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### Addiction: What is it?

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#### Recommended Citation

University of Montana–Missoula. Office of University Relations, "Addiction: What is it?" (1998). *University of Montana News Releases, 1928, 1956-present*. 15739.

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# The University of Montana

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## **NEWS RELEASE**

This release is available electronically on INN (News Net.)

Nov. 9, 1998

**Contact:** Michael Hufford, psychology assistant professor, (406) 243-4371.

**ADDICTION: WHAT IS IT?** (Sidebar)

**MISSOULA--**

Can a person be addicted to gambling? Sex? Shopping? Certain TV programs?

Technically no, says Michael Hufford, an assistant professor of psychology at The University of Montana-Missoula who has studied addictive behavior for years. Addiction means either abuse of or dependence upon a chemical substance such as alcohol or other drugs.

“It is certainly true that gambling, compulsive shopping, sex and any number of human vices have been labeled addictions,” Hufford says. “But there’s no consensus whether or not those can be considered addictions. My rule of thumb is, What purpose does it serve to call something an addiction?” If calling something an addiction can help clients overcome difficulty in acknowledging they have a problem, that’s fine, Hufford says. But from a public policy standpoint, people need to be careful about what they call an addiction.

The scientific definition of addiction has two categories, substance abuse and substance dependence. Substance abuse is the less severe, Hufford says. Technically, it’s defined as a maladaptive pattern of substance use leading to significant impairment or distress. Here are the criteria. It takes just one of these to qualify a person as a substance abuser.

- Failure to fulfill major obligations at work, school or home.
- Recurrent substance use in situations that are physically hazardous.

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- Recurrent substance-related legal problems.
- Recurrent persistent social or interpersonal problems caused or worsened by the effects of the substance.

“The general notion here is that the substance-abuse category reflects that you are starting to have problems,” he says. “(Substance use) is starting to elbow out other important aspects of your life.”

Some people go on to develop full-blown substance dependence, which is the more severe of the two categories.

“It, too, is this maladapted pattern of substance use leading to clinically significant impairment or distress,” Hufford says. “But here you’re looking for the classic things like tolerance -- more of the substance to achieve the same effect ... and withdrawal when you stop taking the substance.” Hufford also lists several other classic symptoms of substance dependence:

- Repeated unsuccessful attempts to cut down the substance use.
- Increased amounts of time spent in activities necessary to obtain the substance or recover from its effects.
- Important social or recreational activities given up because of the substance use.
- Continued substance use despite knowledge that it is causing or worsening recurrent physical or psychological problems.

Hufford says anyone with three or more of those symptoms qualifies as substance dependent.

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