Problem Gambling Awareness Month (PGAM) coincides with March Madness, the popular NCAA basketball single-elimination tournament, and this is not by accident. Collectively, the games in the tournament will attract more in wagers than even the NFL’s Big Game. Following 2020, when March Madness was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, sports bettors are eager to return to the action they’re used to this time of year. Unfortunately, this too means that those suffering from and at risk for problem gambling will also be drawn in and make bets they cannot afford, and the impacts go far beyond financial problems.

It’s no secret that the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the world of sports and the way people watch. With in-person attendance restricted or completely off-limits in certain markets, many sports networks have leveraged virtual viewing opportunities [1]. As the viewing methods have changed, so too have the ways that one can wager on the games. Nationally, there have been reported increases in online gambling as many gamblers shift from casino or other gambling types to online gambling and social casino or gambling sites. In terms of March Madness, 42% of fans said they followed college basketball more closely this season, with 70% of those following more closely attributing their increased attention either somewhat or very significantly to the increased availability of legal sports betting. “The sports betting landscape has changed dramatically since 2019 – and as a result, tournament betting has transformed. With more legal, regulated options than ever before, millions of customers now have safer ways to enjoy all the fun and suspense only March Madness provides,” said Bill Miller, President and CEO of, American Gaming Association [2].

As sports betting expands in other states, an important thing to remember is that in the state of Florida, online gambling and sports betting have not been legalized to date.

According to the American Gaming Association, the number of Americans planning to wager on this year’s tournament via online sportsbooks will triple compared to 2019, while the number of Americans placing wagers at brick-and-mortar sportsbooks will nearly double [2]. In Florida, sports betting is not legal, but that doesn’t mean that those who struggle with a gambling addiction will restrict themselves to legal boundaries. Within the last year, 888-ADMIT-IT HelpLine callers reported that 17% of the problem gamblers committed illegal acts in order to help finance their gambling addiction.

Those reporting online gambling (which is also not legalized in Florida) as the form of gambling causing the most problems also more than doubled over the past year with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic [3]. Did you know that legal assistance referrals and associated resources are part of the extensive services that our 888-ADMIT-IT Problem Gambling Helpline offers?

This Problem Gambling Awareness Month, our emphasis is on leading individuals to learn about the opportunities and challenges that this pandemic has brought to the issue of problem gambling. That’s why our PGAM theme for this year is Shining the Light on Problem Gambling: Changing the Game. We have worked hard to expand the resources available through the 888-ADMIT-IT HelpLine furnish help and hope to those indirectly or directly affected by problem gambling during these transformative times, not only in March but throughout the year. Problem Gambling is both treatable and preventable, and anyone in need of supports, including gamblers and loved ones, can call our 24/7, Confidential, and Multilingual 888-ADMIT-IT HelpLine to get connected to the road to recovery.

Our 24/7, Confidential and Multilingual Problem Gambling HelpLine may be reached by calling 888-ADMIT-IT (888-236-4848), texting (321) 978-0555, emailing fccg@gamblinghelp.org, initiating a live chat at gamblinghelp.org, or by reaching out to us on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.

Follow and share PGAM on social media using hashtags #PGAM and #PGAM2021! Learn more at problemgamblingawarenessmonth.org.
