

**Abstinence Exercise Paper**

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### **Abstract**

On Monday, January 24, 2022 I began a month-long abstinence from video games. I carried out this exercise in order to gain experience into what it is like to withdraw from an addictive behavior and to gain experience into that it is like to struggle with an addiction disorder. In choosing video games as a behavior to abstain from, I gained considerable insight into what a serious addiction must be like and how difficult it is to successfully end an addiction.

In choosing video games, I had to discount two other possible choices from which to abstain, which in my case were caffeine and social media. After discounting these two options, I chose video games because I felt it would be more difficult to avoid video games than it could caffeine or social media.

By the end of the four-week abstinence exercise, I had succeeded in not playing video games for the duration of the exercise. Weeks three and four proved to be the greatest challenge as I came close to slipping during both weeks. By the end of the exercise, I felt I had learned and grown from the experience, which will put me in a good position to help clients who have addiction issues in the future.

## Introduction

On Monday, January 24, 2022, I began a month-long abstinence from video games in order to gain some experience of what it is like for those with addictions who have chosen to abstain from their addiction. After much consideration, I chose video games because they have become a central part of my life and something I am involved with on a daily basis. I believed abstaining from video games would prove to be difficult for me. I considered other options, such as caffeine and social media, but concluded these were not an important part of my life when compared to video games. I have been playing video games since I was 10 years old and still play today at the age of 51. Video games have been a consistent presence for most of my life and are an important form of entertainment and escape from the daily routine of life. “Video games, in particular, provide a wide variety of genres, and today, in many cases, they are free of charge, which contributes to the social generalization of their use” (Gormaz-Galen et al, 2021, p. 330). In my case, as an adult, video games are easily accessible both in console form and on computer as well as on cell phones, and I have few limitations on when and where I can play. Indeed, “gaming has established itself as a dominant form of media that demands attention” (Parrott et al, 2020, p. 817). Therefore, abstaining from video games did prove a challenge as I always had the ability and the means to play.

During my month-long abstinence, I discovered that while it was difficult to abstain from playing video games, it was not impossible and I was able to complete a month without playing. Moving forward, I have decided to keep up my abstinence although, in the long term, I feel I will return to playing video games as I miss the enjoyment and escapism that video games offer. Part of the reason I was able to sustain

my abstinence was the belief that I could return to playing video games once the abstinence period was over. This is what continues to sustain my abstinence exercise and has made it much easier for me to abstain from playing video games than otherwise might have been the case.

Maintaining the abstinence for the four-week period was a challenge, but proved not to be as challenging as I had anticipated. The promise of future video game play helped to sustain the abstinence exercise as did the fact that I feel I am not an addictive person. With enough motivation, I am able to give up anything that I want to for a sustained period of time. The abstinence exercise taught me what it is like when working with clients who are suffering addiction issues

### **Choosing my Abstinence Behavior**

When choosing a substance or behavior from which to abstain, I knew from the beginning that I had three options. The first option was social media, which I spend a lot of time on and I know would be difficult for me to abstain from. My second option was caffeine, I consume large amounts of caffeine, mostly in coffee and tea, and I know this would also have presented a challenge. The third was to abstain from video games, which have become an important part of my life over the years and I knew would also be a challenge. Video games would be considered to be one of the “behavioral addictions” (Van Wormer & Davis, 2018, p. 18) along side compulsive gambling. Unlike gambling addiction, video game addiction does not appear in the DSM-5, although it is being considered for inclusion in future editions after more research is conducted into the disorder.

I discounted abstaining from social media as I often use it to keep in touch with my family in the United Kingdom and this was even more important because my father died in January. Social media proved to be invaluable as I made arrangements to return to the UK and participated in planning my father's funeral. It has also proved useful in helping to administer my father's estate.

The second option, caffeine was discounted because I often only consume large amounts of tea and coffee when I am at work. I rarely consume caffeinated at home except for the occasional cup of tea. Giving up caffeine was too easy of an option and I felt that I should choose an option that would be difficult for me to cope with and would prove a challenge. As a result, I choose video games because I believed they would prove more difficult to abstain from in my life than anything else.

### **Beginning My Abstinence**

I began my abstinence on Monday, January 24, 2022. The last game I played before my abstinence began was Diablo III, which is a game I have been spending a lot of time playing in recent months. I did not put away any of my gaming equipment or delete games off my computer and phone, which in retrospect would have been the right thing to do. One of the first things I noticed in my abstinence exercise was I had much more free time. Some of this time ended up been given over to social media and watching television, so in effect, I was replacing one vice with another. Some of the time was also given over to social relationships and domestic chores, which I had been neglecting. "For some gamers, time spent in front of the screen may begin to interfere with social relationships, habits of healthy living, school or work, and other commitments" (Parrott et al, 2020, p. 816) which was the case with me. By reducing the amount of time I spent

on video games, I was able to devote more time to friends and family, which was especially important when I was in the UK attending to my father's funeral.

During the first week of the abstinence, I did not miss video games so much since I was out of the country. After I returned, I was sick with a viral infection, which further reduced my desire and ability to play. As a result, the first week of abstinence was relatively easy although I did think about my games a lot and did have a wish to play.

### **Week Two**

During the second week, I did start to think of them a lot more and did have the drive to play. In order to overcome my craving for video games, I spent more time on social media, such as Facebook and Instagram. In many ways, I was compensating for the loss of video games. I noticed I was spending more time in social interactions and domestic responsibilities. As a result, my social interactions improved without video games and I completed more domestic due to spending no time on video games.

Despite some of the positives from not playing video games, there were some negatives. I often play video games for escapism and to avoid the realities of life. While this may be seen as a disadvantage because it means avoiding real life, I find video games ameliorates my depression and anxiety. By playing video games, I am seeking gratification for needs that are not being met in normal life. According to Parrott et al, "if a person is gratifying needs by playing video games while these needs are not being met elsewhere, it is not difficult to imagine how video game use might become problematic" (Parrott et al, 2020, p. 817). While I do not feel my video game playing has become problematic, the abstinence exercise has taught me that I spend a large amount of time on them, which is time that could be spent on other activities. The main issue is cutting back

on social media usage and actually spending more time on constructive activities.

Spending more time one vice in order to replace another is not a good strategy and is something I will address as I continue my abstinence exercise.

### **Week Three**

The third week of my abstinence exercise presented more of a challenge. While I was still able to abstain from video games and reduce the amount of social media I was using, I spent a lot more time watching television. This was not a good use of my time and I regretted not spending more time reading or spending time doing activities I enjoy, such as biking and swimming. In the time I have spent not playing video games, I feel I have wasted a lot of time on social media and now watching television. I honestly think such activities are an easy way out for me and fill the gap left by the video games.

During the third week, I visited the Great Clips hair salon to get my haircut. This was significant because the Gamestop videogame store is just a few doors down from Great Clips and is located in the same building. It proved tempting and difficult not to visit Gamestop and I would have considered it breaking my abstinence if I had gone into the store. By visiting Gamestop, I would almost certainly have spent a few hundred dollars on Games and then would have returned home and played them. Despite the huge temptation, I did not go into Gamestop and the abstinence remains unbroken.

During the third week, my symptoms of depression and anxiety were not as bad and I was able to alleviate the symptoms by listening to more music. Listening to music seems to ease and soothe my symptoms of depression and anxiety, which is a good way of spending time away from videogames, social media, and television. I have also made a decision to try and extend the abstinence period beyond the four-week period. It will be



interesting to see how far I can go, although the promise of been able to play at anytime is actually a factor in what is keeping me from playing. I do look forward to when I can play again and spend time with my videogames.

#### **Week Four**

During the final week of my abstinence exercise, I came close on a number of occasions to slipping and playing my Diablo III. I have the game saved as an icon on my desktop computer so it is easy for me just to click and open the game. On two occasions during the fourth week, I came close to opening the game and playing. On both occasions, I was able to shut the game down before it actually opened up and so I feel I have not broken my abstinence. During the fourth week, I spent a lot of time on social media, which show I have replaced one habit with another. Since I have decided to continue my abstinence after the fourth week, I most focus on reducing the amount of time I spend on social media and my phone. I have noticed during this period my phone usage has increased and, for the first time, I have used more than my maximum amount of data usage on my phone.

Looking back at the last four weeks, it may have been a better option to abstain from my phone rather than video games. The only reason I did not is because I need my phone to stay in touch with family back in the UK and this is especially important following the death of my father. Over time, video games have become a significant part of my life and, despite at least two attempts in the past to stop playing and sell all my game systems, I could never manage to do it, as they have become an important part of my life.

During the last four weeks, despite spending more time on phone and social media, I have put some time aside for social activities and reading. I have also dedicated more time to my college work, allowing me to work more effectively college studies. I have been less anxious about my college work and been able to complete assignments more quickly than otherwise may have been the case. In addition, I have been able to put more time aside for work, have graded more papers, and spend more time lesson planning than I would of if I had not given up video gaming. Despite this success, I do see myself returning to video games at some point as I see them as a great stress reliever and help to reduce my anxiety and depression at least in the short term.

### **Conclusions**

After four weeks of not playing video games, I feel relatively calm and relaxed. Research evidence suggest this is often not the case with people who are video game addicts and that video game addiction, which is a behavioral addiction, experience shared mental and physical symptoms which characterize addiction. “For example, individuals with behavioral addictions and individuals with substance addictions both present with the shared core feature of a failure to resist an impulse, drive or temptation to perform an act that is harmful to the person or others” (Wong & Hodgins, 2014, p. 195). In may case, I only modernly experienced such symptoms, but I did struggle to resist the impulse to play and I am starting to see how such an addiction could be harmful to others and myself. I came close a number of times to slipping during the abstinence activity, but maintained abstinence during the entire four week period.

From my experiences of the abstinence exercise, I have concluded that video game addiction is an addiction that deserves classification in the DSM. The American

Medical Association “proposed the addition of a diagnosis for video game addiction” (Wong & Hodgins, 2014, p. 195) into the DSM-5. However, the American Psychiatric Association “responded with a cautionary statement against prematurely classifying video game addiction as a mental disorder and suggested that more research is needed before it can be considered for inclusion as a formal diagnosis” (APA, as cited in Wong & Hodgins, 2014, p. 195). As a result, the term “Internet Use Gaming Disorder will be included in an appendix of the DSM-V to encourage further study” (APA, as cited in Wong & Hodgins, 2014, p. 195).

Based on what I learned from the abstinence exercise, addiction is a difficult disorder to deal with and, at times, the cravings to use a substance or engage in an addictive behavior can be very strong. This makes it very difficult for those who are addicted to break with their substance use or addictive behavior and can therefore pose a challenge both to a client and their counselor. As I evolve into my role of clinical mental health counselor, I will be mindful of addictions and just how overwhelming and damaging they can be to both the client and their families.

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