

Gambling Addiction and Problem Gambling

Signs, Symptoms, and Treatment

In America alone, problem gambling affects more than 15 million people. More than 3 million of these are considered severe problem gamblers, otherwise known as gambling addicts or pathological gamblers.

Problem gambling can strain your relationships, interfere with responsibilities at home and work, and lead to financial catastrophe. It may even lead you to do things you never thought possible, like stealing money to gamble or taking money meant for your children. You may think you can't stop, but problem gambling and gambling addiction are treatable. If you're ready to admit you have a problem and seek help, you can overcome your gambling problem and regain control of your life.

Understanding gambling addiction and problem gambling

Gambling addiction, also known as compulsive gambling, is a type of impulse-control disorder. Compulsive gamblers can't control the impulse to gamble, even when they know their gambling is hurting themselves or their loved ones. Gambling is all they can think about and all they want to do, no matter the consequences. Compulsive gamblers keep gambling whether they're up or down, broke or flush, happy or depressed. Even when they know the odds are against them, even when they can't afford to lose, people with a gambling addiction can't "stay off the bet."

Gamblers can have a problem, however, without being totally out of control. Problem gambling is any gambling behaviour that disrupts your life. If you're preoccupied with gambling, spending more and more time and money on it, chasing losses, or gambling despite serious consequences, you have a gambling problem.

Myths & Facts about Gambling Addiction and Problem Gambling

MYTH: You have to gamble every day to be a problem gambler.

FACT: A problem gambler may gamble frequently or infrequently. Gambling is a problem if it causes problems.

MYTH: Problem gambling is not really a problem if the gambler can afford it.

FACT: Problems caused by excessive gambling are not just financial. Too much time spent on gambling can lead to relationship breakdown and loss of important friendships.

MYTH: Partners of problem gamblers often drive problem gamblers to gamble.

FACT: Problem gamblers often rationalize their behaviour. Blaming others is one way to avoid taking responsibility for their actions, including what is needed to overcome the problem.

MYTH: If a problem gambler builds up a debt, you should help them take care of it.

FACT: Quick fix solutions may appear to be the right thing to do. However, bailing the gambler out of debt may actually make matters worse by enabling gambling problems to continue.

Relieving unpleasant and overwhelming feelings without gambling

Unpleasant feelings such as stress, depression, loneliness, fear, and anxiety can trigger compulsive gambling or make it worse. After a stressful day at work or after an argument with your spouse or co-worker, an evening at the track or the casino can seem like a fun, exciting way to unwind. But there are healthier and far less expensive ways to keep unpleasant feelings in check. These may include exercising, meditating, using sensory relaxation strategies, and practicing simple breathing exercises.

For many people, an important aspect of quitting gambling is to find alternate ways to handle these difficult feelings without gambling. Even when gambling is no longer a part of your life, the painful and unpleasant feelings that may have prompted you to gamble in the past will still remain. So, it's worth spending some time thinking about the different ways you intend to deal with stressful situations and the daily irritations that would normally trigger you to start gambling.

Learn to recognize & reduce hidden stress

Gambling addiction is sometimes referred to as the "hidden illness" because there are no obvious physical signs or symptoms like there are in drug or alcohol addiction. Problem gamblers typically deny or minimize the problem. They also go to great lengths to hide their gambling. For example, problem gamblers often withdraw from their loved ones, sneak around, and lie about where they've been and what they've been up to.

Do I have a gambling problem?

You may have a gambling problem if you:

Feel the need to be secretive about your gambling. You might gamble in secret or lie about how much you gamble, feeling others won't understand or that you will surprise them with a big win.

Have trouble controlling your gambling. Once you start gambling, can you walk away? Or are you compelled to gamble until you've spent your last dollar, upping your bets in a bid to win lost money back?

Gamble even when you don't have the money. A red flag is when you are getting more and more desperate to recoup your losses. You may gamble until you've spent your last pound, and then move on to money you don't have- money to pay bills, credit cards, or things for your children. You may feel pushed to borrow, sell or even steal things for gambling money. It's a vicious cycle. You may sincerely believe that gambling more money is the only way to win lost money back. But it only puts you further and further in the hole.

Family and friends are worried about you. Denial keeps problem gambling going. If friends and family are worried, listen to them carefully. Take a hard look at how gambling is affecting your life. It's not a sign of weakness to ask for help.

Treatment for problem gambling

Every gambler is unique and so needs a recovery program tailored specifically to him or her. What works for one gambler won't necessarily work for you. The biggest step in treatment is realizing you have a problem with gambling. It takes tremendous strength and courage to own up to this, especially if you have lost a lot of money and strained or broken relationships along the way. Don't despair, and don't try to go it alone. Many others have been in your shoes and have been able to break the habit.

Overcoming a gambling addiction or problem is never easy. But recovery is possible if you stick with treatment and seek support. When you are ready, for advice or a treatment referral, contact **GamCare**

www.gamcare.org.uk National Helpline 0845 6000133 or Gamblers Anonymous UK

www.gamblersanonymous.org.uk National Helpline - 020 7384 3040

Group support for gambling addiction and problem gambling

Gamblers Anonymous is a twelve-step recovery program patterned after Alcoholics Anonymous. A key part of a 12-step program is choosing a sponsor. A sponsor is a former gambler who has time and experience remaining free from addiction, and can often provide invaluable guidance and support.

Therapy for problem gambling

Cognitive-behavioural therapy for problem gambling focuses on changing unhealthy gambling behaviours and thoughts, such as rationalizations and false beliefs. It also teaches problem gamblers how to fight gambling urges, deal with uncomfortable emotions rather than escape through gambling, and solve financial, work, and relationship problems caused by the addiction. The goal of treatment is to “rewire” the addicted brain by thinking about gambling in a new way. A variation of cognitive behavioural therapy, called the Four Steps Program, has been used in treatment of compulsive gambling as well. The goal is to change your thoughts and beliefs about gambling in four steps; re-label, reattribute, refocus, and revalue. More comprehensive information about cognitive behavioural therapy and applying it to your situation is found below.

Seeing a therapist does not mean you are weak or can't handle your problems. Therapy is for people who are smart enough to realize they need help. It can give you tools and support for reframing your thoughts that will last a lifetime.

Maintaining recovery for problem gambling and gambling addiction

As you may have noticed, quitting problem gambling is relatively easy. It's staying in recovery- making a permanent commitment to stay away from gambling- that is such a challenge. Maintaining recovery for problem gambling and gambling addiction is possible if you surround yourself with people to whom you're accountable, avoid tempting environments, give up control of your finances (at least at first), and find exciting or enjoyable activities to replace gambling.

Changing your lifestyle and making healthier choices

One way to stop yourself from problem gambling is to analyze what is needed for gambling to occur, work on removing these elements from your life and replace them with healthier choices. The four elements needed for problem gambling to continue are:

A decision: Before gambling occurs, the decision to gamble has been made. If you have an urge to gamble: stop what you are doing and call someone, think about the consequences to your actions, tell yourself to stop thinking about gambling, and find something else to do immediately.

Money: Gambling cannot occur without money. Get rid of your credit cards, let someone else be in charge of your money, have the bank make automatic payments for you, and keep a limited amount of cash on you at all times.

Time: Gambling cannot occur if you don't have the time. Schedule enjoyable recreational time for yourself that has nothing to do with gambling, find time for relaxation, and plan outings with your family.

A game: Without a game or activity to bet on there is no opportunity to gamble. Don't put yourself in tempting environments or locations. Tell the gambling establishments you frequent that you have a gambling problem and ask them to restrict you from betting at their casinos and establishments.

Maintaining recovery from problem gambling or gambling addiction depends a lot on the reasons why you were gambling in the first place. Once you've quit gambling, reasons such as depression, loneliness, or boredom will remain, so in order to maintain your recovery, you'll need to address these problems. There are alternative behaviours you can substitute for gambling. Some examples include:

Reason for Gambling

Sample Substitute Behaviours

To provide excitement, get a rush of adrenaline

Sport or a challenging hobby, such as mountain biking, rock climbing, or go sky diving!

To be more social, overcome shyness

Counselling, enrol in a public speaking class, join a social group

To numb unpleasant feelings, not think about problems

Therapy, consult your GP regarding longer term therapy options

Boredom or loneliness

Find something you're passionate about such as art, music, sports, or books then find others with the same interests

To relax after a stressful day

As little as 15 minutes of daily exercise can relieve stress. Or deep breathing, meditation, or massage

To solve money problems

The odds are always stacked against you so it's far better to seek help with debts from a credit counsellor

Dealing with gambling cravings

Learn more about how addiction hijacks the brain.

Feeling the urge to gamble is normal, but that doesn't make it any easier when you are struggling to make better choices. Remember, as you build healthier choices and a good support network, resisting cravings will be easier and easier. The following strategies can help

Reach out for support. Call a trusted family member, meet a friend for coffee, or go to a Gamblers Anonymous meeting.

Do something else. Distract yourself with another activity, such as cleaning your house, going to the gym, or watching a movie.

Postpone gambling. Tell yourself that you'll wait five minutes, fifteen minutes, or an hour — however long you think you can hold out. As you wait, the urge to gamble may pass or become weak enough to resist.

Give yourself a reality check. Visualize what will happen if you give in to the urge to gamble. Think about how you'll feel after all your money is gone and you've disappointed yourself and your family again.

If you aren't able to resist the gambling craving, don't be too hard on yourself or use it as an excuse to give up. Overcoming a gambling addiction is a tough process. You may slip from time to time; the important thing is to learn from your mistakes and continue working towards recovery.

Helping a family member with a gambling problem

Does my loved one have a gambling problem?

If your loved one has a gambling problem, he or she might:

Become increasingly defensive about his or her gambling. The more a problem gambler is in the hole, the more the need to defend gambling as a way to get money. Your loved one may get secretive, defensive or even blame you for the need to gamble, telling you that it is all for you and you need to trust in the "big win someday."

Suddenly become secretive over money and finances. Your loved one might show a new desire to control household finances, or there might increasingly be a lack of money despite the same income and expenses. Savings and assets might mysteriously dwindle, or there may be unexplained loans or cash advances.

Become increasingly desperate for money to fund the gambling. Credit card bills may increase, or your loved one may ask friends and family for money. Jewellery or other items easily pawned for money may mysteriously disappear. If you are a partner or family member of a compulsive gambler then contact **Gam-Anon www.gamanon.org.uk National Helpline - 08700 50 88 80**

How to help with a gambling problem

Compulsive and problem gamblers often need the support of their family and friends to help them in their struggle to stop gambling. But the decision to quit has to be theirs. As much as you may want to, and as hard as it is seeing the effects, you cannot make someone stop gambling.

If your family member has a gambling problem, you may have many conflicting emotions. You may try to cover up for a loved one or spend a lot of time and energy trying to keep him or her from gambling. At the same time, you might be furious at your loved one for gambling again and tired of trying to keep up the charade. The gambler may also have borrowed (or even stolen) money from you with no way to pay it back. He or she may have sold family possessions or run up huge debts on joint credit cards. When faced with the consequences of their actions, a gambler can suffer a crushing drop in self-esteem. This is one reason why there is a high rate of suicide among problem gamblers.

Preventing suicide in problem gamblers

When gamblers are feeling hopeless, the risk of suicide is high. It's very important to take any thoughts or talk of suicide seriously. If you or someone you care about is actively suicidal, call the Samaritans, or consider an urgent appointment to see their GP or psychiatrist/therapist

Tools for family members of problem gamblers:

Start by helping yourself. You have a right to protect yourself emotionally and financially. Don't blame yourself for the gambler's problems. The right support can help you make positive choices for yourself, and balance encouraging your loved one to get help without losing yourself in the process.

Don't go it alone. It can feel so overwhelming coping with a loved one's problem gambling that it may seem easier to rationalize their requests and problems "this one last time". Or you might feel ashamed, feeling like you are the only one who has problems like this. Reaching out for support will make you realize that many families have struggled with this problem. Or you might consider therapy to help sort out the complicated feelings that arise from coping with a problem gambler.

Set boundaries in managing money. If a loved one is serious about getting help for problem gambling, it may help if you take over the family finances to make sure the gambler stays accountable and to prevent relapse. However, this does not mean you are responsible for micromanaging the problem gamblers impulses to gamble. Your first responsibilities are to ensure that your own finances and credit are not at risk.

Consider how you will handle requests for money. Problem gamblers often become very good at asking for money, either directly or indirectly. They may use pleading, manipulation or even threats and blaming to get it. It takes time and practice to learn how you will respond to these requests to ensure you are not enabling the problem gambler and keeping your own dignity intact.

Do's and Don't for Partners of Problem Gamblers

Do

Seek the support of others with similar problems; attend a self-help group for families such as Gam-Anon.

Explain problem gambling to the children.

Recognize your partner's good qualities.

Remain calm when speaking to your partner about his or her gambling and its consequences.

Let your partner know that you are seeking help for your own sake because of the way gambling affects you and the children.

Understand the need for treatment of problem gambling despite the time it may involve.

Take control of family finances; review bank and credit card statements.

Don't

Preach, lecture, or allow yourself to lose control of your anger.

Make threats or issue ultimatums unless you intend to carry them out.

Exclude the gambler from family life and activities.

Expect immediate recovery, or that all problems will be resolved when the gambling stops.

Bail out the gambler.

Cover-up or deny the existence of the problem to yourself, the family, or others.