

TACKLING  
SOCIAL ISSUES



Dealing with  
**problem**  
gambling

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## Introduction

**It is now estimated that there are around 300,000 problem gamblers in Australia. It is also believed that for every one problem gambler, many others are affected – usually family, friends and employers – creating a flow that affects around two million people. In fact, few people today are not affected in some way by the impact of problem gambling upon our society.**

If you or someone you care about has a gambling problem, you may feel overwhelmed or unsure of how to deal with it. You may even feel the problems are insurmountable. Be encouraged. Problem gamblers do have options and many have been able to regain control and turn their lives around.

This information aims to help you identify a gambling problem in yourself or someone you know. Most importantly, it aims to show you how to get help quickly before it's too late.

## What is gambling?

To gamble is to risk money or anything of value on an outcome involving chance.

Gambling can include playing poker machines, online lottery games or cards; playing in casinos; betting on sporting events, horses, greyhounds or on games of skill (eg. pool, golf, etc.); and buying lottery tickets.





Around 40% of Australians gamble regularly and 2.1% of the adult population is estimated to have a significant gambling problem.

The Salvation Army does not endorse the practice of gambling, but acknowledges that it is entrenched within Australian society.

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What is problem gambling?  
The terms ‘problem’,  
‘compulsive’ and  
‘pathological’ are used  
interchangeably to describe  
problem gambling.

**Problem gambling occurs when a person is dominated by a persistent strong urge to gamble. This is often coupled with a belief that continued gambling will solve their financial problems. Gambling excessively causes havoc to a person’s life socially, emotionally and financially. It may lead to the loss of relationships, home, health and career. It causes depression and stress in a person’s life.**

It is believed there are a range of reasons people develop gambling problems.

### **A sickness or addiction**

Problem gambling is commonly thought of as an addiction not unlike other addictions such as alcoholism and drug addiction.

There is a suggestion that a minority of problem gamblers might have a biological make-up that make them more susceptible to becoming problem gamblers. They may be highly impulsive and therefore unable to resist the urge to gamble, or they may have poor behavioural control or attention deficit issues.

### **Positive reinforcement**

Others become hooked simply through positive reinforcement. That is, they experience a few wins and continue to play in the hope of winning again. The positive experience is further reinforced by the positive nature of the social environment – for example, this may be a place where their social group meets, and may offer enjoyable music, attentive staff, inexpensive drinks and meals.

This type of problem gambler may develop emotional or mental illnesses as a result of their gambling, but may not have a pre-existing mental illness.

### **An escape**

Some people use gambling as an escape from problems or boredom.

They may have a psychological predisposition that makes them more susceptible to gambling problems such as anxiety, depression, problems with substance abuse, and low coping mechanisms for stress. They use gambling to help cope with these issues, to “self-medicate”. They may also be trying to anaesthetise themselves from work or family stresses. Gambling is a ‘solution’ for them – which becomes a problem.

## **Problem gambling is commonly thought of as an addiction not unlike other addictions such as alcoholism and drug addiction.**

### **An adrenalin-rush**

Some problem gamblers, sometimes described as “action” gamblers, seek a “high” or an adrenalin rush from gambling, which quickly fades. They may feel on top of the world and often believe they are capable of winning large sums of money.

# How problem gambling develops.

Anyone can become a problem gambler. This is not a problem that discriminates based on age, income, education, or ethnic background.

**People can become problem gamblers quite quickly. Starting as a non-gambler, you could become a social gambler, then a problem gambler.**

Some problem gamblers equate the experience to being caught in a whirlpool. At the start of the whirlpool, it's easy to escape. As you get sucked further in, it becomes much harder and ultimately escape becomes more and more difficult, as the sheer velocity of the whirlpool takes effect.

The development of problem gambling

has been described by experts in these three phases:

**1 Winning phase** after a big win, the gambler may experience an overwhelming sense that the winning will continue. This leads to increased excitement, and an increase in gambling and amounts spent.

**2 Losing phase** the gambler gets caught up in "chasing a loss", feeling compelled to return to gambling to try and win back his or her losses. He or she may start to think a lot about gambling, lie about

## Identifying a problem gambler

Problem gamblers are not easy to spot. Sometimes, by the time anyone realises there is a problem, the gambler has already reached a stage of financial ruin. Early identification is therefore very important. Here are some simple signs you can look for if you're worried about a friend, loved one or employee:

- Problem gamblers will have a pre-occupation with gambling
- They may want to borrow money to gamble or to obtain money to cover debts



gambling, gamble alone (perhaps online) and borrow or steal money to bet. The gambler may become increasingly irritable, restless and withdrawn.

**3 Desperation phase** this involves a dramatic increase in the amount of time and money a person spends gambling.

The gambler begins to experience remorse as his or her life falls apart, and may blame others and become isolated from family and friends. Feelings of hopelessness may lead to suicidal thoughts, substance abuse, or emotional breakdown.

*(Robert L Custer MD, [www.about.com](http://www.about.com))*

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- Their sleeping and eating habits may start to change
- Problem gamblers may start to miss appointments such as work or a regular commitment
- Problem gamblers may start to express suicidal thoughts
- Problem gamblers may sometimes celebrate their “good fortune” by doing more gambling
- Problem gamblers may use gambling as a way of escaping their work stresses or concerns in their family life
- Problem gamblers can make their home lives unhappy and they may display remorse after a big gambling session. However, they will then return to gamble significantly again because they have developed a dependency on gambling.

# Do I have a problem?

## Early warning signs

Following are some early indicators of a gambling problem developing:

- Going to gambling venues alone and more often
- Staying at gambling venues longer than you intended
- Spending more time on gambling than other favourite pastimes or interests
- Gambling every last dollar
- Thinking about gambling every day
- Trying to win back money you have lost with more gambling
- Reaching the point where you no longer enjoy gambling
- Finding it difficult to stop yourself spending too much
- Starting to lie to friends and family about your gambling and how much you have spent or just not telling them about it
- Feeling depressed because of gambling and having trouble sleeping
- Gambling is having a negative effect on other areas of your life, such as family and work.

Courtesy of [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)



## Signs of gambling harm

The Australian Government Productivity Commission has developed a HARM Indicator to help people determine the degree of harm that gambling is causing in their lives. It is simply a guide, and is not comprehensive – that is, a person who gambles may be experiencing other forms of harm not covered here. However, you may have experienced harm from gambling if you can say ‘yes’ to any of the following:

- Gambling has made life less enjoyable
- You feel you can’t control your gambling, even though you want to
- You have money arguments about gambling
- You borrow to gamble and don’t pay back the borrowings
- You lose time from work or study because of gambling
- You feel guilty about gambling
- You borrow from loan sharks to gamble
- You write fraudulent cheques to gamble
- You believe you have a problem with gambling
- You always spend more on gambling than you can afford
- You suffer from depression due to gambling
- Your gambling has had an adverse effect on your job
- You changed jobs in the last year because of gambling
- You have been sacked in the last year because of gambling
- You haven’t had enough time to look after your family’s interests because of gambling
- You have become bankrupt because of gambling
- You have experienced relationship breakdown because of gambling
- You have obtained money illegally to gamble
- You have been in trouble with the police over gambling
- You have appeared in court on a gambling related matter
- You have seriously thought about suicide because of gambling
- You have wanted help for gambling problems
- You have tried to get help for gambling problems in the last year.

Printed courtesy of The Australian Government Productivity Commission (1999)

# How to get help

## Helping a friend

**If you think a friend has a gambling problem, show your concern without lecturing or criticising. Your comments may be met with defensiveness and denial. Don't take this personally, but let them know you care and explain how his or her gambling behaviour affects you. You may have to set limits with the person. Don't be manipulated into excusing, justifying, overlooking, enabling or participating in the person's destructive behaviour. If the person agrees that he or she has a problem, here are some tips:**

- Help the person make contact with organisations who can help, such as those listed in this section
- Be supportive and encouraging of their attempts toward change, however small
- Expect that there may be steps backward as a normal part of the recovery process
- Encourage activities that are not associated with gambling, and try to support them by limiting or stopping your own gambling
- Find out more about problem gambling – become informed on the subject.

## Finding help

If you believe you have a gambling problem, it's vital that you seek help immediately. Early intervention is very important as problem gambling can be like a whirlpool that drags people deeper and deeper down.

The good news is that help is available.

Many people who go through treatment programs experience a complete turn around and a new quality of life.

Effective programs address all aspects of the problem gambler's suffering. This may include financial counselling, family member counselling, and legal counselling.

**For 24-hour assistance, contact:**

**The Salvation Army's  
Sydney Problem  
Gambling Centre**

**Phone (02) 9723 8134**

The Sydney Problem Gambling Centre is an initiative of The Salvation Army and Fairfield RSL.



The Salvation Army also provides assistance for problem gamblers and their families at these locations:

#### **ACT Phone**

- Canberra (06) 6295 1256

#### **NSW Phone**

- Blue Mountains (02) 4782 7392
- Central Coast (02) 4388 4588
- Hunter region (02) 4973 1495
- Sydney (02) 9212 2322

#### **Qld Phone**

- Brisbane (07) 3369 0922
- Gold Coast (07) 5594 7288
- Townsville (07) 4772 3607

People in regional and remote areas can call Salvo Care Line on **1300 36 36 22** to talk or seek referral advice.

For more information, contact [www.salvos.org.au/gambling](http://www.salvos.org.au/gambling)

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- Victoria's Problem Gambling Strategy
- The Productivity Commission.

[www.salvos.org.au/gambling](http://www.salvos.org.au/gambling)

