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ARE YOU ADDICTED TO SEX?

To shopping? To wine? To porn? Things that we consider harmless or, even worse, pleasurable, can turn out to have far more serious undertones—because they all carry with them the potential to go from appealing to addictive. *Cosmo*, clues you into 'social addictions'. By **Pratishtha Dobhal**

■ Most of us find comfort in company; obviously as social creatures living in a giant global commune we also indulge in innumerable activities that seem socially acceptable just 'cause nobody seems to be shocked or horrified. And in this resilience and acceptability, how do you then judge whether socially accepted behaviour patterns do you any good? You are also quick in your defense with a smoke dangling from your fingers and purring 'Oh...I am just a social smoker'...

While some things are better left to premature assumptions (like how working your backside off at work could be a ticket to getting a promotion), there are others which could with a

little help from us, help you recognise that they're no longer harmless.

Dr Amy Fan and her colleagues at the National Centre for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion in Atlanta, US, recently concluded in a study that just two alcoholic drinks a day are enough to significantly increase the risk of high blood pressure and heart disease!

All those harmless night outs after a blah day at work don't seem so harmless when you think of the long term consequences. We seek comfort in alibis and acceptability where social situations are concerned. Here, 12 socially accepted behaviours that could be... mild, harmful or dangerous. Get

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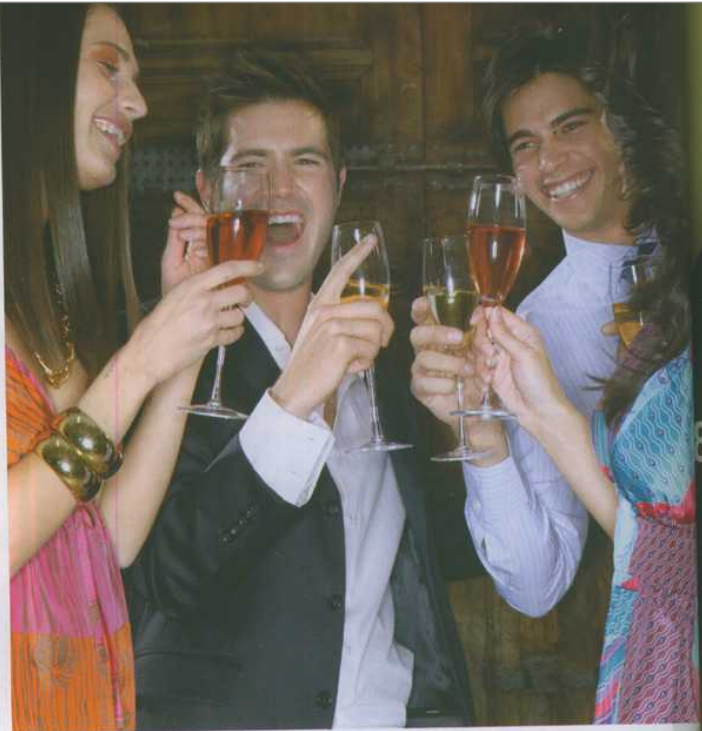
a reality check which could do you good in the long run!

1 "A DRINK FOR TWO?" SOCIAL ALCOHOLISM

According to Dr Rohit Garg, Senior Resident, AIIMS (All Indian Institute of Medical Sciences), "One might start by consuming alcohol on only certain occasions. However, over a period of time you can become tolerant to the same quantity and increase your consumption levels to get the same effect." Alcoholism is not simply related to the amount someone drinks. Alcoholism begins when an individual is controlled by the need to drink rather than being in control of their alcohol consumption. The current recommended safe drinking limits are up to 21 units a week for men and up to 14 units a week for women. One unit of alcohol is the amount found in half a pint of ordinary strength of beer or one small glass of wine. The reason the safe alcohol limit is lower in women as compared to men is because our body water content is less and therefore alcohol has a greater effect on us.

Dr Garg says, "When one starts to get restless, can't sleep well late into the night, experiences tremors, decreased concentration and irritability, that's when you should start to worry about all those late night outs with your mates! They happen because you want them to happen, and the fact that you are not drinking alone allows you to reason that you are not addicted to alcohol when you actually may crave it at the end of the day!"

Alcohol addiction impairs your cognitive functioning, i.e. memory, attention and concentration. While there are innumerable problems that arise because of alcohol consumption, there are also ways in which you can contain the problem from spilling over into something more serious. Dr Megha Hazuria Gore, Psychiatry, Mental Health and Behaviour Science Department, Max Healthcare says, "Alcohol consumption



THE CURRENT SAFE DRINKING LIMIT FOR WOMEN IS UPTO 14 UNITS IN A WEEK. ONE UNIT IS EQUIVALENT TO A SMALL GLASS OF WINE.

has a glass ceiling when it comes to diagnosing a person as an addict. All young people need to bear in mind that at the pretext of catching up with friends, they shouldn't make excuses for a few bottoms up! Bear in mind the number of times in a week you go out drinking and if it's higher than you're comfortable with, then cut that number by half at least and the same goes for the alcohol consumed!"

2 "BUT IT'S ONLY A DRAG..." SOCIAL SMOKING

According to Wikipedia, about 1.3 billion people in the world smoke, and the number is on the rise, thanks to the stages of quiet experimentation most

of us find thrill in as youngsters. Dr Garg says, "Nicotine is one of the most addictive substances around. It is at least at par with Heroin as far as its addictive properties are concerned. Most people who smoke once or twice become dependent or addicted to it. Although it is known to have a relaxing effect on most people, it is also one of the major causes of lung cancer." According to a report published by WHO (World Health Organisation) in 2002, smoking related-diseases kill one in 10 adults globally, or cause four million deaths worldwide. By 2030, if current trends continue, smoking will kill one in six people.

Alarming, to say the least! But in your defense you wail that you smoke only when you are out with friends. However, here's a reality check

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3 "LET'S SEX IT UP!" RANDOM SEX ADDICTION

In the *Handbook of Addictive Disorders*, by Robert Holman Coombs, Coomb says, "The majority of sex addicts have other family members with addictions. As a result children of sex addicts get inadequate nurturing." According to Dr Garg, you could be addicted to sex when you feel that only sexual intercourse with a partner is the foundation of any relationship with the opposite sex. Many kids who come from broken homes find themselves in this rut and eventually start equating random acts of intercourse with various partners as normal. According to proponents of the concept, sexual addicts may enjoy frequent sexual intercourse and other sexual activities including sexual fantasies, but the key to this addiction is more the enjoyment of the journey rather than the destination. That is, sexual addicts do not require orgasmic event in order to feel accomplished in the pursuit of their addiction. This is why sex addicts are sometimes referred to as "chemical addicts", because of the high dose of brain chemicals that are released during sexual activity, arousal and sexual fantasising.

Pick the flava that gets you in the mood!





BY 2030, IF CURRENT TRENDS CONTINUE, SMOKING WILL KILL ONE IN SIX PEOPLE ACCORDING TO A REPORT PUBLISHED BY WHO.

that'll get you back on track as soon as possible... Dr Megha Hazuria Gore says, "Even if you are smoking say two cigarettes in a week while out with friends, it's not like it reduces the risk of lung cancer later on. Smoking two is as bad as smoking say a pack in a week. Moreover, if any opportunity you get at a social gathering becomes an excuse to light up means you are addicted to it. Your body after all is craving it." Researchers call people who bum a smoke at parties and are *just* social smokers—Chippers. The term is a slang for heroin users who try to avoid addiction by infrequent use of small drug doses. It's not a strategy that often works for heroin, or for nicotine, says Elizabeth E. Lloyd-Richardson, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Psychiatry and Health Behaviour at Brown University, Providence, R.I. US.

"I hear this all the time when I am counselling," said Dr Vanessa Tatum, a spokeswoman for the American Lung Association. "When I ask women between 21 and 30 whether they smoke, I'd say about 75 percent of them say, 'No, not really.' They don't think of themselves as smokers, and some of them are smoking a pack or more every weekend." Experts are concerned about the growing number of social smokers and the severe health hazards they are courting. So while you might be just a Chipper as of now, you could do correcting that bit!

4 "YOU LOOK SO HOT!" SOCIAL FLIRTING

Flirting is a great way to meet people and practice your charms on someone. Healthy flirting is when you can tease or talk to a person of the opposite sex in front of anyone, and you don't end up making sexual advances or promises, and touch or tease without suggestive sexual behaviour.

Flirting, according to popular belief and research, can be a liberating form of play, a game with suspense and ambiguities that brings joys of its own. Some flirts appear to want to prolong

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the interaction as it's pleasurable and erotic in its own right, regardless of where it might lead and what direction it might take. Dr Gore says, "Flirting is pretty harmless till the time you don't go overboard with it! For instance, if you vie for attention even from your best friend's boyfriend or any guy for that matter, it's indicative of a lack of self esteem. If you crave attention at all times—you are clearly compensating for missing elements in your own life."

**5 "TRIPPIN' ON A TOKE?"
DOPING ADDICTION**

The International Olympic Committee defines doping as the use of an artifice,



**6 "PILING ON!"
EATING ADDICTION**

The effects of an eating disorder on a person's emotional and physical well-being can be devastating. Eating out with friends is one thing, but being consumed and completely obsessed by it is a different ball game altogether. The most common eating disorder is now thought to be Binge Eating Disorder (or compulsive overeating) where people have

"binges" where they eat more food than they would wish, usually in a short period of time, and very often alone. The binges are very often accompanied by a feeling of shame and disgust with themselves. Shockingly, it has now been estimated that up to 50% of obese people may actually be suffering from binge eating problems. According to Dr Garg, eating can become a problem bordering even on addiction when you:

1. Start avoiding social situations as eating addiction mostly demands that everything is done in secrecy and the person becomes increasingly withdrawn;
2. You suffer from depression and anxiety due to lack of social interaction, coupled with poor nutrition. The good news is that frequent lunches can't be classified as an eating addiction because the addict likes to be alone in most cases.

whether substance or a method, which can harm an athlete's health and/or is capable of enhancing his/her performance. Drug addiction also raises the issue of potential harmful effects on the development of new neurons in adults. Saurabh Jha*, 28, Marketing head, says, "I believe it's better to smoke a joint once a week than smoke a cigarette everyday. The high it gives you can't beat anything else in the world... I start tripping like nobody's business when we are all sitting down and playing taxi. I think I am pretty sorted and definitely not a junkie!" Dr Gore thinks it's an interesting rebuttal. However, according to her, smoking up is harmful, period! She adds, "If he thinks doing it once a week does not make him an addict, then ask him if he looks forward to the getting together session anxiously, week after week. If he does, then clearly he feels the need for it, and it's the need which makes him a 'dependent'. Moreover, neuroplastic changes which are brought about by repeated exposure to drugs are relatively permanent."





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1. **Preoccupation**—the addict becomes completely engrossed with sexual thoughts or fantasies.
2. **Ritualisation**—the addict follows special routines in search for sexual stimulation like porn material, which intensifies the experience and may be more important than reaching orgasm.
3. **Compulsive sexual behaviour**—the addict's specific sexual acting-out.
4. **Despair**—the acting out does not lead to normal sexual satisfaction, but to feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness, depression, and the like.

Porn addicts spend whole days consumed by sexual thoughts. They develop elaborate fantasies, find new

9 "NETWORKING?" ADDICTED TO SOCIAL NETWORKING

Increasing your social circle by leaps and bounds is a pretty mundane preoccupation most of us indulge in, however if your life depends on the number of friends on your list going from 200 to 500 then social networking may be more than just a place to catch up, in your case. According an article that was published in the March issue of *American Journal of Psychiatry*, being too internet savvy can lead to mental disorders and can ruin your social life as users feel loneliness, irritation, depression and anger, when a computer cannot be accessed. Gauge your state of networking for yourself now!



7 "RETAIL THERAPY?" SHOPPING ADDICTION

Who doesn't like shopping?! All of us need a little retail therapy after a hard day at work. You've got your first pay cheque...great! Blow up the money on a dress you've been lusting after for weeks! It's a great excuse to catch up with friends and have an absolute blast shuttling from one changing room to the other in a gazillion stores. But when does shopping become an addiction? It's when you are traipsing from one shop to the other like a manic depressant blowing up your credit card limit and going back home happy with the clothes but worried about the consequences of not actually being able to afford that Dior bag. According to www.addiction.lovetoknow.com/wiki/ a shopping addiction is an uncontrollable obsession. When people who are addicted to shopping are feeling low, they will purchase unnecessary items in order to feel better about themselves. Sounds familiar?

8 "CAUGHT IN THE ACT!" PORN ADDICTION

Pornography addiction can be defined as a psychological addiction to, or dependence upon, pornography, theoretically characterised by obsessive viewing, reading, and thinking about pornography and sexual themes to the detriment of other areas of one's own life. Online pornography addiction involves pornography obtained via the internet. The behaviour of porn addicts is comparable to the behaviour of alcoholics and drug addicts, where porn acts like a drug. Porn addiction has been in the past diagnosed as a male problem, but recent studies suggest that it's prevalent among women too. Porn addicts may enjoy frequent sexual intercourse and other sexual activities including sexual fantasies. A certain chemical in the brain (dopamine) is released when one is fantasising while reading or watching porn.

Porn addiction generally conforms to a cycle:

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focus on are neglected.

There are also some critics who argue that people who regularly view pornography are able to have normal relationships and are desensitised to less stimulating materials. At the end of the day, like any other addiction, you need to assess whether you are absorbed by it all the time or just occasionally!

10 "THE RUMOUR, MILL HAS IT..." ADDICTED TO GOSSIP

Gossiping is a universal social phenomenon. It's the result of complex interaction between the individual psyche and the social world. Gossip at times destroys friendships, marriages and even business partnerships. "Gossip is essentially vocal grooming," says says Robin Dunbar, a University of Liverpool psychology professor and the author of *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*. But that doesn't always mean, adds Dunbar, that it should form the mainstay of human bonding. Contrary to what we think, gossip doesn't always result in reduced stress, comradesly feelings, and increased odds for thriving in society. According to Dr Garg, "If you look at the nature of someone's

11 "SOUNDS OF SILENCE?" SPIRITUAL ADDICTION

Spiritual research conducted by the Spiritual Science Research Foundation (SSRF) over the past 20 years has revealed that 80% of problems in life have their root cause in the spiritual dimension. However, forgetting that a world exists beyond your zen like state can really end up making one feel really disconnected to people around. There's no dearth of people lapping up to spirituality, but it can monopolise a normal way of life if being one with god is the only thing that you are concerned with.

Spirituality addicts often lose touch with reality retreating to an inner sanctum where even reasoning can become hard, according to Dr Garg. Who knew there were so many ways to prove... "Too much of a good thing"...right!

12 "ALL FOR A HOT BOD!" FITNESS ADDICTION

Fitness addiction can be as addictive as 'recreational' drugs like cocaine, alcohol and nicotine, especially when everyone around you also wants to be in the best shape of their life. Fitness addiction can be in two ways i.e. either exercising too much or restricting food. The scientific evidence behind exercising as an addiction is that laboratory mice deprived of their daily

'fix' on the exercise wheel displayed measurable withdrawal symptoms in particular regions of their brains. Exercise addiction is when...

1. The person may continue to exercise despite harm to the body particularly if the person is already malnourished e.g. despite permanent knee injuries. Stress fractures are very common in such people as danger is heightened by malnutrition.
2. Give up on their social life in order to satisfy their thirst for exercise or start their schedule early morning!
3. Exercise takes priority over everything else in life.
4. Missing their regular exercise session makes them irritable, agitated and one may become aggressive as well.
5. They become more anxious while fighting out the urge to exercise.



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