

Impulse Control

Introduction

Impulses are thoughts that inspire behavior. Whether or not you actually do the behavior depends on how much control you have. As humans, many of our impulses are directed towards bad behavior. Alone, this is not the problem. The problem begins when there is not enough control to prevent us from engaging in behaviors that are harmful or socially unacceptable. Disorders of impulse control stem either from lack of internal control or a lack of external control or both.

Symptoms

- Aggressive acting out
- Assaulting others
- Destroying property
- Compulsive stealing
- Setting fires
- Maladaptive gambling
- Inflicting self-harm
- Substance abuse

Types of Impulse Control Disorders

- Intermittent Explosive Disorder- We will see episodes of aggressive outbursts resulting in either destruction of property or physical assaults of others. Typically, these individuals will not take responsibility for their loss of control and either blames their victim, life circumstances, or some third party that “caused” their uncontrolled anger. Lack of control is a central part of the problem, and inability to accept responsibility for the aggression helps to alleviate guilt.
- Kleptomania- This impulse control problem involves the compulsive stealing of items not needed for their monetary value. There is usually a feeling of tension before stealing, and a sense of pleasure at the time of the theft.
- Pyromania- This psychological problem primarily involves setting fires for pleasure and experiencing a sense of relief or gratification from the experience. This does not include fires set for monetary gain, to hide criminal activity, or to express anger. The individual usually has a significant fascination with fire.
- Pathological Gambling- This impulse control problem consists in persistent maladaptive gambling that creates serious life problems for the individual. This is different from recreational gambling, and is diagnosed by the impact it has on your life, and by the loss of control, rather than the amount of money gambled or lost.
- Trichotillomania- This involves pulling your own hair habitually, to the point of seeing noticeable hair loss, and experiencing pleasure or tension relief from the behavior. This does not include hair loss as a result of medical conditioning, and the disorder must result in distress or impairment in life functioning.

Things you can do for yourself:

- Seek professional help. Telling a therapist increases your chances of working through your problems. There is always hope in overcoming impulse disorders, no matter how severe.
- Tell a trusted friend or family member.
- Identify “triggers” to your behavior and develop better ways of controlling it.
- Replace unwanted behaviors with new healthy behaviors.
- Participation in Gamblers Anonymous (if applicable) is often helpful, but the individual should also seek therapy, especially in cases of with underlying depression.

Things you can do for someone you are concerned about:

- Listen and take them seriously. Avoid simple solutions. Recognize that the person is taking a risk by opening up to you.
- Suggest counseling and remain supportive.
- Do not avoid the subject; talk openly and honestly with them.
- If you feel the problem needs immediate attention, consider telling a professional counselor, doctor, or their parents. Get help for your friend.

If you are concerned about yourself or someone that is presenting these symptoms or behaviors, one should be aware that there are many facilities and a variety of counselors to help individuals deal with impulse control disorders. If you are a University of Louisiana at Lafayette student, and are concerned and would like to speak to a counselor, please contact the Counseling and Testing Center at 337-482-6480 for more information. The center offers unlimited confidential sessions, free of charge to all students and university faculty and staff members.