

Treating Gambling Addiction



For the majority of people who go to a casino and place bets on slot machines, sports events, or other games this is a fun and relaxing activity. They do not spend more than they can afford to lose and are able to go home to lead a fulfilled life. For the minority of people who develop a gambling addiction betting becomes a compulsive activity and they take ever increasing risks to maintain their thrill. For such people

addictions treatment is often required to help them stop gambling.

People who become addicted to gambling experience a progressive decline into a completely unmanageable state that results in severe problems for the gambler. These problems occur in many spheres - financial, family relationships, physical health, emotional health, and mental health. Gamblers who are addicted are most often in denial about these problems. Instead of cutting their losses and stopping gambling they compulsively gamble in an attempt to make up for their losses. Because this illness is progressive they start taking increasingly big risks which compounds the problem.

Most professionals in the addictions treatment industry view gambling as an incurable disease that can be arrested through treatment. This means that through receiving gambling treatment the problem gambler will be freed from the obsession and compulsion to gamble, but will not be expected to ever be able to gamble successfully without the addiction reoccurring.

Like other addictions gambling quickly takes over the addicts life and becomes an obsession. When people arrive in an addictions rehab they have often lost friends, jobs, families, as well as the obvious financial losses. These losses happen as the gambler places relationships with others secondary in importance to gambling. The stress of gambling can lead to physical problems such as hypertension, insomnia, and fatigue. Gamblers are at higher risk of developing alcoholism and at the late stages of their illness are at high risk of suicide. Even though the gamblers life may be crumbling he/she will continue to gamble.

If we divide the experience of compulsive gambling up into phases we can identify three parts:

1. Euphoria when winning
2. Stress and tension when losing
3. Anxiety while between these two previous phases

The life of a gambler is consumed by bouts of anxiety and depression with the hope of obtaining the "high" of winning.

The illness is progressive which means that if it is left untreated it becomes worse and worse. The gambler will spend more time and money in the casino. This results in financial stress and some gamblers are forced to turn to crime to fund their addiction. Other gamblers borrow large sums of money from friends and family. They will be dishonest when borrowing the money and may even steal it. Gamblers will often not pay their bills and rather use the money to gamble with. They will also use up their life savings to fund their addiction leaving their families in risky financial situations.

The easy availability of casinos contributes to the prevalence of gambling addiction. The casino industry in South Africa has set up the National Responsible Gambling Program as a community initiative to help problem gamblers quit.

Unlike other addictions gambling seems to affect men more than women. People from lower income groups are more likely to develop this illness than wealthier individuals. There are no identifiable genetic components to becoming a gambling addict but it has been noted that addiction (in many forms) does run in families. Psychological risk factors for developing a gambling addiction include a low self-esteem and inability to take full responsibility for life.

Gambling addiction follows a largely predictable course. Men will start gambling compulsively in their 20's while women tend to start in their 30's or 40's. Initially gambling is a thrilling activity and the glamour of the casino captivates and enthralls the gambler. The brain learns that gambling is a way to produce a "high" and starts to undergo chemical and functional changes as a result. As time goes on the gambler becomes increasingly obsessed with gambling and struggles to think of anything else. The gambler will spend large amounts of time and energy finding money to gamble with. They will borrow money from friends, family, and banks in an effort to recoup their losses.

As the course of the illness progresses other mental disorders start to appear. Persistent depression and anxiety seem to be common in gamblers presenting for treatment at a rehab. Gamblers often don't take care of themselves and will suffer from physical problems. Gamblers will often be irritable and seek to withdraw from contact with other people.

Gambling addiction can be treated in contemporary rehab programs in South Africa. A successful treatment addresses all the elements of the addict and rehabilitates her to living successfully. A medical component will address the physical health of the addict; psychiatrists will assess the moods; psychologists will help with applying interventions to address behavioural problems; addictions counselors will help the gambler to deconstruct denial and come to terms with the nature of the illness; financial consultants will help to develop strategies to deal with the financial consequences; relaxation therapists will teach new ways to relax; and occupational therapists will help to access emotions hidden behind masks. Treatment for gambling addiction in South Africa is normally provided in the same drug rehab clinic as other addictions, however the focus for the gambler will be different than for patients on the drug rehabilitation treatment program.

After the rehabilitation program the gambling addict would be encouraged to attend meetings at Gambling Anonymous and return to the clinic for aftercare sessions. Abstinence from alcohol and other mood-altering substances is highly recommended as the gambling addict would be at high risk of "cross-addicting" onto a substance. The rehabilitated gambler should never gamble again as her addiction is nearly certain to reoccur.

With proper treatment a gambling addict can be restored to healthy living and lead a happy and fulfilled life.