

CLOSE TO HOME



DEALING WITH gambling



Holding out for a big win

Barb was successful in her work in the accounting department of a health service agency. With her attention to detail and strong organizational skills, she moved steadily to greater levels of responsibility. When her husband Randy's job was cut, Barb felt added pressure. She worked extra hours to ensure her position was secure, and to bring in additional income.

The financial stresses came at a time when Barb was already struggling. Two years before, her only son had left home to attend university. The depression she had known for most of her life became difficult to manage. Even the time she usually enjoyed with friends or at church events became dull and unfulfilling.

One day her office friends organized a birthday dinner for a colleague at a lounge with electronic gaming machines. Accepting an invitation to play, she was surprised when she quickly won \$60. She was also surprised by how relaxed she felt—a complete escape from her worries. As a long-time Christian, Barb never imagined herself involved with gambling. But over the next several months, she found herself returning repeatedly to the lounge to play. She had some big wins, increasing her desire to gamble.

Gambling allowed her to escape from the pressure and emptiness she experienced. She began to spend more time and money at gaming machines, and she fell deeper into debt. As her losses mounted, she continued to gamble, believing that she would eventually get her money back if she played the right machine at the right time. Because she managed the family finances, she was able to keep her gambling secret from Randy.

But the secret came at a price. Her gambling led to missed social and family commit-

ments, lying, increasing debt, and even stealing from work. One afternoon Randy got a call from their bank notifying him that both their mortgage and credit card payments were overdue. Randy was shocked. When Barb returned home that night, he asked her for the truth. Initially she resisted telling him, but finally she gave up and tearfully explained that she had lost the money through gambling.

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Randy was angry, hurt, and confused. In his distress, he remembered a co-worker who had been fired for problems related to gambling, and had found help through Gamblers Anonymous. Randy told Barb about the organization and urged her to go. Barb agreed, not because she believed she had a gambling problem, but because of her commitment to Randy.

At the meeting she was surprised to find other people like herself. She met some other Christians, and began to see herself in their stories. Barb didn't stop gambling right away but she did continue with Gamblers Anonymous. She began seeing a counselor who helped her look at the reasons for her gambling and to develop strategies to stop.

Through counseling and through the prayer support of their friends, she and Randy repaired their relationship. Over time, she recognized how gambling was hurting her and her family, and found the means to stop.

The problem of gambling

Gambling is the act of risking something of value (usually money) on an event in which the outcome is based on chance. Gambling requires two parties in which one wins and another loses. In the U.S. and Canada, many people participate in some form of gambling, whether through buying lottery or raffle tickets, playing bingo, internet gambling, or going to the casino.

Problem gambling (a compulsive, addictive behavior) is increasing among adults, with youth and young adults at particular risks. It is significantly more common among males than females, although that is changing.

Problem gambling occurs when a person has difficulty limiting money and time spent on gambling (see sidebar). The problem can be somewhat mild when one pursues gambling “just for the fun of it”—but it can progress to a chronic mental illness recognized by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). Problem gambling usually has devastating effects on one’s family, emotional life, and livelihood. It is often associated with other social problems such as domestic violence, suicide, substance abuse, or mental illness.

Gambling affects and distorts beliefs. If you are a problem gambler, you may find yourself thinking a certain gambling machine is luckier than others or that with more effort you can win. You may question the fact that gambling benefits the business that runs the gambling. You refuse to believe that the longer you play the more money you will likely lose. Your desire and your attempts to stop are blocked by your belief that one more win will solve your problems.

If you recognize gambling as a problem, it’s important to recognize that more gambling won’t solve it. The problem also won’t be solved through prayer or good intentions alone. Rather, change will come through facing the problem and getting help from others (see page 8).

Signs that you may have a gambling problem

- You spend large amounts of time gambling, taking time away from family, friends, or other interests, and cutting into work and other commitments.
- You place larger, more frequent bets in order to get the same level of excitement.
- Your debt is growing. With finances strained, you may borrow money from family members or friends, or run up your credit cards.
- You believe the “big win,” rather than changing your gambling behavior, will solve financial or other problems.
- You don’t keep your promises to cut back.
- You lie about, or refuse to explain, behaviors such as long periods away from home or work, or an unusually high number of phone calls. You may be secretive or defensive about the way you spend money.
- Your gambling brings on emotional highs and lows. You may be bad-tempered, withdrawn, depressed, or restless when you are unable to gamble, and on a high during a winning streak.
- You boast about winning. Some gamblers love to relive a win, but will make light of losses. Others will keep secret both wins and losses.
- You prefer gambling over special family occasions.
- You seek regular access to gambling opportunities. You may insist that evenings out or vacations occur at places where gambling is available.

Gambling, the Bible, and the Christian story

In one Bible story, Jesus meets a woman who is so crippled by an unhealthy spirit that she is bent over and unable to stand up straight (Luke 13:10-17). Jesus heals her from her sickness, and by calling her a “daughter of Abraham” reminds her of her worth in God’s eyes.

People struggling with a gambling problem can seem like the woman Jesus met, crippled by their addiction. Many struggle to find and accept God’s love. Perhaps they’ve heard messages about gambling as a sin. Perhaps judgments about gambling have included references to Bible verses about money, such as “you cannot serve God and wealth” (Matthew 6:24), or “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Timothy 6:10).

Barb was very familiar with these verses. She was confused because she knew her gambling wasn’t driven by a desire to get rich. But when she thought about how much she craved gambling, her shame and guilt grew.

Sometimes she considered talking with her pastor, but such thoughts led to more anxiety

and guilt. To escape from the anxiety, she had an even greater desire to gamble. She understood the apostle Paul’s dilemma: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Romans 7:20).

Trusting God’s love and grace

Barb’s anxiety drove her to misplaced trust in her gambling skill and her capacity to “beat the machine.” The Bible reveals a God who lovingly provides for creation and who invites people to trust in God’s care. Compulsive gambling leads people to trust in “chance” and hampers their ability to relate to money and people in healthy ways. God offers people full, abundant lives in the rich arms of grace.

God’s good news is that Jesus comes to free us from guilt and from the traps of compulsive behaviors. “The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death,” writes Paul (Romans 8:2).

Through God’s help, Barb claimed this healing journey as she confronted her habit. She gradually came to accept the support of church friends and was able to rebuild her relationship with Randy. Her Gamblers Anonymous friends understood what she was going through and encouraged her. Her counselor helped her follow through on a treatment plan.

As a foundation for it all, however, she allowed herself to experience the unconditional love of God. As Barb learned, a life centered in God enabled her to live with a greater level of inner peace, better management of finances, and more integrity and openness in her relationships.



Steps toward wholeness

If you are trapped in a compulsive gambling habit (see sidebar on page 5), you can know that healing and freedom are possible. The following are some practical steps:

- 1. Open up.** A hallmark of gambling is secrecy. You may feel like you are bearing a huge burden that is too shameful to tell to anyone. Acknowledging your problem to yourself is a necessary step, but it is also important to talk with someone you can trust: a family member, pastor, counselor, or friend.
- 2. Understand your motivation.** With gambling, you have received certain “benefits” such as an escape from stress or the thrill of playing. But now you want to stop—perhaps because of your financial losses, or the guilt you have experienced. Understanding the reasons you gambled and the reasons you want to quit will help.
- 3. Start small.** It is not necessary to commit to abstaining from gambling to start on the route to recovery. Begin where you can.
- 4. Deal with finances.** If your gambling has progressed to a serious level you will have financial problems. Discuss your finances with someone and disclose the extent of your gambling and debt. To reduce your access to money, arrange to have your bills paid automatically from your account. Consider turning the management of your finances over to a family member.
- 5. Don't chase your losses.** Money lost to gambling is gone forever. Trying to win it back will result in more losses. Accepting the loss will help you to refrain from more gambling.
- 6. Address faulty beliefs about gambling.** You may find yourself thinking your luck is about to turn or that you can improve your chances of winning by betting differently. Recognize that these thoughts are part of your problem. Learn to reframe them with new thinking: Financial gain does not come through games of chance. The real winners are those who run the gambling operations. God intends for us to live lives of contentment and gratitude, not of compulsion for more and more.
- 7. Deal with the urge to gamble.** Gambling addiction is a disease that is not the core of who you are. Stop blaming yourself. Instead, with practice, you can learn to control your unwanted thoughts about gambling. When the urge to gamble strikes, don't wait for it to go away. Instead, shift your attention to something more positive or constructive.
- 8. Seek treatment.** There are many sources of treatment for gambling problems.
 - **Self-help groups.** Gamblers Anonymous, for example, provides a supportive atmosphere where you can share what you're going through and get feedback and advice from fellow gamblers.
 - **Your doctor.** He or she can investigate related ailments and offer treatment. Your doctor may also be able to refer you to a professional counselor.
 - **Counseling.** Most counseling agencies have staff equipped to deal with a gambling problem.
 - **Treatment programs.** Many addiction treatment centers or mental health clinics have treatment programs for problem gamblers.

For further awareness

Books

- Berman, Linda and Mary-Ellen Siegal. *Behind the 8 Ball: A Recovery Guide for the Families of Gamblers*. Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2012.
- Blaszczynski, Alex. *Overcoming Compulsive Gambling: A Self-Help Guide Using Cognitive Behavioral Techniques*. London, England: Constable & Robinson, 1998.
- Custer, Robert and Harry Milt. *When Luck Runs Out: Help for Compulsive Gamblers and Their Families*. New York: Warner Books, 1985.
- Federman, Edward, Charles E. Drebing, and Christopher Krebs. *Don't Leave It to Chance: A Guide for Families of Problem Gamblers*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2000.

Websites

- www.gamblock.com** A site that offers programs for compulsive Internet gamblers.
- www.gamblersanonymous.org** Based on the classic 12-step addiction recovery strategy.
- www.camh.net/egambling** The site of a journal devoted to gambling issues.

Phases of gambling addiction

Winning phase. This often starts with a big win, leading to excitement and a positive view of gambling.

Losing phase. Gamblers become preoccupied with gambling. They start to gamble alone, borrow money, skip work, lie to family and friends, default on debts, and gamble even more in order to win back lost money.

Desperation phase. Gamblers feel ashamed and guilty after gambling, but they can't stop. They may cheat or steal to finance their addiction. They may lose their jobs, divorce their spouses, or get arrested.

Hopeless phase. Gamblers hit "rock bottom." They don't believe that anyone cares or that help is possible. They feel excessively guilty about their gambling and do not care if they live or die; many consider or attempt suicide. They may abuse drugs and alcohol to numb the pain.

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**Local resources for help with
gambling:**

**For more information on other Close to Home
titles, go to:**

www.mennomedia.org/closetohome



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