



Life Balance

March 2014

Compulsive gambling: It's all in the brain

In any given year, 6 to 9 million Americans will have a gambling problem.¹ Like alcohol, drugs, sex and shopping, a gambling problem is an addiction that is difficult to control and even harder to admit.² And like any other addiction, the difference between a little social gambling and a compulsiveness to gamble is measured by how this activity disrupts life, damages relationships, hinders the ability to work and destroys finances.

Addicts typically engage in substances or activities in order to cope with certain feelings and situations. In the case of compulsive gamblers, there is an inability and unwillingness to accept reality and a tendency to escape into a dream world where they feel comfortable and

secure. The problem gambler likely lacks maturity, opting for instant gratification and aspiring to a life of affluence without effort.³

Compulsive gamblers may exhibit a thirst for power and strive to maintain a certain image. Ironically enough, subconsciously they may be wishing to lose everything as a well-deserved punishment.⁴ What causes this behavior in some people and not in others? Scientists are making more and more inroads into the reasons for addiction and the role the brain plays.

Pleasure is key to addiction

To our brain, pleasure is pleasure. Whether it's caused by drugs, money, sex or food, it follows the same pattern: there is a release of the neurotransmitter **dopamine** in the nucleus accumbens, a cluster of nerve cells lying underneath the cerebral cortex. Neuroscientists refer to this region as the brain's pleasure center.⁵

The likelihood that the use of a drug or participation in gambling will lead to addiction is directly linked to the speed with which it promotes dopamine release, and the intensity and the reliability of that release.⁶

But wait! You've gotten pleasure from a number of things throughout your life, yet you don't find yourself craving them at every waking moment. What scientists are finding is that dopamine not only contributes to the experience of pleasure, but also plays a role in learning and memory — what takes a person from liking something to becoming addicted to it.⁷ With repeated exposure to addictive substances or behavior, our brains link the pleasure we feel with the desire to repeat the experience. This occurs as the nerve cells in the nucleus accumbens communicate with the prefrontal cortex (the area of the brain involved in planning and executing tasks). Our brain tells us we want the desired experience, and we should do whatever is necessary to get it.⁸

SEAP

Call toll-free
(800) 692-7459

(800) 824-4306 (TDD)

or log on to

www.liveandworkwell.com

access code: Pennsylvania

Get help.

Gamblers Anonymous

Visit www.gamblersanonymous.org to find hotlines listed by state.
(626) 960-3500

When gamblers are feeling hopeless, the risk of suicide is high.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at (800) 273-8255.

Or call SEAP for a referral to a therapist. An addictions specialist can give you the tools and support you need to change your behavior.

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Ultimately, with continued use or engagement in the pleasurable pursuit, the brain will stop creating dopamine for anything except that substance or pursuit and require more of it to feel any kind of gratification or reward. At this point, the tolerance level has been reached. Now compulsion sets in. Although the pleasure associated with the addiction subsides, the user is compelled by the memory to try to recreate the experience. Compulsion drives many people to relapse, returning to addictive behaviors after a period of abstaining from them.⁹

This doesn't mean, however, that an addict is doomed to a life of addiction. The brain is plastic and malleable, and can rewire itself by changing mindset and behaviors.¹⁰

Rewiring the compulsive gambler's brain

It's no secret that breaking any type of addiction is difficult, but it can be done. What is more demanding for gamblers is staying away from gambling once they've stopped. Meaningful recovery from compulsive gambling requires finding new, healthy ways to deal with difficult emotions and stressful situations.¹¹



Steps to overcome compulsive gambling:

- Admit to yourself and others that you have a problem. How do you know if you're a compulsive gambler? Gamblers Anonymous describes a compulsive gambler as a person whose gambling has caused growing and continuing problems in any department of his/her life.¹²
- Seek help. Join Gamblers Anonymous. Choose a sponsor — a former gambler in recovery — who can provide the guidance and support you need.
- Turn to a cognitive-behavioral therapist to help you change your unhealthy behavior, fight urges, deal with difficult emotions, and solve financial, work and relationship problems caused by the addiction.
- Give up control of your finances to someone you trust (at least at first).
- Learn to earn through hard work and repayment of debts. It is very important that gamblers not claim bankruptcy and turn to borrowing in order to get their financial house in order.
- Substitute healthy, exciting and fun activities for gambling.
 - Need a rush? Try a sport or challenging hobby such as windsurfing, rock climbing or go-kart racing.
 - Are you shy or isolated? Join a social group, meet with family and friends, make new friends or volunteer.
 - Feel bored? Find something you're passionate about and pursue it, for example, art, music, books, cooking, horseback riding, running.
- Relieve stress. Stress is a major trigger of addictive behavior. Take at least 15 minutes each day to engage in exercise, stretching, deep breathing and/or meditation.
- Get help from a financial advisor or credit counselor.¹³

Resources

www.liveandworkwell.com

Do a search under the word "gambling" for access to the Addictions Center, articles, links to resources and an addictions help guide. You can also search for a therapist in your area.

1. <http://www.npgaw.org/problemgamblinginformation/factsfigures.asp>
2. http://www.helpguide.org/harvard/addiction_hijacks_brain.htm
3. <http://www.gamblersanonymous.org/ga/content/questions-answers-about-gamblers-anonymous>
4. http://www.helpguide.org/harvard/addiction_hijacks_brain.htm
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.

8 Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. http://www.helpguide.org/mental/gambling_addiction.php
12. <http://www.gamblersanonymous.org/ga/content/questions-answers-about-gamblers-anonymous>
13. Ibid.