



Massachusetts Council on  
**Compulsive Gambling**

*We understand the problem. We can help.*

## **Gambling Disorders and Substance Use Disorders: What's the Connection?**

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, 32

### **Problem Gambling and Substance Abuse**

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 similar 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 lifetime prevalence rate for alcohol use disorder is 18.6% (Kessler, et al., 2005). The lifetime prevalence rate for gambling problems at 2-3% is significant and, while lower than alcohol levels, is similar to other substance use disorders:

- 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, 51

## Similarities and Differences

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, 44

Gambling has been a part of human activity throughout recorded history. Most people who gamble do so for entertainment and with minimal disruption to their lives. However, for some individuals, gambling becomes extremely problematic with devastating emotional and financial consequences.

*Problem gambling* is characterized as behavior that results in harmful effects to a gambler, his or her family, friends, and coworkers. 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 gambling to attain the same level of desired effect)
- continued usage despite negative consequences
- significant withdrawal symptoms

### Differences between gambling disorders and substance use disorders:

- there is no substance ingested
- there are no obvious signs such as odor, bloodshot eyes, slurred speech, or impaired body movement—causing 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,” tacitly implying that the properties of drugs or other objects cause addiction. Treatment for these different excessive behaviors follows this rationale and views alcohol dependence and pathological gambling, for example, as distinct disorders. Evidence to support a broader conceptualization of 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, 27

### Funding for Problem Gambling and Substance Abuse Services

Although Massachusetts programs to prevent, intervene and treat substance use disorders are significantly funded, similar programs for gambling disorders are not.

Proposed FY11 Budget for Substance Abuse Services: **\$84,224,448**

Proposed FY11 Budget for Gambling Addiction Services: **\$1,000,000**

Since 1998, state funding for problem gambling services has not exceeded \$1 million. From 2003 to 2006 the budget was cut to \$655,000. Massachusetts is #1 in per capita Lottery sales and ranks #18 in per capita funding for problem gambling services.

### Treatment Availability Statewide

	Substance Abuse	Problem Gambling
Outpatient	more than 50*	10
Residential	more than 90*	0

**\*Some substance abuse treatment agencies have multiple sites.**

I wish my problem was alcohol, not gambling. At least then I would know where to go for help. –Barbara, 64

For more information and complete citations for references found in this document, please contact:

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*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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