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COMCARE Article

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about Mental Health in Sedgwick County Government

February 2012

Problem Gambling

I have read a lot of stories about gambling addiction. I go occasionally and really have a good time. What are the chances of people getting addicted?

There's no doubt that gambling addiction exists, but the research out of Stanford Graduate School of Business indicates that casinos are primarily entertainment destinations. The research provided by Sridhar Narayanan and his co-author, Puneet Manchanda, associate professor of marketing at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business built a model based upon how consumers behaved during casino visits by analyzing both their "play decisions" - whether to continue gambling or stop after a win or loss - and the size of the bets they placed. What they found showed some intriguing insights into this gambling-as-entertainment theory. For example, research indicated that people have fairly rigid thresholds for how much they are willing to gamble. People seem to be satisfied with relatively small wins, and will tolerate even smaller losses. "Most of them won't play after a certain threshold of loss has been reached. They tend to be conscious that, in the long run, they are more likely to lose than win. "The research results indicate that the casinos are primarily entertainment destinations," said Narayanan. "After all, a lot happens there other than the gambling - there's the opulence to look at, the ability to sit and have a drink, or watch a show."

On the other hand, problem gambling is there, affecting millions of Americans of all ages, races, and ethnic backgrounds in all communities that have a significant societal and economic cost. A 1999 National Prevalence Study revealed that .9 percent of the adult populations in Kansas, approximately 18,614 Kansans, are pathological gamblers. Of the 18,614 Kansas pathological gamblers, 4,500 live in Sedgwick County.

Pathological gamblers are five times more likely to be alcohol dependent, four times more likely to abuse drugs, three times more likely to be depressed, and are eight times more likely to have a bi-polar disorder. According to Dr. Rachel A. Volberg, "Suicide attempt rates among pathological gamblers are higher than any other addictive disorder."

Problem gambling is sometimes referred to as the "hidden illness" because there are no obvious physical signs or symptoms, unlike substance use disorders. When gambling is out of control and the game is no longer about winning, but about having enough money to keep playing, it can lead to serious consequences. Problem gambling can result in financial debt, damaged relationships, job loss, loss of self-respect, and involvement in criminal activity. The National Council on Problem Gambling defines problem gambling as: "...gambling behavior which causes disruptions in any major area of life – psychological, physical, social or vocational."

Problem gambling warning signs:

- A preoccupation with gambling
- Talking only about wins, not losses
- Gambling as a way of escaping problems
- Hiding losses from family members
- Borrowing money in order to gamble
- Gambling results in withdrawal from family and friends
- Stopping or cutting back seems impossible



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Problem gambling is treatable and treatment is effective in minimizing the harm to individuals and society as a whole. To help combat the growing gambling problem facing many Kansans, the state of Kansas has allocated funds to reimburse certified gambling counselors in Kansas who provide counseling to individuals with gambling problems and their families. COMCARE's Addiction Treatment Services employs four Kansas Certified Gambling Counselors and one Kansas Interventionist for Problem Gambling and is credentialed to provide individual, group and family counseling to problem gamblers and/or their concerned family members. This treatment is available at no cost to the individual or his/her family member.

March 4-10, 2012, is Annual Problem Gambling Awareness Week. The goal is to educate the general public and health care professionals about the warning signs of problem gambling and raise awareness about help that is available both locally and in Kansas.