How many hours of gaming are too many? [1]

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,

Spending a lot of time gaming can be problematic, but does not necessarily qualify as an addiction? yet (more on that later). The compulsive consumption of games, however, has been documented to reveal a potential disruption in one's life. Whether or not you are spending ?too much? time in front of a screen is really only a question you can answer. One thing, however, is pretty clear ? it?s less about the number of hours spent gaming and more about the reasons behind and consequences of playing.

The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV) contains criteria for addiction, but doesn?t include a diagnosis for a gaming addiction. However, the proposed DSM-V, which is coming out later this year, will call something addictive (gambling) that isn?t substance abuse for the first time. Gambling will go under the new category ?behavioral addiction,? which suggests that other disorders may be recognized at some point in this category as well. Recent evidence reveals that gaming is, in fact, affecting people?s lives ? even if it?s not officially recognized as an addiction.

One study found that the genre and involvement of a video game ? whether you are gaming solo or with multiple players ? was a strong predictor for whether an individual engages in problem video game playing. A cross-sectional study found differences in the brain tissue of gamers and patients with online gaming addiction ?suggesting that ?problem gamers? may have differing brain chemistry from so-called ?healthy gamers.? Some researchers also suggest that problematic use of video games is symptomatic of other underlying disorders, such as depression, anxiety disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders, or impulse control disorders.

While this evidence isn?t conclusive, it does seem that it?s not all about the number of hours played so much as the reasons and consequences for playing. Does gaming cause problems
in your life? How do you feel about having ?sunk? so many hours into gaming? Have you been playing games for longer periods of time, needing to play more to feel satisfied? Do you think about gaming during other activities? Do you schedule your life around gaming? Do you use gaming to escape from problems in your life? Do you lie to friends or family about your gaming habits? Do you feel irritable if you can?t fit in as much gaming as you want to? Do you forget to eat or sleep because of gaming? Answering these questions may help you determine if the time you spend on your gaming is healthy behavior.

If you?re worried that you?re spending too much time in front of a screen ? you could try keeping track of your time. Knowing how much time you spend can help you set realistic goals for curbing your gaming and making a plan to do so. Maybe you could try out other types of games without giving up gaming all together. 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. It might also be helpful to speak with a professional counselor or therapist to help you determine your next steps.

Alice!
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Published date:
Apr 05, 2013
Last reviewed on:
Apr 05, 2013
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