



## the bet you can't win

Ever felt the need to bet more and more money?



Ever had to lie to those important to you about how much you gambled?

If you honestly answered “yes” to either of those questions, you may be among the estimated 1-2 percent of the population for whom gambling is a serious problem.

The condition is called “compulsive gambling” – gambling as a sickness. As online gaming and sports betting continues to grow, up to 20 million Americans have a severe gambling problem. Another 4-6 million have mild or moderate problems and are at risk of having their gambling spin out of control.

Compulsive gambling (CG) is an impulse-control disorder – failure or inability to control an urge to engage in a destructive activity.

Compulsive gamblers do enjoy their wagering. They gamble for the excitement of the game. The money they expect to win is at most secondary, and becomes an important consideration only when they are desperately trying to win back their losses.

Although compulsive gambling has many characteristics of addiction, it isn't technically classified as one, since there is no addictive substance involved. Like substance users, however, compulsive gamblers will sacrifice fortune, family, friends and careers in pursuit of the “high” they get from gambling.

## RESOURCES

Patterned on support organizations for alcoholics, there are groups for both adult and underage gamblers and for the families of compulsive gamblers.

### Gamblers Anonymous

Support group for problem gamblers:  
[www.gamblersanonymous.org](http://www.gamblersanonymous.org)

### Gam-Anon

Support group for families of compulsive gamblers. A subsidiary, Gama-Teen, addresses the problems of underage gamblers.  
[www.gam-anon.org](http://www.gam-anon.org)

### National Council On Problem Gambling

Information and self-assessment tools relating to problem gambling.  
[www.ncpgambling.org](http://www.ncpgambling.org)

>INFOCUS

## problem GAMBLING



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## Profile of a Gambler

There are 10 characteristics of compulsive gamblers:

1. Preoccupation with gambling
2. Need to gamble increasing amounts of money to achieve the desired excitement
3. Repeated unsuccessful efforts to control gambling
4. Restless or irritable when trying to cut down or stop gambling
5. Gambling as a distraction from problems
6. After losing money, returns the next day to try and recoup losses
7. Lies to family members and others regarding the extent of gambling
8. Has committed illegal acts, like forgery, fraud, theft or embezzlement to finance gambling
9. Has jeopardized or lost a significant relationship, educational or career opportunity because of gambling
10. Relies on money from others to get out of a desperate financial situation caused by gambling

Anyone who exhibits at least five of these symptoms is diagnosed as a compulsive gambler. Those who exhibit less than five, fall somewhere on the spectrum of "at risk" or "problem" gamblers.

The typical compulsive gambler is a middle to upper-class white male in his 40s, who began gambling in adolescence. Women tend to develop problems later in life, often coinciding with a stressful event or major loss, for which gambling is an escape or emotional response.

Another significant group of problem gamblers play the lottery. Studies show that 28% of Americans who earn less than \$30,000 per year play at least once per week, spending an average of \$412 per year. In some states 20% of lottery players can account for over 70% of compulsive lottery sales.

## What Contributes to Compulsive Gambling?

**Brain chemistry.** A brain-imaging study found that, like drug users, the brains of compulsive gamblers showed low activity in areas that signal reward, indicating a need for more intense stimulation. A brain area related to impulse control also showed low activity.

**Emotional illness.** Three-fourths of compulsive gamblers also suffer from depression or bipolar disorder. Forty percent have anxiety disorders. Twenty percent meet the criteria for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). CG is common among those with narcissistic or anti-social personality disorders. How uncontrollable gambling and psychological problems relate to one another is still being investigated.

**Compulsive gamblers typically hide the degree to which they are depleting family resources.**



**Family influence.** Among compulsive gamblers in one recent study, 58% had at least one relative with problem gambling behavior.

**Substance use.** About half of all problem gamblers are also substance users, with alcohol being the most common.

**Suicidal tendencies.** Approximately one in five compulsive gamblers attempts suicide. It isn't clear whether despair over gambling losses makes them suicidal, or whether gambling is a symptom of self-destructive urges.

## What Contributes to Compulsive Gambling?

Compulsive gamblers typically hide the degree to which they are depleting family resources until there is a sudden financial collapse so profound that there isn't even money for food and shelter.

At that point, the family's first priority becomes economic survival.

- The non-gambling spouse should immediately assume control of all bank accounts, credit cards, life insurance policies, annuities – anything the gambler could convert to cash.
- The services of a financial planner may be needed to untangle the financial mess.
- The family should encourage friends and extended family from lending the gambler money.
- The gambler should be made responsible for calling creditors about repaying debts.
- The spouse should not take out loans or seek a job expressly to pay off gambling debts until he or she is certain that the gambling has stopped.

Family members should also consider seeking counseling from a mental health professional trained in problem gambling. The family's rage and resentment can be so severe that they may lash out violently against the gambler.



## Getting Help

While compulsive gambling is a serious condition, it can be overcome.

**Gamblers Anonymous (GA).** A 12-step program similar to Alcoholics Anonymous. With more than 1,000 GA chapters across the U.S., it is the most accessible source of help.

**Psychodynamic therapy.** This short-term form of psychoanalysis, which focuses on a particular problem, has helped some problem gamblers.

**Cognitive-behavioral therapies.** A form of psycho-therapy concentrating on correcting a patient's mistaken perceptions and irrational actions in the present, not delving into the past. It appears promising as a treatment.

**Medication.** Success has been reported with medications used to treat the manic side of bipolar disorder, as well as certain anti-anxiety medications and antidepressants.

