

# CANDY CRUSH

## When “just one more level” becomes hard to stop

Understanding reward loops, habit-forming game design and the point at which enjoyable play may begin to interfere with everyday life.

PLAY • ENJOY • BE AWARE • KEEP CONTROL

### A game can be enjoyable and still be difficult to put down

Candy Crush is designed to be played in short, repeatable rounds. That can make it an easy way to relax, fill a few spare minutes or shift attention away from stress. For most people, gaming remains one enjoyable activity among many. The important question is not simply how often somebody opens a game, but what begins to happen around it. Does a planned ten-minute break repeatedly become an hour? Is sleep being delayed because the next level feels too close to leave? Are responsibilities, conversations, meals or other interests being pushed aside? Is the game becoming the main way of escaping uncomfortable feelings? These changes can be more useful to notice than the number of levels completed.

It is important not to label ordinary enthusiasm as addiction. The World Health Organization describes gaming disorder in terms of impaired control, gaming taking increasing priority over other activities, and continuing or escalating despite negative consequences. The pattern must cause significant impairment in important areas of life and would normally have been evident for at least 12 months. WHO also stresses that gaming disorder affects only a small proportion of people who play digital or video games.

### Why “one more level” can feel so compelling

Puzzle games repeatedly place a small goal within reach: clear the board, beat the level, preserve a streak, earn a reward or try again after a near success. The brain does not need a huge prize for a behaviour to become strongly learned. Repetition, anticipation and immediate feedback can create a powerful habit loop. A difficult level can also create unfinished-business tension: stopping may feel less satisfying than trying once more, particularly when the player believes the next attempt could be successful.

Candy Crush and similar mobile games may also contain lives, boosters, rewards, events and opportunities to obtain extra moves or continue playing. These features do not mean that a person will develop a disorder, and they are not proof that a game is inherently harmful. They can, however, make stopping points less clear. For somebody already using gaming to regulate boredom, anxiety, loneliness, frustration or emotional overload, the constant availability of another small task can become especially attractive.

### When play may be becoming a problem

Look for change rather than judge yourself by a single session. You might notice that you open the game automatically without consciously deciding to play, repeatedly extend the time you intended to spend on it, feel unusually irritable when interrupted, hide how much you play or spend, or continue even though you are tired and need sleep. Other signs can include losing interest in activities that used to matter, playing during conversations or responsibilities, spending more than intended, or relying on the game whenever difficult emotions appear.

None of these signs alone provides a diagnosis. They are prompts to become curious about what the game is doing for you and what it may be beginning to cost. Sometimes the issue is less about the game itself and more about what is happening underneath it: exhaustion, loneliness, overwhelm or a need for predictability. Some neurodivergent people may find clear rules, repetition, visual feedback and immediate completion particularly regulating. Understanding the function of the behaviour creates more options than simply telling yourself to stop.

## Check in with yourself

| QUESTION                                                 | WHAT TO NOTICE                                                                                   |
|----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Do I decide when I play, or open the game automatically? | Automatic play can become strongly cued by boredom, stress, place or routine.                    |
| Can I stop at the time I planned?                        | Repeatedly moving the stopping point matters particularly when sleep or responsibilities suffer. |
| What feeling am I trying to change?                      | Gaming may provide relief from anxiety, loneliness, overwhelm, frustration or emotional pain.    |
| What is being displaced?                                 | Look at sleep, relationships, work, movement, meals, finances and activities that matter to you. |

## Practical ways to regain choice

Create a stopping point before you begin rather than negotiating with yourself once you are absorbed. Decide whether you are playing for ten minutes, during a particular break or for a set number of attempts, and use an external timer if time disappears easily. Turn off non-essential game notifications if they repeatedly pull you back in. Avoid using the game as the final activity before sleep if it keeps you awake. If spending is part of the difficulty, remove stored payment details or use device-level purchase controls so buying requires an extra deliberate step.

It can also help to replace the function rather than simply remove the behaviour. If the game gives your brain a transition after work, build another short transition beside it: music, a shower, a walk, a sensory activity, a puzzle away from the phone, or ten quiet minutes. If it helps you manage distress, consider what additional forms of support could sit alongside it. The aim is not necessarily never to play again. For many people the aim is to make playing a choice again rather than something that feels as though it is choosing for them.

## When to seek more support

Consider speaking with a GP or mental-health professional if gaming is causing significant difficulty with sleep, work, education, relationships, finances or day-to-day functioning; if repeated attempts to cut back are unsuccessful; or if gaming has become your main way of coping with emotional distress. A professional can explore the wider picture rather than focusing only on screen time, including anxiety, depression, ADHD, autism, trauma, loneliness, burnout, compulsive behaviour or other pressures contributing to the pattern.

Gaming disorder is recognised in ICD-11, but it is not the same as simply playing a lot. Assessment looks at loss of control, increasing priority given to gaming, persistence despite negative consequences and significant impairment. You do not need to decide first whether the word “addiction” fits before asking for support because a behaviour is affecting your life.

## A message from me

Sometimes we reach for something repetitive because our brain needs somewhere simple to go. A game can offer colour, order, predictable rules and a small sense of achievement when the rest of life feels complicated. I do not think shame helps us understand that. I would rather ask: what is this giving you, what is it taking from you, and do you still feel that you have a choice? If the answer is becoming uncomfortable, that is information. Start small, notice the pattern and make one change that gives you a little more space between the urge to play and the decision to play.

## Clinical notes and sources

World Health Organization (WHO), ICD-11 Gaming disorder (6C51), and WHO guidance on disorders due to addictive behaviours. WHO describes gaming disorder as impaired control over gaming, increasing priority of gaming over other activities, and continuation or escalation despite negative consequences, with significant impairment in functioning. WHO notes that only a small proportion of people who game develop gaming disorder. Candy Crush is used here as an example of a mobile puzzle game; this resource does not diagnose individual players and does not suggest that playing the game is itself an addiction.

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