

# Problem Gambling: *The Hidden Addiction*

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For most, gambling is an entertaining pastime. But when does something harmless turn into a problem?

Problem gambling can be defined as anytime gambling causes a problem in someone's life. This can include financial issues, relationship conflicts, stress and anxiety, or distraction from school or work. A common societal view is that gambling problems are the result of a moral failing or lack of self-discipline. However, problem gambling and gambling disorder have a significant impact on a person's physical, mental and social well-being.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) classifies Gambling Disorder as a Substance-Related and Addictive Disorder. A common misconception about gambling is that it is dissimilar to drugs and alcohol because a person does not ingest

anything into the body. However, through things like Positron Emission Tomography (PET) scans and other tests, we understand that gambling causes a release of dopamine in a similar manner as with the use of drugs and alcohol. It is no surprise, then, that there is a high rate of co-occurrence between gambling and alcohol and/or drug use.

The 2020 NYS Problem Gambling Prevalence study by the Office of Addiction Services and Supports found that although adults experiencing gambling problems represented 4.3% of the general NYS population, they represented 14.7% of those experiencing an alcohol, tobacco, or other drug problem. Among those experiencing gambling disorder, over 73% also have an alcohol use disorder, over 60% have a nicotine dependence, and over 38% have a drug use disorder .

Further, repetitious exposure to gambling activities can also change brain function, and individuals can experience urges or cravings to gamble, irritability or agitation when unable to gamble, and even physical withdrawal symptoms.

Irritability is not the only impact that gambling can have on one's mental well-being either. In some cases, issues like loss, grief or other life events can lead to gambling as an escape from trauma and depression. In others, the negative consequences of gambling can cause stress, depression and anxiety. Two out of three people with a gambling problem reported that their mental health suffered as a result .

**Gambling & Dopamine**  
It's not about the money – it's about the action of the game and the hope of winning.

Potential losses      Potential gains

LH      RH      Z-value  
-4.0   -2.323   4.0

Dopamine not released when expecting a loss.  
Flooded with dopamine when expecting a win!

Source: Brain Briefings (2007, October), Society for Neuroscience, Washington, DC

*“Several similarities between drug abuse and gambling effects on one’s brain and responses given by brains of several addicts to many cues. Gambling and drugs activate reward systems in the brain in a similar manner.”*

*“People with addiction disorders have underactive reward systems in the brain. These people choose other ways for stimulating reward pathways that include gambling and drug-fueled highs.”*

If left unchecked, these struggles can lead to an increased risk of suicidality. Nearly half of people with gambling disorder experience suicidal ideation, or thoughts of suicide. One in five people with a gambling problem or gambling disorder will attempt or die by suicide – the highest rate of any addiction.

The harm from problem gambling and gambling disorder are not exclusive to just the person gambling. It is estimated that each person with a gambling problem directly impacts about 10 other people in a variety of ways, physically, emotionally, financially, and more<sup>2</sup>. With about 600,000 New Yorkers experiencing a gambling problem, that translates to about six million people across the state being negatively impacted by gambling. Nearly all the affected others (91%) surveyed experienced emotional distress with more than half (57%) experiencing some kind of mental ill health<sup>3</sup>.

Problem gambling is often described as a hidden addiction. Gambling itself can be easily hidden. Many of the harms associated with gambling can be hidden as well. Some indications that gambling might have become problematic could include being absent from activities with friends or family because of gambling; feeling stressed or anxious when not gambling; low school or work performance due to preoccupation with gambling; inability to pay for regular expenses or needing to borrow money; or lying to family and friends about how much money and time is spent on gambling.

The Finger Lakes Problem Gambling Resource Center (PGRC) is here to help anyone who is looking to reprioritize their lives and overcome the problems that gambling has caused, whether they are gambling themselves or have a loved one who is. Private-practice counselors, behavioral health and treatment facilities, recovery groups and other community services throughout the Finger Lakes region make up a vast referral network. When people call (585) 351-2262 or email [FingerLakesPGRC@NYProblemGambling.org](mailto:FingerLakesPGRC@NYProblemGambling.org), they confidentially connect with a knowledgeable PGRC staff person who will listen to and connect them with the resources that best meet their needs. Whether you are ready to get help, or you are just curious about your options, call us today. We're here to help.

#### References:

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Jenna Hotaling is a recent addition to the problem gambling field. Since the fall of 2018, she has been leading the Finger Lakes Problem Gambling Resource Center (FL-PGRC) team through outreach efforts, community education, and raising awareness on problem gambling. She has conducted numerous problem gambling training sessions for agencies across the region. Jenna has a Bachelor's Degree in Community Health and a background in health education.

Continued from page 11.

It is essential that we start thinking of substance use disorders and describing them by using the same language that we use when we describe other chronic medical conditions. The language is critical here: Let's change the world by changing the way we think about, and talk about, the medical conditions formerly known as "behavioral health."



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