

High Stakes: The Dark Side of Gambling

"It's hard to walk away from a winning streak, even harder to leave the table when you're on a losing one." Cara Bertioia

Lottery: A tax on people who are bad at math.
Author Unknown

Four out of five Americans engage in some form of gambling on a yearly basis. Whether it's an evening of poker with friends, a wager on the Super Bowl or the NCAA Final Four, a trip to a casino, a lottery ticket or a competitive bet between friends, for most people, gambling is just entertainment. But 20 million Americans have problems at work and with their social lives because of gambling and about two million Americans are addicted to gambling.

How can a habit that doesn't involve chemicals be addictive?

Like amphetamine and cocaine, gambling prompts neurons in the reward system of the brain to squirt out mega-doses of dopamine which in turn makes people feel really, really good. As a source of reference, for problem gamblers, gambling has 10 times the feel good impact of chocolate or sex.

The catch is that the brain builds a tolerance to the dopamine rush. As a consequence, continuous gambling causes the brain to produce less dopamine and to become less responsive to its effects. This means that in order to feel the dopamine high, gambling addicts have to keep gambling and play for higher and riskier stakes. It's hard for gambling addicts to get and stay "sober" because their brains eventually stop pumping out dopamine. Without gambling to trigger the dopamine rush, gambling addicts feel lifeless.

But that's not all. As with amphetamine or cocaine use, continuous gambling weakens the neural pathways to the prefrontal cortex -- the part of the brain that curbs our impulses. So, the more a problem gambler gambles, the lower their impulse control and the harder it is for them to call it quits even when they are losing. These weakened neural pathways make giving up gambling incredibly difficult. Opportunities to gamble are everywhere and without the impulse control, it's just so easy to place a bet or buy a lottery ticket on a whim and slide back into the addiction.

There's also a huge psychological component to gambling addiction. Gambling allows you to be the rock star. When big time gamblers walk into a casino, people welcome them with open arms, free drinks and sometimes at the bigger casinos, free rooms and concerts. And as long as they are winning and spending money, they can have an entourage. This sense of feeling important is hard to give up.

What are the signs of gambling addiction?

According to the American Psychiatric Association, gambling addicts:

1. Need to make higher and higher bets in order to achieve the desired excitement.
2. Feel restless or irritable when they try to cut down or quit gambling.

3. Are often preoccupied with gambling, for example: spending a lot of time reliving past gambling experiences, planning the next gambling venture or trying to figure out how to get money to gamble.
4. Chase their losses by gambling again to recoup money that they lost rather than cutting losses by walking away.
5. Lie to cover up how much they gamble.
6. Gamble to avoid feeling uncomfortable or negative emotions like helplessness, guilt, anxiety, or depression.
7. Jeopardize or lose relationships, jobs, and/or educational or career opportunities because of gambling.
8. Rely on others to bail them out of desperate financial situations caused by gambling.
9. Their repeated efforts to control, cut back or stop gambling have been unsuccessful.

Meeting four or more of these criteria (for people who are not manic) is a sure-fire sign of gambling addiction. If you think that you or someone you love has a gambling problem and you'd like help, call or text the National Counsel on Problem Gambling: 1-800-522-4700 or contact your local Gambler's Anonymous. You can find them at: <http://www.gamblersanonymous.org/ga/hotlines>.

For more information:

The National Council on Problem Gambling website: <http://www.ncpgambling.org/help-treatment/faq/>

And for an inside view of gambling addiction and recovery, see:

All Bets Are Off: Losers, Liars, and Recovery From Gambling Addiction by Arnie and Sheila Wexler with Steve Jacobson.

This column originally appeared in Outlook.