Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling

We understand the problem. We can help.

Veterans: Gambling Disorders Treatment and Prevention

April 10, 2014
Veterans: Gambling Treatment & Prevention (& Policy!)

MCCG 30th Anniversary Conference

April 10, 2014

Keith Whyte, Executive Director
National Council on Problem Gambling
Overview

- Gambling & PG likely start prior to enlistment, exacerbated by service & especially combat, and worsen again upon retirement.
- Gambling-specific prevention, education & treatment services non-existent or lacking all along this cycle.
- Veterans have substantial risk factors for problem gambling.
- Presentations will review important gambling treatment, prevention & policy efforts for veterans.
Panelist Presentations
Gambling in the U.S. Military…

• US service members may legally engage in slot machine gambling at the age of 18.
• It is estimated that at least 36,000-48,000 active duty US service members may have a gambling problem.
• No dedicated problem gambling prevention, education or treatment services.
Military Slots Program

- 7,000+/-? OCONUS slots @ MWR facilities.
- 2005: $2 billion handle, $120 million revenue.
Recruits

- N=31,104 AF recruits
- 10.4% weekly gambling
- 6.2% current problem gambling
- 1.9% current pathological gambling
- Higher rates among minorities
Senior Airman Lenyatta Tinnelle

- “Started gambling when she was stationed in South Korea in the mid-1990s, but her addiction intensified when in 2000 she was deployed to Keflavík, Iceland, where the slot machines available on the former naval base offered a respite from dark, cold evenings and boredom.”
- Gambled all her $40,000 in savings and wrote about $50,000 in bad checks on the base.
- Court-martialed for bad checks and put on suicide watch as she was threatened with hard labor, brig and demotion, even though she had asked for medical help for her addiction. Lenyatta avoided jail, but was demoted and eventually pushed out of the Air Force.
## Rates of Gambling Problems Among Active Duty Personnel

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>At Risk (1-2 criteria)</strong></td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem (3-5 criteria)</strong></td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pathological (5 or more criteria)</strong></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
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Summary Veterans Research

• Veterans utilizing VA treatment services 2-5x rate of gambling problems.
• Veterans in treatment for PTSD up to 60x higher rate of gambling problems.
• 40% of veterans seeking treatment for gambling problems reported suicide attempt.
  • NCPG Letter to Sec. Shinseki, Nov 12, 2012
Substance Abuse & Problem Gambling Among Veterans

- 66% of problem gamblers in residential program met lifetime substance abuse or dependence criteria.
- Most substance abuse preceded gambling problems.
- 33% of substance abusing veterans in a treatment program met criteria for problem gambling.
- Current alcohol consumption significantly higher in problem gamblers.
Suicide, PTSD & PG Among Veterans

• 40% of veterans with problem gambling in treatment had made a lifetime suicide attempt.

• 64% of those who attempted suicide reported their most recent attempt related to gambling.
  • *Suicide Attempts Among Veterans Seeking Treatment*. Kausch, O. *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* (2003)

• 17% of veterans entering treatment for PTSD also met criteria for problem gambling.
Warrant Officer Aaron Walsh

• Decorated Army Apache helicopter pilot.
• Developed severe gambling problem.
• Unsuccessful treatment attempts.
• AWOL, resigned 2005 before court martial.
• Committed suicide 2006.
NCPG Military Committee

- Raise awareness of unique circumstances surrounding gambling in military & veteran populations & work with stakeholders, including DoD & VA, to reduce harm.
- 2012 House MilCon/VA Appropriations Report language.
- Dr. Rena Nora Military & Veterans Gambling Care Act.
Summary

• Veterans are likely to need help.
• Treatment works.
• Need national top down and grassroots bottom up advocacy to ensure we have adequate awareness & resources to help this important population.

“To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan” – President Abraham Lincoln
730 11th Street, NW, Suite 601
Washington, DC 20001
Tel: 202.547.9204
Fax: 202.547.9206
Veterans and Gambling

- Introduction
- Gambling in the Military
- Issues in Treatment
- Treatment Modalities
- Case Study
Introduction
“Meeting the Needs of Veterans with Gambling Problems”

- Increase the number of gambling treatment specialists at the Bedford VAMC
- Increase referrals for specialized PG treatment
- Identify and treat more Veterans with PG
- Produce a documentary on Veterans with PG
- Educate staff and Veterans about PG and provide resources for treatment of PG
Negative Consequences

Diagram:
- Gambling
  - Substance Abuse
  - Isolation
  - Depression
  - Isolation/Withdrawal
  - Completed Suicide
  - Suicidal Ideation
  - Suicide Attempt
  - Theft, Embezzlement, Fraud, Forgery
  - Violent against Partners
  - Legal Problems
  - Divorce
  - Relationship Problems
Gambling in the Military

- Confidence in personal skills
- Downtime and boredom
- High-risk environment
- 24/7 access to online gaming
- Stress and anxiety
- Geographical isolation
- Easy access to online gaming via laptops
- Available credit online

Minnesota Department of Human Services
“Gambling, just like drugs, allows you to keep distress, depression, and anxiety at bay and remain in control of your own mind. So for Veterans who are distraught — maybe thinking they’re a coward because they lived and their comrades died — they sometimes think gambling can save them.”

Dr. Joseph J. Westermeyer
V.A. Staff Psychiatrist, Minneapolis
Gambling Among Veterans

Contributing Factors

- Elevated rates of PTSD, depression, and substance abuse, which are strongly correlated with pathological gambling
- Heightened shame and secrecy, making it difficult to seek treatment
Gambling Among Veterans

Contributing Factors

- The thrill of winning (or losing) when the stakes are high is like the adrenaline rush that occurs in combat.
- Gambling provides a nonlethal escape.
- “Why save today when you can die tomorrow?”

John Tucker, 2012
Slot Machines

A numbing escape from PTSD:
“Slot machines are like an anesthetic.”
Slot Machines

- Present on military bases since at least the 1930s
- Removed from all Army and Air Force bases in 1972, but remained on Naval bases
- Reintroduced in 1980
- At least 5,000 located on nearly 100 military bases overseas
Issues in Treatment

- Lies
- Transference and Countertransference
- Hope
- Abstinence vs. Harm Reduction
- Leisure
- Spirituality
Treatment Modalities

- Integrated, individualized treatment plan
- Individual Therapy/Group Therapy
- Psycho-educational Groups
- C.B.T.
- Medications
- Self-Help: G.A., GAM-ANON, GAMA-TEEN
Psycho-educational Gambling Groups

- What is gambling?
- What are chance, odds, games of chance and skills, gambling traps?
- What are thinking errors related to gambling?
- What are high risk situations leading to gambling?
- What are strategies to deal with cues and triggers that lead to gambling?
- What coping skills work for you?
- What is relapse prevention?
Medications

 Medications to help curb symptoms (not to treat gambling addiction itself):

- Antidepressants
- Anti-Anxiety agents
- Seizure medications
- Medications that block opioid receptors
- Sleep Aids
Dr. Lisa Najavits study to determine patient preference

16 different treatment types for PTSD and pathological gambling

- Self-help, self-guided including books and computerized therapy
- Body therapies, such as yoga and therapeutic massage
- Coaching by telephone or by e-mail check-ins and advice
- Medications, including sleep aids, anti-depressants, and anti-anxiety agents
- Professionally led psychotherapies such as C.B.T., Seeking Safety, Exposure
Study Findings

- **Pathological gambling only**
  - Self-help groups rated highest, medication rated lowest

- **PTSD Only**
  - Psychotherapy rated highest (individual over group)

- **Both pathological gambling and PTSD**
  - Medication rated lower than other treatment types
  - Relatively low rating for non-standard types of therapy (coaching, reading books, computer-based care, family therapy)

- Among pathological gamblers, ratings for most professionally led psychotherapies (C.B.T., Seeking Safety, Exposure) did not differ significantly
Treating Problem Gambling & Substance Use Disorder

- Identify specific triggers for each addiction.
- Identify ways in which use of addictive substances or gambling acts as mutual triggers.
- Educate about crossover addictions.
PG Profile at the Veterans Community Care Center

- Male in the 50's with SMI and Health Issues
- Limited income
- Currently heavy smoker or past smoker
- Alcohol and Drug free for number of years
- Sequentially develops gambling problem, primarily with scratch tickets
Identified Problems in the Milieu and in Community Residential Homes

- Excessive borrowing and harassment of others for money and cigarettes
- Behavior leading to warnings and in some cases, discharge from their Community Residential Homes
- Excessive irritability and anxiety leading to confrontations
- Most of leisure time spent buying/scratching tickets
- Isolation and withdrawal
Interventions: in the Milieu and Beyond

Integrate treatment into existing programs:

- **Groups:** Addictions/Habits, CBT, Mindfulness, Smoking Cessation
- **Other program offerings:** OT, Recreation, Community Integration, Peer Support, Health and Wellness/Ilness Management
- **On main VA campus:** Gambling psycho-education and spirituality group
Emphasis on Recovery
Moving from....

- Denial/Guilt/Shame ➔ Awareness and Acceptance
- Despair ➔ Hope
- Persistent relapses ➔ Breaking the cycle
Case Study

“Sam”: Age 56, single, Caucasian male, non-combat Veteran who served during Vietnam era; long history of SMI (Schizoaffective Dis.) and addictions (alcohol, cocaine)

- Received treatment both in and outside VA.
- Cigarette smoker; Health issues; Limited income

Course of treatment and my current role

Lessons Learned:
- Empowerment, Powerlessness, Spirituality
Spirituality and Transformational Considerations

- Anthropologist James Mooney said, “Gambling is rooted in the universal longing of mankind to know the cause of things and how effects may be controlled.”
- Gambling addicts, are, in a manner of speaking, spiritual seekers.

Kathryn Gabriel, 1996
Spirituality speaks to the heart and soul...is an invisible part of ourselves which gives us a sense of value and purpose in life.

Instills hope and sense of connectedness to value self, others and something outside the self.

In a 2014 article in Current Psychiatry, John Allen and his fellow authors conclude that “asking about religious and spiritual aspects of patients’ lives shows respect for their views, and facilitates a therapeutic alliance by recognizing their autonomy in treatment.”

They conclude that during initial assessment, the therapist should:

- Assess comfort level in discussing religious and spiritual beliefs
- Consider ethical and clinical practice concerns
  - approach not for all patients or clinicians; beware of proselytizing
- Confer with or refer to Clergy and clinically trained Chaplains
- Refer/assess experience in 12 Step programs
References

- Minnesota Department of Human Services, Problem Gambling: The Hidden Addiction.