

The Hidden Epidemic: Gambling as a Behavioral Addiction

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Gambling addiction, a widespread (i.e., 2-3% of US population has problem or disordered gambling) and frequently concealed problem, entails risking something on an uncertain event or activity in pursuit of an immediate reward. Despite the element of skill that may reduce uncertainty, the essence of gambling lies in its inherent risk. Gambling addiction demands attention due to its profound impact on individuals, families, and communities.

The Need for Screening and Addressing Gambling Addiction

Ignoring gambling issues can significantly decrease the effectiveness of treatment for other disorders and increase overall treatment costs. Unaddressed gambling problems lead to poorer treatment outcomes and greater use of resources, particularly intensive and expensive ones. For individuals recovering from substance use disorders (SUD), gambling can be a sequential addiction and a relapse risk factor. It can exacerbate psychological symptoms and is associated with relationship violence and child abuse.

Patients in treatment for SUD may be reluctant to mention problems with gambling. They often have varied attitudes towards gambling: some may not recognize it as a problem, others might see it as a financial solution, and many may acknowledge it but are unwilling to give up the perceived benefits. The reluctance to discuss gambling can also stem from feelings of shame. It's essential to explore how gambling may be detracting from mental health, substance use recovery, and life goals.

Defining Gambling and Problem Gambling

Gambling involves risking money or property on uncertain outcomes. Popular forms include casino games, internet gaming, sports betting, slot

machines, lotteries, and casual bets. Problem gambling is characterized by impaired control over time and money spent, leading to adverse consequences for the gambler and their community. The DSM-5, (American Psychiatric Association,) defines gambling disorder as an ongoing and repetitive pattern of problematic gambling behavior that interferes with personal, family, and work-related responsibilities.

A recreational gambler maintains control over their gambling, risks only what they can afford to lose, and does not chase losses. In contrast, problem gamblers spend harmful amounts of time and money on gambling, leading to severe consequences such as loss of control, continuing despite adverse outcomes, failed attempts to stop, and gambling interference in daily life.

Symptoms and Criteria for Gambling Disorder

To diagnose gambling addiction, individuals must endorse at least four DSM-5 criteria, including:

- Preoccupation with gambling
- Increased tolerance, needing more significant amounts to achieve excitement
- Unsuccessful attempts to cut back
- Restlessness or irritability when trying to quit
- Gambling to escape problems or negative feelings
- Trying to recoup losses
- Lying about gambling
- Losing significant relationships or career opportunities due to gambling
- Relying on others for financial relief due to gambling losses.

The Consequences of Gambling Addiction

Gambling addiction is associated with numerous adverse effects, including general and mental health problems, loss of wages, bankruptcy, arrest, and even suicide ideation and attempts. Gambling addiction is highly co-occurring with other psychiatric disorders, particularly SUD, major depression, anxiety disorders, ADHD, and bipolar disorder. Other behavioral addictions like excessive exercise, internet use, workaholism,

food addiction, and compulsive shopping are also prevalent among gambling addicts.

The Social and Personal Impact

Gambling addiction's social consequences are severe, leading to family dysfunction, domestic violence, significant financial problems, criminal behavior, and homelessness. The addiction has the highest suicide attempt and completion rate among all addictions, with 50-80% of gamblers contemplating suicide and 10-20% attempting it.

Causes and Risk Factors

Addiction occurs from a complex interplay of factors, including chemical imbalances, unresolved issues, distorted beliefs, inability to cope, and conditioned responses. Risk factors for gambling addiction include early big wins, easy access to gambling, cognitive distortions and irrational beliefs, financial issues, boredom, loneliness, impulsivity, and a history of trauma or other addictions. Family studies suggest a genetic vulnerability shared between pathological gambling and other addictions.

Treatment Techniques

Effective treatment for gambling addiction involves a multi-faceted approach:

- **Motivational Interviewing:** Fosters intrinsic motivation to change by exploring and resolving ambivalence.
- **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT):** Addresses cognitive distortions and develops coping strategies, helping individuals evaluate evidence and develop healthier beliefs about gambling.
- **Supportive Therapy:** Provides education on financial management, addressing financial loss, and fostering craving management skills.
- **Financial Management and Behavioral Changes:** Patients need practical financial management strategies, such as budgeting, restricting access to money, involving others in economic decisions, and

planning non-gambling activities around paydays. Identifying triggers, adopting healthy coping mechanisms, avoiding environmental triggers, and signing up for self-exclusion at casinos are crucial tools for recovery.

Conclusion

Gambling addiction, with its devastating impact on individuals, families, and society, necessitates comprehensive screening, awareness, and treatment. By addressing this often-hidden addiction with effective therapeutic strategies and practical financial management, individuals can reclaim control over their lives, moving towards recovery and stability.

Understanding Cross Addiction to Prevent Relapse By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Understanding and addressing gambling addiction is crucial. It's equally important to understand its relationship to other behavioral addictions, substance addiction, and recovery. Many individuals struggling with gambling addiction also have substance use disorder. Even in recovery from substance use disorder, gambling problems may present as a cross addiction, replacing one addictive behavior with another. This phenomenon, known as cross addiction, can significantly increase the risk of relapse in addiction recovery and complicate gambling addiction recovery. It's vital to explore strategies for understanding and preventing cross addictions and ultimately supporting sustained recovery and well-being.



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