What Are the Top Signs and Characteristics of a Gambling Addiction?

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Signs of Gambling Addiction in Adults

The term addiction usually applies to the use of mind-altering substances including illicit drugs, like cocaine, heroin, alcohol, and even some prescription medications. Ongoing use of these substances will negatively impact many aspects of your mental and physical health.

In recent years, there has been a better understanding of non-substance related addictions. With these conditions, there is an overriding desire to engage in a range of behaviors, even when significant risk presents.

In the latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), the American Psychiatric Association (APA) included gambling disorder as an addiction for the first time.

In previous versions of the text, the diagnosis was called pathological gambling and thought to be a disorder of poor impulse control.

As a better understanding of the condition leads to better treatment options and more positive outcomes; having a firm grasp of the signs of gambling addiction is imperative. Without knowing the symptoms and signs of gambling disorder, you may not realize the entire impact of gambling on your life.

Characteristics of a Gambler

Not all gambling is gambling addiction. The majority of people will be able to gamble responsibly in social situations or other contexts while others will struggle with moderating this behavior.

The DSM-5 list's criteria for every recognized mental health disorder. With this list of signs and symptoms, professionals gain quick information about your state.

For gambling addiction, the criteria begin with “persistent and recurrent” gambling behaviors that have been problematic and result in significant distress. If you agree that this is true for you, you can move to the next nine symptoms.

Symptoms and Signs of Gambling Addiction

Do you:

- Need to gamble more often with larger amounts of money to find the desired level of thrill and enjoyment?
- Make repeated, unsuccessful attempts to cut back, end, or control your gambling?
- Feel restless, irritable, and uncomfortable during these attempts?
- Find yourself always thinking about gambling by:
    - Reliving past wins and losses?

    - Preparing for your next gambling scheme?
    - Planning ways to get more money to use for gambling?
- Gamble when you are feeling sad, nervous, helpless, or guilty?
- Feel the need to get even after a loss (chase the loss) by returning to that location and attempt to win back your money?
- Frequently lie to minimize the true state of your gambling?
- Risk your relationships, career, or education due to your desire to gamble?
- Depend on other people to bail you out of dangerous financial situations caused by gambling?

When looking for these gambling addiction signs and symptoms, you only need four out of the nine to meet criteria for gambling disorder. The current severity of the condition is determined by the number of symptoms you have.

- A mild disorder is either four or five symptoms.
- Moderate disorder is six or seven symptoms.
- Severe disorder is eight or nine symptoms.

Some people with gambling disorder will experience their symptoms consistently with a steady rate of gambling. This is called persistent gambling disorder.

Other people will gamble in bursts that can last for hours, days, weeks, or months followed by a period without symptoms that lasts for several months. This is called episodic gambling disorder.

The Intersection of Gambling and Mania

Mania and gambling disorder may share symptoms and signs. It will be critical to differentiate between these two conditions to improve your status.

Mania is a state of being related to bipolar disorder. During a manic episode, the individual will engage in a range of impulsive, irresponsible, and dangerous behaviors like having sex with numerous partners, driving recklessly, and overspending money.

When viewing the signs of gambling, it is important also to consider the influence of bipolar disorder and mania. If your gambling *only* occurs during a period of mania, bipolar disorder is your concern, not gambling disorder.

Accurately Assessing Your Gambling Habits

People with addictions commonly minimize their symptoms. Gamblers will frequently downplay that amount of money gambled, the number of losses compared to wins, and the negative effects gambling has on their lives.

Gamblers lie to others about their gambling, but it is likely that they will also lie to themselves to reduce the feelings of guilt, shame, and responsibility. Because of this, it might be challenging for you to assess your symptoms of gambling accurately.

For you, gambling might seem like a positive coping skill because it is exciting and enjoyable at times. In actuality, for people with a gambling disorder, gambling is a negative coping that may bring about immediate relief before producing constant stress, sadness, and frustrations.

You may breeze through the list of nine symptoms only to assure yourself there is no problem, other people are overreacting, and you just need to “hit a hot streak.” This tendency is dangerous and only leads to more profound denial.

To counteract this phenomenon, you may consider reviewing the criteria with a trusted support in your life – someone that knows the true extent of your gambling. By combining your point-of-view with their perspective on your gambling, you can arrive at a more objective assessment of your problem.

Who is at Risk of Developing a Gambling Addiction?

Gambling disorder is not the most prevalent mental health condition affecting Americans, but it does pose a risk to millions.

Pathological Gambling Statistics

- Gambling addiction affects as many as 1% of Americans at some point in their life.
- Males are more likely than females to have gambling disorder, though this gap is thinning over time.
- Men are more likely to gamble on sports, card games, and horse racing.
- Women are more likely to wager on slot machines and bingo games.
- African-Americans are more likely than other groups to have gambling disorders.

Gambling disorder is a condition that affects people throughout their lifetime. Symptoms can first appear during early adolescence in some individuals or during late adulthood for others.

In either case, the behaviors are usually mild initially before developing into severe cases over time.

The Health Risks of Gambling Addiction

Like other forms of addiction, gambling disorder can dramatically impact a person's physical health, mental health, and overall well-being. People with gambling disorder are at higher risk of:

- Cardiac issues like:
    - Tachycardia – a quicker heart rate
    - Angina – chest pain related to decreased blood flow
- Substance use disorders
- Depression
- Anxiety

If left untreated, gambling addiction can quickly consume your life.

You may find yourself spending more time thinking about gambling and less time actively participating in the other aspects of your life. You may reduce your interest in other activities or other people to focus on gambling solely.

Do Gamblers Ever Stop? Looking Into Treatment for Gambling Addiction

Gambling disorder will not vanish or alleviate on its own. To make significant, lasting improvement with the condition, you will need professional treatment.

Addiction treatment will look different depending on your needs and level of treatment being offered. A mental health professional or addiction specialist can evaluate your symptoms, supports, and stressors, and recommend appropriate services treat your disorder.

Addiction treatments can be intense and involve living at a treatment center for an extended period or attending many hours of outpatient treatment weekly. Other treatments can be less intense and require only a few hours of therapy per month.

Like other conditions, it will be important to engage in the level of care that best fits your needs.

There are no medications prescribed for gambling disorder, but medications may be helpful in treating your other mental health concerns. By addressing symptoms of depression and anxiety, your gambling addiction may improve.

Many people gamble without serious risk every day, but for the unfortunate few, gambling disorder is a substantial

hazard. If you or someone you know is at risk of a gambling addiction, seeking treatment early can reduce future harms.