



NHMRC FAQ

Frequently Asked Questions:
Gambling and Marriage

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Research-based answers to important questions related to forming and sustaining healthy marriages.

One of the most prominent forms of entertainment in American culture is gambling. Going to Las Vegas, visiting local casinos, or playing the lottery is widely viewed as fun and “harmless” entertainment within our society. The Internet and the advancement of technology have made it possible for people to gamble secretly and conveniently 24 hours a day.

With the variety of ways to gamble has come an increase in compulsive and destructive forms of the pastime. Research from the late 1990s suggests that there were about 125 million Americans who gambled within the previous year, ¹ and that about 7.5 million of them have experienced a serious problem gambling. ² However, because of the recent growth in gambling over the Internet, the number of problem gamblers likely has grown a lot over the past 10 years. And researchers estimate that nearly 8 million American teens struggle with gambling problems. ³

Compulsive gambling may have destructive and long-lasting financial effects. Moreover, the harm caused to marriage and family relationships from a gambling problem can be as stressful and serious as the financial consequences.

This brief FAQ answers some common questions about gambling and its impact on marriages, using findings from scientifically sound research. Research doesn't have all the answers, but it can shed a great deal of light on many questions. A lot more research is needed on gambling and its impact marriages.

Questions:

Q1. What are some marital problems that may occur when one or both spouses have a gambling problem?

Q2. What resources are available to help spouses and people struggling with a gambling problem?

Q1. What are some marital problems that may occur when one or both spouses have a gambling problem?

A1.

- Gambling problems often go together with other addictive behaviors (e.g., alcohol or drug use). Research on gambling and family life is difficult to interpret because many people do not seek treatment for pathological or problem gambling. Individuals experiencing problems with gambling are more likely to seek treatment (if they seek treatment at all) in drug or alcohol recovery programs. And the studies on gambling and family life have often been done with small numbers of people, usually individuals seeking help in a gambling treatment center. ⁴
- Some spouses of problem or pathological gamblers report feeling depressed, upset, or sad on a regular

basis. The long-term impact of these emotions on a marital relationship often leads to emotional stress, feelings of isolation in marriage, lack of trust and intimacy with one's spouse, and separation or divorce. ⁵

- The effects of problem or pathological gambling are often devastating on the emotional and physical well-being of spouses and children. Also, studies indicate a high rate of abuse among problem or pathological gamblers. One study reports that about one-quarter (23 percent) of the spouses and 17 percent of the children of pathological gamblers were physically and emotionally abused. ⁶ Another study suggests that one-half of spouses and 10 percent of children of pathological gamblers experienced physical or emotional abuse. Usually the victim of physical abuse is a woman. ⁷

Q2. What resources are available to help spouses and people struggling with a gambling problem?

A2.

Several resources are available to assist people who struggle with problem or pathological gambling.

- The most widely used resource is Gamblers Anonymous, a private support group (not a treatment group) organized by those who are recovering from problem or pathological gambling. GAM-ANON, as it is known, is a nationally recognized support group for spouses and other family members who have a loved one who struggles with problem or pathological gambling. ⁸
- In addition, there are several Internet sites available to direct people to a resource more suited for their needs. Among these resources is the National Council for Problem Gambling commissioned by the federal government. This site is dedicated to providing 24-hour resources about problem gambling, treatment centers, and local and national agencies that can be utilized to overcome the addiction. ⁹

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