Signs of Gambling Problems

How do you know if you or someone close to you has a gambling problem? The following behaviors can signal the need for help.

- **Preoccupation**: Problem gamblers spend a lot of mental energy thinking about the next time they will gamble, planning their strategy, or thinking of ways to get money for gambling.

- **Inability to stop or control gambling**: Problem gamblers find that they cannot stop gambling when they want to. Maybe they decide to quit altogether but then they still gamble anyway. When they gamble, they may try to control the amount of time or money they spend, but they are unable to stick to the limits they set. They often gamble until their last dollar is gone.

- **"Chasing" losses**: Problem gamblers get a strong urge or idea to win back money that they have lost in the past. They may say, "If only I could win back what I've lost, I won't have to gamble anymore." More and more, they feel trapped. They start thinking that the hole they have dug is so deep that only a big gambling win can get them out of it.

- **Gambling to escape negative emotions**: Problem gamblers may gamble in order to feel better temporarily, or to change their mood. They may feel angry, lonely, bored, anxious or depressed, and they gamble to escape these emotions. Gambling feels like an escape from their problems. After gambling, the negative feelings return, as bad as ever.

- **Lying to conceal gambling**: Problem gamblers have lied to their spouse, family, friends or employer in order to hide or to minimize their gambling.

- **Borrowing to pay for gambling**: Debts grow because of gambling. Bills are unpaid. Money that could be used to pay bills is used for gambling. Problem gamblers may have borrowed money from family or friends because of gambling debts. They may have sold possessions, stocks or bonds, borrowed from retirement accounts or savings, or gotten a second mortgage because of gambling debts.

- **Allowing gambling to jeopardize other parts of life**: Gambling can ruin marriages, friendships, careers, school performance, and reputations. Divorce, bankruptcy, or legal problems are all closely associated with compulsive gambling.

- **Ambivalence about quitting or controlling gambling**: A problem gambler may say things like:
"I know I should stop but I love to gamble."

"My wife/husband/partner/parents/children want me to quit but I'm not sure I do."

"Maybe I can slow my gambling to the point where it is manageable."

"I want to quit but don't think I can."

It makes sense for anyone who is experiencing problems caused by gambling to seek professional help. Because of the convenience and availability of gambling, it is possible for people who have never gambled much in the past to develop severe gambling problems very quickly, even in middle age or older. Early intervention probably increases the chances for success in dealing with gambling problems, and avoiding greater harm being caused.