

Gambling, mental health, and drug and alcohol use

Did you know?

- Depression and severe mental illness is associated with problem gambling
- Suicide, suicide attempts and suicidal ideation are associated with problem gambling
- Alcohol, drug and nicotine misuse and dependency are common amongst problem gamblers.

What is the relationship between gambling and mental health problems?

- 36% of problem gamblers experience severe mental illness, compared to around 3% of the broader population¹
- Problem gamblers are 2.4 times more likely to experience depression than non-problem gamblers²
- Problem gamblers have an elevated risk of suicide, and experience more suicidal ideation and suicide attempts than the general community.³

What is the relationship between gambling and drug and alcohol misuse?

- Up to 70% of problem gamblers have an alcohol dependency⁴
- Up to 38% of problem gamblers have a drug use problem⁵
- Up to 15% of people receiving treatment for drug use problems are also problem gamblers⁶
- Up to 60% of problem gamblers have a nicotine dependence.⁷

What is the causal relationship between gambling, mental health and drug and alcohol problems?

There is no clear evidence about whether mental health and drug and alcohol problems are caused by or a consequence of problem gambling. There is a variety of research that suggests people with existing mental health problems turn to gambling as a way to alleviate symptoms of mental illness⁸, while research also suggests that mental health problems and drug and alcohol misuse are a consequence of problem gambling.⁹

Why are people experiencing mental health or drug and alcohol problems at greater risk of developing problems with gambling?

- Pokie machines can cause a dissociative state that distracts from problems and can be used to manage trauma
- Social isolation of people with mental health or alcohol and drug problems can increase vulnerability to gambling
- The perceptions of winning can be distorted with some types of mental illness
- Gambling may be used as a source of income to purchase drugs.¹⁰

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Other issues

Problem gambling and mental health impacts on families

Problem gambling has been noted to not only affect the mental health of the gambler, but also the mental health of the families and partners of problem gamblers. One study suggests up to 40% of problem gambler's partners experiencing stress-related illness.¹¹

More significantly, children of problem gamblers are more likely to exhibit stress-related illnesses and attempt suicide, and indulge in risky behaviours such as alcohol and drug use.¹²

What are some health promotion actions that target people experiencing mental health or drug and alcohol problems who gamble?

- Avoid venues with pokie machines and establish alternative social or recreational activities, particularly for organised group outings
- Educate mental health and drug and alcohol service providers on the relationship between gambling and these issues
- Ensure gambling education and support information is available within mental health and drug and alcohol treatment services
- Organise financial literacy courses incorporating problem gambling information
- Assist people to access employment/education opportunities or programs that enhance community connections.

Want to know more?

Contact James Dunne, Project Officer Problem Gambling Prevention, HealthWest Partnership on 9313 5080 or at james.healthwest@isispc.com.au or visit www.problemgambling.vic.gov.au.

¹ Thomas, S. and Jackson, A. (2008). *Report to beyondblue: Risk and Protective Factors, Depression and Comorbidities in Problem Gambling*, Monash University and University of Melbourne; Department of Human Services (2009). *Because mental health matters: Victorian Mental Health Reform Strategy 2009-19*, Mental Health and Drugs Division, Department of Human Services, Melbourne.

² Thomas et al (2008).

³ *Ibid*; Australian Productivity Commission (1999) *Australian Gambling Industries*, Report No.10, AusInfo, Canberra

⁴ Thomas et al (2008)

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ Australian Productivity Commission (1999)

⁷ *Ibid* and Department of Justice (2008)

⁸ Brown, H. (2009). *Notes on Problem Gambling*. City of Greater Dandenong, Melbourne. See for a full list of studies related to alleviation of issues such as depression through gambling.

⁹ Australian Productivity Commission (1999)

¹⁰ Banyule-Nillumbik Primary Care Alliance (2009). *Health promotion resource guide for problem gambling prevention*. Banyule-Nillumbik Primary Care Alliance, Melbourne.

¹¹ Australian Productivity Commission (1999)

¹² Jacobs, D, Marston, AR, Singer, RD, Widaman, K, Little, T, Veizades, J 1989, 'Children of problem gamblers', *Journal of Gambling Behavior*, vol. 5, pp. 261-8.