



SYMPTOMS OF COMPULSIVE GAMBLING

Just as with alcohol or drugs, people can get addicted to gambling. Having a one-time losing streak will not change your life style but losing sufficient amounts of money on regular basis indicates signs of compulsive gambling. Problem gambling causes disruptions in any major area of life: psychological, physical, social or vocational. It usually begins in adolescence in men and later in women.

This behaviour usually progresses from occasional gambling to habitual gambling. The urge to gamble becomes so great that the tension can only be relieved by more gambling. Higher stakes and personal risks become involved, as well as neglect of other interests, family, and work.

If not detected and treated early, compulsive gambling might lead to:

- Estrangement from family and friends;
- Financial ruin and legal difficulties;
- Criminal behaviour to support the gambling habit;
- Inability to resist impulses to gamble;
- Increasing preoccupation with gambling;
- Loss of control manifested by continuation of gambling behaviour;
- Gambling continues, whether winning or losing, until all money is lost or the game is terminated;
- Occasional gambling becomes habitual;

These characteristics mount to severe personal or social consequences and that is why the society owes them external help to progress into normality. This safeguard is well catered for in the Maltese gaming legislation which encourages voluntary societies and humanitarian groups to address this problem.

The cause for this behaviour is not known, however one risk factor may be excessive alcohol consumption or substance abuse which will lower inhibitions and impairs judgment.

PREVENTION

Prevention of the urge to develop addictive behaviour is challenging and may not always be possible. Counselling may benefit people who are prone to compulsive gambling or other addictive behaviour. People with close relatives who are compulsive gamblers might be at higher risk and should be especially careful.



TREATMENT

Treatment for the person with compulsive gambling begins with the recognition of the problem. It is often associated with denial, allowing the person to believe there is no need for treatment. Most people affected by compulsive gambling enter treatment under pressure from others, rather than a voluntary acceptance of the need for treatment.

Treatment options include individual and group psychotherapy, and self-help support groups such as Gamblers Anonymous (similar to Alcoholics Anonymous). Abstinence principles that apply to other types of addiction, such as substance abuse and alcohol dependence, are also relevant in the treatment of compulsive gambling behaviour.

Recently, medications such as antidepressants have been shown to be beneficial in combination with psychotherapy.

WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT AFTER I UNDERGO TREATMENT?

Many people are able to gain control over their lives after undergoing treatment for compulsive gambling. However, compulsive gambling is a chronic condition and therefore relapses after treatment is a real risk.

The first months after the person stops gambling are filled with change and unfamiliar feelings. Withdrawal causes feelings of confusion and tension, which may leave the person feeling incapable of handling problems. Throughout the recovery, he/she will be faced with many situations that will be difficult to deal with. This is why a Relapse Prevention Plan is important. The recovered patient should aim to:

- Deal with the problems and feelings as they come up;
- Build a balance in his/her daily routine to reduce stress;
- Talk to friends, family or a professional counsellor. Let them help;
- Think through ways to handle high-risk situations;
- Plan and work for success!