

Choosing Abstinence or Moderation

Addictions exert a powerful influence on the brain that manifests in three distinct ways: a craving for the object of addiction, a loss of control over the addiction, and continuing involvement with the addiction despite adverse consequences. Addictions can include things we take into our bodies such as alcohol, drugs, tobacco or food, but also behavioral addictions such as gambling, sex, shopping, or even video games.

Do you have an addiction? If you answer “yes” to one of the following statements, then you are exhibiting some degree of an addiction.

- Do you use more of the substance or engage in the behavior more often than you did in the past?
- Do you have withdrawal symptoms, including a significant change in your mood, when you don't have the substance or engage in the behavior?
- Have you ever lied to anyone about your use of the substance or extent of your behavior?

If you are ready to address your addiction, the first step is to decide whether you will strive towards moderation or choose to completely abstain. There is no strong research that suggests either moderation or abstinence is more successful in overcoming an addiction, but rather it is something you should consider carefully with a trained therapist or counselor.

To begin, rate the following statements as honestly as you can on a 1 to 10 scale, with 1 being strongly agree and 10 being strongly disagree.

1. _____ I am highly motivated to stop this addiction.
2. _____ My current circumstances (income, relationships, health, stress level, etc.) will help me stop this addiction.
3. _____ In other areas of life I usually have a great deal of self-control.
4. _____ I'm usually very good at analyzing a problem and making decisions.
5. _____ I am not breaking any law by my addictive behavior.
6. _____ I am not endangering my health with my addiction.
7. _____ In the past, I have been able to easily moderate my addictive behavior.
8. _____ I have a lot of support from friends and family.
9. _____ I have support from trusted professionals.

Total Score _____

Generally speaking a higher score would indicate that you would be better off choosing to completely abstain from your addictive behavior, however addictions can be very complex, and the choice of how to treat them should be discussed with an experienced counselor or therapist.

Answering the following questions will help in making this decision.

Why do you want to stop this addiction?

What are the immediate consequences of your addiction?

What are the longer term consequences of your addiction?

What are the things in your life that could help you stop your addiction?

What are the things in your life that could be obstacles to overcoming your addiction?

What are the areas of your life where you feel most control?

Write down times in your life that you have carefully analyzed a problem and made good decisions.

To what extent does your addiction affect your health?

Write down any other relevant health problems.

What kinds of things do you do to keep yourself healthy?

Write down what happened in the past when you have tried to moderate your addiction.

Write down what happened in the past when you tried to give up your addiction entirely.

Write down the names of people in your life who can help you overcome your addiction.

Write down professionals in your life who can help you overcome your addiction.

Adapted in part from *Sex, Drugs, Gambling & Chocolate*, by Dr. A. Thomas Hovrath, Impact Publishers, 2004.