

Gambling: Harmless Recreation or a Growing Problem?

Legalized gambling is touted by the gaming industry as harmless recreational activity. ESPN's "World Series of Poker" is the latest offering of gambling entertainment for eager and, perhaps, naïve consumers. But is gambling really harmless recreational activity, or do problems associated with compulsive and problem gambling increase with increased exposure and access?

Researchers are studying how access to legalized gambling affects the prevalence of gambling problems. The National Gambling Impact Study Commission found close proximity to a casino (within 50 miles) doubled the rate of pathological gambling. Similarly, a survey conducted in Nevada established that the prevalence of pathological gambling in Las Vegas was approximately 75 percent to 85 percent higher than in the rest of the United States

When does gambling become a problem?

Pathological gambling is a significant problem in the United States, impacting millions of adults, teens and their families. According to the National Council on Problem Gambling, approximately 1 percent of adults in the United States (3 million) are compulsive gamblers. Another 2 percent to 3 percent have less significant, but still serious, problems with gambling and are classified as problem gamblers.

Some recent research suggests that there may be a progressive nature to gambling disorders. In other words, the severity of gambling problems can be represented along a continuum. These include:

- **Nonclinical pattern of gambling**—infrequent or binge gambling with some remorse and negative financial consequences. For example, spending more at a casino or in a local card game than you intended.
- **Subclinical pattern of problem gambling**—increased rates of gambling, lying, gambling to escape and preoccupation with gambling. For example, lying to your partner about the sum of money you intended to play with to cover your loss, playing more frequently or with groups of people that you would not normally socialize with.
- **Pathological gambling**—loss of control, obsessive symptoms, increasingly high tolerance, risking social relationships, depressive symptoms, guilt and remorse and financial problems. For example, a good portion of your time is spent thinking about gambling, preparing to gamble, locating places to gamble, searching for money or more money to gamble—perhaps withdrawing money from savings, using credit cards or opening new credit card accounts to support gambling.
- **Severe pathological gambling**—loss of control, job loss, loss of social and family relationships and increased illegal activity. This is the "rock bottom" of the addicted gambler.

Diagnosis of gambling addiction

According to the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition*, a person who has a problem with gambling meets five or more of the following criteria:

- is preoccupied with gambling (for example, relives past gambling experiences, handicaps or plans the next venture, thinks of ways to get money with which to gamble)
- needs to gamble with increasing amounts of money to achieve desired excitement
- has made repeated unsuccessful efforts to stop gambling
- is restless or irritable when trying to cut down or stop gambling
- uses gambling as a way to escape problems or to relieve feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety or depression
- returns to gambling to get even or to chase his losses
- lies to family members to conceal the extent of involvement with gambling
- has committed illegal acts such as forgery, fraud, theft or embezzlement to finance gambling
- has jeopardized or lost an important relationship, job or educational or career opportunity because of gambling
- relies on others to provide money to relieve a desperate financial situation caused by gambling

If gambling is, in fact, a progressive disorder similar to other addictions, the environmental factors cannot be ignored. For example, research has shown a genetic predisposition for alcoholism. This genetic predisposition would not be experienced if you do not drink alcohol. So, we see rates of alcohol abuse and dependence only as they are related to the availability of alcohol.

The same logic appears to apply to gambling. If you have the temperament or genetic inclination for problem gambling, it is likely that that problem will emerge if gambling is accessible to you. The bottom line: Problem gambling will continue to increase as gambling becomes more accessible and socially tolerated.

If you are concerned about problem gambling, contact your employee assistance program or a mental health professional.

Sources: Walker, M.B. & Dickerson, M.G. (1996). The prevalence of problem and pathological gambling: A critical analysis. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 12(2):233–249; Volberg, R.A. (2002). *Gambling and Problem Gambling in Nevada. Report to the Nevada Department of Human Resources*. Carson City, Nev.: Department of Human Resources; *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition*, American Psychological Association, 2000.

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By Drew Edwards, EdD, MS
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