How many hours of gaming are too many?

Dear Alice,

What is "gaming addiction"? Is it a real thing? I can play some games, like World of Warcraft or League of Legends, for a whole day, and I've sunk 150+ hours into RPGs. How many hours in front of a screen are too many?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Your princess is in another castle! The question you ask is a tough one, because the jury is still out when it comes to defining "gaming addiction," also known as Online Gaming Addiction (OGA) or Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD). An official clinical diagnosis for OGA isn't available yet, but, like other behavioral addictions, the consequences of compulsive gaming can still play out in peoples' lives in very real ways. Though the research is limited, the short answer to your question is this: there's really no set number of hours that delineates healthy gaming from unhealthy. What's more, determining whether or not someone's gaming habit is cause for concern really depends more on what drives them to play as many hours as they do, or, what they give up in order to play. In other words, gaming itself may not be directly harmful to your health, but a compulsive need to keep playing could cause issues if other areas of your life (e.g., relationships, work performance, sleeping and eating habits, stress and conflict coping, etc.) are neglected or start to deteriorate.
Overall, research on potentially problematic gaming has produced mixed results. Current estimates state that IGD affects between one and ten percent of the world’s population, but much higher figures have also reported. There is still more research to be done, but some preliminary data do suggest that compulsive gaming has neurological effects similar to those of other addictive behaviors. In one study, the brains of (male) subjects with IGD reacted to internet gaming-related stimuli differently than the average person. When these IGD individuals were exposed to gaming-related words, they were more easily distracted and had more difficulty completing tasks that required focus and attention. This is similar to the way that the brains of people with substance dependency respond to stimuli related to their addiction. Other research suggests that problematic gaming is the result of other underlying conditions, such as depression, anxiety disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders, or impulse control disorders. However, it’s also possible that these disorders are triggered or exacerbated in these individuals because they game compulsively. Or, the symptoms and the gaming both perpetuate one another and neither one really precedes the other.

What’s more, there’s a chance that some game genres (such as massive multi-player online role-playing games or first-person shooter games) are more likely to be associated with problematic gaming than others. But, there isn’t a consensus yet as to which genres are most harmful. It’s also difficult to know if a genre itself is more addictive or if people who are attracted to the genre are more likely to be predisposed to addictive behavior (keep in mind that some games incorporate multiple genres, which can further complicate the issue). But it’s not all bad news: there’s evidence that gaming can have some positive aspects. For example, another study found that electronic gaming for less than an hour a day among adolescents was associated with greater life satisfaction and a more sociable personality.

When considering your personal playing habits, taking stock in your current level of gaming can help you determine if it’s cause for concern. How do you feel about having dedicated so many hours to gaming? Does your level of gaming cause other problems in your life? For example, have you noticed that your grades have been slipping recently or that gaming has hindered your ability to meet expectations at work? What about while you’re doing other activities? Do you still think about gaming? Do you tend to schedule your life around gaming, or lie to friends or family about your gaming habits? Do you often feel irritable if you can’t fit in as much gaming as you want to? Or, do you find that sometimes you even forget to eat or sleep? Talking through these questions with a counselor or mental health specialist may help you decide if the time you spend on your gaming is seriously affecting your day-to-day functioning and how you can address it.

In the meantime, if you’re worried that you’re spending too much time in front of a screen, you could try keeping track of the duration of your gaming sessions. Knowing how much time you spend can help you set realistic goals for curbing your gaming and develop a plan to achieve those goals. You might also consider setting limits on when you log on? like only after dinner or certain evenings of the week? and turning off the console at a set bedtime. Or, what about trying other types of games? How about gaming for exercise? Are there activities aside from gaming that you find fun? Try reaching out to your friends and family for support if you feel that your gaming habits might be interfering with other parts of your life.

Good luck raiding, Reader, but don’t forget to stop and smell (or gather) the flowers? in real life!

Alice!
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