

Assessing Problem Gambling – A Guide for EA Professionals

Gambling doesn't pose a problem for most people. However, for an estimated one in 20 persons, gambling leads to a host of personal and economic problems that weave a path of personal and economic destruction. Consider:

- The National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG) estimates that 2 million (1%) of adults in the U.S. meet the criteria for pathological (i.e. compulsive) gambling in a given year. Another 4-6 million (2-3%) would be considered problem gamblers; that is, they do not meet the full diagnostic criteria for pathological gambling, but they do meet one or more criteria and are experiencing problems due to their gambling behavior.
- The National Gambling Impact Study Commission points out that for every compulsive gambler, five additional people are affected by the addiction.
- The NCPG estimates that compulsive gamblers annually cost businesses \$40 billion in lost wages and insurance claims.
- One third of the U.S. prison population is considered compulsive gamblers.
- One out of every five compulsive gamblers attempts suicide.

Characteristics of a Problem Gambler

According to the NCPG, the essential features of problem gambling are: an increasing preoccupation with gambling; a need to bet more money more frequently; restlessness or irritability when attempting to stop; "chasing" losses; and continuing gambling behavior in spite of mounting, serious consequences affecting finances, work, and/or personal relationships.

An inability and unwillingness to accept reality (hence an escape into a "dream world") is another characteristic of a problem gambler. A compulsive gambler also seems to have a strong inner urge to be a "big shot" and a feeling of being powerful. A compulsive gambler is willing to do anything (often of an antisocial nature) to maintain the image that he or she wants others to see.

"If the gambler is seeking a 'bail-out,' it's a sure sign that there is a compulsive gambling problem," adds Terri Ohlms, counselor, interventionist, and executive director of the Ohlms Institute (<http://olms-institute.com>).

Defining 'Chasing'

As the term implies, "chasing" means that a gambler often "chases" after his/her losses, betting more to regain what was lost. "But do enough chasing and the initial winnings will be gone – regardless of how large the initial payout was," states Pam Koonz, a certified problem gambling counselor and chemical dependency counselor with Wheaton Franciscan Healthcare in Racine, WI (www.mywheaton.org).

While winning enough money might appear to be the "answer," in reality it becomes the problem as cold hard cash becomes an obsession – leaving behind broken marriages and other relationships that end in conflict and bankruptcy.

Comparing/Contrasting to Other Addictions

In some ways, problem gambling is similar to other addictions, such as alcohol and other drug abuse. “I haven’t seen a major difference,” says Bruce Cotter, a leading interventionist and recovering alcoholic who has helped hundreds of people with their addictions (www.whentheywontquit.com). “Many gamblers drink, and they probably use another drug. There are also gamblers who abuse their wives,” he notes.

Moreover, like alcoholic employees, problem gamblers often deny they have a problem – even though the reality is that their problematic behavior is likely affecting their family and/or work life, even if it isn’t always obvious to co-workers and/or family. As the Nevada Council on Problem Gambling puts it: *“when someone has a problem with gambling, everyone in the family is affected.”*

“What differentiates the gambling addiction from drug or alcohol addictions is that there are no obvious physical signs shown by the gambling addict,” Ohlms states. “Behaviorally, they simulate the sexual addict. Even so, with the sexual addict, there are often signs among intimate others indicating that particular addiction, especially in the later stages.

“The gambling addict, however,” she adds, “holds his/her secret close to himself/herself. Family and friends may not have a clue about how bad the gambling has become until it’s too late. Therefore, the deception is felt far worse than other addictions, especially since it affects the pocketbook.”

Uncovering Problem Gambling Behavior

Since so many people with addictions – gamblers in particular – are clever liars, how can the EAP uncover problematic gambling behavior? According to Ohlms, when an EAP screens for drug/alcohol use, questions about gambling can be interwoven into the screening by using [the CAGE assessment](#):

- 1) *Have you ever felt the need to **cut** down on your drinking, drug use or gambling?*
- 2) *Have people **annoyed** you by criticizing your drinking, drug use, or gambling?*
- 3) *Have you ever felt bad or **guilty** about your drinking, drug use, or gambling?*
- 4) *Have you ever needed an **eye** opener to steady your nerves or to get rid of a hangover; or stayed longer at a gambling event than you planned trying to get back what you lost?*

“If the CAGE draws out a possible issue with gambling, then ask about debt: who, how much; does the person plan restitution; does the person think he/she has a problem with gambling?” Ohlms adds. “If the answer is yes, then apply the SOGS (South Oaks Gambling Screen) assessment – www.stopgamblingnow.com/sogs_print.htm

Cotter points out another potentially revealing question that can be asked: *“If you could never gamble again, how would you feel?”* According to Cotter, an approach like this is useful because, to the gambler, it’s not just the gambling itself that’s important, it’s the “thrill of the bet.” “If you say it [the question] this way, it doesn’t have a provocation to it,” Cotter says.

Treatment

If the screenings point to a need for further assessment or treatment, Ohlms urges a referral to a professional who has been trained to work with compulsive gamblers.

“These clients CANNOT resolve their problems without thorough treatment – certainly not in 3-4 sessions,” adds Ohlms, who has presented national workshops with case studies for EAPs.

Summary

Since lottery tickets, office pools, casino trips, etc. have made gambling socially acceptable in many areas, it can be easy to overlook gambling as a potentially addictive behavior. Just like some social drinkers who can stop at one drink while others can't; many people only make an occasional bet, while others can't stop gambling until it wreaks major havoc in their lives. Gambling has often been a hidden and invisible problem. It's time to shed more light on this issue. The EAP is in a position to help.

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