

ARE YOU A GAMBLER? HOW IT AFFECTS YOU AND YOUR FAMILY

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People love to dream big. For some, this means gambling. We love to get something for nothing. Gambling is an old 'vice' (although some may disagree with the term) that is becoming a menace in modern times.

We are all familiar with lottery. We can always find a desi convenience store close to home or work that offers a dedicated counter space for lottery. Some people engage in horse racing, off-track betting, sports betting, and card games. People are willing to bet on anything that offers some excitement and competition. I have heard of people betting big on IPL cricket matches.

Have you visited the New Jersey state lottery website lately? It used to have one simple lottery ticket. Now, there is a dizzying gamut of lottos. In New Jersey, we have the Pick-3, Pick-4, Jersey Cash 5, 5 Card Cash, Pick-6, and Quick Draw. There are multi-jurisdictional draw games like Cash4Life, Mega Millions, and Powerball. And don't forget scratch tickets. While writing this column on a Sunday morning, I was surprised when I read that the Powerball lottery has hit a record \$750 million with no jackpot winners. I am thinking of buying a ticket myself.

The modern state lottery was first introduced in New Hampshire in 1963. Most other states have followed suit. Now, a majority of states, with the exception of Hawaii and Utah, offer some form of gambling. States have figured out a way of imposing a 'tax' without naming it so by coming up with a variety of lottery programs. They have creative marketing strategies and large budgets for the lottery. They do it under the guise of raising funds for



an important purpose like education, thus playing an interesting role in encouraging gambling.

Most of us have engaged in gambling without even realizing that we're doing so. Many of us have participated in bingo at a neighborhood party or picnic. It may not feel like gambling, but it is a game of chance. A bingo ticket for five dollars offers a chance to win and make it manifold. Some people buy several tickets to increase the odds of winning.

Gambling does not just exist in contemporary times. Those who are familiar with the Mahabharata remember the game of dice that is believed to have happened 2500 years ago. The Pandavas, after losing the game to the Kauravas, were forced into exile. Throughout history there are examples in various cultures of gamblers losing money, land, property, and even people.

The attitudes and laws regarding gambling have fluctuated between permissive and strict depending on the governments in power and the needs of society. Gambling was banned when it had an adverse impact on society. There were instances when funds were raised for roads, education and healthcare through

lottery. Even when banned, gambling thrived illegally. Remember matka on the streets of Mumbai? I believe it was illegal but it was nevertheless a multimillion-dollar enterprise.

In 1941, El Rancho Vegas was the first resort casino built on Las Vegas's Highway 91. Thus was born the Las Vegas Strip. In 1977, Resorts Casino opened in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and it was followed by many more casinos. This changed the landscape of the beach town and its culture. Many casinos were built in other states and on Indian reservations. Now some casinos in Atlantic City are seeing tough times and some have been shut down.

In 2002, state lotteries spent \$466 million on advertising. These ads lure the unsuspecting into the web of the myriad of gambling games. Some escape. Others succumb.

Does increase in availability of gambling translate into an increase in gambling problems? There is debate about this. A major study revealed that the rates of pathological and problem gambling remained stable during the 2000s. This happened despite a general expansion

of legal gambling and liberalization of gambling laws in the U.S. during this time.

Customs, traditions, religion, morals and the context in which gambling occurs influence society's attitude towards gambling. Society has considered gambling both harmless and sinful, respectable and corrupt, legal and illegal, depending on the segment of society and historical time period.

During my research on gambling, I found libraries stocked with how-to book and guides on gambling and winning. However, they have not helped most people beat the system. Remember Kenny Rogers' iconic song, "You got to know when to hold them know when to fold 'em. Know when to walk away, know when to run"?

Why do people gamble?

Some people gamble for the thrill of it. Some, the high-rollers, gamble to feel important. For others, the activity provides entertainment and relief from stress. Then there is the excitement of winning. There are those who gamble occasionally; for example, taking their families and visiting friends on a trip to a casino. The only choices for such trips used to be Las Vegas or Atlantic City. Now they can find a casino a short drive away.

And there are those who are compelled to gamble. People lose millions, but gambling continues to thrive. Scientists have been studying brain function to try to understand how gambling affects people's brains and why and how some get 'addicted.' We are, however, far from understanding gambling and finding effective solutions to it. Some people argue that the research on gambling is industry-sponsored and thus biased.

I know people who spent their entire paychecks on scratch tickets and are left with no money for food or rent. Video poker games are the "crack cocaine" of gambling. The power of gambling is incredible in taking over people's lives.

Those whose lives are seriously affected are drawn to gambling



like an alcoholic is drawn to alcohol. Just as an alcoholic craves for a drink and experiences withdrawal symptoms, so does a gambler. There is restlessness till the next gambling opportunity.

Gamblers hide it from their families. They are unable to control their urge even after heavy losses driven by the misguided conviction that losses can be recovered. Just as an alcoholic needs increasing amounts of alcohol to get a high, a gambler needs increasing stakes to get a gambling high.

Gambling destroys relationships and careers. A gambler is consumed by thoughts of gambling and where to find the money. Negative consequences do not seem to deter him or her. Some borrow money and incur debt. Some even resort to stealing. And the worst consequence: suicide. I remember one such tragedy affecting the family of a classmate in school. We had heard that the father had lost in horse racing and he drowned his family in the ocean. Only one family member, my classmate, miraculously survived.

Is there help for gamblers?

If gambling is an addiction,

there should be a treatment for it. Although, no medication has been approved by the FDA for treatment and control of gambling behavior, there is some evidence that naltrexone, the opioid antagonist used in treatment of alcohol and opioid addiction, may help. SSRI's (e.g. paroxetine, sertraline, fluoxetine and others) which are used in treatment of depression, anxiety and OCD, may help some people, especially those who also suffer from depression. Psychotherapy, especially cognitive behavioral therapy, may have potential benefits for some. Those affected should discuss these options with their physician. Some people will benefit from attending the free Gamblers Anonymous meetings, a twelve-step program for people with gambling problems. You can find a meeting nearby by searching on the internet.

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