

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Gambling: recognizing the problem

Gambling is a regular activity for many people. For some, gambling takes the form of buying a weekly lottery ticket or attending the occasional church bingo. For others, it means the betting pool at work, or a trip to the casino. Many people who take part in these forms of gambling can take it or leave it. But for approximately 2 percent of all American gamblers, it’s not that simple.

For people engaged in problem gambling, the pastime has become a habit that compromises, disrupts or damages personal and family relationships, or effects work pursuits.

Are you or someone you know a problem gambler?

Some of the traits and characteristics of problem gamblers can include:

- Low self-esteem
- Can become liars
- Manipulative
- Are in a numb, almost hypnotic state while gambling
- May feel free from physical and/or emotional pain while gambling

If you think you or someone you care about may have a problem, consider the following questions:

- Have you often gambled longer than you had planned?
- Have you often gambled until your last dollar was gone?
- Have thoughts of gambling caused you to lose sleep?
- Have you used your income or savings to gamble while letting bills go unpaid?
- Have you made repeated, unsuccessful attempts to stop gambling?
- Have you often been remorseful after gambling?
- Have you gambled to get money to meet your financial obligations?

If you or a loved one answers "yes" to any of these questions, consider seeking help from a professional.

Recognizing the phases of problem gambling

Phase One: Winning. Gambling often begins as a fun, social activity. During this phase, people sometimes win large amounts of money and feel invincible, so they bet bigger amounts because they believe they will win even more. Sometimes players bet even more to maintain the excitement level, holding on to the dream of winning big or the escape from everyday problems or stresses.

Phase Two: Losing. Problem gamblers can go through this stage just before they hit rock bottom. At

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this stage, players feel desperation and hopelessness as losses continue to mount. People cling to their fantasy of winning—hoping to make everything OK. Even when the realization sets in that you can't win, you keep gambling anyway, with little concern for the people around you. At this stage, problem gamblers are known to steal, to write bad checks or commit illegal acts to finance their gambling. For many problem gamblers, at this stage, family life has fallen into shambles, with some thinking about suicide.

Phase Three: Desperation. In this phase, gamblers have hit rock bottom, but recovery is possible. Gamblers no longer have any control over gambling, having exhausted all means of obtaining money. Many face legal problems, with a spouse or employer forcing them into a recovery program. At this stage, some get into a cycle of periodic recovery and periodic compulsive gambling.

Phase Four: Hopelessness. At this stage, most problem gamblers have given up. Having attempted recovery a number of times, you believe nothing can help you. Clinically depressed, you may believe no one cares and no help is available, and/or you may contemplate suicide.

Regardless of where you or a loved one is at, help is available. It is generally believed that recovery among problem gamblers can be more successful when the gambler receives help from a professional trained and certified in treating gambling addictions, and when the gambler's family is involved in the treatment. For more information on the steps to take toward recovery, please see other articles on this site.