

When to put the controller down

Video games are seen as a young person hobby, but people of any age can get addicted

Entertainment evolves, but video games – no matter your console of choice – seem to be a constant. The games can have benefits, says Marla Nelson, LCPC, a psychotherapist at OSF HealthCare. They can lead to social connections and creativity sparks.

But, people young and old can get addicted to video games, possibly leading to serious mental health concerns.

"It can be a real problem," Nelson says.

What happens and why

"Sometimes people use [video games] as a coping mechanism. They use them to get away from things they'd rather be doing," Nelson explains. "They could bring you relief from depressive symptoms and anxiety. They allow you to get away from how you're feeling."

That, Nelson says, can lead to isolation and less in-person socialization. For adults, that can create rifts in relationships and at work. Or, you might focus so much on the game that you don't take care of yourself as well, and you appear disheveled. Young gamers could also be exposed to adult content (like weapons or gambling), leading to a warped worldview.

"There's a danger of desensitizing violence with video games and, really, TV too. Kids are exposed to much more than I was," Nelson says. "So I do think there's a reason content warnings are on games."

Ways to be a healthy gamer

- Know the warning signs. If you or someone you know is losing sleep or not taking care of other basic needs, it might be a sign they're on the console too much.

"If you're lying about how much you're playing, that's another indicator," Nelson also points out.

- For parents, take an active role in your child's hobbies.

"Talk to your kids about what they're playing, even if you don't know the game," Nelson suggests. "Sit and watch them. Kids are cool about showing you games. And if they're not willing to show you, maybe it's one they shouldn't be playing."

Nelson says you should also talk to kids about keeping priorities in order. Come up with a plan to balance video games, homework and more.

"Get down to the numbers. How long are they going to play each day?"

- Having a plan can work for adults, too.

"Write it down. What's appropriate? Can I follow these guidelines? Can I play video games for, for example, two hours a week? Is that reasonable? Can I stick to that? If I can't, why can't I?" Nelson says. "For some people, when they put it on paper, they find they can do it."

- Is it ever appropriate for dad to take the console away from the child? Or the wife to take it away from her husband?

"If you're not able to self-regulate and stick with those guidelines you set for yourself, then yeah it might be time to try abstinence temporarily," Nelson says. "Find things that the child can do instead. Let's set up some play dates."

"If it's an [adult] partner, have that conversation," Nelson adds. "Say: 'This is a problem. You've tried to regulate yourself, and I guess you can't. Maybe you should talk to somebody about that.'"

- Consider seeing a mental health professional. Nelson says there are even specific programs and centers to help with technology addiction.

"Get down to the nitty gritty about why you feel the need to game all the time," Nelson says.

Learn more

Read more about [mental health resources](#) available at OSF that can help build good technology habits. Some resources, such as [behavioral health navigators](#) and [support groups](#) at hospitals like the one Nelson works at, are available even if you are not an OSF patient.