

Abnormal Psychology

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## **Pathological Gambling and the Problem of Adolescent Gambling**

### Introduction

The American society has changed a lot in terms of recreational activities. One of the new favorite activities for “John Q. Public“ is gambling. During the last decades, more and more American states have discovered that communities and states can make a lot of money out of gambling facilities. Therefore, gambling was legalized in many states and ever since, casinos and racetracks have been flourishing all over the country and this seems to be profitable for communities and states. For example, in 1996, Americans wagered \$586.5 billion in any kind of gambling activities (Black & Moyer, 1998). This change, nevertheless, did not only bring advantages to the communities, like money from revenues and tourism, but it also introduced the problem of pathological gambling into societies that had not been as familiar with this kind of problem. The National Center for Responsible Gaming funded a study by the Harvard Medical School in 1997 – with the resulting estimate of a 1. 29% prevalence rate of pathological gambling among the adult population (National Gambling Impact Study Commission, 1999) in the United States of America. This result is alarming and shows how big a problem compulsive gambling has become during the last decades. Pathological gambling has officially been listed as a disorder of impulse control in the

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM-III) in 1980 (APA, 1980).

There are three possible reasons for the increase of pathological gambling, and the belief that these numbers will rise even further in the future. The first one, as mentioned above, notes that legal gambling has become much more accessible to the public, because gambling has been introduced as a harmless way of obtaining money for communities and states without raising taxes. State lotteries, racetracks, casinos or other forms of gambling are legal in all but two states in the US (Utah and Hawaii) and thus, there is much to offer from gambling activities.

The second reason is that along with the easier access to gambling facilities comes the change of the social attitude towards gambling. Gambling has lost its stigma of violence, greed, crime etc., and has become a legitimate recreational activity. It has become socially acceptable and thus, the number of gamblers has increased. The third reason for the increased numbers of pathological and problem gamblers is the changed situation in American families. Many families face economical problems, as well as emotional distress and it has been shown that this kind of environment fosters addictive behaviors (Lamberton & Oei, 1997). A child who grows up in a family where both parents are employed and therefore not present for the child, (causing emotional nurturing to be almost nonexistent) is more likely to develop a risk of addictive behaviors such as gambling. It has also been suggested that familial gambling has an important

influence on the development of pathological gambling (Lamberton & Oei, 1997). Children who are not supervised adequately by their parents are likely to be drawn into the exciting and stimulating world of gambling, with the highs of winning. Yet, along with the excitement, come problems such as low grades at school, truancy, alcohol and drug use, and finally, even getting into trouble with the police due to criminal activities in order to finance the gambling. A child or adolescent who has a severe gambling problem is likely to become a pathological gambler when grown up.

All these are reasons that have led to a rise in numbers of pathological gamblers and are as well likely to cause even further increase.

#### What is pathological gambling?

Pathological gambling has been listed as an impulse-control disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders since 1980.

The disorder is characterized by the gambler's preoccupation with gambling. The pathological gambler is hardly able to think of anything else but gambling-related issues such as how the last bet went, where to place the next bet, how to bet, or as well, where to get the money for the next gambling session. Another characteristic of pathological gambling is that the gambler cannot quit gambling. When he tries to control his gambling, he shows signs of withdrawal, becomes restless and irritable (Lamberton & Oei, 1997).

Once the gambler has come so far as to be totally occupied with these kinds of thoughts, many problems come to the surface. The worst problem is

usually the money. A compulsive gambler cannot stop gambling and therefore spends all of his/ her money on wagers. This usually leads to heavy debts and severe monetary problems for the whole family. A pathological gambler usually tries to get money everywhere and once the resources of family and friends are exhausted, illegal means of obtaining money often follow. A large number of pathological gamblers get caught up in a net of embezzlement, fraud and theft. In a study by Lesieur and Kline (1988), it was found that actually 13% of prisoners were in prison because of gambling- related problems (Lamberton & Oei, 1997).

To compound matters even more, a lot of gamblers face unemployment – their preoccupation with gambling leads to a lack of concentration at their working places, and a lot of gamblers also miss work because they cannot resist the need to gamble.

Pathological gambling is a progressive problem; the gambler usually goes through three phases (Abbott et al., 1995). For most gamblers, their problems begin with a harmless day of recreational gambling, as it has become a socially accepted activity. Gambling is described as fun, something exciting and enjoyable, and a welcome change from the every- day drudgery and worries. Most gamblers get drawn into the maelstrom of the game because they often win at the beginning, maybe not necessarily big wins, but they make a bit of money. This streak of wins causes the gamblers to believe that they have understood the logic of the specific game; it makes them believe that they have the perfect system to beat the 'house'. Or they may simply believe that they are very lucky

people and cannot lose much. It is usually a combination of both that makes people more venturesome, they are prepared to take risks in the amount of money they wager, and it also makes them gamble more frequently.

In this first phase of pathological gambling, they get sucked into the spiral of winning and losing. Yet, it usually does not take long until the wins are far outnumbered by the losses. The pathological gambler believes in his strategy and luck, though, and continues gambling, often with now even higher wagers because the lost money has to be earned back. This is when the second phase begins, it is often also called "the chasing phase". The gambler is now preoccupied with gambling, losses occur more frequently and the gambler starts to perceive losses as intolerable. Losses lead to feelings of shame and guilt. The gambler needs to win again to feel the excitement and high he felt when he first started to gamble, but he cannot stop at this point and try to minimize the financial problems. At this point, he starts borrowing money and concealing losses, borrowing more money to pay back loans, etc. The gambler gets more and more involved in the game and at the same time, his options of obtaining money decrease. The gambler is in a desperate situation. It is at this point that a lot of gamblers get involved in criminal activities like fraud, embezzlement etc. because they face high debts and loans. Along with the financial problems now family and employment problems come to the surface, also. Nevertheless, the gambler usually tries to rationalize his problems and behaviors as he is convinced that he will win again and all his problems will be gone then.

Phase three is the last phase of pathological gambling, it is often referred to as the “desperation phase” because the gambler is now at the peak of his addiction. Gambling is the priority in his life, but the losses increase his feelings of guilt, shame and anxiety. He cannot resist the need to gamble, not even the heaviest arrearage and family problems can stop him. He becomes desperate because there are only a few options left for him how to go on with his life. The family situation is very tense, payments cannot be made, and committed criminal acts might be discovered. In addition to these pressures from outside, the gambler often suffers physical symptoms, such as sleep deprivation, digestive problems, head- and backaches, as well as anxiety and depression, and even suicidal thoughts. The gambler often sees only four options left: suicide, prison, running away, or looking for help (Gowen, 1996).

### Resulting problems

Pathological gambling does not only affect the gambler alone. The family of a gambler usually suffers extremely from the addiction of the family member. In most cases, it is the father of the family who gets caught up in the addiction. The first and most obvious effect gambling has on a family is of course related to money. As the gambler goes on betting more frequently and always higher wagers, the family faces high debts. Along with the debts comes the threat of losing all the worldly possessions like the apartment, house, cars etc. In order to cover for some of the debts and the next gambling session of the spouse, a lot of wives borrow money from family and friends. But the losing continues, and

sources for money dry out. Because of shame, the gambler and his family often withdraw from friends and family; the loans cannot be paid back and the feeling of being looked down on is too deep to maintain social bonds. Along with the isolation comes even more frustration, especially for the gambler's spouse. The nagging money worries and lack of help and support often lead to physical and psychological symptoms such as binge eating, starvation and alcohol abuse (Lamberton & Oei, 1996).

#### Are we raising generations of pathological gamblers?

When you look into video arcades, you will find that most of the people at the video machines are children and teenagers. However, adolescents do not only play on fairly harmless video games, but more and more adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 seem to be driven to more serious forms of gambling like private gambling, betting on dog and horse races, and also playing the lottery. Other forms of games which adolescents prefer can be seen in Table 1, page 7.1.

There are difficulties in researching the prevalence of gambling amongst adolescents because there are no separate tools (like questionnaires etc.) for adolescents, and scientist are not sure yet whether the same signs and symptoms of pathological gambling amongst adults also apply to adolescents (Kaminer & Petry, 1999). But so far, studies show that children do gamble, even when they are still at high school, and the rate of young gamblers is alarmingly higher than the prevalence of adult gambling. Estimates of several researchers state that 4 to 8 percent of youths have serious gambling problems, which is

more than twice as high as the prevalence among adults (Stinchfield & Winters, 1998). It has also been found that there are gender differences in the structure of gamblers - boys are more likely to participate in gambling than girls, maybe because it is sometimes considered to be a form of passage into adulthood (Stinchfield & Winters, 1998).

Adolescents often gamble on illegal and private activities such as card games or games of skill, but nevertheless a significant number of adolescents do also gamble on legal forms of gambling and can be found placing wagers in casinos. It has also been found that they tend to participate more in legal forms of gambling the closer they get to the legal gambling age. Another interesting fact, and reason for concern, is that there is a rise in gambling activity the older the youths get (Stinchfield & Winters, 1998). Scientists are not completely in agreement with each other, but according to the numbers of adolescent and adult prevalence of gambling, researchers are rather certain that adolescent gambling might lead to pathological gambling behavior in adult years. Since children and teenagers start gambling ever more early, the number of pathological adult gamblers are very likely to rise further in the future.

How can the high percentage of lifetime and past year prevalence of gambling of adolescents be explained? One of the main factors is the high accessibility of gambling forms like video poker. It is no problem for children and teenagers to play this form of game, which is supposed to be very addictive (NGISC Report, 1999), because there is often no age limit for this type of game.

Another threat for children and youths is the visual similarity between computer games they play at home and gambling devices. Children get lured into gambling by the illusion that those gambling machines can be 'beat' by skill just like their computer games, they are not able to see that the gambling machines are based on chance and not skill (Knickerbocker, 1999).

Another risk is the way casinos present themselves to the public. Casinos get more and more attractive for children and adolescents because they are designed as family theme parks with cartoon characters (Stinchfield & Winters, 1998) and they also usually offer various attractive entertainment shows. All those things attract youths and increase the risk of them getting hooked up on gambling. And it should not be forgotten that it is still too easy for underage teenagers to get access to gaming facilities and place their bets (Stinchfield & Winters, 1998).

Youths often have a low self-esteem and need support from their families to develop a stable image of themselves. If the family background cannot offer this support, they try to find their self-esteem in other places. A casino seems to be the ideal place for that because there their egos get pushed and inflated— as one recovering addict puts it, "When you're spending money at the tables, they give you free drinks and call you Mister." (Chavira, 1991). Parents have to be a source of support and control in their children's development, otherwise the children are too vulnerable for influence from outside. It has been criticized that gambling is publicly presented in a way as to only show the positive effects of gambling. Advertisement show happy winners combined with slogans like "This

could be you!” and newspapers only show the winners of lotteries etc, as well. The message children and youths get from this is that gambling is an easy and simple way to get rich, they do not see the dangers of gambling, the amounts of money they can lose, because those sides are not presented in the advertisements (Stinchfield & Winters, 1998). Researchers are not quite sure yet to what extent youths are influenced by this type of media presentation, but it is very likely that it does increase the attractiveness of gambling for youths.

As before mentioned – the family background is a crucial factor in adolescents’ development. Therefore the regulatory influence, or the lack of this influence, parents have on their children is very important. If the parents are gamblers themselves, studies have shown that the children are likely to show addictive behaviors themselves, such as alcohol and substance abuse, but also gambling (Lamberton & Oei, 1997).

All of these issues show how much at risk adolescents are in this day and age to develop an addictive behavior pattern and be drawn in completely by at risk activities such as gambling. To prevent a further increase in numbers of pathological gamblers in the next decades, it is necessary that more attention is paid to adolescents at high risk for problem and pathological gambling. More research and more public awareness has to be drawn to the topic of adolescent gambling in order to come up with adequate means of prevention and education, to save children and adolescents from becoming trapped in this addiction at an early age.

