



LawCare Ltd.
Health Support and Advice for Lawyers

Gambling



www.lawcare.ie

1800 991801 (Solicitors)

1800 303145 (Barristers)

Introduction

Between 2002 and 2007 the amount spent on Gambling in Ireland doubled. Betting taxes have been reduced successively over the last number of years and there are far fewer restrictions on the advertising and availability of gambling than in Continental countries. For most people gambling is not a problem, and many would attest that their local school has benefited from their buying strips of raffle tickets, or that they have whiled away many pleasant minutes imagining creative ways to spend a lotto win. But gambling also has a deeply unpleasant and destructive side. Recent figures suggest that around five percent of those who gamble regularly will become pathological gamblers.

Although gambling does not produce the behavioural changes or mental impairment associated with alcohol or drugs, it can still cause considerable heartache and difficulty to a family, and can destroy social, personal and professional standing. Sometimes called “the drugless addiction”, it is characterised by the same sense of loss of control, deception and dishonesty, narrowing of interests, increasing tolerance, withdrawal symptoms, preoccupation, euphoria and guilt as other addictions, and financial problems may be particularly pronounced.

Compulsive gambling is recognised as a progressive and incurable illness over which the sufferer has no control. The only solution is to arrest the illness by ceasing to gamble, but the sufferer will never be able to gamble again. Compulsive gamblers who have previously thought of themselves as simply morally weak, or even plain “evil”, often take great comfort in knowing that they are suffering from an illness which can be treated, and find enough strength in this to be able to address the issues.

It is also thought that gambling addiction is a symptom of an emotional disorder related to poor self esteem and insecurity. Often the gambler only feels comfortable when gambling, and gamblers may often seem to be out of touch with reality, or living in a dream world filled with luxury homes, top of the range cars and exotic holidays. The gambler wants to appear to others as a philanthropist, an achiever and an all-round good guy*, and sees gambling as a way to achieve this.

Just as there are binge drinkers, there are “binge gamblers”. If he does not gamble every day but does so to excess at weekends, or even during annual pilgrimages to Las Vegas, then he may still be addicted to gambling. It may be helpful to think of a problem gambler defined as someone who continued to gamble despite the problems it causes to himself or others.

The Drugless Addiction

Despite all the similarities between the symptoms of gambling addiction and addiction to alcohol or drugs, it can be difficult to understand compulsive gambling because there appears to be no chemical substances which the addict ingests. However, addictions are essentially pleasure-seeking behaviours, and those who become addicted may do so because they seek a certain type of pleasure more and more, often to blot emotional pain, whether it be stress, loneliness or insecurity. Since many types of behaviours – such as gambling, eating and sex – bring pleasure, then these can also be addictive.

Addictions to physical changes in the body caused by behaviours such as these are called Process Addictions. Clinical studies have shown high levels of Noradrenaline in pathological gamblers and it could be that gamblers are addicted to the natural high that this hormone produces. The pleasure caused by the behaviour is rooted in a chemical, and the addict is addicted to that chemical pleasure and the behaviour which causes it.

The children of alcoholics or addicts have been shown to be four times more likely to themselves become addicted to a chemical substance, and they are also more likely to suffer from process addictions. It seems that there is a gene for the “addictive personality”.

* Through this document the gambler will be referred to as “he” for simplicity’s sake. Men are more likely to be addicted to gambling, but there are female compulsive gamblers too.

How does the Addiction Develop?

The course of gambling addiction is very similar to that of drug addiction or alcoholism, and can be divided into four phases as follows:

1. *Winning*
This phase is usually triggered by a large and unexpected win, which serves as a trigger for the unreasonable optimism which typifies the compulsive gambler. In this phase the “high” is fun, and the consequences minimal or nonexistent. The gambler will probably indicate that he is seeking excitement and action. He will brag about his wins and neglect to mention his losses. The amount he gambles will begin to increase. This stage can last from months to years.
2. *Losing*
This stage often begins with an equally unexpected losing streak, during which the gambler is unable to stop gambling and keeps on gambling more money in the hope of winning back his losses (“chasing”). He may borrow money from family, friends or professional colleagues, and will begin to lie about his gambling or attempt to cover it up. His personality will change – he may become irritable, restless and withdrawn, and his home and work life will begin to be affected even if his wife is unaware of the extent of his losses and debts. His interests will probably have narrowed to include only gambling, and planning to gamble.
3. *Desperation*
This phase often begins with gambling away money intended for something else – generally to settle a debt. His reputation may have been affected and his family and friends may have been alienated. He may resort to illegal or immoral acts to obtain money – such as “borrowing” from client account.
4. *Helplessness*
Gamblers at this stage of their addiction have a 25% likelihood of committing suicide. They will probably be suffering from severe clinical depression and may well be abusing drugs or alcohol. Their spiraling debts will have led to catastrophic situations and terrifying experiences.

Do You Have a Gambling Problem?

This screening test may help you identify whether you have a problem. Try to answer honestly. The scoring system is overleaf.

1. When you gamble, how often do you go back another day to win back money you lost?
Never Some (less than half) of the time I lost
Most of the time I lost Every time I lost
2. Have you ever claimed to be winning money gambling when you weren't really?
Never Yes, sometimes Yes, often
3. Do you feel you have ever had a problem with betting money or gambling?
No Yes, in the past but not now Yes
4. Did you/Do you ever gamble more than you intended to?
Yes No
5. Have people criticised your betting or told you that you had a gambling problem, regardless of whether or not you thought it was true?
Yes No
6. Have you ever felt guilty about the way you gamble or what happens when you gamble?
Yes No
7. Have you ever hidden betting slips, lottery tickets, IOU's or other signs of gambling from your spouse or other important people in your life?
Yes No
8. Have you ever felt that you would like to stop betting or gambling but didn't feel you could?
Yes No
9. Have you ever had arguments with someone you live with regarding how you handle money and centred on your gambling?
Yes No
10. Have you ever borrowed money from someone and not paid them back as a result of your gambling?
Yes No
11. Have you ever lost time from work due to gambling?
Yes No
12. Have you ever borrowed money from any of the following to gamble or pay gambling debts?
Household money Your spouse or partner
Relatives or in-laws Banks or loan companies
Credit cards Loan sharks
By cashing in shares, etc. By selling personal property

Scoring

| | | |
|-------------|---|---|
| Question 1 | - | Score 1 point for either "Most of the time" or "Every time" |
| Question 2 | - | Score 1 point for "Sometimes" or "Often" |
| Question 3 | - | Score 1 point for "Yes in the past" or "Yes" |
| Question 4 | - | Score 1 point for "Yes" |
| Question 5 | - | Score 1 point for "Yes" |
| Question 6 | - | Score 1 point for "Yes" |
| Question 7 | - | Score 1 point for "Yes" |
| Question 8 | - | Score 1 point for "Yes" |
| Question 9 | - | Score 1 point for "Yes" |
| Question 10 | - | Score 1 point for "Yes" |
| Question 11 | - | Score 1 point for "Yes" |
| Question 12 | - | Score 1 point for each box ticked. |

TOTAL SCORE _____ **POINTS**

0 points = No gambling problems

1-4 points = Some level of gambling addiction

5 or more points = Probably pathological gambler.

If allowed to continue, a gambling problem can be as destructive to the individual and his/her family, career and future as any other addiction. The problem can be successfully treated, however, with the right help. If you think you have a gambling problem then call LawCare on 1 800 991801, or Gambler's Anonymous on 01 8721133 (Dublin) or 087 2859552 (Cork)

What Can the Firm or Family Do?

A gambling habit is extremely traumatic and destructive for a family. There will almost certainly be major financial problems, and the gambler will become withdrawn, moody, defensive, unreliable and will refuse to acknowledge his behaviour or accept any responsibility for the family's plight.

A firm is likely to suffer some fallout too. A pathological gambler may resort to "borrowing" from client account to gamble, or to pay gambling debts, and even if he does not do this he is likely to be a poor lawyer – distracted, uncommitted and regularly absent, often without explanation.

It is easy for the family, friends or firm to feel helpless; that it is up to the gambler to recognise and deal with the problem. However, there is much that they can do to minimise the damage done.

- Do not "enable" the gambling behaviour in any way. Don't lend the gambler money, don't cover up or lie for him when his behaviour gets him into difficulties, and don't do anything which might spare him from the consequences of his behaviour.
- In a caring manner, make it clear that you believe him to be addicted to gambling, and that you want to help. Let him know that you have information about help available to him when he is ready to ask for it.
- For families, there are meetings Gam-Anon (www.gamblersanonymous.ie/gam_anon.htm) in Dublin, Limerick, Cork and Kilkenny. These can help give you strength and the support of others in the same position.

- For firms, establish clear boundaries and policies on what is and is not acceptable with relation to gambling at work. For example, you may like to enforce a policy of not using office computer equipment to visit online casinos, or insist that staff are not regularly late for work, or leave for home early, if this is the time used by the addict to gamble.
- If necessary it is possible for the family, friends and/or professional colleagues to confront the gambler and force him to accept treatment, through a process called intervention. This should ideally be handled by an experienced professional intervention facilitator. More detailed information about intervention is available on request from LawCare.

Treatment

Treatment of gambling addiction is just as successful as treatment of alcohol or drugs, and in many cases the addict can attend the same treatment centre and be treated with people with a variety of problems. This can often be helpful in making them understand that their addiction is an illness and that their behaviour is just as destructive as that of alcoholics and drug addicts.

The primary problem is helping the gambler to accept that he has a problem. Addicts are often deep in denial, because the idea that that the thing which gives them so much pleasure is harming them is just unthinkable. They cannot imagine life without it, and so they go to any lengths to blame their problems on something or someone else. It may take a particularly terrifying event – such as finding themselves betting their home – to make the gambler reach “rock bottom”

Once the addict has accepted that he needs to deal with his problem, there are a number of options available.

- **Psychotherapy or Counselling.** This may take the form of cognitive-behavioural therapy that focuses on identifying unhealthy, irrational and negative beliefs and helps the gambler replace them with healthy, positive ones. The therapist counsellor should have specialist knowledge and experience of treating gambling addiction.
- **Group therapy** enables an addict to meet others who have a gambling addiction and gain strength from their advice, feedback and support. Gamblers Anonymous provides a 12-step program patterned after Alcoholics Anonymous which has been shown to be very successful. More information about Gamblers Anonymous can be found visiting their website at www.gamblersanonymous.ie .
- **Residential Treatment Centres** often follow the same twelve step approach as Gamblers Anonymous, but have the added advantage of taking the gambler “out of the world” for a time (typically around six weeks) and provide support and expertise 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. They may use a combination of counselling, group therapy and other methods, such as journal keeping, to intensively address the issue. The GP is the first port of call for referral to a treatment centre. If the sufferer prefers to be treated privately, then contact LawCare on 1 800 991801.

Treatment for gambling addiction is generally abstinence based; the addict will never be able to gamble again. In a twelve-step setting the addict will be taught to see recovery one day at a time. It can be terrifying to think that he has to give up such an important and fulfilling area of his life, but with time he will come to rebuild and enjoy his life without gambling. There is always hope.