How Gambling Can Kill You Faster Than Drugs

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1 in 5 problem gamblers try to kill themselves. Why gambling may be the most dangerous addiction of all.

Of all the destructive habits in the world, gambling would seem to be one of the more benign. It doesn’t blow out your liver. It won’t make your nose cave in. Even after the most appalling run of bad luck, you can be reasonably sure that you won’t be carted away, having expired with a mouth full of vomit. No harm done. It’s only money.

You can keep telling yourself this until the moment you kick the chair out from under you.

For the majority of addictions, how much you spend is regulated by how much the body can endure. There is only so much heroin, cocaine or vodka you can consume before you end up in a hospital or a morgue. Gambling is subject to no such constraints. “The amount of financial devastation you can wreak plays a big role in this,” says Keith Whyte, the NCPG Executive Director. “You can bet $50,000 in a single hand, every minute.” Suicide rates among gambling addicts are staggeringly high. The National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG) has estimated that one in five problem gamblers attempt to kill themselves, about twice the rate of other addictions. The reasons for this fact are both blindingly simple and impossibly complicated. And the central befuddling fact is this: Gambling kills you because it doesn’t kill you.

Scholars of addiction point out that problem gamblers are subject to a slew of messy contributing factors and associative disorders. “We’ve known for along time that problem gambling is not a standalone issue,” says Dr. Rachel Volberg, President of Gemini Research, which conducts gambling-related studies. “Problem gamblers are likely to have other substance abuse issues, usually alcohol and tobacco. Depression and anxiety are also prevalent among problem gamblers.”

In terms of the gambler’s tendency toward suicide, however, these factors serve only to cloud the issue. The most reliable killer of people with gambling problems can be summed up in a single word: debt. Because once negative equity enters the picture, gambling addiction moves into a category of its own.

A study undertaken in Hong Kong in 2010 found that of the 233 gambling suicides in the city over the course of a year, 110 of the victims had significant debts related to their problem. The majority of these were male, middle-aged, married and employed. Few showed evidence of prior psychiatric
problems. They appeared normal in every way except that they had gambled their way into a bottomless pit.

It’s tough to put a number on how much debt Americans incur due to gambling; people lie about the problem; the landscape shifts too quickly to keep track. We do know that callers to a Wisconsin helpline a couple of years back claimed an average of $43,800 in gambling-related debts—up from $36,000 the previous year. One study estimated that US problem gamblers owe, on average, between $55,000 and $90,000. Another reported that 90 percent of problem gamblers use their credit cards to play.

None of these figures, though, get to the heart of the issue like the following passage, which was posted on the NCPG website: “I’m sitting here trying to figure out how to tell my husband that once again we have a major credit card bill on the way. I swore to him that it would never happen again. I believed my vow, especially when I saw how hard he had to work to pay off the last debt I ran up. How can I tell him I’ve done it again?”

This is where, in terms of suicidal tendencies, gambling addiction leaves the pack. “If you stop drinking, you can still go get a job,” says Whyte. “But once you’ve got a gambling debt twice your annual income, it’s hard to come back from that. In our society, living without money is a lot harder than living without alcohol.”