ROLLING THE DICE – WITH YOUR LIFE

Gambling addiction is a growing, but often hidden, problem in the United States

By **PATTI ZIELINSKI**

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For Deron Drumm, gambling wasn't a problem — it was a solution.

Diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder, Drumm always struggled with anxiety, which increasingly got worse as he aged. "I thought bad things would happen to those I cared about if I didn't perform certain rituals," he says. "On some level, I knew this wasn't really true, but I was compelled. It was exhausting, and I was desperate for relief."

He found that relief one summer at age 12 when he visited his grandfather who owned racehorses as a hobby. "He took me to the track and placed a small bet on one of his horses. He won by a lot," he says. "That win gave me a sense of peace that I had never experienced before."

After that, Drumm sought out similar avenues that would make him feel "right": He started sneaking into jai alai games in his native Connecticut and betting, welcoming the release of dopamine and the distraction from his pain that occurred with each bet.

By his late teens, he had fully submerged himself into gambling. He had a bookie and was already in serious trouble for owing money. But that didn't matter: He had relief from his pain that even the prescribed medications from his psychiatrist couldn't manage.

From the outside, Drumm seemed to have it all together, pouring his energy into his education and enjoying academic success. He got accepted to law school, but shortly after starting took a leave of absence. When he was not hiding under his bed, he was in casinos or at the racetrack. He eventually found the strength to return to school and became an attorney.

His achievements did little to stem his gambling. He took out student loans that went unpaid, charged up his credit cards, and embezzled more than $200,000 from his law firm. He lied to family and friends, who thought he simply made bad financial decisions. And those who knew he gambled did not know the extent; at casinos he would leave his friends playing low-stakes games under the guise of using the restroom to wage larger bets elsewhere. At work, he used the company computer to bet on horses.

Along the way, Drumm suffered two strokes and had open-heart surgery — which he attributes to stress and high blood pressure from gambling and emotional distress. He contemplated suicide.

But he hadn't hit rock bottom yet.

Drumm's wake-up call came when his firm discovered he was stealing money. He avoided jail by agreeing to pay restitution and enter a rehabilitation center. Over the coming years, he was in and out of court and was disbarred.

Left with nothing, Drumm began to start his life anew.

AN 'INSIDIOUS' DISORDER

For many Americans, gambling — whether it is in a casino, playing the lottery; fantasy sports; or online betting — is a casual pastime. There's the rush of wagering one's hard-earned money on a dream of the win, big or small. Approximately 80 percent of U.S. adults have gambled at least once in their lives, according to the Gambling Addiction Index. While research shows that most adults who choose to gamble do so responsibly, the 2013 National Survey of Problem Gambling Services estimates there are 5.77 million disordered gamblers in the United States in need of treatment.

The trouble is that many gamblers like Drumm and their families do not know there is a problem until considerable damage has been done. "My parents educated me on the dangers of alcohol and drugs, but none of us realized that gambling was in that category. People question if gambling is really an addiction," says Drumm, who is now executive

director of Advocacy Unlimited, a nonprofit advocate for addiction and mental health issues in Hartford, Connecticut. "I would go to casinos and racetracks with my family. No one ever said to me, 'Be careful. Gambling is really dangerous.' But then again, that likely wouldn't have mattered to me."

"'Insidious' is a good word to describe what is going on in a gambling disorder — which is how the latest edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders refers to it. People often are very high-functioning in other areas of their life. They can keep it hidden for a long time until it becomes very obvious: They are evicted, face a legal charge from embezzlement, or lose their job," says Sheryl Anderson, the director of the Vanguard Center for Gambling Recovery at Project Turnabout, a residential program for those suffering from problem gambling in Granite Falls, Minnesota.

"People tend to distance themselves from gamblers," she says. "The Minnesota Lottery once asked a focus group to draw a picture of their idea of a gambler. Everyone drew a person who was physically different. They're saying 'It couldn't be me' and categorize: If it's poker, it's gambling; if it's penny slots or bingo, it's not."

"Many people also think since gambling is legal, it cannot be damaging," Anderson says. State lottery commercials validate this thought by alluding that gambling is a civic responsibility since it pumps money back into public concerns like roads and schools.

Gambling disorders often start casually, then escalate as the person wagers more money and spends more time betting despite the negative consequences. The reasons people gamble are varied: entertainment; action; escape; or a solution to problems with relationships, work, or health. It's also social — think office pools and fantasy sports leagues — and an ego boost, especially when casinos offer VIP lodging, free drinks, and perks to regular customers.

People also enjoy the thought that they can beat the system by skill. "We are used to applying our work ethic to everything: The more time, effort, and resources we put into something, the better the outcome," says Anderson. "But with gambling, the more we put into it, even with games where there is an element of skill, the house often still has the advantage. We are not going to come out ahead long-term."

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The stakes are huge — for gamblers, their families, and the community. According to H2 Gambling Capital, which tracks statistics on the gambling industry, in 2014, U.S. gamblers lost $143 billion. Frequency and the amount of money lost or won does not determine the disorder's severity, however. Some people with a gambling addiction may binge only periodically, but the negative effects and underlying issues are the same.

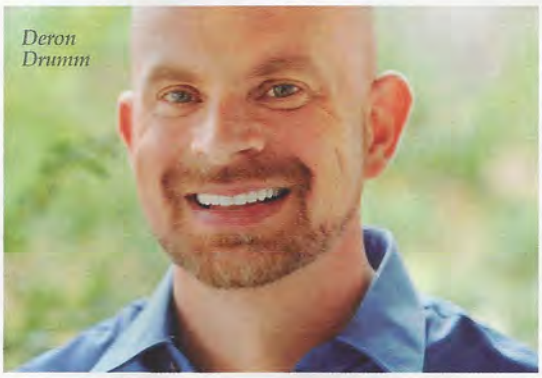
The repercussions are more than financial. The National Problem Gambling Helpline Network (800-522-4700) notes that problem gambling "includes all gambling behavior patterns that compromise, disrupt or damage personal, family or vocational pursuits," and the National Council for Problem Gambling reports that people with gambling disorders commit suicide twice as much as those who misuse substances.

The American Psychiatric Association defines pathological gambling as having five or more of the following symptoms:

- Committing crimes to get money to gamble
- Feeling restless or irritable when trying to cut back or quit gambling
- Gambling to escape problems or feelings of sadness or anxiety
- Gambling larger amounts of money to try to make back past losses
- Losing a job, relationship, education, or career opportunity due to gambling
- Lying about the amount of time or money spent gambling
- Making many unsuccessful attempts to cut back or quit gambling
- Needing to borrow money due to gambling losses
- Needing to gamble larger amounts of money in order to feel excitement
- Spending a lot of time thinking about gambling, such as remembering past experiences or ways to get more money with which to gamble

Studies have shown a comorbidity between gambling and substance abuse, with problem drinkers at an increased risk of developing a gambling disorder. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) has found that common genetic factors have been reported to contribute to pathological gambling and alcohol dependence in men.

"We see many co-occurring behaviors, such as cross addiction and transfer addiction," says Anderson. "It's not uncommon for someone to be in recovery for decades for addiction and never know that gambling can become an addiction. We need to start having that conversation on all levels, including educating people on setting a healthy practice with time and money limits. Also, people should be honest with their doctors so they are not prescribed medications that could increase the urge to gamble."


Deron Drumm

The NIH reports that pathological gambling typically begins with men in their early teens and with women between ages 20 and 40, but the foundation can be laid as early as childhood, as was the case with Drumm. A number of states allow children under 18 to gamble and many do so illegally through internet gambling or sports betting. "Some of those precursors of gambling behavior can occur in childhood — with activities such as role-playing games. These games are not bad, but they can set patterns for the future," says Anderson.

Adults who dole out scratch-off lottery tickets in children's birthday cards and Christmas stockings could be innocently starting a risky habit. "They don't see this as potentially harmful, but I've treated adults who recall begging for scratch tickets as a 4-year-old," she says.

DO I HAVE A GAMBLING DISORDER?

Gambling disorder symptoms are more subtle than those that accompany substance misuse: The person might have a good job but always seems short on cash. They might be late on bills, frequently borrowing money or become increasingly withdrawn.

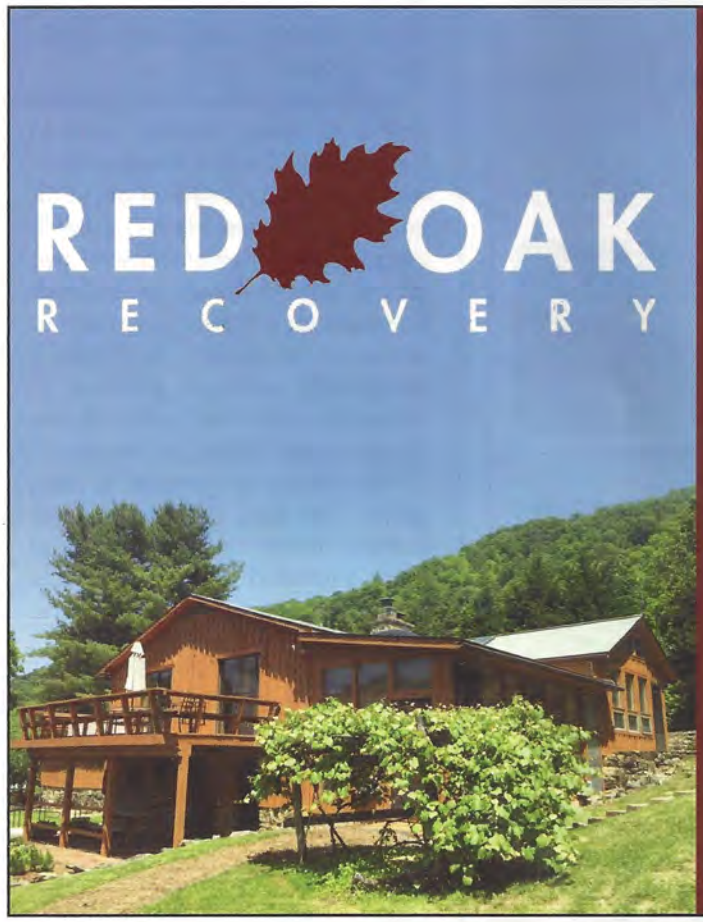
"Unfortunately a lot of people addicted to gambling never stop," says Drumm. "You take money you don't have because you assume you will win and put it back."

It's a vicious cycle, Drumm says: For gamblers, the solution seems to lie in the problem. "You think the next bet will be a winner and solve all your problems," he says. "But let's face it: Why would you stop if you're on a roll?"

If you suspect that you or someone you know has a gambling disorder, there are a number of online screening tools that can help you know if further assessment or treatment is needed, Anderson says. For example, the brief biosocial gambling screen is a three-question tool derived from the diagnostic criteria for gambling disorder. During the past 12 months have you: become restless, irritable, or anxious when trying to stop or cut down on gambling; tried to keep your family or friends from knowing how much you gambled; or had such financial trouble as a result of your gambling that you had to get help for living expenses from family friends or welfare? "If the person says 'yes' to any of these questions, it means they are at risk for developing a gambling problem and further assessment is warranted," Anderson says.

"From there, they will engage in group therapy, individual and family counseling, and, most importantly, develop a recovery strategy for when they finish treatment, which includes community resources, such as Gamblers Anonymous."

The National Counsel for Problem Gambling and Gamblers Anonymous also have screening tools and lists of resources for treatment.



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Treatment centers offer a variety of options, from cognitive behavior therapy to peer support to medication, such as antidepressants, to treat underlying disorders.

"When a person enters treatment at Vanguard, they have a full assessment, then meet with the nursing and mental health staff and certified gambling counselors for a biosocial assessment," Anderson says. "From there, they will engage in group therapy, individual and family counseling, and, most importantly, develop a recovery strategy for when they finish treatment, which includes community resources, such as Gamblers Anonymous."

Cognitive behavioral therapy plays a key role in treatment. Individuals learn how to change their self-talk and develop healthier coping skills. "We want them to think about how they cannot resort to gambling in the future as a way to relieve problems and replace them with healthier activities," Anderson says.

Financial education is a crucial part of the program. "The person meets with nationally certified financial counselors to develop a spending plan for their recovery, taking into account their income, expenditures, and debt," she continues. "This will help them get out of that chasing pattern and sustain their recovery."

For Drumm, who is in his seventh year of recovery, healing came in the form of a healthy lifestyle, filled with yoga, tai chi, meditation, nutrition, and exercise. He has a fulfilling job and is remarried with two loving step-children. A staunch advocate for a holistic approach to recovery, he recently launched a mind-body wellness initiative at Advocacy Unlimited called Toivo, which means "hope" in Finnish.

"My desire to gamble is long gone," he says. "These positive outlets bring me more relief than gambling ever did. I now know I can sit with the pain and it will pass."

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