

Gambling Addiction

If you heard that the odds were good that gambling is now a legitimate and socially acceptable form of recreation, would you take that bet? You should, it would be one of the few bets that you'd win against the house. Riverboat gambling, casinos, Mega Million lotteries and the ability to play overseas via the internet have made gambling a booming enterprise. Unfortunately, the odds are almost always stacked against the players, who could even develop a chronic condition as a result of betting.

A compulsive gambler is someone who is unable to resist the urge to gamble, leading to severe social, legal, and financial consequences, according to The University of Illinois Medical Center. While some might believe that bingo isn't gambling, Gamblers Anonymous defines gambling as ANY betting or wagering, for self or others, whether for money or not, no matter how little or insignificant, where the outcome is uncertain or depends upon chance or 'skill'. The group also operates under the premise that the emotional disease (classified by the APA as an impulse disorder) can never be cured, but can be arrested.

Compulsive gambling differs from professional gambling or social gambling in that professionals and social betters are able to set risk limits and exhibit self-control. Compulsive gamblers will play all the time, for any reason. They will play to recoup losses, just as they would continue to play after a big win. Someone with a gambling problem will exhibit at least six or seven of the "signs of gambling" (see sidebar.)

Gambling can affect anyone, rich or poor, male or female, of any background. Like all compulsive behaviors, gambling addiction has biological, social, and psychological roots. Biologically, a compulsive gambler feels a rush of dopamine, the chemical in the body's pleasure center. For most gamblers, the pleasure center is already unresponsive to normal pleasure sources, leaving the person to turn to addictive behaviors to experience happiness. Socially, gambling can be an exciting group activity, such as at a casino, card tournament, or at the track. Psychologically, gambling provides an escape from everyday lives, despite the risk of the bets ruining a gamblers life.

Experts agree that we can inherit addictive and compulsive behavior tendencies from our parents, and indeed, according to Indiana University researchers, one third of problem gamblers have parents with similar afflictions and most were introduced to gambling by a family member when they were young. The younger a person is when introduced to gambling, the higher the odds they will develop a gambling problem.

The following are some characteristics of a person who is compulsive gambler, according to Gamblers Anonymous:

- **Inability And Unwillingness To Accept Reality** - escapes through gambling
- **Emotional Insecurity** - has to be part of the action
- **Immaturity** - wants to have good things in life without any great effort

- **Daydreaming** — a lot of time is spent creating images of all the wonderful things they are going to do after that big win. Typically after a significant win, gamblers continue gambling, usually losing all their winnings.

Left untreated, compulsive gambling can have devastating effects, including:

- Financial Ruin
- Legal Problems
- Isolation From Friends And Relatives
- Danger To Family (From Loan sharks And Other Illegal Methods Of Financing Gambling Habits.)
- Suicide Attempts
- Loss Of Employment
- Marital Problems

Signs of a Gambling Problem

- Most compulsive gamblers will answer YES to at least seven of the following questions.
- Did you ever lose time from work or school due to gambling?
- Has gambling ever made your home life unhappy?
- Does gambling affect your reputation?
- Have you ever felt remorse alter gambling?
- Have you ever gambled to get money with which to pay debts or otherwise solve financial difficulties?
- Has gambling caused a decrease in your ambition or efficiency?
- After losing, have you felt you must return as soon as possible to win back your losses?
- After a win, do you have a strong urge to win more?
- Have you often gambled until your last dollar was spent?
- Have you ever borrowed money to finance your gambling?
- Have you ever sold anything to finance gambling?
- Are you reluctant to use your "gambling money" For normal expenditures (bills, payments or food, clothing, etc.)?
- Has gambling made you careless of yourself or your family's welfare?
- Have you ever gambled to escape worry or trouble?
- Have you ever gambled longer than planned?
- Have you ever committed or considered committing an illegal act to finance gambling?
- Did gambling cause you to have difficulty in sleeping?
- Do arguments, disappointments, or frustrations create an urge to gamble?

- Did you ever celebrate good fortune with a few hours gambling?
- Have you ever considered self destruction or suicide as a result of your gambling?

Assessing Addictions:

Gambling vs. Substance Abuse

Differences:

- Gambling is a hidden addiction
- Can't overdose on gambling, there is no saturation point
- Compulsive gamblers can function at employment site
- Gambling can't be tested in a setting as in drugs
- Gambling does not require ingestion of a chemical for a high
- Fewer resources available for gamblers and their families
- Perception of the disease not easily related to the general public
- Prevention message not easily accepted by the community

Similarities:

- Inability to stop
- Denial
- Severe depression & mood swings
- Progressive disease with phases and stages
- Chasing the first win/high
- First drink/ First Win remembered
- Addiction used to escape from pain
- Preoccupation
- Low self-esteem and high ego
- Dysfunctional families
- High from gambling similar to rush from cocaine
- Use of rituals
- Affects finances

Getting a Grip on Gambling

Just as with alcohol or drug abuse, treatment for gambling requires recognition that there is a problem. Often, compulsive gamblers are compelled to seek treatment for their gambling by

family members. The gambler usually doesn't see a problem. Once a gambler recognizes his addiction, he must WANT to get help for treatment to work effectively. There are several treatments available:

- *Individual Therapy*
- *Group Therapy*
- *Support groups, similar to Alcoholics Anonymous, called Gambler's Anonymous.*

Abstinence principles that apply to other types of addiction are relevant in the treatment of a gambler. Some people gamble often, but they don't have a problem. Others only binge gamble, but they have a significant issue. Based on the extremes, experts agree that abstaining from betting is the only way to beat a gambling addiction.

The Three Stages of a Gambling Addiction

1. **Early Winning Stage:** Dependency develops as the individual bets more frequently and increases knowledge of odds to develop risks. They think they can "control" this behavior; and stop at any time. In this stage, they will rarely borrow money as winnings are usually enough to support continued gambling. This stage may continue for months or even years, and typically ends with a substantial win.
2. **Losing Stage:** They begin to gamble alone instead of with friends and bet large amounts of money they lose more. Out of frustration, they bet larger amounts and take more chances. Winnings are quickly depleted and they draw upon other resources to "break even". They feel a sense of urgency to replenish savings and may borrow money. They will try to cover up and lie about gambling, which alienates both family and friends.
3. **Desperation Stage:** The gamblers will disregard creditors, families and friends to take further risks. They may engage in illegal loans (loan sharking), thefts, or crimes. They often lose their families and jobs. Depression is common and suicide attempts are frequent.