



Wellness Monthly

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

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 So, our brain now learns and remembers the pleasure it experienced and wants a replay. And when the nerve cells in the nucleus accumbens and the prefrontal cortex (the area of the brain involved in planning and executing tasks) communicate, they tell each other they want it, and are willing to do whatever is necessary to get it.⁸

Get help.

Gamblers Anonymous

International Service Office
P.O. Box 17173
Los Angeles, CA 90017

T 626-960-3500
F 626-960-3501

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

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.

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

Upcoming Articles

April 2014

Are you addicted to shopping? If you can't stop, you are.

May 2014

Want to lose weight? Get some shuteye.

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Ultimately, with continued use or engagement in the pleasurable pursuit, the brain will stop creating dopamine for anything but 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, the reason so many people relapse, sets in. Even as the pleasure associated with an addictive drug or behavior decreases, the memory lingers and so does the desire to recreate the feeling.⁹

This doesn't mean, however, that an addict is doomed to a life of addiction. The brain is plastic, 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. For meaningful recovery from compulsive gambling, a change of character is required and this could be an individual's most arduous undertaking.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, e.g., art, music, books, cooking, horseback riding, running etc.
- 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.

Ask your health benefits representative for your access code to liveandworkwell.com

The information, advice, treatments and therapeutic approaches in this article are provided for informational and educational purposes only. Consult with your doctor or mental health provider for specific health care needs, treatment or medications. Certain treatments may not be covered under your benefit, so check with your health plan regarding your coverage of services. We do not recommend or endorse any treatment, medication, suggested approach, specific or otherwise, nor any organization, entity, or resource material that may be named herein. Except for Liveandworkwell.com no other site identified herein is affiliated or controlled by us. You will be subject to the terms of use, privacy terms and policies of any site you may visit.

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.