

Compulsive Gambling is a Bad Deal

There are few of us who have not impulsively purchased a gas station scratch-off or dropped a few quarters into a slot machine in hopes of hitting a big payoff. The lure of turning a few dollars into life-changing riches is one that plays on our dreams.

For many, gambling is the bridge of hope that leads nowhere but crushing personal debt, broken marriages, depression, or even suicide for some who cannot control it. It's a destination of nightmares for compulsive gamblers.

What is Compulsive Gambling?

Compulsive gambling is an impulse control disorder in which an individual feels an uncontrollable urge to gamble. The behavior patterns associated with compulsive gambling are similar in scope and severity to physical addiction to drugs and/or alcohol.

Why do People Become Compulsive Gamblers?

Although the causes of compulsive gambling are not fully understood, research suggests that neurotransmitters related to pleasure, reward, stress, and addiction play a role in compulsive gambling. Some, but not all, compulsive gamblers have lower than average levels of norepinephrine – a neurotransmitter that's released by stress, tension, and excitement. It's thought that compulsive gamblers are rewarded by the "rush" involved with the risk/reward of betting money when this chemical is released.

Dopamine and serotonin are also thought to play a role in the development of compulsive gambling. Dopamine is a neuro-

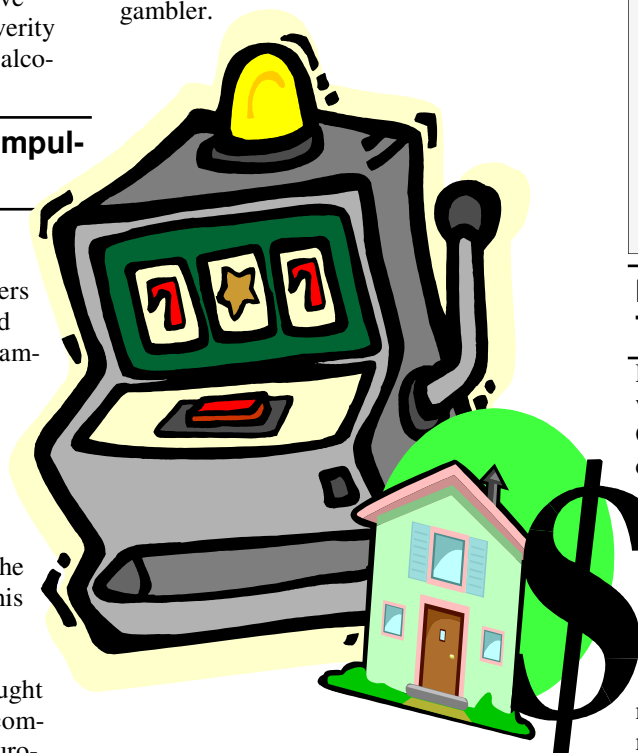
transmitter related to pleasure and reward. Serotonin is a brain chemical responsible for regulating mood and behavior.

Am I at Risk?

Risk factors linked to compulsive gambling may include heavy alcohol consumption, a competitive and/or workaholic personality, taking up gambling at an early age, and a family history of gambling problems. Men are more likely than women to be compulsive gamblers. None of these factors, however, are necessary to developing a problem with compulsive gambling.

How Do I Know if I'm a Compulsive Gambler?

The American Psychological Association has identified 10 criteria to identify and diagnose compulsive gambling. If an individual displays 5 or more of the following, then he/she is considered to be a compulsive gambler.



10 Signs of Compulsive Gambling

- ♦ **Preoccupation:** Obsessively talking about and dwelling on past or future betting outcomes and strategies.
- ♦ **Escalation:** Needing to put greater amounts of money at risk in order to achieve the same level of excitement and satisfaction.
- ♦ **Chasing:** Responding to a loss by escalating bets in order to "get even." An inability to take a loss.
- ♦ **Withdrawal:** Restlessness, irritability, or depression when unable to gamble or voluntarily attempting to moderate or stop.
- ♦ **Escape:** Using gambling as a way to escape daily problems or stress.
- ♦ **Concealment:** Lying to friends and family about the extent or frequency of gambling.
- ♦ **Financial Strain:** Experiencing financial pressure related to gambling losses. Needing to be "bailed out" of losses by friends and family.
- ♦ **Illegal Acts:** Stealing, committing fraud, writing bad checks or other illegal acts to raise money for gambling.
- ♦ **Risking Significant Relationships:** Losing or putting important relationships or opportunities at risk in order to gamble.
- ♦ **Loss of Control:** Failing attempts to stop or moderate gambling.

Is Compulsive Gambling Treatable?

Recovery from addiction necessarily begins with self-acknowledgement of the problem. Once this step has been taken, treatment for compulsive gambling may include psychological counseling, medication, and peer group counseling such as Gambler's Anonymous.

If your life has become unmanageable due to an inability to control your gambling, please review your recovery options with a mental health professional. For more information, contact the Evergreen Council on Problem Gambling at <http://www.evergreencpg.org> or the EAP.