

Problem gambling and depression



FACT SHEET 45

This fact sheet looks at the links between depression and gambling problems, and highlights some ways to identify gambling problems and seek help and treatment.

Gambling is common in Australian society – nearly 75 per cent of Australian adults gamble in any year.¹ However, about 300,000 Australians have a gambling problem that may affect many parts of their lives, including:

- physical and emotional health
- relationships
- study
- finances
- work.

For every person with a gambling problem, between five and 10 others (e.g. partners and children) also experience serious consequences, including:

- emotional distress
- the breakdown of family relationships
- financial difficulties.

This means that more than two million Australians are affected by problem gambling.²

There is a strong link between problem gambling and mental health problems. Nearly three out of four people with a gambling problem are at risk of developing depression.¹ Gambling can also be a sign that a person already has a mental health problem and may need help.

WHAT IS GAMBLING?

To gamble is to risk money or something of value on an outcome involving chance. Gambling can include:

- playing poker machines
- playing online lottery games
- playing cards
- playing casino games (e.g. table games, electronic gaming machines)
- betting on sporting events, horses, greyhounds or on games of skill (e.g. pool, football)
- buying lottery tickets.

REASONS WHY GAMBLING CAN BECOME A PROBLEM

Anyone can develop a gambling problem – it does not depend on age, gender, income, education or ethnic background – and the transition from being a non-gambler to someone with a gambling problem can be swift. For people experiencing mental or physical health problems, stress, loneliness and isolation, or loss and grief, the risk of problem gambling developing is greater.

Problem gambling can be thought of as a behavioural addiction, sharing some features of other addictions such as alcoholism and drug addiction. Reasons for developing a dependency on gambling vary, but can include:

- Going for the next win – Some people may not have a mental health problem, but get hooked on gambling after a few wins and continue to play in the hope of winning again. These people may develop a mental illness as a result of their gambling.
- As an escape – Some people who experience an anxiety disorder, depression, stress or harmful substance use may use gambling to try to 'escape' from their lives or to try to numb the pain of past or present problems. Gambling is a temporary 'solution' for them – which then becomes a problem.
- Seeking an adrenalin rush – Some people seek a 'high' from gambling, although this fades quickly. They may feel on top of the world and often believe they are capable of winning large sums of money.

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

Problem gambling is not easy to spot. Sometimes, by the time anyone realises there is a problem, the person already has mental health problems and is close to financial ruin. Like other addictions, the longer problem gambling goes on, the harder it is to break free.

Recognising the problem in others

Here are some signs you can look for if you're worried about a relative, friend or employee. People with a gambling problem have a preoccupation with gambling and may:

- want to borrow money to gamble or to cover debts
- have changes in their sleeping and eating habits
- start to miss work or other regular commitments
- express suicidal thoughts
- sometimes celebrate their 'good fortune' by gambling more.

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Recognising the problem in yourself

If you answer 'yes' to one or more of these questions, you may be developing a gambling problem. Do you:

- go to gambling venues alone and often?
- stay at gambling venues longer than you intended?
- spend more time on gambling than other favourite pastimes or interests?
- gamble every last dollar you have on you?
- think about gambling every day?
- try to win back money you have lost with more gambling?
- find it difficult to stop yourself spending too much?
- lie to friends and family members about your gambling and how much you have spent or do you just not tell them about it?
- sometimes reach the point where you no longer enjoy gambling?
- feel depressed because of gambling?
- have trouble sleeping?
- feel that gambling is having a negative effect on other areas of your life, such as family and work?

WHAT ARE THE LINKS BETWEEN PROBLEM GAMBLING AND MENTAL HEALTH?

People may not see a connection between their gambling and their health, but problem gambling is associated with a range of mental health problems, including:

- depression
- anxiety disorders
- other mood disorders

- heavy alcohol use or drug problems
- poor physical health (such as headaches and difficulty sleeping)
- suicidal thoughts.

A 2008 Australian study¹ found people with a gambling problem were:

- nearly 20 times more likely to display severe psychological distress
- more than four times more likely to drink alcohol at harmful levels than people without a gambling problem
- nearly 2.5 times more likely to be depressed.

In addition, a 2009 Victorian survey³ found that 46 per cent of people with a gambling problem reported anxiety compared to 7 per cent of people who did not have a gambling problem.

It's important to remember that each person is different and it's often a combination of factors that puts a person at risk of both depression and problem gambling, including:

- biological factors
- genetic factors (e.g. a family history of mental health problems)
- social factors
- psychological factors (e.g. poor coping strategies and poor relationships).

There is also evidence that people gamble to deal with their psychological problems, but problem gambling may worsen existing psychological problems, and it tends to cause the most harm to those who are most vulnerable. It may also create psychological problems in people who did not previously have any mental illness.

FACTS ABOUT DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY

Depression

- Depression is more than just a low mood – it's a serious illness. People with depression find it hard to function every day and may be reluctant to participate in activities they once enjoyed. Depression has serious effects on physical and mental health.
- On average, one in five females and one in eight males will experience depression in their lifetime.⁴

Anxiety disorders

- Everyone feels anxious from time to time, but for some people, anxious feelings are overwhelming and cannot be brought under control easily. An anxiety disorder is different from feeling stressed – it's a serious condition that makes it hard for the person to cope from day to day.
- Nearly one in seven people will experience some type of anxiety disorder in any one year – around one in six women and one in ten men. One in four people will experience an anxiety disorder at some stage of their lives.⁴

Depression and anxiety disorders are common, serious conditions, and getting help early assists treatment and promotes recovery. Find out more about depression and anxiety disorders on the *beyondblue* website – www.beyondblue.org.au – or by calling the *beyondblue* info line **1300 22 4636**.



DEALING WITH PROBLEM GAMBLING

If you or someone you care about has a gambling problem, you may feel overwhelmed or unsure of how to deal with it – but there are options and many people with a gambling problem are able to regain control and turn their lives around.

Helping a friend or family member

If you think a friend or family member has a gambling problem, show your concern without lecturing or criticising. Your comments may be met with defensiveness and denial. Don't take this personally, but let the person know you care and explain how his or her gambling behaviour affects you. You may have to set limits with the person. Don't be manipulated into excusing, justifying, overlooking, enabling or participating in the person's destructive behaviour. If the person agrees that he or she has a problem, here are some tips:

- Help the person make contact with organisations that can help, such as those listed at the end of this fact sheet.
- Be supportive and encouraging of the person's attempts toward change, however small.
- Expect that there may be steps backward as a normal part of the recovery process.
- Encourage activities that are not associated with gambling and try to support the person by limiting or stopping your own gambling.
- Become informed by finding out more about problem gambling.

Helping yourself

If you are concerned about your gambling and want to make some changes, then these suggestions may be useful:

- Break the silence and talk to someone you trust or a gambling counsellor. Keeping a gambling problem secret only makes it harder to bring about change. Talking to someone you trust can help reduce the stress of a gambling problem and help you to do something about it.
- Avoid high-risk situations. These include any situations which you know can lead to gambling in a harmful way, such as having your ATM or credit cards with you when gambling, gambling on your own or mixing alcohol with gambling. You may want to avoid risky situations such as talking about gambling, carrying large amounts of money or socialising close to gambling venues.
- Challenge your gambling thoughts. It's difficult to cut down or stop gambling if you believe that you can win and will come out in front. Remember, the odds are always with the venue, so you are sure to lose if you keep gambling.

- Prepare for gambling urges. Urges to gamble are common for people trying to cut down or stop. Preparing yourself can help you cope. Think of times or situations that are likely to trigger urges and have plans for alternative activities that can help distract you.
- Find alternatives to gambling. It's important to replace gambling with activities that you find satisfying. Finding a range of alternatives can help, such as sports, being with family members and friends, hobbies, and relaxation exercises (e.g. yoga or meditation).
- Reward your progress. There is a lot of guilt and shame associated with having a gambling problem. Acknowledge any progress you've made and reward yourself with a non-gambling treat – a nice meal, a movie or something else you enjoy.

SEEKING HELP

If you have tried to stop on your own and you are still gambling in a way that is causing problems for you or those around you, consider getting help.

Effective programs aim to address all aspects of the person's problems. There are several agencies (listed at the end of this fact sheet) that provide help for people with gambling problems. All Australian states and territories have free or inexpensive counselling services to help people with a gambling problem and their families.

Some common services to assist people with a gambling problem include:

- telephone counselling services
- individual counselling
- couples and family counselling
- financial counselling
- support groups.

A General Practitioner (GP) is a good person with whom to discuss your concerns in the first instance if the problem gambling is associated with a health or mental health problem such as depression. Your GP will be able to conduct or arrange any necessary medical tests, provide treatment or refer you to a mental health professional.

For a list of GPs, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers and occupational therapists with expertise in treating mental health problems, visit www.beyondblue.org.au and click [Find a Doctor or other Mental Health Practitioner](#) or call the *beyondblue* info line on **1300 22 4636**.

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THINGS TO REMEMBER

- Problem gambling can ruin a person's life socially, emotionally and financially. It may lead to the loss of relationships, home, health and career. It may cause stress, anxiety and depression. There are few people today who are not affected in some way by the impact of problem gambling on society.
- If you believe you have a gambling problem, it's vital that you seek help immediately. Getting help early is very important as problem gambling can be like a whirlpool that drags people down, deeper and deeper.
- Some people who have a gambling problem can return to a controlled level of gambling. However, most people prefer to give up gambling for good. If you're losing more money than you can afford, accumulating debts and your health and relationships are suffering, giving up may be your best option.
- If gambling is causing you concern, the chances are that your mental health is being affected as a result. Talk to your GP about a treatment plan that will help you to overcome both problems.
- With help, you can overcome a gambling problem and get control back into your life. The sooner you start, the easier it will be.

USEFUL NUMBERS AND WEBSITES:

beyondblue: the national depression initiative

www.beyondblue.org.au or **1300 22 4636**

Information on depression, anxiety and related disorders, available treatments and where to get help

Youthbeyondblue

www.youthbeyondblue.com

beyondblue's website for young people – information on depression, anxiety and how to help a friend

Lifeline

13 11 14

24-hour counselling, information and referral

MensLine Australia

1300 78 99 78

Support for men and their families

Suicide Call Back Service

1300 659 467

Telephone support for those at risk of suicide, their carers and those bereaved by suicide

Multicultural Mental Health Australia

(02) 9840 3333 or **www.mmha.org.au**

Mental health information for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

Relationships Australia

1300 364 277

Support and counselling for relationships

WHERE TO GET HELP

If you are concerned about your gambling, you can contact the gambling helpline in your state or territory, the Salvo Care Line or Gambling Help Online.

- Gambling Helpline SA – 1800 060 757
- G-line NSW – 1800 633 635
- Gambler's Help Victoria – 1800 858 858
- Lifeline Gambling and Financial Counselling ACT – (02) 6247 0655
- Gambling Help Line QLD – 1800 222 050
- Gambling Helpline Tasmania – 1800 858 858
- Gambling Helpline WA – 1800 858 858
- Amity Community Services NT – 1800 858 858
- Salvo Care Line – 1300 36 36 22 (national)
- Gambling Help Online – 1800 858 858 (national)

For online counselling, the following sites can be accessed from anywhere in Australia:

- www.gamblinghelponline.org.au
- www.gamblinghangover.nsw.gov.au
- www.problemgambling.sa.gov.au
- www.problemgambling.vic.gov.au

REFERENCES AND OTHER SOURCES

This fact sheet was adapted from the following sources.

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