



Gambling Addiction and Problem Gambling

How to Stop Gambling and Regain Control of Your Life



It can happen to anyone from any walk of life: Your gambling goes from a fun, innocuous diversion to an unhealthy preoccupation with serious consequences. Whether you bet on sports, scratch cards, roulette, poker, or slots—in a casino, at the track, or online—if your gambling becomes a problem, it can strain your relationships, interfere with work, and lead to financial disaster. You may even do things you never thought you would, like stealing money to gamble or pay debts. It may feel like you can't stop, but with the right help, you can overcome a gambling problem or addiction and regain control of your life.

What is gambling addiction and problem gambling?

Gambling addiction—also known as *pathological gambling*, *compulsive gambling* or *gambling disorder*—is an impulse-control disorder. If you're a compulsive gambler, you can't control the impulse to gamble, even when it has negative consequences for you or your loved ones. You'll gamble whether you're up or down, broke or flush, happy or depressed, and you'll keep gambling regardless of the consequences—even when you know that the odds are against you or you can't afford to lose.

Of course, you can also have a gambling problem without being totally out of control. *Problem gambling* is any gambling behavior that disrupts your life. If you're preoccupied with gambling, spending more and more time and money on it, chasing losses, or gambling despite serious consequences in your life, you have a gambling problem.

A gambling addiction or problem is often associated with other behavior or mood disorders. Many problem gamblers also suffer with substance abuse issues, unmanaged ADHD, stress, depression, anxiety, or bipolar disorder. To overcome your gambling problems, you'll also need to address these and any other underlying causes as well. The first step is to separate the myths from the facts about gambling problems:

Myths & Facts about Gambling Problems

Myth: You have to gamble every day to be a problem gambler.

Fact: A problem gambler may gamble frequently or infrequently. Gambling is a problem if it causes problems.

Myth: Problem gambling is not really a problem if the gambler can afford it.

Fact: Problems caused by excessive gambling are not just financial. Too much time spent on gambling can also lead to relationship and legal problems, job loss, mental health problems including depression and anxiety, and even suicide.

Myth: Having a gambling problem is just a case of being weak-willed, irresponsible, or unintelligent.

Fact: Gambling problems affect people of all levels of intelligence and all backgrounds. Previously responsible and strong-willed people are just as likely to develop a gambling problem as anyone else.

Myth: Partners of problem gamblers often drive problem gamblers to gamble.

Fact: Problem gamblers often rationalize their behavior. Blaming others is one way to avoid taking responsibility for their actions, including what is needed to overcome the problem.

Myth: If a problem gambler builds up a debt, you should help them take care of it.

Fact: Quick fix solutions may appear to be the right thing to do. However, bailing the gambler out of debt may actually make matters worse by enabling gambling problems to continue.

Signs and symptoms of problem gambling

Gambling addiction is sometimes referred to as a "hidden illness" because there are no obvious physical signs or symptoms like there are in drug or alcohol addiction. You may have a gambling problem if you:

Feel the need to be secretive about your gambling. You might gamble in secret or lie about how much you gamble, feeling others won't understand or that you will surprise them with a big win.

Have trouble controlling your gambling. Once you start gambling, can you walk away? Or are you compelled to gamble until you've spent your last dollar, upping your bets in a bid to win lost money back?

Gamble even when you don't have the money. You may gamble until you've spent your last dollar, and then move on to money you don't have—money to pay bills, credit cards, or things for your children. You may feel pushed to borrow, sell, or even steal things for gambling money.

Have family and friends worried about you. Denial keeps problem gambling going. If friends and family are worried, listen to them carefully. It's not a sign of weakness to ask for help. Many older gamblers are reluctant to reach out to their adult children if they've gambled away their inheritance, but it's never too late to make changes for the better.

Self-help for gambling problems

The biggest step to overcoming a gambling addiction is realizing that you have a problem. It takes tremendous strength and courage to own up to this, especially if you have lost a lot of money and strained or broken relationships along the way. But many others have been in your shoes and have been able to break the habit. You can, too.

Seek help for underlying mood disorders. [Depression](/articles/depression/depression-symptoms-and-warning-signs.htm) (/articles/depression/depression-symptoms-and-warning-signs.htm), [stress](/articles/stress/stress-symptoms-signs-and-causes.htm) (/articles/stress/stress-symptoms-signs-and-causes.htm), [substance abuse](/home-pages/addictions.htm) (/home-pages/addictions.htm), or [anxiety](/articles/anxiety/anxiety-disorders-and-anxiety-attacks.htm) (/articles/anxiety/anxiety-disorders-and-anxiety-attacks.htm) can both trigger gambling problems and be made worse by compulsive gambling. Even when gambling is no longer a part of your life, these problems will still remain, so it's important to address them.

Learn to relieve unpleasant feelings in healthier ways. Do you gamble when you're lonely or bored? Or after a stressful day at work or school? Gambling may be a way to self-soothe unpleasant emotions. But there are healthier and more effective ways of managing your moods, such as practicing [relaxation techniques](/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm) (/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm).

Strengthen your support network. It's tough to battle any addiction without support, so reach out to friends and family. If your support network is limited, there are ways to [make new friends](/articles/relationships-communication/dealing-with-loneliness-and-shyness.htm) (/articles/relationships-communication/dealing-with-loneliness-and-shyness.htm) without relying on visiting casinos or gambling online. Try reaching out to colleagues at work, joining a sports team or book club, enrolling in an education class, or volunteering for a good cause.

Join a support group. Gamblers Anonymous, for example, is a twelve-step recovery program patterned after Alcoholics Anonymous. A key part of the program is finding a sponsor, a former gambler who has experience remaining free from addiction and can provide invaluable guidance and support.

How to stop gambling for good

It's true: the Internet has made gambling far more accessible and harder for recovering addicts to avoid relapse. Online casinos and bookmakers are open all day, every day for anyone with a smartphone. But staying in recovery—making a permanent commitment to stop gambling—is still possible if you:

- ▶ Surround yourself with people to whom you're accountable
- ▶ Avoid tempting environments and websites
- ▶ Give up control of your finances (at least at first)
- ▶ Find healthier activities to replace gambling

Making healthier choices

One way to stop gambling is to remove the elements necessary for gambling to occur in your life and replace them with healthier choices. The four elements needed for gambling to continue are:

A decision: For gambling to happen, you need to make the decision to gamble. If you have an urge: *stop* what you are doing and call someone, *think* about the consequences to your actions, *tell* yourself to stop thinking about gambling, and *find* something else to do immediately.

Money: Gambling cannot occur without money. Get rid of your credit cards, let someone else be in charge of your money, have the bank make automatic payments for you, close online betting accounts, and keep only a limited amount of cash on you.

Time: Even online gambling cannot occur if you don't have the time. Schedule enjoyable recreational time for yourself that has nothing to do with gambling. If you're gambling on your smartphone, find other ways to fill the quiet moments during your day.

A game: Without a game or activity to bet on there is no opportunity to gamble. Don't put yourself in tempting environments. Tell gambling establishments you frequent that you have a gambling problem and ask them to restrict you from entering. Remove gambling apps and block gambling sites on your smartphone and computer.

Maintaining recovery from gambling addiction or problem gambling depends a lot on finding alternative behaviors you can substitute for gambling. Some examples include:

Reason for gambling	Sample substitute behaviors
To provide excitement, get a rush of adrenaline	Sport or a challenging hobby, such as mountain biking, rock climbing, or Go Kart racing
To be more social, overcome shyness or isolation	Counseling, enroll in a public speaking class, join a social group, connect with family and friends, volunteer, find new friends
To numb unpleasant feelings, not think about problems	Therapy, consult Helpguide's Emotional Intelligence toolkit (/emotional-intelligence-toolkit/)
Boredom or loneliness	Find something you're passionate about such as art, music, sports, or books and then find others with the same interests
To relax after a stressful day	As little as 15 minutes of daily exercise can relieve stress. Or deep breathing, meditation, or massage
To solve money problems	The odds are always stacked against you so it's far better to seek help with debts from a credit counselor

Dealing with gambling cravings

Feeling the urge to gamble is normal, but as you build healthier choices and a strong support network, resisting cravings will become easier. When a gambling craving strikes:

Avoid isolation. Call a trusted family member, meet a friend for coffee, or go to a Gamblers Anonymous meeting.

Distract yourself with another activity, such as going to the gym, watching a movie, or [practicing a relaxation exercise for gambling cravings](/harvard/compulsive-gambling-and-anxiety.htm) (/harvard/compulsive-gambling-and-anxiety.htm).

Postpone gambling. Tell yourself that you'll wait 5 minutes, fifteen minutes, or an hour. As you wait, the urge to gamble may pass or become weak enough to resist.

Visualize what will happen if you give in to the urge to gamble. Think about how you'll feel after all your money is gone and you've disappointed yourself and your family again.

If you aren't able to resist the gambling craving, don't be too hard on yourself or use it as an excuse to give up. Overcoming a gambling addiction is a tough process. You may slip from time to time; the important thing is to learn from your mistakes and continue working towards recovery.

Getting professional treatment

Seeking professional help or seeing a therapist does not mean you are weak or can't handle your problems. Therapy can give you tools and support for coping with your addiction that will last a lifetime. Problem gambling can sometimes be a symptom of bipolar disorder, so your doctor or therapist may need to rule out this disorder before making a diagnosis.

Inpatient treatment programs are an option for those with severe gambling addiction who are unable to avoid gambling without round-the-clock support.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) for gambling addiction focuses on changing unhealthy gambling behaviors and thoughts, such as rationalizations and false beliefs. It can also teach you how to fight gambling urges and solve financial, work, and relationship problems caused by problem gambling.

Marriage and credit counseling can help you work through specific issues created by problem gambling.

Helping a family member with a gambling problem

While compulsive gamblers need the support of their family and friends to stop gambling, it's common for loved ones to have conflicting emotions. You may have tried to cover up for the gambler or spent a lot of time trying to keep him or her from gambling. At the same time, you might be furious at your loved one for gambling again and tired of trying to keep up the charade. The gambler may also have borrowed (or even stolen) money from you with no way to pay it back, sold family possessions, or run up huge debts on joint credit cards. As hard as it is seeing the effects your loved one's problem, you cannot make someone stop gambling. The decision to quit has to be theirs.

When faced with the consequences of their actions, a gambler can suffer a crushing drop in self-esteem. This is one reason why there is a high rate of suicide among problem gamblers.

Preventing suicide in problem gamblers

When gamblers feel hopeless, the risk of suicide is high. It's very important to take any thoughts or talk of suicide seriously. Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 or for a suicide helpline outside the U.S., visit [Befrienders Worldwide](http://www.befrienders.org/) (<http://www.befrienders.org/>).

Four tips for family members:

1. **Start by helping yourself.** You have a right to protect yourself emotionally and financially. Don't blame yourself for the gambler's problems or let his or her addiction dominate your life. Ignoring your own needs can be a [recipe for burnout](/articles/stress/caregiver-stress-and-burnout.htm) (</articles/stress/caregiver-stress-and-burnout.htm>).
2. **Don't go it alone.** It can feel so overwhelming coping with a loved one's gambling addiction that it may seem easier to rationalize their requests "this one last time." Or you might feel ashamed, feeling like you are the only one who has problems like this. Reaching out for support will make you realize that many families have struggled with this problem.
3. **Set boundaries in managing money.** To ensure the gambler stays accountable and to prevent relapse, consider taking over the family finances. However, this does not mean you are responsible for micromanaging the problem gambler's impulses to gamble. Your first responsibilities are to ensure that your own finances and credit are not at risk.

4. **Consider how you will handle requests for money.** Problem gamblers often become very good at asking for money, either directly or indirectly. They may use pleading, manipulation or even threats to get it. It takes practice to ensure you are not enabling your loved one's gambling addiction.

Do's and Don'ts for partners of problem gamblers

Do...

- ▶ Seek the support of others with similar problems; attend a self-help group for families such as Gam-Anon
- ▶ Explain problem gambling to the children
- ▶ Recognize your partner's good qualities
- ▶ Remain calm when speaking to your partner about his or her gambling and its consequences
- ▶ Let your partner know that you are seeking help for your own sake because of the way gambling affects you and the children
- ▶ Understand the need for treatment of problem gambling despite the time it may involve
- ▶ Take control of family finances; review bank and credit card statements

Don't...

- ▶ Preach, lecture, or allow yourself to lose control of your anger
- ▶ Make threats or issue ultimatums unless you intend to carry them out
- ▶ Exclude the gambler from family life and activities
- ▶ Expect immediate recovery, or that all problems will be resolved when the gambling stops
- ▶ Bail out the gambler
- ▶ Cover-up or deny the existence of the problem to yourself, the family, or others

Source: *Dept. of Health & Addiction Services*

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