

FITNESS REPORT

IS YOUR TRACKER MAKING YOU CRAZY?

Health monitors are more popular than ever, but **Andrea Bartz** finds they could be a trigger for less-than-healthy behavior

COUNTING HER STEPS was never the point. When Anna Maltby Patil, 28, first got a Fitbit, the idea was to track her sleep and gain insight on her insomnia. The original goal was quickly abandoned—she was too good at lying perfectly still, fooling the sensor into thinking she was asleep—but she kept wearing the device and was surprised to discover that she rarely hit its 10,000-step goal. “I’d get really down on myself,” the New York City–based writer says. “It sounds crazy, but I felt like a failure when I didn’t get to 10K, so I’d pace around my apartment at night trying to hit the target.”

Patil is just one of about a kajillion women who check their phones and gadgets for daily health stats. More than 13 times as many fitness trackers were sold in 2014 than in 2012, according to consumer research firm NPD Group. And with the launch of the Apple Watch, which tracks not only how much you walk, but also how often you’re standing, self-monitoring neurosis is about to go into overdrive.

Despite the rise of the machines, little research has been published on the impact of health monitors. In general, “We see using these as a good thing,” says Kaiton Williams, a doctoral candidate at Cornell University who is studying how people use technology to understand themselves. Last year’s Digital Health Summit even included the panel discussion “Track-a-holism: A Disorder Worth Having?”

But that may be the problem: “These trackers can contribute to a sense of powerlessness,” says Laura Curtiss Feder, a clinical psychologist and coauthor of *Behavioral Addictions: Criteria, Evidence, and Treatment*. Consider the Jawbone Up



Some women won't sleep until they've reached their fitness tracker's daily goal.

user who won't make a quick run to the grocery store if she can't find her Jawbone to put on. Or take Williams: He quit baking after he spent the better part of a morning trying to calculate baking powder's caloric contribution to a finished cake.

Today's smart monitors also reward you with badges or little prizes to stimulate the brain's reward circuit, providing a rush similar to the kind seen in folks addicted to gambling or sex. Many also feature an all-or-nothing approach that makes 9,821 steps feel worlds away from 10,000. “They quantify goals in a way that fuels the black-and-white thinking that's a hallmark of depression and anxiety,” notes Feder.

What's more, our obsession with data points might actually hinder our fitness goals. “It isn't just the steps you do that count

toward improved health—it's the mind-body connection,” says Dr. Susan Blum, founder and director of Blum Center for Health in Rye Brook, New York. “You may lose that if you are only focused on external data.”

There's no formal diagnosis for tracker addiction, and doctors aren't sure if only those with underlying anxiety or OCD tendencies are at risk. But experts agree there is a better way to let gizmos guide you: “Think of them as a crutch to help you develop healthy habits,” Williams says. “At some point, you can fall away from using it.”

Patil, for one, ditched her device but still makes an effort to move more. “I'll go to the far-away coffee shop rather than the one across the street,” she says. “I think that's been helpful—in a healthy way.” **mc**