

What is the connection between gambling disorders and substance use disorders?

Problem gamblers experience intense excitement, power and hopeful anticipation as a result of the “action” of gambling. For some who gamble, a dependency on the “action” of gambling takes place in a similar way to a dependency on the effects of alcohol or other drugs.

Often, problem gambling is accompanied by substance abuse. Research from a 2008 national telephone survey on problem gambling and other disorders shows that approximately:

- ▶ 75% of all pathological gamblers have had problems with *alcohol*.
- ▶ 38% of all pathological gamblers have had problems with *other drugs*.

The Impact of Problem Gambling & Substance Use Disorders ...

George and Elaine’s stories are common among people experiencing problems with both gambling disorders and substance use disorders.



“I’m really in trouble with my gambling. It is out of control. I just got into a recovery program for my drinking. It seems like whenever I gamble, I have a much harder time not drinking. And when I drink, my gambling really takes off. I just wish I could stop.”

– George, age 32



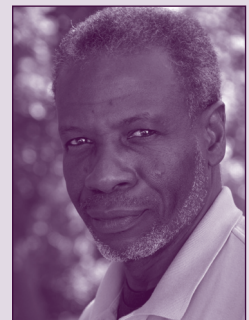
I’ve been sober for 12 years and thought I was really doing well. Now I feel like I am in the same place I was when I was drinking ... I think it’s my gambling.

–Elaine, age 44

Prevalence Rates

- ▶ The lifetime prevalence rate for alcohol use disorder is 18.6% (Kessler, et al., 2005).
- ▶ The lifetime prevalence rate for gambling problems is 2-3% which, while lower than alcohol levels, is similar to other substance use disorders (Compton, Conway, et al., 2005, 2006):
 - Cocaine use disorder: 2.8%
 - Amphetamine use disorder (e.g. methamphetamine): 2.0%
 - Opioid use disorder (e.g. oxycontin, morphine): 1.4%
 - Heroin use disorder: 0.4%
- ▶ Between 85,000 and 185,000 Massachusetts residents have experienced gambling problems during their lifetimes based on national estimates and US Census data.

Since alcoholism runs in my family, I grew up being so careful not to get in trouble with alcohol. Right now my life is falling apart. My wife told me to leave the house and I’m living in my car. I go to work each day, but I took some money, and I think they know...I’m afraid I’ll lose my job. I just never knew that gambling could lead to the same devastation caused by my mom’s drinking.”



– Dave, age 61

Similarities and Differences

Problem gambling is characterized as behavior that results in harmful effects to a gambler, his or her family, friends, and co-workers. The American Psychiatric Association classifies *pathological gambling* as the “persistent and recurrent maladaptive gambling behavior that disrupts personal, family or vocational pursuits.” Similarly, substance use disorders are characterized by continued use of a substance even after the person has experienced serious and related problems.

Similarities between gambling disorders and substance use disorders:

- ▶ preoccupation with the activity
- ▶ intense cravings
- ▶ usage to medicate uncomfortable feelings
- ▶ increased tolerance (needing more and more substance / activity to attain the same level of desired effect)
- ▶ continued usage despite negative consequences
- ▶ significant withdrawal symptoms

Gambling disorders and substance use disorders differ in that with gambling:

- ▶ there is no substance ingested
- ▶ there are no obvious signs such as odor, bloodshot eyes, slurred speech, or impaired body movement—causing it to be called the *invisible addiction*
- ▶ gambling provides a legitimate hope that the next episode will yield a reward
- ▶ loved ones/friends are often willing to provide a bailout for what appears to be a money problem

The Addiction Syndrome Model

Commonly, certain drugs or objects (e.g., games of chance) are termed “addictive”, implying that the properties of drugs or other objects cause addiction; therefore, only treatment for distinct disorders currently exists. However, evidence to view addiction as a syndrome with multiple expressions is emerging (Shaffer, et al., 2010).

Addiction can be thought of as the result of bad things happening from doing too much of something. The reward center of the brain teaches us to do things that bring pleasure or good feelings. Alcohol, drugs, and gambling all stimulate the reward center.

In the addiction syndrome model, to become addicted the following must occur: risk factors, experience with the object, and enjoyment from the feeling or mood produced by the gambling or object (Shaffer, 2004).

“When I was in school, we learned all about drugs and alcohol. Nobody ever said you could get into just as much trouble with gambling.”

– Jim, age 27



RESOURCES

Here are some local resources you may find helpful ...

 Massachusetts Council on
Compulsive Gambling
We understand the problem. We can help.

Our website: www.masscompulsivegambling.org offers many resources such as self-help meeting lists, treatment center contact information, web and print materials, as well as a *Your First Step to Change* self-assessment test, to help you or a loved one to determine the presence of a gambling problem.

We also have many books, journals, articles and informational videos relating to problem gambling available at our office.

Founded in 1983, the Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling is a private, non-profit public health agency dedicated to providing leadership to reduce the social, financial, and emotional costs of problem gambling and to promote a continuum of prevention and intervention strategies including: information and public awareness, community education and professional training, advocacy, and helpline/referral services for problem gamblers, their loved ones and the greater community.

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“I wish my problem was alcohol, not gambling. At least then I would know where to go for help”.

– Barbara, age 64



Helpline: 1-800-426-1234

Gamblers Anonymous

888-424-3577 • website: www.gamblersanonymous.org

Bettors Anonymous

978-988-1777 or 781-662-5199
website: www.bettorsanonymous.org

Gam-Anon (family / friends)

For family members or friends of problem gamblers
888-644-8482 • website: www.gam-anon.org