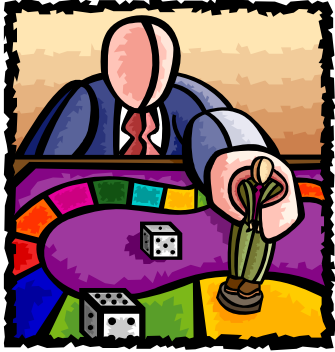


G a m b l i n g

By Rebecca Harris, MS, LPC, CEAP, Solutions EAP Coordinator

"The greatest advantage in gambling lies in not playing at all". Girolamo Cardano 1501-1576.



We hear so much debate about gambling lately, but just what defines gambling for fun and recreation, as opposed to "problem gambling"?

Gambling is defined as

1. Playing games of chance for money or some other stake
2. To take a risk in order to gain some advantage
3. An act or undertaking involving risk of a loss

Given these as the definitions, all of us gamble everyday just by the virtue of living our lives. For some people, the biggest gamble they take is driving their car and trusting everyone else is following the rules of the road. For others the

big gamble is which supermarket line is quicker-they assess the other customer's cartloads, then opt for the line that looks like it will move the fastest. Then they gamble that the cashier won't ring the buzzer for the supervisor to reset the register just as they get in line. For some of us, well, the gamble was the 401K we used to have. Risk is an ingredient in many of the things we do, but what makes gambling a problem for so many people?

Unfortunately for many, gambling has become a seemingly uncontrollable habit, which has severely adverse consequences. What does it mean to have a gambling addiction? Did you know that your kids may be gambling on line, or betting in sports pools that they consider harmless entertainment?

This month we will look at all the wonderfully creative ways people can spend their money to make money. It is so much easier to get caught up than you might think. Marketers have creative ways that make lottery and scratch tickets so alluring. You can buy them with your favorite sports teams on them, and perhaps they have even created one for Mother's Day. "Don't just buy her flowers that will die, buy her a dream..." Whatever the technique to lure you in, you can be certain that the people who have created these wonderful opportunities for us, have created better ones for themselves. As Steve Wynn, owner of mega casinos in Las Vegas says, "If you wanna make money in a casino, buy one".

When is the line crossed? What is the difference between leisurely, social recreation that many people view as harmless entertainment, and a person's apparent out of control impulses that allow them to ruin their lives? Both people started off doing the same activities at roughly the same initial level of involvement. Maybe they are college students who play cards occasionally with friends. But then one seems to slow down, find other interests, and is only occasionally available to sit for the game. The other individual increases their exposure and opportunities to gamble. They buy scratch tickets, set up card games, bet on sports, watch poker on TV for tips, and tend to gravitate to social activities that will have gambling associated. That could even mean Church bingo nights. Gambling becomes much more of a focus to them than to the other person who can seem to "take it or leave it".



What does it mean to be addicted to gambling? Is it really a disease? Why don't they just stop? All of these are good questions to ponder. Addiction can have many definitions. Some include the disease model.

People are often treated with both talk therapy, and can include people who have responded well to medication as part of their treatment. Other definitions focus on the pathological aspects of gamblers who will, despite obvious adversity, make that next bet. Self help groups tend to work well for people who are ready and willing to look at these issues with the support of other “recovering” gamblers.

Many people who work in the treatment and recovery fields tend to describe addiction in terms of how the behaviors of the person in question is affecting their daily lives. A survey can be given in a non-judgmental way. People are asked about their habits, and the outcomes, and based on that information, an individual can assess as to whether they are in trouble with their gambling.

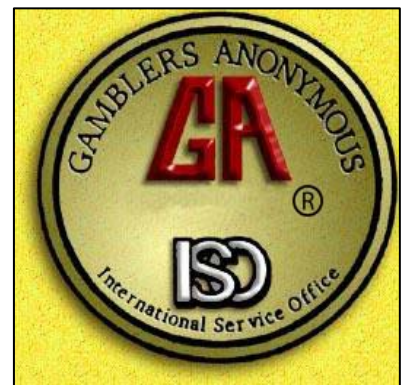
In other words, if gambling causes problems in your life, then gambling is a problem.

A gambler tends to go through many stages before entering the strong grip of gambling. Initially gamblers find betting, slots, etc. fun. It's an escape or stress reducer for others. As people become more preoccupied with winning, the need for bigger and more frequent betting occurs. Next is the desperation stage where the gambler sees relationships fall apart, health issues, both medical and psychological arise, financial ruin is quickly creeping up, and sometimes the person turns to crime so they can still bet. The struggle to get out of gambling is very powerful at this point, and getting into treatment is crucial so that a person doesn't enter the fourth or final stage. At this point, the gambler may become so desperate that they no longer believe that there is any hope left, or any way out for him or herself. Depression can be common, and suicide is also a risk. Fortunately not all people have to go through all the stages before they realize where they're headed.

Who becomes the problem gambler? I have presented an overview of the stages, and talked about seeking help. How do we know when the line is crossed? Often, if you are the person with the problem, the denial is so great that you can justify, rationalize, and keep going until life is really out of control. For people who live with, or love someone they think has a problem, there are potential warning signs.

Gam-Anon, works with friends and families of problem or compulsive gamblers, and Gambler's Anonymous, a self-help recovery group for people who are recovering from the addiction have formulated an assessment questionnaire of 20 questions. They advise that if you answer, “yes” to at least six of them, it is important to seek professional help to further evaluate the situation, and start the process of recovery and support. This is a shortened version highlighting areas of concern. The link to the entire survey follows.

- 1.Excessive sick time
- 2.Late for work
- 3.Unexplained disappearance from work
- 4.Decreased productivity
- 5.Decreased grooming and appearing ill or tired
- 6.Moody
- 7.Excessive and/or secretive phone use
- 8.Gambling on breaks
- 9.Vacations centered primarily on gambling activities
- 10.Displays gambling related souvenirs on person or in office
- 11.Conversations focus primarily on own gambling
- 12.Initiator of sports pool or gambling junkets or office bookie
- 13.Loan seeking from various sources at work, friends, or relatives
- 14.Signs of excessive debt or financial irresponsibility
- 15.Arguments with others related to money
- 16.Theft from coworkers or employer



To take the survey, you can log onto: www.gamblersanonymous.com This is a great website that provides links to many other helpful sites. Talking to a professional is the best way to evaluate the problem and to

create a comprehensive plan which may include family members needing to take financial action immediately.

So... After looking over the "survey" of potential signs of problem gambling, I'm sure that some of you said, "Well these are things that could be a sign of substance abuse, marital problems, Internet addiction, other illnesses etc." You would be absolutely correct. Compulsive gambling is a disorder that is similar to alcohol and other addictions. In fact it is estimated that 30% of compulsive gamblers have an addiction to substances*. Additionally, a combination of national studies has suggested that 1 in 20 college students develop a problem with their gambling.** The survey questions are meant as a source of both awareness and self evaluation.



The fact that children are becoming addicted to gambling raises concerns about how we as a society view this "usually harmless entertainment". Often poker parties are held at kid's homes with the parents grateful that their kids are safely at home, and not out drinking. Football and Baseball fantasy games are big on-line. I heard that there were even pools to vote for "American Idol"! Someone cast 58,000 votes? Can that be true? Perhaps they were just a fan, not really interested in collecting on a bet of who the next winner would be. New scratch tickets are out, and now with Internet access on the cell phone, anyone can gamble anywhere, anytime.

"It can't happen to me; He/She is too smart to get hooked; I would know if they had a problem; There are worse ways to spend my time and money." If only these statements were true. Because not everyone can walk away when they are down, we are fortunate in the state of Connecticut to have some really wonderful resources to help you sort out if someone you love, or if possibly you have a problem with your gambling. It's not a weakness, it's not a moral issue, and it's not a judgment. "If gambling is causing a problem in your life-it"s a problem!!! Seek help!"

Solutions EAP is always there to confidentially help you evaluate the situation. There are also numerous agencies, which provide excellent services to both the person seeking help for their own gambling, and family members and friends who want to help them. Below are the websites to area resources.

~"The Bettor Choice" - a program of DMHAS, The State Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services: 1-800-446-7348, <http://www.ct.gov/dmhas/cwp/view.asp?a=2902&q=335220#programs> .

~CT Council on Problem Gambling-1-800-346-6238, <http://www.ccpq.org>

~The CT Clearing House, a program of Wheeler Clinic:
<http://www.ctclearinghouse.org/Topics/topicView.asp?TopicID=70>

<http://www.gamblingtreatment.net>

Calling to seek help is one gamble you can't lose.

**The Ct Council on Problem Gambling.*

***Schaffer & Hall, 2001*

**Call Solutions EAP at 1-800-526-3485
for assistance for all of life's challenges.
It's free, confidential and open to family members.
Check us out on-line www.solutions-eap.com**