



Gambling

What are Gambling and Gambling Problems?

Most Canadians play games of chance for money or other prizes. Popular gambling activities include lottery and raffle tickets, scratch tickets, casino games, slot machines, vlts, bingo, sports betting and informal card games. In Canada and around the world, people have had more and more opportunities to gamble over the past 20 years.

Although most Canadians are recreational gamblers, about 5% of the adult population develops gambling-related problems. These problems can range from the person who over spends on one occasion to the person who has a longer-term problem controlling his or her gambling activity. At the extreme end of the scale is pathological gambling, which is continued and extreme gambling that is maladaptive because of its negative effects on family, personal and work life (APA, 1994). About 1% of adults experience this severe form of the disorder.

Indicators¹ may include: repeated unsuccessful attempts to control, cutback or stop gambling, restlessness or irritability when making these attempts, needing to gamble with increasing amounts of money to achieve the desired excitement, preoccupation with gambling, gambling to escape from problems or emotions such as depression or anxiety, lying to family members or others about the extent of gambling, committing illegal acts such as forgery, fraud or theft to finance gambling, jeopardizing relationships, jobs or career opportunities because of gambling, and relying on others to provide money to relieve the financial consequences of gambling. Chasing losses (returning to gamble on another day to win back lost money) is considered a key feature.

There is no one cause of gambling problems and it is clear that biological, psychological and social factors all play a role. Gambling problems tend to run in families and people who have or have had problems with other addictions such as alcohol are at an increased risk of developing a gambling problem. Gambling problems can also be related to clinical depression, but we do not yet fully understand whether gambling problems lead to depression, whether depression contributes to gambling problems or both. People who are impulsive (for example, people who make decisions without thinking about consequences) are also more likely to have gambling problems. Most gambling also occurs in a social context. People gamble because their friends and family are gambling.

What can Psychologists do to Help People who have Gambling Problems?

Researchers are only starting to look at how successful we are at treating people with gambling problems. In most areas of the country, programs and counselors use treatment approaches that are similar to those used for drug and alcohol problems. These approaches can be provided individually or in groups and for inpatients and outpatients. Most cities have chapters of Gamblers Anonymous, which offer mutual support groups that operate on a twelve-step, spiritual model.

Research supports psychologists' use of cognitive and behavioural treatments with problem gamblers. Cognitive treatments help people understand and change thinking that maintains maladaptive gambling. For example, problem gamblers try to predict the outcome of their next bet by considering the outcomes of earlier bets. This kind of thinking is false and risky. A certain outcome is not more likely because it has or has not occurred on earlier bets - the chance of a certain outcome remains the same for each bet. With behavioural treatments, people change their behaviours and environment in order to make it harder for them to gamble. For example, people will often limit their access to cash.

Research also highlights the importance of motivation in overcoming gambling problems. Motivational enhancement techniques help people to understand how gambling affects their lives and the mixed feelings they might have about stopping gambling.

To date, there are no medications which have been proven to be effective in treating problem gambling.

The website for the Responsible Gambling Council, www.responsiblegambling.org has a comprehensive list of links to Canadian treatment programs, Gamblers Anonymous and provincial help lines.