

# Understanding Gambling Addiction

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✓ Medically reviewed by [Melissa Bronstein, LICSW](#)

## Table of Contents

[Definition](#)

[Effects](#)

[Steps to Getting Treatment](#)

[Stopping a Gambling Addiction](#)

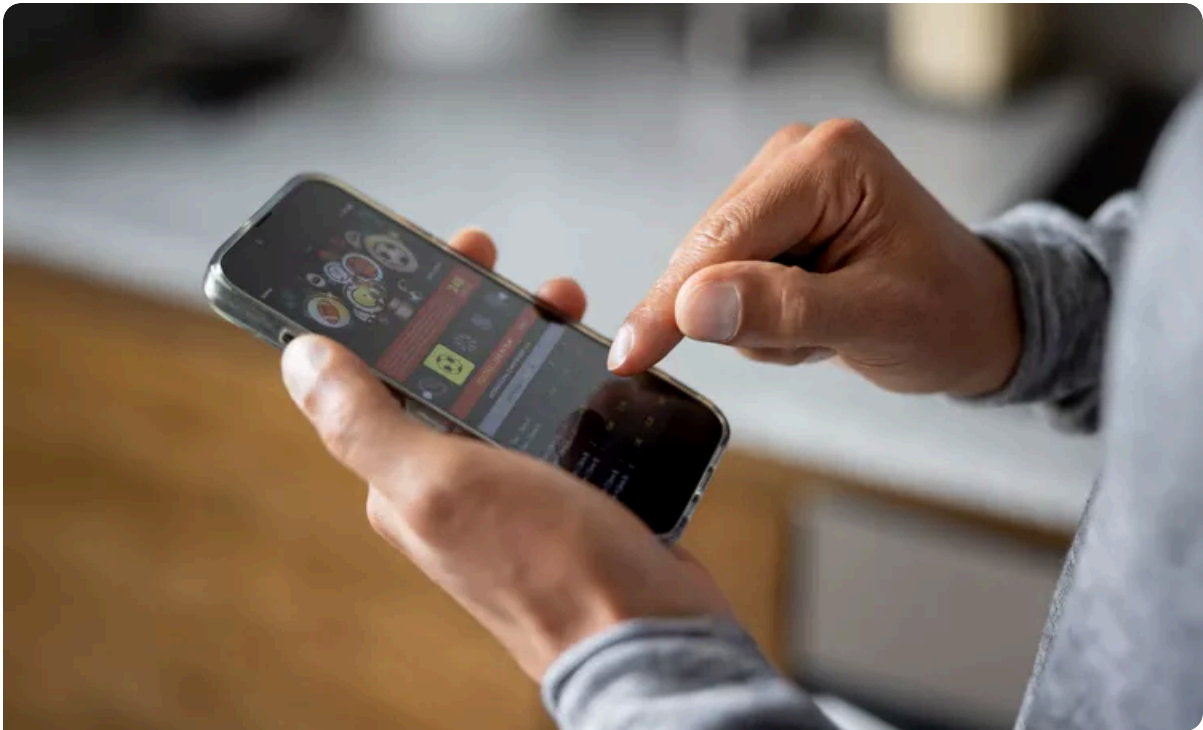
[Coping](#)

Gambling disorder (also called gambling addiction) is characterized by repeated, [problem gambling behavior](#) that leads to problems for the individual and their loved ones. Approximately 1% of the population currently has a gambling disorder. Some common symptoms of gambling disorder include not stopping or controlling gambling, lying about gambling, being preoccupied with gambling, and spending excessive amounts of time gambling.

Gambling disorder can cause problems with [mental](#) and physical health, relationships, finances, and more. Treatment options for gambling disorder include counseling, medications, and support groups. <sup>[1]</sup>

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of gambling addiction, treatment for gambling addiction, and coping through gambling addiction treatment.



andresr / Getty Images

## Defining Gambling Addiction

To meet the criteria for a diagnosis of gambling disorder, at least four of the following must have occurred during the past year and caused significant distress: <sup>[2]</sup>

Needing to gamble increasingly high monetary amounts to achieve the desired excitement.

Repeated unsuccessful attempts to cut back on, control, or stop gambling.

Restlessness or irritability when trying to cut down on or stop gambling.

Frequently gambling when feeling distressed.

Frequently thinking about gambling (such as reliving past gambling or planning future gambling).

Often "chasing one's losses" (i.e., returning to "get even" after losing money gambling).

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Lying to hide gambling activity.

Relying on others for help with money problems stemming from gambling.

Symptoms of gambling disorder can subside for periods and return.

Gambling problems can develop quickly or over many years. Gambling activities also occur along the following continuum:<sup>[3]</sup>

**No gambling:** People who never gamble

**Casual social gambling:** The most common type of gambling. Buying an occasional lottery ticket, occasionally visiting a casino for entertainment, etc.

**Serious social gambling:** Regular gambling, and gambling as a primary form of entertainment, but does not harm work or personal relationships.

**Harmful involvement:** Gambling that leads to difficulties with personal, work, and social relationships.

**Pathological gambling:** Gambling seriously harms all aspects of the person's life, and they are unable to control the urge to gamble despite the harm it is causing.

## Typical Symptoms

Symptoms of gambling disorder can vary, but may include:<sup>[1][4][3]</sup>

Lying about gambling behavior<sup>[5]</sup>

Gambling more than you can afford to lose

Obsessive preoccupation with gambling (excessively thinking about it even when not in the act of gambling)

Stopping doing things you previously enjoyed

Ignoring self-care, school, work, or family tasks

Withdrawing from friends and family

Missing family events

Changes in patterns of eating, sleeping, or sex

Regular lateness for school or work

Increased alcohol or drug use

Decreased willingness to spend money on things other than gambling

Having conflicts with others over money

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or neglecting their basic care)

Frequently borrowing money or asking for salary advances

Cheating or stealing to obtain money for gambling or paying debts

Taking a second job, without a change in finances

Cashing in assets such as savings accounts, RRSPs, or insurance plans

Alternating between being broke and flashing money

Organizing staff pools

Leaving for long, unexplained periods

Feeling anxious

Having difficulty paying attention

Having [mood swings](#) and sudden bursts of anger

Feeling bored or restless

Feeling depressed or having suicidal ideation

### **Suicide Prevention Hotline**

If you are having suicidal thoughts, contact the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) at **988** for support and assistance from a trained counselor. If you or a loved one are in immediate danger, call **911**.

## **Traits and Signs In Others**

Gambling addiction can be hard to recognize, especially since signs often remain hidden until they become severe, such as a dire financial situation. <sup>[6]</sup>

If you notice symptoms of gambling disorder, such as those mentioned above, in a friend or family member and want to talk to them about it, there are ways to approach it: <sup>[7]</sup>

Prepare yourself for many possible reactions from them, including [anger](#) and denial.

Manage your expectations (don't expect them to quit right away; it can take time).

Be honest when sharing your concerns.

Remember that stopping their gambling behavior is their responsibility, not yours (you are there for support).

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Recognize their good qualities.

Seek support from others in similar situations (such as a self-help group for families, like Gam-Anon).

Let them know how the gambling is affecting you and, if applicable, the children or other family members.

If you share finances, set boundaries in managing money (review bank and credit card statements, take control of family finances, etc.).

## **Causes, Triggers, and Risk Factors**

Problem gambling stems from a psychological principle called Variable Ratio Reinforcement Schedule (VRRS). With VRRS, mood-stimulating rewards are variable and unpredictable. This can cause someone to gamble compulsively. <sup>[5]</sup>

Adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of gambling compared to adults. This may be linked to their stage of brain development, with decision-making and impulse-control skills still developing. <sup>[8]</sup>

Some factors that may contribute to problem gambling behaviors in adolescents and young adults include: <sup>[9]</sup>

Increased availability and access to gambling activities without supervision or physical proximity to a gambling venue (through online gambling)

Gambling as a [coping mechanism for stress](#) and anxiety (including previously experienced trauma, abuse, or neglect, and problems with mental health)

Family history of gambling or addiction

Peer pressure

High number of risk behaviors in other areas (such as alcohol and drug use)

Problems with decision-making and impulse control

Exposure to gambling (such as "loot boxes") or simulated gambling (such as slot machines using virtual money or points) through [video games](#)

Seeing parents, siblings, or other family members engage in gambling

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Some factors that can contribute to the development of (or difficulty stopping) gambling problems include: <sup>[3]</sup>

Having easy access to gambling

Having an early big win, creating an expectation of future wins

Holding erroneous beliefs about the odds of winning

Not taking steps to monitor gambling wins and losses

Having a history of mental health problems, especially [depression](#) and anxiety

Often feeling bored or lonely

Having a history of risk-taking or impulsive behavior

Having self-esteem tied to gambling wins or losses

Having recently had a loss or change, such as job loss, divorce, retirement, or the death of a loved one

## Types of Games Associated With Gambling

Gambling activities can include: <sup>[5]</sup>

Lotteries

Casino table games

Electronic gaming machines (such as slot machines and poker machines)

Horse racing

Bingo

Internet gambling sites

Charitable raffles

All forms of gambling have the potential to be addictive. But ones that are rapid, have immediate large payouts (such as slot machines), involve betting small amounts to win a huge jackpot, or allow you to place multiple bets at one time tend to be at higher risk for addiction.

<sup>[10]</sup>

## Effects of Gambling Addiction

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## Self-Esteem and Mental Health

Problem gambling has been associated with mental health conditions and considerations, such as: <sup>[8]</sup><sup>[11]</sup><sup>[12]</sup>

Increased negative mood states

Elevated stress levels

Feelings of helplessness

Changes in personality or mood

Increased drug or alcohol use

Depression

Anxiety

[Bipolar disorder](#)

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

Increased risk of [suicide](#)

While gambling disorder may not cause these conditions, it can exacerbate the symptoms and effects associated with them. <sup>[12]</sup>

## Relationships

Gambling disorder can cause people to withdraw from friends and family.

<sup>[11]</sup> Behaviors associated with gambling disorder, such as asking to borrow money, lying, stealing, and not fulfilling responsibilities, can lead to conflict with others. These factors and others can strain personal relationships. <sup>[1]</sup>

## Financial

Financial losses are not necessary for a person to have gambling disorder, but they often occur. <sup>[1]</sup>

People who have gambling disorder may experience financial issues such as: <sup>[12]</sup><sup>[11]</sup>

Credit card debt and other debts

Lower credit scores

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Unpaid bills  
Lack of money for food and other essentials  
Regularly borrowing money

Some people with gambling disorder reach a point they begin selling household items or stealing.

## Loss of Time and Productivity

When gambling prioritizes a person's time and becomes a mental preoccupation, it can lead to a loss of productivity at work, school, home, or in other areas. <sup>[1]</sup>

## Physical Health

Gambling disorder, and the [stress](#) that comes with it, can lead to health problems such as: <sup>[3]</sup><sup>[1]</sup>

Sleep disturbances and deprivation  
Poor hygiene and self-care  
Headaches  
Stomach or bowel issues  
Overeating or loss of appetite

## “ A Word From Verywell

If your loved one seems increasingly preoccupied by gambling, is withdrawing from other areas of their life, or is noticing negative consequences to their finances, work, or relationships, it could be a sign that this is something to pay closer attention to.”

— MELISSA BRONSTEIN, LICSW, MEDICAL EXPERT BOARD





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Treatment for gambling disorder usually involves counseling, and often support groups. In some cases, medication may also be helpful.

## **Counseling and Psychotherapy**

[Counseling](#) and forms of psychotherapy (talk therapy) are first-line approaches to gambling disorder treatment. [Cognitive-behavioral therapy \(CBT\)](#) is the most common and frequently studied form of treatment for gambling disorder. <sup>[9]</sup>

CBT helps people with gambling disorder to identify damaging thought patterns and behavior and modify them into more productive patterns. <sup>[4]</sup>

CBT for gambling can include components such as: <sup>[13]</sup>

- Correcting cognitive distortions about gambling
- Developing problem-solving skills
- Learning social skills
- Learning relapse prevention

Other forms of therapy that may be used include: <sup>[2]</sup>

- Psychodynamic therapy
- Group therapy
- Family therapy

Counseling can help you:

- Deal with gambling urges
- Manage stress and handle other problems
- Gain control over your gambling
- Heal family relationships
- Maintain recovery
- Avoid triggers

Family members affected by a loved one's gambling may also benefit from counseling. <sup>[3]</sup> Financial counseling can be helpful for those in need of financial recovery and management. <sup>[11]</sup>

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While there are no U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)-approved medications for treating gambling disorders, medications that treat co-occurring conditions which can make gambling behavior worse, such as [depression or anxiety](#), can be helpful. <sup>[2]</sup>

Currently, medications are being studied for their potential in treating gambling disorder, particularly in reducing urges and cravings for gambling. Certain opioid antagonists have been found in randomized trials to be more successful than placebo in the treatment of gambling disorder. <sup>[4]</sup>

More research is needed to determine if medications can be effectively used as a primary treatment for gambling disorder.

## Support Groups

Some people with gambling disorder find peer support through groups such as Gamblers Anonymous to be helpful. <sup>[2]</sup>

Gamblers Anonymous is a [12-step program](#) in which participants attend meetings, share experiences, and offer each other support as they abstain from gambling. <sup>[4]</sup>

Gambling Therapy is another organization, similar to Gamblers Anonymous, that offers online support groups to people with gambling disorder and their families. <sup>[12]</sup>

Support groups are not a substitute for professional treatment. <sup>[1]</sup>

## How to Stop a Gambling Addiction

The first step to stopping gambling addiction is [recognizing the problem](#). Once you realize you have a problem with gambling, it's time to reach out for help.

You can start by contacting your healthcare provider, a mental healthcare professional, or support groups and resources for gambling disorder. From

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## Resources and Support

Places to find resources and support for gambling disorder include:

[Gamblers Anonymous](#)

[National Council on Problem Gambling](#)

[National Problem Gambling Helpline](#)

[Gambling Therapy](#)

## Coping Through Gambling Addiction Treatment

Getting professional help for gambling addiction is paramount, but there are strategies you can use at home to help you cope while you go through treatment.

### Set Goals

Give yourself actionable, realistic short and long-term goals to help you stay focused.

### Distract Yourself

Keep yourself busy with other activities, and look for alternative ways to fill the time you used to spend gambling. <sup>[2]</sup>

### Practice Relaxation

Activities such as [yoga](#), physical activity, meditation, and progressive muscle relaxation, can help foster relaxation. <sup>[14]</sup>

### Avoid High-Risk Situations and Triggers

Stay away from gaming venues, avoid carrying cash and credit cards, or anything else that makes you more [tempted to gamble](#). Some gambling venues and apps have options for you to have yourself voluntarily banned from using their services. <sup>[10]</sup>

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Talk to friends and family, or other people you trust. Or go to a Gamblers Anonymous meeting. <sup>[2]</sup>

## Summary

Gambling disorder is associated with a number of symptoms, such as being excessively preoccupied with gambling, intense cravings to gamble, and gambling more than you can afford to lose. Gambling disorder can cause problems with relationships, mental and physical health, finances, productivity, and more. Treatments for gambling disorder include counseling, support groups, and medication.

14 Sources <sup>+</sup>



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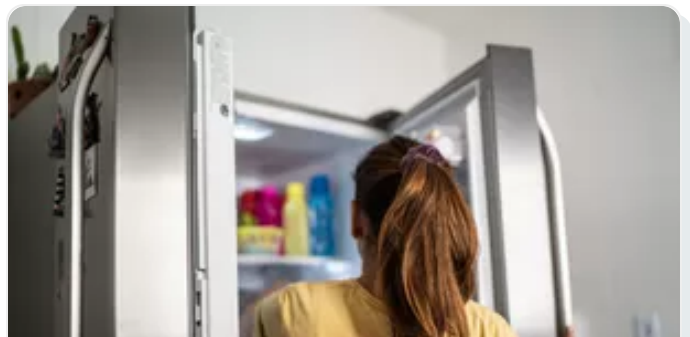


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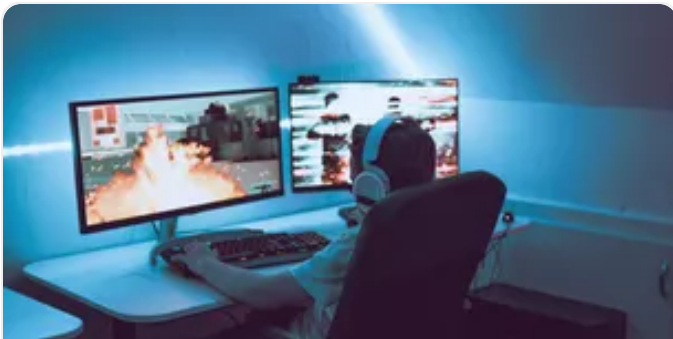
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