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‘Gaming disorder’ revives debate over what constitutes an addiction

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CHICAGO — Now that the world’s leading public health group says too much Minecraft can be an addiction, could overindulging in chocolate, exercise, even sex, be next?

The short answer is probably not.

The new “gaming disorder” classification from the World Health Organization revives a debate in the medical community about whether behaviors can cause the same kind of addictive illness as drugs.

The strictest definition of addiction refers to a disease resulting from changes in brain chemistry caused by compulsive use of drugs or alcohol. The definition includes excessive use that damages health, relationships, jobs and other parts of normal life. Brain research supports that definition, and some imaging studies have suggested that excessive gaming might affect the brain in similar ways.

Under a looser definition, addiction is considered “a disease of extreme behavior. Any behavior carried to extreme that consumes you and keeps you from doing what you should be doing becomes an addiction as far as life is concerned,” said Dr. Walter Ling, a UCLA psychiatrist.

In its widely used manual for diagnosing mental illness, the American Psychiatric Association calls excessive video gaming a “condition” but not a formal diagnosis or disease, and says more research is needed to determine if it qualifies as an addiction.

“The term ‘addiction’ is tossed around pretty commonly, like ‘chocoholic’ or saying you’re addicted to reality TV,” said Dr. Ellen Selkie, a University of Michigan physician who studies teens’ use of digital technology. But addiction means an inability to control use “to the point where you’re failing at life,” she said.

The only behavior classified as an addiction in the American Psychiatric Association’s diagnostic manual is compulsive gambling.

The manual doesn’t include sex addiction because there’s little evidence that compulsive sexual behavior has similar effects on the brain.

Many excessive gamblers, gamers and sex “addicts” have other psychiatric conditions, including anxiety, attention deficit disorder and depression, and some mental health specialists believe their compulsive behaviors are merely symptoms of those diseases rather than separate addictions.

Excessive use of the internet and smartphones is also absent from the psychiatric manual and World Health Organization’s update. Psychiatrists disagree on whether that is a true addiction — partly because overuse is hard to measure when so many people need to use their smartphones and the internet for their jobs.

The World Health Organization’s decision to classify excessive video gaming as an addiction means “gaming disorder” will be added to this year’s update to the organization’s International Classification of Diseases. Doctors worldwide use that document to diagnose physical and mental illnesses. Insurers, including Medicaid and Medicare, use billing codes listed there to make coverage decisions. The American Psychiatric Association’s manual is widely used for defining and diagnosing mental disorders. If conditions aren’t listed in these documents, insurance coverage for treatment is unlikely.

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