

Problem Gambling

“The Hidden Addiction” Is Not So Hidden Anymore

BY ARLENE M. SIMON

THE DELAWARE COUNCIL on Gambling Problems is the only public health agency in the state of Delaware whose sole mission is to facilitate the development of a network of services for compulsive gamblers and their families, and to raise awareness about problem gambling. Like other addictions, such as alcohol and drugs, disordered gambling can be successfully treated.

It is important to note that the staff and counselors representing the DCGP make no moral judgements about gambling, but are committed to helping those who do it to detrimental excess. “We take no position as to the existence of gambling; we are gambling neutral,” says Arlene M. Simon, the Executive Director of DCGP. Most people safely gamble, or drink alcohol, in a social setting without severe consequences. However, for the addict, there is always a tumultuous outcome.

An addiction is a brain disorder where an individual seeks rewarding stimuli – things that make them feel good – without regard to the consequences. The powerfully good feeling that results can lead to continuous use of an addictive substance, or continuous engagement of the addictive behavior, which essentially desensitizes the brain to dopamine. This results in the substance addict having to increase the amount of the substance used to achieve the desired “high.” And the addicted gambler gambles with increased amounts of money to achieve the desired “excitement.” Both substance addicts and gambling addicts are marked by unsuccessful efforts to cut back or stop the addiction. A substance addict’s focus is on controlling the substance. A gambling addict’s focus is on controlling the behavior. Problem gamblers show few physical signs of their problem and therefore it is often referred to as a “hidden addiction.”

Statistics show there are more than 2 million people in this country who meet the criteria for being a disordered gambler and 4 to 6 million who are considered problem gamblers. In Delaware this translates to more than 15,000 individuals. With the advent and legalization of online gambling, fantasy sports and now sports betting, the numbers

are steadily growing. Easy access and availability have resulted in a major rise in problem gambling, including among youth and young adults. An important fact to keep in mind is that when problem gamblers finally seek help or treatment, most have already committed embezzlement or other types of fraud to finance their habit, and many have attempted or seriously thought of suicide.

Our government has just added fuel to the fire of this already serious problem. In May, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that states could legally offer sports betting. For the experts and the organizations already concerned about the pervasiveness of problem gambling, it promises a whole new list of worries.

“We think this is the biggest expansion of gambling in our nation’s history, in one fell swoop,” says Keith Whyte, executive director of the National Council on Problem Gambling. “Absolutely, there will be more risk factors for addiction – we’ve never had that much high-speed, high stakes, interactive access to any sort of betting.”

These expanded forms of sports betting intensify the allure that fantasy sports leagues already have for vast numbers of people, especially young men. You watch obsessively and ignore your family, instead of making sports an enjoyable activity for the whole family.

The National Council on Problem Gambling believes the expansion of legalized sports gambling in the United States will likely increase gambling participation and problems unless important steps are taken to minimize the harm. Sports betting should not be allowed in a state where no funds are dedicated to preventing and treating gambling problems. Sports betting and other gambling venues must implement responsible gaming programs which include good employee training, self-exclusion and the ability to set limits on the time and money spent betting.

As with other forms of gambling, there will be a significant portion of people who have no negative consequences as a result of sports betting. But for those people who will experience harmful effects from gambling, it is important that our government helps both betting venues and their customers by requiring reasonable regulations that will protect individuals from these insidious addiction issues. ■

