

Gambling Addiction

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Researchers suggest that some people gamble because they are physically and chemically addicted to the games they play. The mere act of gambling had changed the way their brains function, and these brain changes fuel a dangerous and growing gambling addiction. Left unchecked, this compulsive gambling can lead to family strife, financial ruin, and severe depression. In short, what began as a game can often end in tragedy.

The Cycle of Gambling

Some gamblers play games of skill, such as cards or dice, and they enjoy the idea of “beating the house” and impressing others with their knowledge and prowess. Others tend to play slots and games of chance, and these people may enjoy the idea that they are simply luckier than those they know. Both of these groups consider themselves individuals with unique stories. Unfortunately, the paths they take with their addictions are predictable and they’re often incredibly unpleasant. Many gamblers tend to follow these phases into serious addiction (Lesieur & Custer, 1984):

The Winning Phase. For the first five years, the gambler is rewarded for the behavior with amazing wins of one week’s salary or sometimes more. Some people even win a year’s salary in one game. These wins might give the gambler the impression that he or she is smarter or luckier than other players, and this might encourage the player to take bigger risks. With these bigger risks come bigger losses.

The Losing Phase. This phase can last longer than five years, and the gambler can face some considerable financial losses during this time. The gambler may begin chasing losses, placing bigger bets in order to recoup money lost during a previous game. The gambler might believe that he or she is just facing a “losing streak,” but he or she will climb out of it. The gambler may need to borrow money to cover losses. The tension begins to build, and the addiction is beginning to take hold.

The Desperation Phase. The gambler may know that he or she cannot win, but can no longer control the activity. The gambler may spend more and more time gambling, and planning the next game. Financial losses during this stage may be huge. Stealing money may be one way the gambler funds the addiction. The gambler may try to stop gambling, and find that he or she is unable to quit.

The Hopeless Phase: If the gambler does not get help during the desperation phase, he or she may no longer care whether life continues. The gambler may do illegal things to fuel the addiction or simply to get caught and get help, or the gambler may contemplate suicide.

It can be difficult to understand why someone wouldn’t simply stop gambling in order to prevent these terrible things from occurring. The answer may lie in chemistry.

When a person smells good food, hears a loved one's voice or feels a bright ray of sunshine, the body releases a chemical called dopamine. This chemical is considered the "feel good" chemical, as people who feel dopamine often feel a flush of happiness or joy. When gamblers experience a win, especially when that win is big and it happens early in the gambler's career, he or she also experiences a rush of dopamine.

Gambling Addiction 101

Gambling addiction is a compulsive disorder defined by the inability to stop gambling despite constant loss and a host of residual negative consequences (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). A treatable issue, few people get the gambling treatment they need until they have lost almost everything.

Gambling causes a high in the people who compulsively do it. Chasing the big win is similar to chasing an elusive high through using heroin or other drugs. Every loss is only another reason to win big and every small win is a disappointment because more money could have been won if more had been gambled. Those in need of gambling addiction treatment will:

- Lie about how often they gamble, how much they gamble, and how much they lose.
- Gamble more than their extra money. They gamble the rent money, college savings – anything they can get their hands on.
- Get into extreme debt in order to keep gambling.
- Gamble instead of keeping promises to family members.
- Gamble for days on end.
- Often experience co-occurring disorders like alcohol abuse or stimulant addiction.

Treatment of Gambling Addiction

Various methods of treatment for gambling addiction are found in both inpatient and outpatient settings. The most common therapeutic approach for gambling addiction is a combination of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), medication for related depression or anxiety, and attending support groups (Griffiths, 2011).

Most of the time, gambling addiction treatment will consist of some method of CBT. This method of treating problem gambling focuses on helping the addict to change unhealthy thought processes and behaviors into rational, healthy thought processes and behaviors. Gamblers learn how to effectively fight the urge to gamble, how to deal with the triggers that cause them to gamble, and how to solve problems that have been caused by their addiction. As an adjunct to this treatment, psychotropic medications are also typically prescribed to address the depression and anxiety that often accompany addiction.

The most well known support groups are sponsored by Gamblers Anonymous. These groups help addicts stay on a direct path of continued abstinence from gambling through peer support. The groups use 12-step recovery methods similar to those which

are outlined by Alcoholics Anonymous for the treatment of alcohol addiction. The gambler will have a sponsor who will help him or her by providing guidance and support along their journey to recovery from gambling addiction.

References

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