Gambling and suicide

The National Council on Problem Gambling, citing various studies, reports that one in five pathological gamblers attempts suicide, a rate higher than for any other addictive disorder. People who struggle with gambling problems may experience serious social, emotional, financial and health consequences. For many, coping with the negative emotions related to these issues, can become overwhelming. Feelings of shame, hopelessness and failure may seem too hard to bear. For some, suicide appears to be a solution to all of these problems.

In Connecticut:

In 2005 a joint study by Yale University and the CT Council on Problem Gambling found:

- Of 986 callers to the Helpline, 252 acknowledged gambling related suicidality (25.6%); of those 53 (21.5%) reported gambling-related suicide attempts
- Treatment for mental health and addiction, and family histories of drug and gambling problems were more frequently acknowledged by gamblers with gambling-related suicidality
- Debt, financial problems, family problems and arrest were variables found with gamblers with gambling-related suicidality.

In 2008: Of the 696 callers to the CT Helpline:

- 280 responded to the question of whether or not they were in danger of harming themselves
- Of those 280, 4.4% (13) male and 3.3% (9) female problem gamblers stated they were considering suicide as an option.

According to the World Health Organization, factors such as mood disorders, stressful life events or circumstances and a history of physical or sexual abuse in childhood put people at increased risk for harming themselves (World Health Organization, 2002). All of these factors are common among those experiencing problems related to gambling.

One study showed that 77.5% of those experiencing problems with gambling had been diagnosed with a mood disorder at some point in their life, compared to only 25% in the control group (Specker et al., 1996). Higher rates of depression were also reported among women who gamble, compared to women in the general population (Westphal & Johnson, 2002). As far as stressful events or circumstances, persons experiencing problems related to gambling often experience conflict with family or friends, financial problems, as well as legal or work-related problems.
Considerably higher rates of physical and sexual abuse were also reported in a study of persons experiencing problems with gambling, compared to national samples (32.5% vs. 1-2%) (Specker et al., 1996). Higher rates of childhood physical (41%) and sexual (38%) abuse were also found among women who gamble (Boughton & Brewster, 2002). Finally, some research suggests that the impulsivity, which is common among those experiencing problems with gambling, may also be a risk factor since it may contribute to impaired decision making which is also common in suicide (Ledgerwood & Petry, 2004).

In addition to problems related to tracking, it is not always evident that a death is caused by suicide. In some instances, a suicide can be disguised as an accident. Also, if there is no suicide note referring to gambling, or a person’s gambling is hidden from others, it may not be known that gambling was related to the suicide. For some families, the shame and guilt that they experience around suicide and/or gambling may cause them to withhold that information (Canada Safety Council, 2006).

There is emerging evidence that gambling severity increases the risk of suicide ideation and behaviour. Thirty percent (30%) of the sample of a study conducted by Battersby & Thomas, 2002, of pathological gambling patients attending treatment services, indicated they had previous suicide attempts and it is known that the risk of suicide increases with previous attempts (Rudd & Joiner, 1998). The high prevalence of co-morbid anxiety disorders and co-morbid depression, as well as significant levels of co-morbid alcohol dependence, among individuals in this same study should also lead to further research on the relationship between these disorders and suicidal ideation and/or behaviour in pathological gamblers.


Ledgerwood, N. Petry. “Psychological experience of gambling and subtypes of pathological gamblers. Psychiatry Research,” Volume 144, Issue 1, Pages 17-27 D.


