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Gambling addiction

Most people agree that behaviors associated with alcohol and drug addiction are not attributable to weak willpower and that most people with those addictions need some form of help to achieve recovery.

However, ask people about gambling addiction and you're more likely to get looks of confusion. The truth is that gambling addiction, while having its own unique manifestations, is more similar to substance addiction than not, and the consequences and results are as devastating as any substance addiction. Consider the following:

"As a child, you're in need of security and stability, but having a parent that gambles provides neither. In good times, things were okay, but still untrustworthy. In the bad times, it felt like we were in freefall, never knowing when we'd hit bottom or if things would get better again."

"It seemed like every time we wanted to do something as a family, all of a sudden he was gone. For the kids, it was one broken promise after another."

Anyone who has had a family member or friend with a gambling problem can relate to these comments and the distress felt by both problem gamblers and their significant others. Indeed, gambling addictions can blindside families and destroy lives.

Whether it's called problem gam-

Free treatment is available

By Catherine Perrault, MBC

bling, compulsive gambling, or gambling addiction, the results are the same. A gambling problem often begins with a good experience, perhaps a night of fun or a big win. But, inevitably, the winning stops and losses begin to pile up.

While chasing those losses can become a driving factor in compulsive gambling, money is not the reason behind the need to gamble. It's the feeling that gamblers experience while playing that drives them to continue. Gambling becomes an all-consuming obsession that takes over every aspect of their life, causing them to neglect essentially everything, including job, faith, family, and recreational outlets.

Fortunately, the state of Minnesota sets aside funds to counsel and treat compulsive gamblers and to provide support for affected family members. And, as with other, better known addictions, recovery is possible for those with a compulsive gambling disorder.

The popularity of gambling in Minnesota is borne out by the numbers. Approximately 75 percent of the state's residents have participated in a gambling activity in the last year. And while most people enjoy gambling as a healthy form of recreation, it is esti-

mated that between 1 percent and 4 percent of the population is at risk for gambling addiction.

Risk

Gambling is an equal opportunity employer; there is no typical problem gambler. The risk of addiction is the same regardless of age, gender, or socioeconomic status. The stunning revelation that Maureen O'Connor, former mayor of San Diego, had a casino gambling addiction that caused her to misappropriate more than \$2 million put a high-profile face on problem gambling. But it can just as easily affect anyone.

Causes and risk factors vary, and for most people, there is no one identifiable cause. Like many other mental health conditions, compulsive gambling is considered to result from a combination of biological vulnerabilities, thoughts and attitudes, and social



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stressors. Factors can include behavior or substance abuse problems or other mental health disorders. It is also known that if your parents have a gambling problem, the chances are greater that you will too. Within the past few years it has been determined that some people develop compulsive gambling behavior after taking medications for treatment of Parkinson's disease or restless leg syndrome, including the drug Mirapex.

Symptoms

Identifying someone with a gambling problem is not easy. It's known as the "hidden" addiction because there are no obvious outward signs as there are in the case of excessive alcohol or chemical use. However, there are warning signs that can alert you to a potential problem:

- Increased frequency of gambling activity
- Increased amount of money gambled
- Gambling for longer periods of time than originally planned
- Bragging about wins, but not talking about losses
- Pressuring others for money as financial problems arise
- Lying about how money is spent
- Escaping to other excesses (alcohol, drugs, sleep, food, etc.)
- Denying there is a problem

Additional signs of problem gambling may include frequent absences from home and work, excessive phone use, withdrawal from family, personality changes (increased irritability/hostility) and diversion of family funds.

A two-minute risk test that can help determine the existence of a gambling problem can be found on the Northstar



Types of compulsive gambling

There are two primary types of problem gamblers: action gamblers and escape gamblers. Action gamblers are often assertive, persuasive, loud, and energetic. They are typically younger men and see themselves as friendly, sociable, gregarious, and generous. In spite of this, they usually have low self-esteem. Action compulsive gamblers gamble primarily at so-called "skill" games such as poker, craps, racing, and sports betting. Action gamblers are playing for the thrill of the game. They attempt to lose themselves in the excitement of the gambling experience.

Escape gamblers are more typically women, and while they often exhibit some of the same characteristics as action gamblers, there are important differences. They tend to develop a gambling problem later in life and gamble to escape problems. They prefer games of luck, such as slot machines, video poker, bingo, lottery, other machines, and online games. When gambling, they may be in a numb, almost hypnotized state.

Problem Gambling Alliance website (www.NorthstarProblemGambling.org)

Treatment

Medical research has clearly shown compulsive gambling to be a brain disease. The newly released DSM-V (the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association) classifies problem gambling as an addiction disorder similar to alcohol and drug addiction.

Treatment has evolved based on alcohol and drug addiction models. Cognitive behavioral therapy has proven helpful, as have motivational interviewing techniques and self-help group participation. Continued medical research on pharmacological interventions has found that certain medications, including antiseizure medications, mood stabilizers, and antidepressants, may have the potential to reduce gam-

bling urges. As with other addictions, there is no magic remedy for the complex physical, psychological, social, and spiritual aspects of addiction.

Free treatment

In Minnesota, treatment is available free of charge to qualifying individuals and their families. This is particularly helpful given that most gamblers exhaust all financial resources during the course of their addiction. If you're concerned about your gambling or the gambling of others, you may call the state's 24/7 gambling helpline at (800) 333-HOPE. This helpline is the best starting point for someone seeking personal help or help for someone else.

Early diagnosis and treatment is especially important for people with gambling addiction. The longer an addiction persists, the greater the likelihood that retirement and lifetime savings will be depleted. A gambling addiction is also accompanied by

a higher than average rate of suicide. The National Council on Problem Gambling cites numerous studies in reporting that one in five compulsive gamblers attempts suicide, a rate higher than for any other addictive disorder.

The key to treating a gambling addiction is early intervention. It is important that the stigma associated with gambling and other addictions be eliminated so that people feel comfortable asking for help before the addiction progresses to dire circumstances. ❑

Catherine Perrault, MBC, is the executive director of the Minnesota Northstar Problem Gambling Alliance, Minnesota's affiliate to the National Council on Problem Gambling. Northstar provides programming to create awareness about problem gambling in the community, educate treatment professionals, and advocate for treatment funding.