Calls to gambling and gaming support centers have increased since the start of the virus.

The American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) states addiction is an inability to abstain from something that may cause, "impairment in behavioral control or cravings" plus cause significant problems with one’s behaviors and interpersonal relationships. ASAM also states addiction is a chronic brain disorder, not simply a behavioral problem. An addicted individual may experience physical and psychological withdrawal symptoms when the addiction is taken away. Similar to other addictions, individuals suffering from video game addiction use the virtual fantasy world to connect with real people through the Internet, as a substitution for real-life human connection. These individuals use the Internet to access massive multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs*) and multi-user domain games (MUDs**).

Video game addiction is compulsive or uncontrolled and has been an increasing concern for not just parents anymore. Video games include computer games, console games, arcade machine games, and even cell phone, and advanced calculator games. Games can also be embedded in social networking sites, such as Facebook. While some see it as a way to stay connected and entertained during the pandemic, there are risks to spending too much time gaming. It’s become a way for millions of quarantined people to pass the time and stay connected to others without spreading coronavirus — and health officials have applauded the idea. But for some users, the binge comes with a dark side: internet and gaming addiction. Like problem gamblers, video-game addicts are under a number of pressures, including stress, isolation and unemployment. And they’re being encouraged to engage in the very behavior they struggle with. Psychiatrists are seeing a spike in video-game-addicted patients, and support groups are seeing members relapsing globally. “Having these entertainment options is helping people to stay home and not feel like they have to go out and meet people,” Ray Chambers, the WHO’s ambassador for global strategy. But some gamers may struggle to get their lives back on track after the pandemic is over. Here is one story of a “reformed gamer”:

Cam Adair, who is 31 and now runs the support website GameQuitters.com, used to play games like 'Counter-Strike: Global Offensive' and 'StarCraft' for 16 hours a day. That made it difficult to hold down a job. In 2011, he quit cold turkey, then relapsed, then quit again. He still craves gaming regularly. He is now in coronavirus lockdown with his girlfriend in a flat in Thailand, and distracting himself with work and playing music on his DJ equipment. “I’ve seen a lot of reports from members saying that they are relapsing,” said Adair, whose website serves 75,000 users a month.
The World Health Organization added “gaming disorder” to the 2018 version of its medical reference book, International Classification of Diseases. But the American Psychiatry Association’s manual, the DSM-5, didn’t. (So far, gambling is the only “activity” listed as a possible addiction.) Research with people who are addicted to video games shows that they have poorer mental health and cognitive functioning including poorer impulse control and ADHD symptoms, compared to people who do not have video game addiction. So how do you know if your gaming habit is turning into an addiction?

The DSM-5 does include a section to help people and doctors know the warning signs of problem video gaming. These problems can happen whether you play online or offline. Here’s what to look for in yourself or someone close to you — your partner, a child, or a friend. Of course this pandemic lockdown could be an exception to the rule but it can also exacerbate the symptoms. You need to have five or more of these signs to have a potential problem, according to criteria that were proposed in the DSM-5:

- Thinking about gaming all or a lot of the time
- Feeling bad when you can’t play
- Needing to spend more and more time playing to feel good
- Not being able to quit or even play less
- Not wanting to do other things that you used to like
- Having problems at work, school, or home because of your gaming
- Playing despite these problems
- Lying to people close to you about how much time you spend playing
- Using gaming to ease bad moods and feelings

**How can we Prevent a Gaming Problem?? Is it too late?**

To keep the amount of time spent gaming under control, try these tips for adults and kids alike:

- Set time limits for play and stick to them.
- Keep phones and other gadgets out of the bedroom so you won’t play into the night.
- Do other activities every day, including exercise. This will lower the health risks of sitting and playing for long stretches of time.
- For kids, find more educational games for them to enjoy.

Most gamers will not want to seek treatment until they understand the scope of the problem. A loving, supportive intervention may be used to help them face their addiction. Friends, relatives and respected associates can come together to share any adverse effects they believe gaming is having on the addicted person. The best way to conduct an intervention is to use a professional interventionist who is trained in organizing and running an intervention. Staging an impromptu intervention may be unsuccessful and can damage the relationships between the addicted person and his or her loved ones.

Gaming addiction is in the same category as gambling. Treatment services can be found locally at Anchor Recovery in Watertown, NY at 315-836-3460 or contact Gamblers Anonymous: Compulsive Gambling Help at (855) 222-5542. Or call me, Christine, to discuss other options. — 315-772-2597.