

Special Focus

Money: A Drug of Choice

When people abuse substances like alcohol and drugs, it's fairly easy to understand how they can become addicted and ruin their lives. It is also not difficult to determine when someone may be under the influence and impaired. However, when a person gambles compulsively, it is much harder for loved ones and others to understand the psychological addictive qualities of an activity that is typically viewed as an enjoyable pastime. Even more challenging at times, is trying to identify when someone may be suffering from a gambling problem – hence its label as a “hidden addiction.”

For compulsive gamblers, the “drug of choice” isn't a toxic substance, it's money. Without money to gamble, these people go into withdrawal. Without money, there is no action and without action there is no euphoria or escape. That's why compulsive gamblers will do almost anything to keep the cash and credit flow going.

Since having money to place bets is what keeps the action in progress, anything or anyone that gets in the way is in danger

of being compromised.

This includes family members, friends, employers, financial institutions and even the law. In desperation to obtain their “drug of choice,” compulsive gamblers, more often than not, violate the norms of behavior simply because in the throes of their addiction, nothing else matters. The results are devastating for the gambler and everyone else associated with the gambler's situation. (See next article for family impact.)

Though it is true that compulsive gamblers do not overdose like drug addicts or alcoholics, and have no “saturation point,” the high rates of suicide, divorce, spousal abuse, ill health and bankruptcy are solid indicators of an illness that is just as serious and very costly.



What about Families of Compulsive Gamblers?



By the time family members of compulsive gamblers recognize the severity of their loved one's addiction, the financial losses involved are often incredible. The problem is that the true extent of these losses is rarely uncovered without a full investigation. It is at this point that family members must move beyond self-blame for not recognizing the problem sooner.

Without question, it is imperative that an honest financial picture be compiled and examined. A vital step in this process is obtaining one or more credit reports from national credit reporting agencies such as Experian (888) 397-3742, Equifax

(866) 349-5191, or Trans Union (800) 916-8800. It is also critical that all joint accounts be closed and the gambler's access to money becomes limited. At this point, emotional outbursts, surrounding the issue of money, between gamblers and their families are not uncommon. This is where love often mixes with anger, fear, anxiety and stress to produce feelings of confusion, betrayal, helplessness and hopelessness. Arguments abound and unfortunately at times, marriages or relationships do fall apart.

The good news is that there are very effective resources available to help gamblers and loved ones resume a productive way of life. An essential first call is to the Florida Council on Compulsive Gambling (FCCG) 24-hour HelpLine (888-ADMIT-IT), which provides information and referrals to self-help groups, such as Gamblers Anonymous (GA) and Gam-Anon, as well as to highly qualified counselors, attorneys and financial advisors. Some GA fellowships offer “Pressure Relief,” a program that aids gamblers and their families in regaining financial balance in their lives. The FCCG also provides a free self-help workbook that assists gamblers and loved ones in understanding the disease of compulsive gambling and outlines a step-by-step process for restoring emotional and financial health. (See related article on page 3.)