

Problem Gambling: The Hidden Addiction

Did you know that problem gambling is often called the “hidden addiction”?

That’s because it has no visible symptoms, unlike drug or alcohol abuse. However, an estimated two million people suffer from a pathological gambling addiction. That figure jumps to 4 to 6 million when you count those people who don’t fit the definition of pathological gamblers but have some gambling-related problems. Included in those numbers are people of all ages, from senior citizens who spend their weekends at casinos to teens who play online games that involve betting. In fact, as many as 10 to 15 percent of and youth have some type of gambling problem.

The term “problem gambling” includes but is not limited to pathological gambling, which is a progressive addiction. It is characterized by an increasing preoccupation with gambling and a need to bet more money more frequently. A person who suffers from pathological gambling will become restless and irritable whenever he or she attempts to quit and will continue to gamble in spite of negative consequences and financial losses.

While problem gambling does not involve ingesting a substance, it is nevertheless considered an addiction because its impact on the brain is similar to that of drugs or alcohol. It alters a person’s mood so that he or she continues to gamble to re-create that mood. Like a drug, the act of gambling releases dopamine in the brain. Eventually, the brain builds up a tolerance to it, and the person needs to gamble more to get the same stimulation.

But when it comes to problem gambling, there is some good news. Research shows that most adults are able to gamble responsibly. What's more, people who are educated about the warning signs of problem gambling are more likely to make good choices.