

High Stakes: Gambling, Depression and Suicide

Like all addictions, compulsive gambling causes intense distress and continual disruptions in most areas of life: It messes up your mind, body, family and work. Even worse, compulsive gamblers are significantly more likely to have suicidal thoughts and to make suicide attempts than those with other addictions.

When gambling is a problem

The term "compulsive gambling" includes a condition known as *pathological gambling*, a progressive addiction where someone:

- becomes increasingly preoccupied with gambling
- needs to bet more money more frequently
- feels restless or irritable when trying to stop "chasing" losses
- loses control—continues gambling although it is causing serious problems

Have you, or someone you care about, lost control of your gambling? According to the National Council on Problem Gambling, approximately 1 percent of adults in the United States (about 3 million people) are compulsive gamblers. Another 2 percent to 3 percent have less significant, but still serious, problems with gambling and are classified as problem gamblers.

Why depression and suicide are more likely

Factors that contribute to depression and suicide among compulsive gamblers include:

- **Medical:** Compulsive gamblers have higher occurrences of insomnia, irritable bowel syndrome, peptic ulcer, high blood pressure, migraines and other stress-related physical problems than those in the general population.
- **Psychiatric:** Compulsive gambling is associated with major depressive disorder, hypomania, bipolar disorder, and panic and anxiety disorders.
- **Addiction:** Fifty percent of compulsive gamblers are also substance abusers.
- **Financial:** Problem gamblers also accumulate debts that often result in foreclosures on mortgages and bankruptcy.

The financial burdens associated with compulsive gambling can be enormous. It is often cited as the precipitating event prior to a suicide attempt. For example, a patient in Florida lost more than \$65,000 on Internet gambling in a few short months by using credit cards. As debt accumulated and bills were neglected, the stress, anger, guilt and remorse escalated, creating pain and despair for the family.

As a result of this acute and overwhelming distress, spouses of problem gamblers have higher rates of stress-related physical problems such as headaches, insomnia, intestinal disorders, asthma and depression. The suicide-attempt rate for spouses of problem gamblers is three times higher than that of the general population.

Signs to watch for

Characteristics of gamblers who contemplate or attempt suicide include:

- suffer from more psychiatric symptoms
- are less satisfied with their living situations
- report more days of marital, interpersonal and family conflict
- abuse, or are addicted to, drugs or alcohol
- have large debts
- feel hopeless
- recently lost a large amount of money

Symptoms of compulsive gambling

The American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic manual classifies compulsive gambling as an impulse-control disorder. To meet the diagnostic criteria for compulsive gambling, a person must show persistent gambling behavior as indicated by at least five of the following criteria:

- is preoccupied with gambling (for example, reliving past gambling experiences, handicapping or planning the next venture, thinking of ways to get money with which to gamble)
- needs to gamble with increasing amounts of money to achieve desired excitement
- makes repeated, unsuccessful efforts to cut back or stop gambling
- is restless or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop gambling
- uses gambling as a way to escape problems or to relieve a dysphoric mood (feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety, depression)
- after losing money gambling, often returns another day to get even ("chasing" one's losses)
- lies to family members, therapists or others to conceal 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 you are concerned that you may have a gambling problem or suspect or worry about a family member, talk with a mental health professional for more information.

Sources: National Council on Problem Gambling, www.ncpgambling.org; Blume, S. "Pathological Gambling." In Lowinson's *Substance Abuse: A Comprehensive Textbook*. 3rd Edition. Williams & Wilkins, 1997; Angst F, Stassen HH, Clayton PJ, Angst J. "Mortality of patients with mood disorders: Follow-up over 34-38 years." (2002) *Journal of Affective Disorders*; 68:167-181.

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