Gambling: How to Recognize When You or Someone You Love Has a Problem

For most people, gambling is an occasional recreational activity. For some, however, it’s a debilitating compulsion that affects employment and family relationships. A recent study shows that between 3 per cent to 5 per cent—or between 600,000 and 1.2 million adult Canadians—experienced problem gambling. If you suspect that you or a loved one may be among this number, don't try to struggle alone—there are many excellent resources available to help you.

Tips and Tools You Can Use

The typical problem gambler goes through four phases. Recognizing the signs associated with each phase will help you to determine whether you or someone close to you has a problem, and gain immediate help. The earlier the problem is detected, the better the chances for complete recovery.

Though everyone’s experiences are unique, in general terms, the four phases can be described as follows:

The Winning Phase

- The gambler usually wins more than is lost
- Sometimes has a "big" win (usually one month's salary or more)
- Believes he or she is a smart gambler
- Believes he or she could be a professional gambler
- Begins to spend more time gambling
- Begins to spend more money
- Eventually, begins to lose

The Losing Phase

- The gambler is betting larger amounts
- Believes he or she is just on a "losing streak"
- Bets on long shots because they will pay big
- Starts losing much more often than he or she wins
- Frequent losses trigger more gambling (to cover the losses)
- Borrows money
- Lies
- Continues to boast about gambling prowess
- Experiences a bail out—convinces family member or colleague to loan them money under the guise of some sort of "disaster"
- Life becomes unmanageable
- Family life deteriorates

The Desperation Phase

- Majority of time is spent thinking about gambling
- There is no longer any control over gambling
- Lying is completely out of control
- Feels a need to obtain money at any cost
- Family has left or is on the verge of leaving
- May be stealing or embezzling money
- Bills are unpaid
- If the gambler enters a recovery program at this point, he or she often expects immediate forgiveness from family members

The Hopeless Phase

- Gambler has "given up"
- Believes nothing can help
- May be contemplating suicide
- May commit actions that will lead to imprisonment

Seeking Help

If gambling is affecting your life or the life of someone you care about, talk to a professional and access other resources. Organizations such as Gamblers Anonymous offer support for family members as well as people suffering from compulsive or problem gambling. If gambling is having a bad effect on your life, you are not alone. Help is available.