

Let's talk about...

Problem Gambling

MENTAL ILLNESS DEMYSTIFIED

WHILE MOST CANADIANS GAMBLE RESPONSIBLY, GAMBLING HAS BECOME A SERIOUS PROBLEM FOR AN INCREASING NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN OUR COUNTRY. THE 2002 CANADIAN COMMUNITY HEALTH SURVEY ESTIMATES THAT 1.2 MILLION ADULT CANADIANS, OR 5% OF THE TOTAL ADULT CANADIAN POPULATION, ARE AT RISK OF EXPERIENCING A PROBLEM WITH GAMBLING, OR WERE PROBLEM GAMBLERS. AS MORE OPPORTUNITIES TO GAMBLE ARISE, INCLUDING CASINOS, SPORTS BETTING, SLOT MACHINES IN PUBS AND BARS, TELEPHONE BETTING, AND GAMBLING OVER THE INTERNET, THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO BECOME ADDICTED TO GAMBLING INCREASES.

Most people are able to gamble without risking a psychological addiction. Just as many people can have a glass or two of wine with dinner, so can they buy a lottery ticket, visit a racetrack, or spend an evening playing bingo in the local hall. For others, the ticket, visits, and evenings spent wagering are like a money pit into which they end up tossing their entire life's security.

Compulsive or pathological gambling is a progressive behaviour disorder in which a person has a psychological, uncontrollable preoccupation and urge to gamble. This results in excessive gambling, the outcome of which is the loss of time and money. It is often referred to as the 'hidden illness' because there are no physical or visual symptoms such as slurred speech, stumbling, or smell on the breath. Yet the effects of compulsive gambling can be as devastating as drug addiction and can result in financial and personal destruction.

The severity of a gambling problem can range from the occasional missed utility bill to life-threatening relationships with bookmakers and organized crime to suicide. Gambling addiction is also linked to other serious personal and social harms such as bankruptcy, family breakup, domestic abuse, assault, fraud, theft and even homelessness.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF A GAMBLING PROBLEM

- Spending large amounts of time gambling with little time for family, friends or other interests.
- Needing to gamble with increasing amounts of money to achieve the desired excitement.
- Promising repeatedly to cut back on gambling.

- Growing debts or relying on others to provide money to relieve a desperate financial situation or committing illegal acts such as forgery, fraud, theft, or embezzlement.
- Lying about behaviour or rejecting questions about it.
- Becoming depressed, restless or withdrawn if unable to gamble.
- Bragging about big wins and downplaying losses. Alternatively, keeping both wins and losses secret.
- Jeopardizing relationships, jobs or educational career opportunities because of gambling.
- Making repeated unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop gambling

HOW CAN YOU PREVENT GAMBLING PROBLEMS?

If you are concerned about your gambling habits, try to keep a balance in your life and make careful decisions about how you spend your time, money, and energy. Here are some ideas:

- Set a limit on the amount of time that you spend gambling, and on the size of your bets. If you go over the limits often, get help.
- Problem gamblers often gamble alone so get involved in activities with other people. Take an evening class, join a club or sports groups, become a volunteer.
- Use your gambling money for something special instead. Take up a hobby, save for a vacation, or treat your children.
- Learn about problem gambling. Read books or borrow videos from your local library or community agencies.

INITIATING THAT DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

Admitting that a problem exists is a huge step in the right direction. Unfortunately, many gamblers have difficulty admitting there is a problem and remain convinced that they will recover their losses. When talking to someone about their gambling, it is important to not make them feel guilty as this could lead them to become more secretive and less inclined to discuss the matter any further. If someone you care about has a gambling problem, become as knowledgeable as you can, and seek professional advice on how to best help the gambler to quit.

TREATMENT

Treatment options include out-patient and residential care. The most successful treatment programs involve both individual professional counseling and group therapy. Treatment involves education for the gambler and their family, individual therapy, group therapy, relapse prevention, and budget planning.

In order to prevent a relapse, participation in a group such as Gamblers Anonymous is encouraged.



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