HOPE and HELP

A Guide for Family and Friends Affected by a Loved One’s Problem Gambling

PROJECT Turnabout
CENTERS FOR ADDICTION RECOVERY
Coping with a Loved One’s Gambling Problem

For more than 20 years, the inpatient/residential program at Project Turnabout’s Vanguard Center for Compulsive Gambling in Granite Falls, Minnesota has been one of very few specialized and separate programs for people and families with gambling struggles. This booklet, which incorporates years of experience from Vanguard staff who have counseled thousands of problem gamblers, as well as individuals and families who have benefited from the program, provides guidance to families and individuals concerned about someone with a gambling problem. It is written for families and friends of problem gamblers who tell us they often feel blindsided, confused and isolated by this frequently misunderstood condition.
A Note to Family and Friends of Problem Gamblers

Over the years we have heard family members and friends describe what it’s like to live with a person with a gambling problem. Words like blindsided, disillusioned, confused, alienated, isolated, disappointed and very angry come up often. At first, they want answers to questions such as “Why?” and “How did it happen?” Eventually, the questions become “What can I do?” and “Who can I turn to?”

In some cases the gambling problem has been the source of arguments. Promises are made and promises are broken. Trust is shaken as the gambler tries to hide the problem from loved ones with lies or half-truths. There is a progressive deterioration in relationships as the family grapples with the consequences, secrets and the need to save face.

Perhaps you’re watching helplessly as a dear friend struggles with a gambling problem. You ask yourself if it’s any of your business as you watch their life plummet despite their assurances that they are okay. “Just having a bad patch of luck,” they’ll tell you. What can you do?

“I saw, in my wife’s face, the hurt I had caused her over 30 plus years of living the way I did. But I also heard from her the love she had for me. It was and still is the start of my road of living in recovery...”

Recovering Gambler
If you can relate to some or all of this, we hope you find some comfort in knowing that you are not alone. What we have described here is life with a problem gambler. Be assured that the person you care about is still there but buried under a cycle of uncontrolled gambling. Please believe us when we say that the person you care about is often just as distraught as you are, though they often won’t, or can’t, admit it at the time.

There is help and you are not alone!

**What Is Problem Gambling?**

Problem gambling or a gambling disorder is defined as “persistent and recurrent gambling behavior that disrupts personal, family or vocational pursuits.” People with a gambling problem can’t seem to quit even though they want to – and even when they’re experiencing significant, negative consequences. According to the National Council on Problem Gambling, three to four percent of the adult population in the U.S. struggle with varying degrees of problem gambling.

Problem gambling is an addictive disorder that can destroy lives, threaten family relationships and cause financial devastation. It’s not always well understood and is often kept hidden as a family secret. Thousands of people and families struggle with it daily.

A gambling addiction, like an addiction to alcohol and drugs, is a very real disease. A professional evaluation or assessment is needed to make a formal diagnosis of this addiction.
If you suspect that someone you love or care about has a gambling problem, take some time to learn about the condition. You'll then be better prepared to know what to expect and how to get help – both for yourself and for the gambler.

**The Signs of Problem Gambling**

Unlike other addictions, compulsive gambling can be difficult to spot. If you suspect that someone is struggling with a gambling problem, you may want to compare their behavior with the following common warning signs of problem gambling. This is not an all-inclusive list.

- Increased frequency of gambling activity
- Increased amount of money gambled
- Gambling for longer periods of time than originally planned
- Bragging about wins, but not talking about losses
- Pressuring others for money as financial problems arise
- Lying about how money is spent
- Growing financial stressors
- Increase in unpaid bills
- Defensiveness when questioned about gambling, shortage of money and unpaid bills
- Increase in number of credit cards or credit card statements
- Escaping to other excesses (alcohol, drugs, sleep, etc.)
- Frequent and/or unexplained absences from home and work
- Personality changes, such as increased irritability and withdrawal
- Denying there is a problem
There is treatment for compulsive gambling, and recovery is possible. There is hope and there is help. Once an assessment or evaluation has been completed, a formal diagnosis can be made and the appropriate kind of treatment recommended. Treatment may range from one-to-one counseling to group outpatient therapy to residential gambling treatment. People can, and do, recover from problem gambling to live normal lives.

Minnesota has funding for problem gambling treatment. Individuals and families in Minnesota can access these services at no charge based on need. This provision recognizes that problem gamblers have often depleted all of their financial resources as a consequence of their gambling. Therefore, lack of money for treatment should not be an obstacle if a resident of Minnesota needs help.

If you are outside Minnesota, please feel free to call Vanguard for assistance in locating resources around the nation. Most states offer professional resources, and there is a listing by state on the website of the National Council on Problem Gambling, www.ncpgambling.org. (Use the “counselor” side bar tab.)
If you have a loved one with a gambling problem, you are likely experiencing many strong – and possibly conflicting – emotions. You could be trying to cover up their gambling while trying to keep them from gambling more. You might be angry at them, depressed about the debt they’ve run up and afraid they won’t stop. You may also be worried that the gambler will borrow or steal money or sell family assets. Finally, you may be feeling lonely, isolated or helpless.

For every problem gambler – and it’s estimated there are more than six to eight million in the U.S. – there are at least that many “affected others,” people like yourself who have lived on a financial and emotional rollercoaster and experienced shock, hurt, shame and anger.

These are comments made by friends and loved ones of compulsive gamblers. Do you find yourself thinking some of the same things?

“The idea that my husband could have a gambling addiction was something that never crossed my mind. He liked to bet on sports and enjoyed going to the casino but I didn’t think that was unusual.”

“There were times when she just didn’t seem to be in the here and now. She was always distracted … and I came to realize that she was always thinking about the next bet, the next chance to win back some losses.”

“I was always asked to lend money for one thing or another – car repair, painting the house, gifts, etc. But I never saw the money used the way it was supposed to be used.”

“\textit{My recovery continues to unfold and will never end as I am a recovering gambler and always will be. Today my addictive thinking is suppressed by my understanding and acceptance of this fact.}”

Recovering Gambler
“I was absolutely devastated to learn that our retirement savings were gone because of gambling. I didn’t know where to turn for help.”

There are countless stories of people who have struggled to come to grips with the gambling problems of friends and loved ones. Like you, they’re caring people who want to help – but feel overwhelmed and don’t know where to turn.

**There’s help – for you.**

Realizing that you’re not alone in dealing with a gambling addict is an important first step in finding peace and healing for yourself. By gaining the knowledge and resources you need, you’ll be able to gain some control over the situation and realize there is hope – both for you and for the person in your life who has a gambling problem.

Gam-Anon is a self-help support group for families and friends of problem gamblers. Gam-Anon meetings are held throughout the world. To find one near you, go to www.gam-anon.org. The National Council on Problem Gambling website, www.ncpgambling.org, is also a valuable resource.
The state of Minnesota recognizes the emotional challenges faced by those whose lives have been wrecked by the unhealthy gambling habits of spouses, children and parents. In fact, the state provides up to 12 sessions of free counseling to family members affected by someone’s gambling addiction. Call 800-333-4673 (HOPE) for assistance.

**Self Care**

Living and coping with a loved one’s gambling can be a difficult and scary thing. Your first responsibility should be to keep yourself mentally and physically well. You can chart your own path to peace and serenity, even in the face of a family member’s destructive gambling addiction.

Here are some things you can do that may help you in the situation:
Take Relief in the Diagnosis

After learning more about problem gambling, you may find some peace of mind in knowing there’s an actual diagnosis for the disorder affecting your friend or loved one. While it doesn’t change the situation, it can be helpful to know that the ups and downs you’ve endured are the result of a verifiable medical disorder for which there is treatment.

Don’t Hide the Problem

The loved ones of a problem gambler often think that they’re helping by making excuses for the individual and their behavior, lending them money or keeping the problem a secret. However, this merely allows the problem to continue. Be honest and open with friends and family members, and ask that they do the same.

Take Steps to Safeguard Assets

Just as alcoholics need access to alcohol to continue their addiction, compulsive gamblers need access to money to continue gambling. There are several things you can do to reduce access to money and limit further destruction.

1. Stop lending money to the gambler.
2. Set up separate bank accounts so that funds can’t be accessed.
3. Secure family valuables that can be easily liquidated, such as jewelry, from the gambler.
4. Limit access to credit cards.
Try to Help the Compulsive Gambler
But Have Realistic Expectations

It takes a lot of courage to talk with someone you care about who you suspect has a gambling problem. Remember, this is a real condition that is not going away on its own. It’s not unusual for a compulsive gambler to resist the efforts of others to help, even when they’re able to acknowledge that they have a problem. They may rationalize, minimize or blame – this is normal and part of the illness. That doesn’t mean you can’t try, but be prepared for resistance and an outcome that may not be what you desire.

Attempts to help a compulsive gambler should follow these general guidelines:
1. Discuss the matter in private when you’ll have enough time to talk. Do not have the conversation when either of you are feeling angry.
2. Don’t accuse the gambler of having a gambling problem. That only makes them defensive and less open to listen to what you have to say. Do what you can to keep lines of communication open.
3. Focus on the behaviors – not the person – and point out the official symptoms of a gambling addiction. This may allow the gambler to gradually come to their own conclusion about their addiction.
4. Describe the effect that the gambler’s behavior has had on others, including you, as well as on the gambler.
5. Use statements that demonstrate how you feel and why. For example, “I’m worried because you seem distant and you are coming home late at night.”
6. Let them know that you will support them in their efforts to get professional help.
7. Don’t nag. Express your thoughts but don’t belabor the point. Know that what you said may plant a seed for future action even if it doesn’t create immediate results.

“I finally admitted that I was powerless over gambling. I finally admitted that I needed help. I worked hard, with the help of the staff, to find out the feelings that were causing and fueling my addiction. Every day brings a new challenge, but my road to recovery started in treatment and continues today...”

Recovering Gambler
Accept That You Can’t Control the Gambler’s Behavior

The next step, hard as it may be to accept, is to understand that you do not have the power to control another’s gambling behavior or problem. Despite your best intent and efforts, they will likely continue to gamble until they find their own motivation to stop. The only thing you really have control over is taking care of you. Talk with someone you trust and use the resources mentioned in this booklet.

There is Hope

The Vanguard Center for Compulsive Gambling maintains a journal where people who have had gambling problems record their experiences, thoughts and feelings as they start out on the road to recovery from their gambling addiction. Here are some excerpts from this journal:

“I found out I am not alone. There are other people very much like me. What a relief it is to know I’m not crazy. This special place called treatment is a miracle to me. Thirty days
to re-start my life! I wish everyone could go to treatment! What a gift! They told me I am sick and wounded. If I work the program and go to meetings, my wounds will mend and I will be much stronger. My life will finally be mine to live.”

—C.P.

“I came to Vanguard as a shell of a human being, merely existing and wasting away. I lost my life to gambling addiction. It took my career, my friends and my family away from me. I didn’t know that I was ill ... I thought I was stupid, shallow, weak ... so filled with self-loathing I didn’t want to live on. After 30 days of treatment, fighting all the way, I came to know myself again. I was reminded of my strengths and was taught how to cope with my faults. I learned to forgive myself... such a heavy burden lifted! Now I leave this place with renewed hope. Much work is left to be done, but I now have the confidence that I can do it and I can achieve a joyous life in recovery. I can dream once more as often as I wish.”

—Anonymous

“I came here with nothing left — no direction and no self-worth. I no longer wanted to continue on with my life. I surrendered everything here and actually feel worth something now. I’m leaving here with nothing other than peace of mind knowing I am a good person, a good father and a good friend when in recovery. I have a long road ahead of me that will continue for the rest of my life, and I know that I’m not alone in my addiction. I can recover with help from my higher power and the help of others in recovery.”

—J.B.

We think these words are powerful and should make it clear that there is hope for you and your loved one. There is help available and you are not alone!
Helpful Resources for Problem Gamblers and Their Affected Others

Project Turnabout’s Vanguard Center for Compulsive Gambling is a nationally recognized inpatient/residential treatment program. It is located in Granite Falls, Minnesota, and serves men and women 18 years and older who are experiencing problems due to gambling. Vanguard is the only inpatient/residential treatment program for problem gambling in Minnesota and one of only a few in the nation. In addition to addressing the needs of compulsive gamblers, Vanguard offers a family program for those that have a loved one participating in the treatment program. Phone: 800-862-1453; website: www.projectturnabout.org.

Northstar Problem Gambling Alliance. Minnesota’s affiliate to the National Council on Problem Gambling, the Northstar Problem Gambling Alliance (NPGA) is a nonprofit (501c3) agency whose mission is to help Minnesotans deal with the negative effects of gambling through awareness and education activities and advocacy for treatment. Northstar provides educational resources through its website, www.NorthstarProblemGambling.org, and is available on Facebook and Twitter. For more information email info@Northstarproblemgambling.org or call the office at 612-424-8595.

National Council on Problem Gambling. The National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG) is the national advocate for programs and services to assist problem gamblers and their families. NCPG’s mission is to increase public awareness of problem gambling, ensure the widespread availability of
treatment for problem gamblers and their families, and to encourage research and programs for prevention and education. Phone: 800-522-4700; website: www.ncpgambling.org.

Gam-Anon. Gam-Anon is an international self-help program for families and friends of problem gamblers. Meetings take place throughout the U.S. The website, www.gam-anon.org, offers a meeting locator by state as well as a list of international meetings.

Gamblers Anonymous (GA). Gamblers Anonymous is a twelve-step support program for problem gamblers who share their experience, strength and hope with one another to help solve their common problem and recover from a gambling problem. The only requirement for membership is the desire to stop gambling. GA meetings are available throughout the U.S. and internationally. The website offers a meeting locator and a hotline number by state. These hotlines provide a person in crisis the opportunity to speak with someone immediately. Website: www.gamblersanonymous.org.

The Vanguard Center for Compulsive Gambling is located on Project Turnabout’s main campus in Granite Falls, Minnesota.
Project Turnabout’s Vanguard Center for Compulsive Gambling

For more information or additional copies call 1-800-862-1453 or visit our website www.projectturnabout.org