



Problem Gambling

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Thirty years ago, legalized gambling was confined to a few states and was viewed by most of society as a “recreational activity.” Today, some form of gambling is legal in 48 states and is viewed as a “revenue generator” by state and local governments.

Legalized gambling has now become “mainstream” and has been fully integrated into our culture. Just turn on your television at any hour of the day and there is a good chance you will find a *televised* poker tournament. New forms of gambling continue to emerge: video poker, internet poker, video keno. New outlets for gambling are multiplying: truck stops, bars, bowling alleys, even grocery stores. The advancement of technology now allows anyone the opportunity to gamble without ever leaving the confines of their own home by using their PCs.

What are the societal impacts of the burgeoning gaming industry? Are they positive or negative? Sides have been taken, battle lines have been drawn and the debate has started. However, the reality is the answers to these and other related questions will only be fully answered over time. One thing that is known *now* is that problem gambling is becoming a much more visible and growing issue in our society today.

The 1999 National Gambling Impact Study (NGIS) estimated that of the “125 million Americans who gamble at least once a year, about 7.5 million have some form of gambling problem, with another 15 million ‘at risk’ of developing a gambling problem.” The costs created by problem gambling are immense. According to the NGIS, problem gamblers are much more likely to commit crimes, have health problems, suffer from depression and commit suicide. Families with a problem gambler are more likely to experience divorce, domestic violence and incidents of child abuse. According to a study done by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, problem gambling *conservatively* “costs society over \$5 billion yearly in jobless benefits, increased crime and incarceration, and in medical treatment.”

What is “problem” or “compulsive” gambling? The DSM-IV lists 10 behavior patterns as diagnostic criteria; signs of five or more of these behaviors suggest a compulsive gambling problem. However for the sake of simplicity, let’s say a compulsive gambler is anyone whose gambling is causing *psychological, financial, emotional, marital or legal problems* for themselves or those around them.

Let’s consider the financial difficulties created by compulsive gambling. The symptoms of financial disarray (including overdue or unpaid bills, multiple cash advances on credit cards, unexplained disappearance of cash and constant bailouts by friends and family) are also the major motivating factor for problem gamblers to seek professional help.

Working through the quagmire of complications created by problem gambling can be a daunting task. Just like an alcoholic, problems gamblers must abstain from gambling and enter a program of recovery.

Some suggestions for problem gamblers, families or friends:

- Talk to a professional therapist about the problem.
- Contact the National Problem Gambling Helpline at 1-800-522-4700 or visit www.ncpgambling.org.
- Contact Gamblers Anonymous International Service Office at 1-213-386-8789 or visit www.gamblersanonymous.org.

- Contact Gam-Anon International Office at 1-718-352-1671 or visit www.gamblersanonymous.org/gamanon.html.

To make a tax deductible contribution to the Physician's Health Program, contact TMF Administrator Michael Todd at (615) 467-6411, or write to the Tennessee Medical Foundation, 216 Centerview Drive, Suite 304, Brentwood, TN 37027.