

TECHNIQUES

Gambling addiction:

the internet factor multiplies losses

YOU CAN EASILY LOSE £1,000 A MINUTE ON THE E-GAMBLING WEBSITES. RATHER THAN BEING DAUNTED, PEOPLE CHASE GROWING LOSSES. CAROLE SPIERS EXPLAINS THE ODDS...

A recent US survey of gambling behaviour – the University of Connecticut Health Centre survey, reported in the *Addictive Behaviours* journal – concluded that about 16% of gamblers have a serious problem with their habit. But for internet gamblers, that figure shot up to 74%. Nothing demonstrates more clearly the unmatched power of the net to grease the machinery by which people win and lose.

It leads to accelerated losses for punters and accelerated winnings for the operator, with an approving government discreetly holding out its hand... It is the extraordinary ease of this latest form of gambling which explains overwhelming temptation, while other unique features make it even more dangerous.

SNEERING AT EFFORT. Long before the internet, it was the sensation of a smooth, effortless win which formed much of the appeal of gambling. It was an echo of the old reckless nobility: in effect, boasting to the world that they could afford to lose, and were above paid employment. This feeling that the casual flick of a card might bring you more than a bus-driver earns in three months still provides a significant buzz, lifting you into some imaginary club of people who are too special to earn a living.

In the ultra-slick and streamlined e-casino, this 'effortless wealth' factor bulks-up tenfold.

From the moment that a player's credit-card number is registered with the operator, there is virtually no limit to how quickly and slickly you can lose money on-screen – players often lose track of how their account stands. Incredible lightning versions of popular games whip them up into a 'heightened ecstasy' of betting. The gambling dependency helpline Gamcare observed that "the trouble is that the money goes quick because it is on the screen; it is merely numbers on a computer, not notes in your hand". A figure of £30,000 in half an hour – an almost-incredible £1,000 a minute – has been suggested as a vague upper limit to possible losses.

SAD SOLO SPORT. But step back from that screen and study the gambler. If you think that real-life casinos are mostly full of lonely inadequates posing as Champagne Charlie, this scene is even more bleak and miserable. There is not even the hollow pretence of a glittering night among the high rollers, only a headlong dive into debt and misery, perhaps fuelled by solo drinking at the same time: a lethal mix.

And, unlike casinos, e-gambling is a shamefaced attempt to conceal gambling habit. GamCare confirmed this: "There is an isolation factor, unlike a casino or betting shop where someone can tap you on the shoulder and ask 'Are you OK?'"

The evidence suggests that these players are mostly young males, lacking a healthier outlet for their

competitive and risk-taking instincts. There is much room for intervention here, with a need to re-think competitive activities in schools and elsewhere.

The other main gambling charity, Gamblers Anonymous UK, a fellowship of reformed addicts who believe in total abstinence, has reported that, within the last year, there has been a surge of internet gamblers pleading for help. But the lonely loser sitting at home, fruitlessly betting his life away, is only part of the picture.

Internet gambling addiction has also infected the workplace, where easy access to the office computer – and credit-card account – places great temptations in the path of the vulnerable. Perhaps the most sickening prospect of all is the well-run corporate company having to close down, with whole careers ruined, because of one rogue employee who could not control his or her habit. Or even, possibly, because management was unsure how to proceed in cases of suspected gambling addiction without proof, a subject on which formal training courses are now seen as increasingly important.

"HIT ME AGAIN!" The destructive effect of gambling on career and family has long been acknowledged, and these are greatly amplified by the internet. But what about the slow-suicide theory of gambling? If that is acknowledged, will this become speedy suicide?

Psychoanalysts can acknowledge the awkward truth that gamblers actually want to lose. The gamblers themselves, and those close to them, tend to resist this claim, insisting that it is the opposite. They state that compulsive gamblers want to win too badly, hence all those desperate bids to win back losses. One small but significant clue can be found in the following everyday scenario, not involving dependency, but reaching down to the roots of the gambling urge...

A group of young people are drinking in a pub. One of them is playing the fruit-machine. The others want to move on. They ask him to finish and come with them. He looks at the coins in his hand and says "Hang on; wait till I've..." He does not usually finish the sentence, because it would be "Just wait until I've lost this lot". Notice that he is not saying "Wait till I've won the jackpot", because they would be there all night. No, the message is clearly "Wait till I've lost".

That little cameo of small-time gambling reflects a psychology which multiplies to serious cases where huge money is blown away, and careers and families wrecked. On one level, gamblers both expect and want to lose. It stands to reason. Look at the sumptuous furnishings of casinos... flash bookies with stretch-limos... the huge fortunes of the dotcom gaming promoters... Who is doing all the winning? Not the punters. And they know it, not far below that shallow surface where they can still pretend they will soon scoop the pool.

...BEFORE THE GAMBLING ACT COMES INTO FORCE NEXT YEAR, BASED ON GAMBLING COMMISSION USE OF FEEDBACK THIS SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER



Readers can access details about a range of current and proposed gambling policies at www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/Client/Index.asp

The immediate phases of the *Gambling Act* are:

- July-October 2006 – Gambling Commission uses consultation feedback to refine its policies and procedures
- October 2006 – revised policies and procedures published; new licensing forms issued to operators and key personnel.

THE NEED FOR SPECIALIST HELP. When people do face up to their condition as a gambling addict, they are going to need more than a sympathetic chat. They will need trained specialist help by counsellors directly experienced in tackling gambling addiction.

This could infer an extra burden or an opportunity for *Addiction Today* readers who enhance their skills with training in this area. It probably does not mean a centre dedicated to the treatment of compulsive gambling:

that was tried in the US but too many potential clients and their families were bankrupt for the centre to be financially viable. However, Robin Burgess of the Responsibility in Gambling Trust is eager to work with substance-treatment centres on this; interested readers can contact him at robin.burgess@rigt.org.uk or tel: 020-7824 9222.

I need to declare an interest here: the Carole Spiers Group has 20 years' experience of counselling and consultancy to blue-chip corporations on a vast range of stress-related conditions, including many kinds of addiction. We, too, have updated our understanding of and training in this area.

Whoever gamblers choose, they will need to call an expert specialist and stop that wheel before it turns once too often.

Readers can obtain a free report on *The Most Frequently Asked Questions About Stress* by emailing sb@carolespiersgroup.com

Carole Spiers MIHPE MISMA is a business stress consultant, a court expert witness on stress risk assessment, and president of the London chapter of the Professional Speakers Association. She is also author of *Managing Stress in the Workplace* published by LexisNexisUK and of numerous articles. Spiers is the founder and managing director of the eponymous Carole Spiers Group, the UK's "number one provider of stress management and employee wellbeing, from the ground floor to the boardroom". A vice president of the International Stress Management Association UK, Spiers was instrumental in establishing National Stress Awareness Day. Readers can obtain details at www.carolespiersgroup.com or by telephoning 020-8954 1593.

LATEST FACTUAL UPDATE. According to *eMarketer* (March 2006), global online gambling revenues reached \$10.9 billion, or £6.25 billion, last year, a rise of 28%. In the UK, £53 billion was spent last year on gambling, including the National Lottery. One million people regularly gamble online.

There is political pressure on credit-card firms to place a cap on how much can be spent on internet gambling sites. Mike Weir, the Scottish National Party MP for Angus, has called for a limit of £1,000 a week and for sites to limit players to one credit card each.

There are an estimated 2,300 gambling sites on the internet. About four million people in the UK gamble online every month. That figure is forecast to grow by 22% this year.

The *Gambling Act 2005* comes fully into force in September 2007. Proposed new rules governing the future of gambling in the UK were also published by the Gambling Commission in March, while its later consultation document, *Licensing, Compliance and Enforcement*, gives the gambling industry its first indication as to how it intends to use them. The rules include:

- operators publishing policies and procedures for promoting 'socially responsible gambling'
- information and advice for problem gamblers being prominently displayed
- online operators informing customers how much time and money they are spending on their sites.