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WHEN TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING... BECOMES BAD

Age-old addictions like drinking and gambling are making way for modern distractions that some of us just can't give up. Jaclyn Lim gets a grip on the situation.

When I like something, I display a certain Nazi-like obsession with it. Like when I first discovered Facebook. I sacrificed sleep to update my status, leave comments and *ahem* stalk ex-boyfriends. Or when I bought an iPhone and couldn't stop downloading mostly useless apps.

In both instances, I had what experts call a behavioural addiction, a compulsive need to repeatedly engage in a pleasurable activity to chase a chemical high. Dr Kit Ng, psychologist and director of The Center for Psychology, observes: "Any repetitive, compulsive act can be an addiction."

These days, people are becoming addicted to modern pastimes like jogging, online shopping, even Botox. Dr Ng observes: "In the last five years, I've seen a 40 per cent increase in behavioural addiction cases at my clinic." He reasons that it could be a result of the stressful living conditions in our society. "The demands of work, relationships and life can push certain individuals to seek an escape."

But how do we know if what we enjoy doing is taking over our lives? "All addictions have the same basic characteristics – obsession, compulsion, loss of control and continued use in the face of negative consequences," explains Dr Ng. "If it's harming other aspects of your life, you need help."

Here are five modern addictions and tips on how to deal with them.

FARMVILLE

Cubicle rats around the world are planting virtual vegetables every waking hour (sometimes even in their dreams).

The first thing Tina*, 32, an accounts manager, does when she wakes up is to log on to Farmville, a real-time farm simulation game. "I tend to my livestock, plant my crops of raspberries and artichokes to earn farm coins. They wither if they're not harvested in time so I check on them when I can."

Tina admits that she ends up with a lot less sleep than she needs. "Every night, I'd tell myself, 'Just a few more crops'. But before I know it, I'd have clicked away another 10 minutes of my life. I even see plots of land in my dreams." Launched as a Facebook application in June 2009, Farmville now has over 82 million people worldwide playing the game (Facebook revealed that the application is now bigger than Twitter).

In fact, a Farmville Epidemic has been identified – a phenomenon where an increasing number of people become fixated on their virtual farms. It's incredible, but a Bulgarian municipal councillor was sacked when he was caught milking a virtual

cow during a meeting, while TV shrink Dr Phil lashed out at a Farmville-obsessed mother who tended to her virtual crops but neglected her real children. Dr Ng suggests that watching virtual crops grow gives the players a sense of achievement. “As Farmville is also a community-based game, it probably fulfils a need to connect with others too.”

Deal with it

- Ask family or friends to evaluate if you are addicted. Dr Ng says: “They are the best gauge as they can tell if you are neglecting other aspects of your life as a result of it.”
- Stop leaving Farmville as a permanent tab on your browser.
- Adjust your account settings to block Farmville messages. The game developer, Zynga, keeps people coming back with seasonal promotions and free items.
- Cut down your number of hours of play. “Identify a friend who plays Farmville responsibly – and emulate her,” says Dr Ng.
- Delete your Farmville neighbours. It’s usually the competition or camaraderie that keeps addicts coming back.

IPHONE

Connectivity has its price – more of us are walking around in an app-obsessed state.

Jenny*, 29, never switches off her iPhone 3GS. The marketing executive says: “What’s the point? It’s the first thing I touch when I’m awake and the last thing I look at before I sleep.” At work, she places it right next to the computer keyboard and pats it adoringly every now and then. When she’s out and about, she’s surfing or replying to e-mails. She reveals: “If my iPhone is in my bag, I keep checking to see if it’s still there. I’m paranoid because I lost my iPhone once and felt completely crippled! This is my second iPhone, which I paid over \$1,000 for, so I feel secure only when it’s in my palm.”

Her love affair with her phone has reached a point where she can’t stop playing silly games like Angry Bird or checking in at locations on Foursquare – even when crossing a busy road. “My husband constantly berates me for endangering my life. I haven’t got into an accident yet though.”

A recent survey says iPhone addiction is real. Nearly half of the 200 Stanford University students polled admit to being completely addicted, with some revealing bizarre quirks – like not letting anyone touch their iPhones. In the past, people were hooked on Blackberrys because of work (hence the term “crackberries”). These days, iPhones can claim that honour. Dr Ng explains: “The accessibility factor of the iPhone is a charm factor. You can do so much with the gadget that people start relying on it for everything – from dinner recommendations to traffic updates and social networking.”

Deal with it

- Set boundaries. “Determine the times when you should put your iPhone away, like when you’re dining with friends,” suggests Dr Ng. “Make a conscious effort to use it only when you need to.”

- If your colleagues are also iPhone addicts, suggest that everyone go hands-off their phones during lunch and focus on one another.
- Stop yourself from downloading apps every day as that just fuels the addiction. Do it once a week.
- Password-protect your iPhone. The hassle of keying in a four-digit code will put you off checking your phone every five minutes.
- If you feel like you're heading for burnout because you can't wean yourself off the iPhone, seek professional help, advises Dr Ng.

BOTOX

It's a no-brainer why women are getting hooked on the aesthetic benefits of this anti-wrinkle treatment.

Growing old gracefully is not for Jane*, 38. The business director prefers to keep lines at bay with Botox, a toxin that's injected into the muscles beneath facial skin to paralyse them. "I started doing this after I crossed the 30-mark. I felt that I wasn't as attractive as the younger women at my workplace," she reveals.

Botox changed that. Jane explains: "Without my brow furrows and frown lines, I felt more youthful. That boosted my confidence too." She started going for Botox injections every four to six months.

But the effects of Botox are not permanent. Dr Kevin Teh, medical director at Singapore Lipo, Body & Face Centre, explains: "A typical Botox treatment lasts four to six months. After that, the patient will have to return for another injection to maintain the results." Jane admits that she tries to get her Botox fix more often than the recommended four to six months interval. "It seems to wear off so fast. Without it, I feel old and ugly."

Dr Teh observes that only about 5 per cent of patients request for more than two to three Botox treatments a year. "These patients feel a compulsion to do so because they feel beautiful after each Botox injection. They might receive compliments, which pushes them to repeat that psychological high."

Dr Teh usually advises his patients against having injections too frequently. "Too much Botox makes you look plastic."

Deal with it

- Explore the underlying reasons why you want that injection. Dr Ng explains: "You could be using Botox as a superficial way of dealing with an emotional deficiency, such as low self-esteem. If so, consult a psychologist."
- Listen to your aesthetic doctor. Most will advise against too-frequent jabs. Dr Teh says: "I advise my patients to go for Botox treatments at appropriate intervals. If a patient keeps requesting for jabs because she feels inadequate, I will counsel her to channel her energy towards improving other aspects of her life, like widening her social circle."

Running

It's ironic that chasing the high that comes from running can end up being hazardous to your health.

Polytechnic lecturer Ann* can't stop running. Rain or shine, she does a 10km run twice a week. On weekends, the 29-year-old squeezes in a 21km run. "Nothing beats the feeling after a good training run – my heart is thumping and endorphins are charging through my body." Sometimes, she tests her limits by training on challenging terrain like rocky surfaces. She has taken part in marathons like the Standard Chartered Marathon and MacRitchie Runners 25 Ultra Marathon.

But unlike other dedicated runners, Ann pushes her body to the max. "Even a knee injury in 2009 didn't stop me from running. I ran a marathon less than six months after my surgery. "I was worried that I wouldn't be able to keep up with my previous fitness level. It was painful but I kept telling myself it was manageable."

According to Dr Kelvin Chew, consultant sports physician at Singapore Sports Medicine Centre, it is definitely not wise to run through pain. "Listen to your body – pain indicates that something is wrong. Your condition can be aggravated with repeated stress on the injured area." But Dr Chew observes that running addicts like Ann tend to have a high pain threshold. He adds: "Also, these running addicts tend to have high expectations of themselves and a tinge of narcissism."

Sports physiotherapist Chng Chye Tuan from Back2Sports, Core Concepts, adds: "The physical highs from the release of hormones like endorphins keep these addicts running."

The problem arises when running addicts don't know when or how to stop when their bodies are calling out for help. Dr Chew explains: "If running starts to affect you physically (in terms of pain and injuries), socially (neglecting friends and family for exercise) or emotionally (withdrawal symptoms from not running), then you're addicted.

Deal with it

- Cut down on your weekly runs. Dr Chew explains: "This means reducing your weekly mileage and the intensity of your runs. A sports physician will be able to make sure you are not straining your body."
- Vary your training volume and intensity. Dr Chew says: "In a four-week training block, you can allocate one week for lighter exercises."
- Balance your fitness regime. Chye Tuan suggests: "Don't just run. Include other activities like swimming, cycling or ball sports. This will keep give your body a break while keeping your stamina up."
- Don't hang out with other runners all the time. "If everyone else is addicted, you'll just be reinforcing your running habits," observes Chye Tuan. "Make time for other groups of people in your life – and do different things."

Online Shopping

Should we blame sites like Net-A-Porter.com for always tempting us to buy?

Joanna*, a sales consultant, prefers clicking “Next” to flicking hangers in the shops on Orchard Road. “The best thing about online shopping is that I can do it from my own home,” she says.

For the 26-year-old, it all started in 2004 when a friend introduced her to auction sites like eBay. Soon, she was spending every evening surfing for good buys. For her, the appeal went beyond the variety or convenience. “I love receiving packages in the mail! That keeps me clicking ‘Buy’ even though I can’t possibly wear everything I’ve bought,” Joanna says. These shopping fixes can be expensive. “A dress from Net-A-Porter.com costs hundreds at least, excluding shipping,” admits Joanna. “Every month, I spend 70 per cent of my \$3,000 salary on my shopping fix. I have no savings.”

The problem is that it’s too easy to click and spend, says Dr Ng. “It’s more dangerous than shopping at a mall. By the time you’re done, you’ve probably charged a lot to your credit card.” The 24/7 nature of online shopping sites doesn’t help either.

Deal with it

- Identify why you need to shop compulsively. Dr Ng explains: “You may be trying to compensate for a void in some other aspect of your life.”
- Make yourself accountable to someone. Dr Ng suggests a close friend or family member who’s very firm. “Leave your credit cards with him.”
- Always pay in cash. “The act of money leaving your hands might make you more aware of your spending,” says Dr Ng.
- Limit your time on the computer, advises Dr Ng. Spend more time on other pursuits or hobbies that you enjoy.

*Not their real names.