

## **The "Process" Addictions: Gambling, Gaming, Shopping, Sex**

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Recently I attended a professional conference where experts presented the latest research on sexual addiction as well as compulsive shopping, gambling and videogaming. Here's a brief summary of what I learned:

Although these addictions don't involve a substance like drugs or alcohol, they do involve 1) a pattern of compulsive and risky behaviors, 2) fueled by obsessive preoccupation, 3) which continue despite negative consequences, 4) and ultimately undermine relationships, careers and family life. Sound familiar? Also, researchers have identified changes in brain chemistry that occur in sex addicts, gamblers and compulsive shoppers which mimic what alcohol and drugs do: the release of dopamine (the "feel good" neurotransmitter) as well as adrenalin, serotonin and endorphins.

Process addictions often co-exist with drug and alcohol abuse, but are not due to being under the influence. People use these "intensity-based experiences", which cause a type of hyperarousal, to avoid dealing with problems in their lives, or to distract themselves from painful emotions or memories, perhaps associated with loss or trauma.

**Accessibility, affordability, and anonymity:** While the rates of alcoholism and drug addiction have remained relatively constant for decades, there has been a dramatic increase in the prevalence of the process addictions in the past ten years, no doubt the result of the Internet and mobile technology. For example, in 1911, you would have had to travel to a sketchy part of town and ask around to find a back-room club, if you wanted to gamble. Even in 1981, you'd have to make sure no one saw you thumbing through a copy of the Bay Guardian while you stood at a pay phone, making calls to find a prostitute. Today, you can sit at your home computer and play online poker 24/7, or access free and unlimited porn instantly, or, if you have a smart phone with GPS, locate and "hook up" with an anonymous sex partner on your lunch break ("there's an app for that")!

How prevalent are these addictions? These experts say that 3-5% of adult Americans meet the criteria for sexual addiction (85% of them are male); and 2% are pathological gamblers (two thirds are male); while 6% of women and 5% of men are compulsive shoppers.

**There is help available:** if you have a gambling problem and you're in California, simply call 1-800-GAMBLER to get six free counseling sessions (for more information on this program, go to [www.problemgambling.ca.gov](http://www.problemgambling.ca.gov)) or try Gamblers Anonymous. For sexual addiction, there are self-help groups (like Sex Addicts Anonymous) as well as treatment programs (The Sexual Recovery Institute in Los Angeles, at [www.sexualrecovery.com](http://www.sexualrecovery.com), has many good articles and resources on all of the process addictions). A good book for both sex addicts and those who love them is "Out of the Shadows" by Patrick Carnes. I'm not aware of any self-help groups or treatment programs for videogame addicts or compulsive shoppers, however, one of the foremost experts on the latter is a psychologist here in the Bay Area, Heidi Hartston (contact her at [www.heidihartstonphd.com](http://www.heidihartstonphd.com)).