

New diagnosis

The World Health Organisation has recently incorporated 'gaming disorder' into the International Classification of Diseases, and in the UK those diagnosed will be entitled to treatment from the NHS. This change is in response to an increase in excessive gaming, with various knock-on effects including family breakdown.

WHO has described gaming disorder as 'impaired control over gaming, increasing priority given to gaming over other activities to the extent that gaming takes precedence over other interests and daily activities, and continuation or escalation of gaming despite the occurrence of negative consequences.' This must have been going on for a year or more for a diagnosis, and the disorder will have been serious enough to have severely affected personal or social life, family relationships, education or work, or other important areas of life.

Sufferers will experience withdrawal symptoms if they stop, so it is often preferable to continue doing what they crave. Excessive use often occurs, or gets worse, because you need more and more of the activity to feel the same rush. Video games are specifically designed to be hard enough to keep you engaged but not so hard that people give up – games like Fortnite are very addictive, and others like Red Dead Redemption 2 have vast maps that take days to cover. Therefore, success for a gamer often feels just out of reach.

Parents and carers should ensure that gaming and other screen time forms part of a well-balanced range of activities, and that they don't displace sleeping, conversation and physical activities. There are things you can look out for in your children or pupils, so as to prevent or recognise when gaming might be becoming a problem, which can include:

- Not sleeping enough and/or playing late into the night
- Restlessness and/or irritability/anger when not allowed to play
- Preoccupation with thoughts of gaming when doing other activities, or losing interest in activities once enjoyed
- Anxiety/depression or not eating properly
- Only socialising via online games, choosing gaming over spending time with family/friends and becoming alienated from them, or lying to parents and playing in secret
- Migraines, eye strain or carpal tunnel syndrome
- Increasingly ignored personal hygiene
- Using games to escape from reality

The first step in overcoming any problem is accepting that it exists. Patience is always important when helping someone recover from excessive gaming. If they are struggling with recovery, create distractions through sports and other strenuous activities, even just a walk, and do talk to them about how they feel and why. For some of the above symptoms, it has been suggested that a period of abstinence is probably necessary.

In the wake of WHO's classification of gaming disorder, The NHS is opening a treatment centre, there are support groups and therapy, and help and advice from credible healthcare professionals is available; your GP, organisations that specialise in helping people who game excessively, or call the Samaritans free on 116 123.