

**Problem Gambling Published in The Chilliwack Progress, July 17, 2005
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Life is a gamble. From the moment of birth to the moment of death, there are trade-offs and risks to be taken. For example, when you tell someone something they might not want to hear or tell someone a secret, you are gambling that your trust will be honoured. When you buy a lottery ticket, you are gambling a small amount of money to hopefully win a much larger amount. When you take out a loan to buy a car or a house, buy a business, or make an investment in the stock-market, you are gambling away the money you spend in the hope of eventually recovering a substantial profit. All of this is quite normal and not what mental health professionals would call pathological.

Where things get tricky is when gambling becomes a preoccupation or, ultimately, an addiction. Some people continually think about that last time they lost and what they might have done or how they might have played in order to change the outcome in their favour. This is sometimes called “chasing losses.” Others become preoccupied with a past instance of winning and spend most of their time arranging their circumstances in an effort to recreate that winning experience. Behavioural theories about this would suggest that losses are punishing and wins are rewarding and, therefore, people try to avoid losses and approach wins. The interesting thing about gambling is that it can be fuelled by certain schedules of reinforcement. This means the timing of reinforcement is very important. For example, it turns out that games at gambling casinos are deliberately set up so that rewards are not granted to players every game. If they were, there wouldn't be much of a gamble, would there?

Instead, players can expect to win an unpredictable and variable number of times in each session of play. There is no “magic” number of plays you need to win. What this seems to do is increase the drive or motivation to search for that win, even when its actual probability is very low. The effect this situation has on the thoughts of the gambler might sound something like: “It should be coming up next! Just one more try!” When a win does occur, the problem gambler is more likely to associate their drive for “just one more try” with the payoff itself. However, this is illusory. The actual chances of the win remain randomized, and have nothing to do with the gambler's efforts. Overall, the chances are far in favour of “the house” and gamblers lose much more often than they win – or gambling houses wouldn't be able to stay in business.

Neurobiological theories propose that neurotransmitters are stimulated by a win and suppressed by a loss. Ultimately, the person can become dependent on the behaviour to get the “rush” of adrenalin or endorphins. Eventually, the stores of neurochemicals run low, and, as Eryn pointed out in her overview article on Impulse Control Disorders, the person needs to do more of the behaviour to get the same rush. Like addiction, then, the person with a gambling problem feel the need to risk increasing amounts of money in order to get the desired level of excitement.

Also like addiction, the person with pathological or “problem gambling” has often made repeated and unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop gambling. They are often restless or irritable when attempting to cut down, control, or stop gambling. And they gamble as a way of escaping from problems or to relieve feelings of guilt, anxiety, depression, or helplessness. They may lie to family members, therapists, or friends, in an

effort to hide or deny how much they are caught up in gambling. In so doing, they often risk losing significant relationships, educational, or job opportunities because of gambling. As the problem worsens, they may come to rely on others to provide money to finance their gambling. Crimes like forgery, fraud, theft, or embezzlement are sometimes used to finance gambling. While gambling usually starts pretty harmlessly as a small and affordable risk, by this time, it is clear that gambling has become a self-reinforcing and self-destructive cycle.

According to a recent study, the province with the largest total number of problem gamblers in Canada is British Columbia. The study estimated that nearly five percent of the adults in B.C. are problem gamblers, with 0.5% having a severe problem with gambling. This translates into between approximately 120,000 and 175,000 people in B.C. with problem gambling. The study estimated that an additional 11% of the population of B.C. is estimated to be at-risk of a problem with gambling. Most gambling problems were found in lotteries, bingo, horse-racing, internet, and casinos.

In Canada as a whole, gambling is a growing industry. New casinos, online gaming, and video lottery terminals (VLTs) have permitted explosive growth in the industry. According to Statistics Canada, in the decade since 1992, the net revenue from government-run lotteries, VLTs, and casinos has risen from \$2.7 billion to \$11.3 billion.

The gambling industry shows no signs of slowing down and these expenditures have a cost that is all too real. For example, family members of five Atlantic Canadians who killed themselves after becoming addicted to gambling on VLTs are part of a campaign to have the machines banned outside casinos.

Keith Piercey of Corner Brook, Nfld., whose 31-year-old daughter died of a drug overdose after struggling with a gambling addiction, wants VLTs banned across the country, regardless of the money they raise for governments. "It should never be called revenue because it's not real revenue, it's lost money that somebody puts in a machine and the machines are programmed so that the Atlantic Lottery Corporation or Lotto Quebec or Lotto Ontario are the winners, not the person who's playing it," he said.

While problem gambling can fully absorb the life of someone who gambles excessively, it is treatable and help is available. Problem gambling could be a part of other mental health problems like addiction. Another possible overlap is with a mental disorder called bipolar illness. To sort this out, it is important to consult a physician to obtain a referral to a mental health professional so that a clear understanding and course of treatment for the mental health problem can be obtained.

Self-help tips include gambling only for entertainment, not as a way to make money. Avoid gambling when drinking or depressed because these things can increase the risk of problem gambling. Set yourself a time limit, do not go over budget, and take frequent breaks. Don't rely on your gut and know the actual odds of winning and losing.

These and more tips are available on the website of the B.C. government Gaming Policy and Enforcement Branch at www.bcreponsiblegambling.ca. People who think they have a problem with gambling or know someone with a gambling problem can also call the 24-hour toll-free Problem Gambling Help Line in B.C. At 1-888-795-6111. From there, people are referred to a counsellor in their area who has a contract to provide services free of charge under the government program on Problem Gambling.

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