Just can't get enough;
Can gambling, shopping, sex and gaming really be as addictive as the hardest drugs? Helen Phillips investigates

BYLINE: Helen Phillips

SECTION: FEATURES; Cover Story; Pg. 30-35

LENGTH: 3698 words

DAVID had been a normal, happy child, growing up in an English seaside town. But by the time he was 18 he was miserable, withdrawn and rebellious. He skipped school, got angry when confronted, and stole from family and friends. He had a habit to fuel, and it took up all of his time. He lost sleep, had anxiety attacks, and sometimes got violent when he couldn't get what he needed.

David, his parents, and psychologist Mark Griffiths of Nottingham Trent University in the UK, who gathered his case history, have no doubt that David was an addict. It changed his personality and behaviour, gave him a high, and dominated his thoughts for four years. The word addict usually triggers images of drug abusers or alcoholics, yet David's "addiction" was not to any chemical. It was to slot machines, the most innocuous-looking of gambling games, freely accessible to school kids and open all hours, all year round.

Was David's problem as serious as that of a heroin addict? Is it sensible to lump such behaviour together with addiction to drugs? Granted, the term addiction is bandied about a little too readily by chocaholics, workaholics and teens who spend a bit too long playing the latest computer game. "We can't define it simply by excess," says Griffiths. Yet two decades of research have convinced him that excessive behaviour can cross the line and become every bit as real an addiction as being physically dependent on a drug.

He's not alone. Several studies of the brain and behaviour back the idea that there's very little biological difference between what goes on in the head of a gambling addict and that of a crack addict. A growing number of researchers believe that the same processes lie behind all addictions, behavioural or chemical, whether it's gambling or shopping, computer gaming, love, work, exercise, pornography, eating or sex. "They have more in common than different," says Sabine Grüsser-Sinopoli, who runs a clinic and research lab for behavioural addictions at the Charité Medical University in Berlin, Germany. "Addiction is all the same."
That's a controversial claim. There's a common perception that overindulgence in certain behaviours is