



# HEALTHQUEST

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOCUSING ON  
MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND CONCERNS.

## WHEN GAMBLING BECOMES MORE THAN A GAME

With the growth of legalized gambling, more people are being introduced to this exciting form of entertainment. And for most people, it is entertainment - pure and simple. They set aside a small amount of cash they can afford to play - and rarely, if ever - play beyond that limit. Win or lose, they move on to other activities.

However, for others, gambling goes beyond fun and games. Whether they are betting on a sport, spending time at a casino, playing bingo, cards or the lotteries, the urge to keep playing begins to overshadow other things. "As more of an individual's time and resources are spent on gambling, problems can develop. At that point, it may be necessary to get help," says Dr. Warren Shepell, whose firm provides employee assistance program counselling.

### WHAT IS 'PROBLEM' GAMBLING

Basically, it refers to any type of on-going gambling behaviour that contributes to personal, social, work or family disruption. When gambling and gambling-related activities begin to control the person, health professionals consider it an addiction or compulsion.

Many problem gamblers are hard working people who play to relieve stress. "Ironically, some of the difficulties related to their gambling, actually brings on stress-related health conditions such as insomnia, stomach disorders, and false heart attacks," says Betty George, Executive Director of the Minnesota Council on Compulsive Gambling.

### WHO IS AFFECTING?

Problem gambling is very "democratic." It affects men and women of all ages, backgrounds, and income levels. Financial and other troubles experienced by a gambler, can make life difficult for the people around them. Within the family, debts pile up and well-meaning promises are broken. Relationships may become neglectful, manipulative or abusive. According to the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba, "finally, there is an exhaustion phase where family members may feel confused, immobilized, and may doubt their own sanity. The partner or parent may feel anxiety, panic and intense anger which may show up in physical illness."

Problem gambling also affects the workplace. As the gambler's thoughts become more pre-occupied with "winning" or "chasing" (the term gamblers use to describe recouping one's losses), job performance suffers, absenteeism increases, and co-workers may be obliged to "pick

up the slack." Professor Gary Smith, a researcher at the University of Alberta, estimates that each addicted gambler affects the lives of 10 to 17 family members, friends, and co-workers. As one addicted gambler put it, "If anyone would have told me six months ago I would steal from my employer, I would have said, absolutely no way!"

### 'THIS ISN'T HAPPENING TO ME!'

Problem gamblers and the people who care about them often go through a period of "denial." Not unlike many other addictions, they honestly believe there is no problem and offer a variety of explanations for financial difficulties and the gambler's behaviour. But, as Betty George cautions: "problem gambling rarely goes away on its own. More likely, it will get worse. The gambler can experience severe mood swings and suicide might be attempted as a way out."

How can you know if you have (or are developing) a gambling problem?

The following questions (based on information from Gambler's Anonymous) will help you decide:

- ▲ Do you ever gamble to escape worry or trouble?
- ▲ Do you ever gamble to get money with which to pay debts or to otherwise solve financial difficulties?
- ▲ Do arguments, disappointments or frustrations create within you an urge to gamble?
- ▲ Do you have an urge to celebrate good fortune by a few hours of gambling?
- ▲ After a win, do you have a strong urge to return and win more?
- ▲ Do you often gamble until your last dollar is gone?
- ▲ Do you ever gamble longer than planned?
- ▲ Do you feel remorse after gambling?
- ▲ Do worries related to gambling cause you to have difficulty sleeping?
- ▲ After losing, do you feel you must return as soon as possible and win back your losses?
- ▲ Are you reluctant to use "gambling money" for normal expenditures?

- ▲ Do you borrow money to finance your gambling?
- ▲ Do you ever sell anything to finance your gambling?
- ▲ Does gambling make your home life unhappy? For example, does gambling make you careless about family finances? Do you spend less time with your loved ones than you used to?
- ▲ Do you lose time from work due to gambling? (Loss of time includes lateness, long lunches, and mysterious absences. It also includes misuse of the telephone for gambling-related activities, and "slipping off" to the rest room or other relatively private areas to appraise yourself on gambling results.)
- ▲ Does gambling affect your reputation? (For example: have friends or associates complained about your gambling? Have you lost some friends because of your borrowing or because of your gambling activities or associates? Do banks and other legitimate financial institutions now refuse to extend your credit?) Do you ever commit, or consider committing, an illegal act to finance your gambling?

How can you help if someone you care about has a gambling problem, and if necessary, also help yourself?

"It's difficult unless they admit they have a problem, and the chance of that happening, at least in the beginning - is slim," says Betty George. You may not even be sure the problem is gambling. Unlike alcoholism and other drug dependencies, problem gambling is often an invisible disorder. There is no smell on the breath, no stumbling of steps or speech. It's easy to mistake the problem of gambling as simply a matter of someone needing "advice" about how to manage money or time more effectively.

As a friend and colleague, the most you can do is express your concern. A message from the heart goes to the heart. Try saying, "You're a good friend (or colleague) and because of that I'm worried. It's the borrowing, the time lost from work, etc., and I've also noticed you've been gambling (or talking about it) quite a bit. I read something the other day about problem gambling, and where people get help. I can get you a copy if you like." If they seem resentful or evasive, don't push. Let it go. However, if the behaviour affects your work or if it involves an illegal activity, it would be wise for you to discuss it with your supervisor or human resources department.

If you are an affected family member, you may have talked with the person, expressed your concerns, tried to be supportive or perhaps lectured, complained, wept - attempted all sorts of things to make the person stop gambling. Per chance these efforts worked for a short time, but the stress from this situation may have affected your relationships, and health.

It is important to keep in touch with your own feelings and determination about what is best at this time and to realize that you are not responsible for the gambler's behaviour. By focusing on yourself and making positive, and possibly tough choices, the other person will see you making changes and may then feel the need to make some of their own. Some of these positive changes may involve a decision to stop protecting the gambler, and taking action to find out how to safeguard your financial resources, family, and health. And stick with it!

Contrary to popular belief, not all change is hard, but sticking with it is the challenging part. Deciding on what to change or how to go about it

can sometimes be confusing, especially when your positive and negative feelings seem like they are in conflict. You may find it useful to talk to a professional counsellor to address your circumstances to determine the best way to deal with the situation. Remember that you can't change someone else, but you can change yourself...and this may motivate other people to change too!

Keep this in mind:

- ▲ There is no such thing as a "sure thing" or a "system" for winning at games of chance. Belief in such things is part of a problem gambler's preoccupation with luck and superstition.
- ▲ Video Lottery Terminals (VLTs) are among the most addictive forms of gambling. The rapid action and "sensory thrill" (lights and sounds; win or lose) has been compared to the "high" of drug use.

Many factors contribute to problem gambling, but people who are experiencing a lot of stress in their lives may be more susceptible. Finding healthy ways to unwind may be the first small step - our counsellor can help find ways best suited to you.

If you or a family member has a gambling problem, please seek out an EAP counsellor. Our counsellor will assess how severe the addiction is, and recommend steps to see to recovery.

All in all, an EAP counsellor can determine that there is indeed a gambling addiction, discover what may have caused or drawn the person to gambling, and recommend what you can do to motivate the person to quit. Because so much of both the person's life, and the lives of his or her family, can be affected by gambling, we recommend speaking to a counsellor as soon as you believe that you need to.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your EAP counsellors to arrange a telephone or in-person counselling session.

All contact between you and your counsellor is completely confidential.

**English Service: 1-800-387-4765**  
**French Service: 1-800-361-5676**  
**General Information: 1-888-814-1328**