

## Gambling - do you have a problem?

Gambling doesn't start as a problem. For most people, it starts out as a good thing, for example, as a bit of excitement, an opportunity to socialise, or time away from the pressures of work or family. However, gambling can sometimes grow without people realising how their gambling habits have changed.

Problem gamblers may spend 10 to 20 hours or more a week gambling. They also spend a lot of time thinking and worrying about their gambling.

### Triggers for gambling

A significant change or stress is commonly the trigger for gambling to spiral out of control. A big win can also have the same effect. Even without specific stress, gambling can increase.

People often find that they have to gamble with increasing amounts of money to achieve satisfaction. Also gambling, through its increasing demands on time, energy and money, can strain relationships, work and finances. If you're worried about your gambling or someone else's, get help sooner rather than later.

### Assess your gambling

If gambling has stopped being fun for you and started to feel like a problem, think about the reasons why you gamble. Write a list. Common reasons include:

- To win money
- For entertainment
- To be sociable
- To forget troubles
- For something to do
- For excitement
- To avoid talking to people.

Sometimes, people may gamble as a habit. The reasons they started are forgotten, but the habit goes on. You can take steps to break the habit.

### Signs that gambling may be a problem

You do not have to gamble everyday or lose money every session to have an issue with gambling. A person who has a problem may:

- Gamble to avoid dealing with problems or disappointments
- Skip work or study to gamble
- Spend more time gambling than with family and friends
- Think about gambling every day
- Gamble to win money, not just for fun
- Gamble to win back money lost by gambling
- Feel depressed because of gambling
- Lie or keep secrets about gambling
- Borrow money to gamble
- Argue with family and friends about gambling
- Gamble for longer periods of time than originally planned
- Gamble until every dollar is gone
- Lose sleep due to thinking about gambling

- Not pay bills and use the money for gambling instead
- Try to stop gambling, but can't
- Become moody when trying to stop or cut down on gambling
- Try to increase the excitement of gambling by placing bigger bets
- Break the law to get money to gamble.

## Keep a gambling diary

Problem gamblers often have no idea how much they win or lose in the long term, but fool themselves into believing they are in front. Keep a gambling diary. A faithful record of your gambling habits will:

- Help you to be honest with yourself about how often you gamble and how much you lose
- Allow you to develop self-awareness, the first step in changing your behaviour
- Give you the information you need to weigh up the pros and cons of your gambling
- Identify the thoughts, feelings and situations that occur before and during a gambling session, so you can start to understand the causes of gambling
- Point out your 'triggers', which will help you address your gambling habit.

## Making the decision to cut back or quit

Some people who are problem gamblers can return to a controlled level of gambling. Most people prefer to abstain, which means giving up gambling for good. There are no rules for determining whether you should reduce or stop your gambling. However, giving up may be your best option if you are:

- Losing more money than you can afford
- Accumulating debts
- Suffering mentally, physically or socially.

## Family and friends can help

You are more likely to succeed if you have help from your family and close friends. Make an effort to explain your problem to the people closest to you. Most people can understand the problem of addiction. Once you can admit that your problem may have hurt them, and you can tell them so, they will be more likely to support you.

## How to change your gambling habits

Suggestions include:

- **Tell others about your decision** – you are more likely to stick to decisions if you tell other people about them. When looking for support, choose carefully and talk to people you can trust.
- **Set limits and stick to a budget** – decide how much money you want to spend (that means 'risk losing') on gambling each week. Think of it as entertainment money, not an investment. If you choose to spend \$20 at the TAB or on the poker machines, spend only that amount.
- **Spend any winnings** – if you win, do not add the winnings to your initial stake. Spend it another way, such as on bills.
- **Manage your debts** – include regular debt repayments as part of your budget. Set repayments as low as you can so you don't end up short of money, which could add pressure and make you want to gamble more.
- **Be proud of yourself** – when you start to make changes to your gambling habits, say good things to yourself. What we say to ourselves is important because it helps to change old habits.

## How to fill the gap

When you give up or cut back on gambling, you need to fill the gap it leaves.

Suggestions include:

- Make extra time for family and friends if you have neglected them while gambling.
- Take another part-time job.
- If you are a lunchtime gambler, go somewhere different with workmates, arrange to meet someone, take a sandwich and read a book, or go for a walk or a jog.
- Take up a hobby or a sport.
- Set short-term and long-term goals that don't involve gambling.
- Look at other things you can do to 'treat' yourself.
- Make your home an interesting place to be in, with interesting things to do.
- Do the things you may have stopped when you started to gamble too much.

## Get professional help

If you are finding it difficult, you do not have to handle your issues with gambling on your own. Many people seek professional help.

Gambler's Help is a free service for people who are affected by gambling. There are Gambler's Help services available throughout Victoria that provide:

- Free, professional, confidential counselling for people for whom gambling is an issue
- Counselling for the family and friends of people for whom gambling is an issue
- Financial counselling to help people with gambling-related money problems
- Advice on self-exclusion programs and other support services
- Community education to help communities reduce the negative effects of gambling.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor or other health professionals
- Gambler's Help Tel. 1800 858 858, TTY 1800 777 706 – 24-hour telephone counselling service
- Gambling Help Online – for problem gambling counselling and support (Australia-wide), 24 hours, seven days
- Gamblers Anonymous Tel. (03) 9696 6108 – support group for people with a gambling problem
- Gamble Aware – information about the odds of winning, how gambling works, and when to stop
- Financial and Consumer Rights Council Tel. 1800 134 139 or (03) 9663 2000
- Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14
- SuicideLine Victoria Tel. 1300 651 251

## Things to remember

- Gambling can sometimes grow without people realising how their gambling habits have changed.
- You do not have to gamble everyday or lose money every session to have an issue with your gambling.
- If you're worried about your gambling or someone else's, get help sooner rather than later.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Department of Justice - Problem Gambling Strategy

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