

Of Interest

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“Do you know when to hold, and when to fold them?”

by Jim Owen

Everywhere we turn we are being offered opportunities to gamble. Gas stations and fast food outlets offer games of chance to entice us into their stores. Local charities sell lottery tickets as fund raisers. Many states advertise their own lotteries and instant winner games, and depend on income generated by these games. We can go to the horse races, or we can do off track betting and save ourselves the trouble of actually going to see the horses. In many states we can go to a Native American high stakes bingo hall or to a tribal casino. We can bet on sports with our friends at work. We can gamble anytime we want online if we choose to. We can spend some of our lunch hour playing slot machines at a facility near us. We can go for a gambling weekend or vacation, by going to a resort or to a boat offshore. We can gamble legally, or illegally if we choose.

Widespread gambling isn't new. Lotteries in England helped to finance the early efforts at colonizing our country, and even helped raise money during the Revolutionary War.

What is new, is growing awareness that gambling represents an increasing challenge for individuals, families, healthcare providers and businesses. What is new is the spread of legalized gambling since 1973 when just Nevada had casinos. Now 26 states and the District of Columbia have casinos within their borders. In 1964 New Hampshire instituted the first state-run lottery, now 37 states have some form of gambling lottery. Americans spend more on gambling than on any other leisure activity, some \$70 billion a year. For example, there are estimates that employee distraction during March Madness (the NCAA Basketball tournament) costs employers millions in productivity losses, maybe even as much as \$1.5 billion nationwide. According to an article in the University of Miami's Business Law Journal that appeared in the Spring of 1994, businesses are revisiting workplace policies about gambling in response to such productivity issues and in response to the increasing social, personnel and insurance costs associated with the spread of legalized and internet gambling. A business trying to operate in a community with new, ready access to legalized gambling can expect gambling-related problems among their employees and their families to double or even triple, possibly affecting up to 10% of their workforce. Businesses,

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Warning Signs for Problem or Pathological Gambling

- pre-occupied with gambling
- bragging about gambling, exaggerating wins and minimizing losses
- restless or irritable when not gambling
- tried to stop multiple times
- gambling with an intent to win back what was lost
- borrowing money for gambling
- lying to oneself and others about time spent gambling
- minimizing the seriousness of unpaid debts or bills
- frequent unexplained absences from other responsibilities
- being distracted at work by on-line gambling, or other gambling activity
- doing something illegal to get money to pay for gambling
- diverting family finances to pay for gambling
- jeopardizing significant relationships by continuing to gamble
- risking a job or professional status

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which don't directly benefit from gambling, are considering the ready availability of legalized gambling when they are making decisions about where to locate their businesses. They don't want to compete while trying to bear the additional costs generated by problem gambling.

For most people, who engage in gambling activities, intermittent, social gambling with friends and family is fun, and another form of entertainment. They are careful about their losses, they don't pretend that they are winning more often than they are losing (they know the house almost always wins in the end), and they are generally more interested in the people they are with than in the gambling or in the notion that they might win a small fortune.

Problem gambling is another story. Gambling becomes problem gambling when a person's gambling results in negative consequences in their life, in the life of their family, or in their relationships with friends and co-workers, and the person keeps on gambling. Some people, for reasons that aren't clear at this stage of understanding, are more susceptible to the emotional, psychological and neurological stimulation that gambling can provide. Some games and gambling settings are also more reinforcing than others. Casinos and other gambling venues are well aware of this. Even social users can lose track of time and money sometimes in certain gambling settings. Social users learn ways to keep control or to avoid those settings, problem gamblers and compulsive gamblers keep coming back even when bad things are happening because of the time and money they are spending on gambling.

Treatment for problem gamblers is evolving. Until the recent spread of legalized casino and slot machine gambling, there wasn't much help available. That is changing. In addition to Gamblers Anonymous (for gamblers), and Gam-Anon (for gamblers' family and friends), more professionals are being trained to provide help, and research is taking place both in university and community settings. Treatment services for gamblers are where treatment for those suffering from chemical dependency was 20 or more years ago. GA meetings are not available in every community and knowledgeable treatment services for gamblers and their families are in short supply as well.

Resources for Help:

- your EAP
- Gambler's Anonymous, www.gamblersanonymous.org
- Gam-Anon, www.gam-anon.org
- National Council on Problem Gambling, www.ncpgambling.org
- National Problem Gambling HelpLine; 800.522.4700
- Your state's office of substance abuse

**If you are having problems,
your EAP is here for you.**

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