which further contributed to social isolation

from his peers and only increased his anxiety. With the help of his therapist, he began to develop closer relationships with peers and did not feel as much of an urge for online communications. Although Samuel still had to remain vigilant about utilizing healthy coping skills to avoid slipping back into an addictive cycle, he identified feeling more

in-control, less anxious, and more connected with his peers as a result of opening up about his problem and seeking help.

For confidentiality, reasons, names, identifying data, and other details of treatment have been altered.

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The final part of the definition focuses on the addictive behavior being “pleasurable or valuable.” For example, an internet addiction might have value because it serves as a distraction from more stressful aspects of the work day or may provide pleasurable interactions with others.

Warning Signs of Addiction

It is helpful to recognize when a habit is moving toward an addiction. Below is list of warning signs:

- Preoccupation with the activity or substance (e.g., constantly thinking about previous experiences with the activity/substance or anticipation of the next use).
- Increased amounts of time engaging in the activity or increased quantity/frequency of substance intake in order to achieve satisfaction (i.e., tolerance).

- Repeated, unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop the activity or substance.
- Use of the activity or substance to escape from problems or to relieve a dysphoric mood (e.g., feelings of hopelessness, guilt, anxiety, depression).
- Feelings of restlessness, moodiness, depression, or irritability when attempting to cut down frequency of the activity or quantity/frequency of substance use.
- Engaging in an activity longer or consuming more of a substance than originally intended.
- Lying to others to conceal the extent of substance use or involvement with the activity.
- Jeopardizing or risking loss of significant relationships, job, educational or career opportunities because of the activity or substance use.

When and Where to Seek Help

If an individual is displaying a number of the warning signs, this is an indication that additional support is likely needed to help the individual better manage the behavior and restore more balance to their lives. Individual or group therapy and Twelve-Step meetings have all been found to be helpful and effective for treating addiction and promoting greater emotional wellness. If an individual is not sure if their behavior would be considered problematic or addictive, an assessment by a licensed mental health professional can help to clarify whether there is an issue that could benefit from therapeutic support. The earlier a problematic behavior or habit is addressed, the less likely it is to progress into a more severe addiction.

Crystal Taylor-Dietz, Psy.D., is director of Caritas Counseling Center, Saint Luke Institute's outpatient program.

Cultivating Generosity and Mercy

Regular spiritual practices can be understood as habits that incarnate the Word in our attitudes and actions. The Corporal Works of Mercy provide a lens through which we can view the habits that lead to generosity and compassion:

- feeding the hungry
- sheltering the homeless
- clothing the naked
- visiting the sick and imprisoned
- burying the dead.

In Matthew 25, Jesus identifies how we treat others as the criteria upon which we will be eternally

judged. That may feel too simple of a criterion for final judgment; regularly providing food for those who have none, a place to rest for strangers, or visiting those imprisoned. Yet, this is precisely what the Lord, by word and deed, encourages us to do. Each day is an opportunity to stretch our hearts and minds and our attitudes and actions, to cultivate a daily habit of generosity and mercy with family, friends, and strangers alike. This habit will allow us to humbly answer the question: “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?” (Mt 25: 37)

Prayer for Generosity

Eternal Word, only begotten Son of God,
Teach me true generosity.
Teach me to serve you as you deserve.
To give without counting the cost,
To fight heedless of wounds,
To labor without seeking rest
To sacrifice myself without thought of any reward
Save the knowledge that I have done your will. Amen.

-attributed to St. Ignatius of Loyola

Restoring Hope

22nd Annual Benefit to Support

Saint Luke Institute

Our partnership in faith promotes healing in the church now, and a healthier ministerial culture within the church for tomorrow. Join us on Monday, October 21, 2019, 6:30 p.m., as we honor Most Reverend Wilton D. Gregory, Archbishop of Washington with the Saint Luke Award.

This event is hosted by Archbishop Christophe Pierre, Apostolic Nuncio with Bill and Mary Noel Page serving as Benefit Co-Chairs. It will be held at the Apostolic Nunciature, 3339 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008

Contact Kathy Carver for information on sponsorship opportunities kathyc@sli.org, 301-422-5404, sli.org/donate/annual-benefit.

Raising Friends and Gratitude

June 17, 2019 was Saint Luke Institute's first friendraising event held in St. Louis. Hosted by Most. Reverend Robert Carlson, Archbishop of Saint Louis, forty-eight people gathered to hear about the mission of Saint Luke Institute, and particularly our work in Saint Louis through the

Saint Luke Consultation Center led by Robert Furey, Ph.D. This center provides Intensive Outpatient Services for priests, and men and women religious. We are most grateful for the opportunity we had to share how Saint Luke Institute fosters healing and transforms the church.



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