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I treat people with sports-betting and gambling addictions. Here's how I help them recognize the problem and what treatment is like.

Elle Hardy Mar 25, 2022, 12:12 PM



Dan Field. Courtesy of Dan Field

This as-told-to essay is based on a conversation with Dan Field, a licensed clinical social worker and therapist and the cofounder of [Stop Betting Sports](#), who's treated people with gambling addictions for more than 10 years. The following has been edited for length and clarity.

The demographic of most people with a sports-betting addiction is

younger males. However, my initial contact is typically with older men — usually someone's dad calling me — rather than with the gamblers themselves.

Most people I see tend to come from money or have access to it, generally through credit lines or their parents' accounts (although some sadly turn to crime).

It's not uncommon for people to steal money. It's part of the disorder — there's often the intention to pay it back or the delusion that it's just a matter of time before they get the money back. People often steal from the workplace. One client was a pastor who was stealing from the church and got in a lot of trouble, including legal problems.

Many of my sports-gambling clients are reluctant to see me, but gambling therapy may be conditional on living with their parents or partner or accessing family money.

The worst thing a family member can do is bail their child out. It can be very complex, because sometimes the situations are so dire that a person will become homeless. But to some degree, tough love really is necessary.

I see a handful of women, but by and large the majority of excessive gamblers are male

Generally speaking, male gamblers are betting for excitement, and female gamblers are betting for escape. Usually, it occurs to women in life transitions — say the kids have gone to school or they're in relationships that feel dead.

Helping people with a sports-gambling addiction is tough because, as with all gambling addictions, there's a history of winning. They have memories of turning \$100 into a few thousand dollars, and so there's an unbreakable belief that "I can turn this around. I did it before, I can do it again."

Treatment is important, though, because heavy gamblers experience feelings of desperation and hopelessness and may contemplate

suicide.

Recognizing a gambling addiction can be difficult

Gambling is often described as the "invisible addiction." Unlike a substance-use disorders, it's much easier to hide. This is particularly true now due to the development of online and mobile sports betting.

There are three key signs that your partner or loved one may have a gambling disorder:

- They're secretive about finances: It's not uncommon for a person with an addiction to take out loans, open credit cards, and dive into savings. Does your loved one become defensive when confronted about money? Have you seen them make any unexplained, large deductions? Have they taken steps to hide information about their finances from you?
- They're spending more time away: Is the affected individual spending more time away from home without explanation? Are they glued to the TV, computer, or cell phone for hours on end? Are they secretive about their internet use? Are they there but not present or disengaged?
- There's a change in behavior: The emotions that you experience while gambling are very unpredictable. One moment you think you can purchase a new home, while seconds later you may not know where your next meal is coming from. Have you noticed your partner or loved one swing from being extremely positive one second and then upset and angry the next? Are you catching them lying more?

For excessive gamblers, admitting the problem is important but difficult

Some questions to ask yourself if you're concerned about having a gambling addiction: *Are you betting more than you intended? Are you preoccupied with it? Are you betting on games that you really have no interest in?*

I have one client in the US who was betting on soccer and cricket in

I have one client in the US who was betting on soccer and cricket in India in the middle of the night. He couldn't go to sleep unless he was "in action." This took a heavy financial toll on him pretty quickly, and it impacted his relationships.

Another sign you may have gambling disorder is when you're in the chasing cycle, or trying to claw back money that was lost before. There's often a delusion that gambling isn't a problem and it's just a matter of time before you make the money back.

To help gamblers recognize the extent of their disorder, I start with a spreadsheet exercise

I ask them to total time and money spent gambling over three to six months. Even though they typically underreport, we can still do a cost-benefit analysis. The net total is often close to negative-\$300 an hour.

I had a client who was a married male gambler between jobs. His wife, who was a doctor, would go to work, and while he was taking care of the children, he was sports betting continuously, even at the playground with his kids. He had lost a large amount of money when he and his wife came to see me.

He suffered from feelings of boredom and lack of productivity that I have to challenge in these situations. People have a hard time dealing with the sense that they're not doing anything if they're not making money.

They come to see sports betting as a feasible way to do that — I do the spreadsheet to directly challenge the idea that you can make money gambling on sports.

There are a few different things going on in the brain when people gamble

Firstly, there's a [dopamine rush](#) from the anticipation of action. Then there's the actual dopamine release, both when you win and you lose.

I've also observed clinically that when people lose, it's more like a heroin type of high. Like they're anesthetized. Or they're just so numb

...from type of high, and they're anesthetized, or they're just so numb to the horrible situation they find themselves in that it's oddly intoxicating. They feel like there's a thick blanket over them, followed by a renewed sense of purpose. The sense that they need to get the money back is also like a drug that keeps them in action.

Then when people are about to play or about to win, it's more like a cocaine hit.

I often see young men getting into sports gambling through their fathers

I'm working with a client whose dad is a prolific better on horses, and he took his son to the track many times growing up. The excitement of seeing your father in action is normalized from a young age.

That's why I'm so opposed to legalized sports betting. It's being legitimized to the point that dads are taking their sons to a game, and the exciting, positive experience is around gambling rather than the team winning.

People who develop addictions often remember their dad winning \$1,000 and taking them out to dinner to celebrate. This is the concept of [euphoric recall](#). That high when you're young, excited, and surrounded by friends and family that are winning money plants a dangerous seed. Later on, many people with addictions want to replicate that.

It's important to recognize errors of thinking about skill, luck, and pride as the common gambling traps perpetuated by the industry.

The treatment plan looks different for different people

I prescribe different treatment options for my clients only after getting a clear sense of who they are, what motivates them, and generally how successful they've been in the past in adhering to self-improvement activities. I need to understand the personal tendencies, habits, and patterns that surround self-destructive gambling behavior.

First, I advise them to abstain completely from all gambling sites, activities, and sports-related media — as well as things such as poker, cryptocurrency, and stock options — for one month as we develop their plan.

We then look at the big three — sleep, diet, and exercise — as well as examining and revising unhealthy tech habits and coming up with practical ways of boosting dopamine without gambling.

Discovering new ways of boosting dopamine, such as playing sports instead of betting on them, can help counter feelings of listlessness, boredom, and guilt that characterize initial abstinence from sports betting. I'm working with a young man who had gambling addiction who's now an ultra-marathoner — we both believe that you have to come up with alternate ways of boosting dopamine, typically through exercise.

Then there's what I call the 'no-phone zone'

This is where you're not just putting it on airplane mode, but literally putting it away for anywhere up to six hours at night and 60 minutes during the day.

That way, you're beginning to unplug from all dopamine-releasing activities that have to do with technology. Winning money is one of the highest highs, but there are often cross addictions on phones with other things like social media or pornography. Usually, I'm very modest in my prescription for the no-phone zone for 30 to 60 minutes a day, but I try to build that up every couple of weeks.

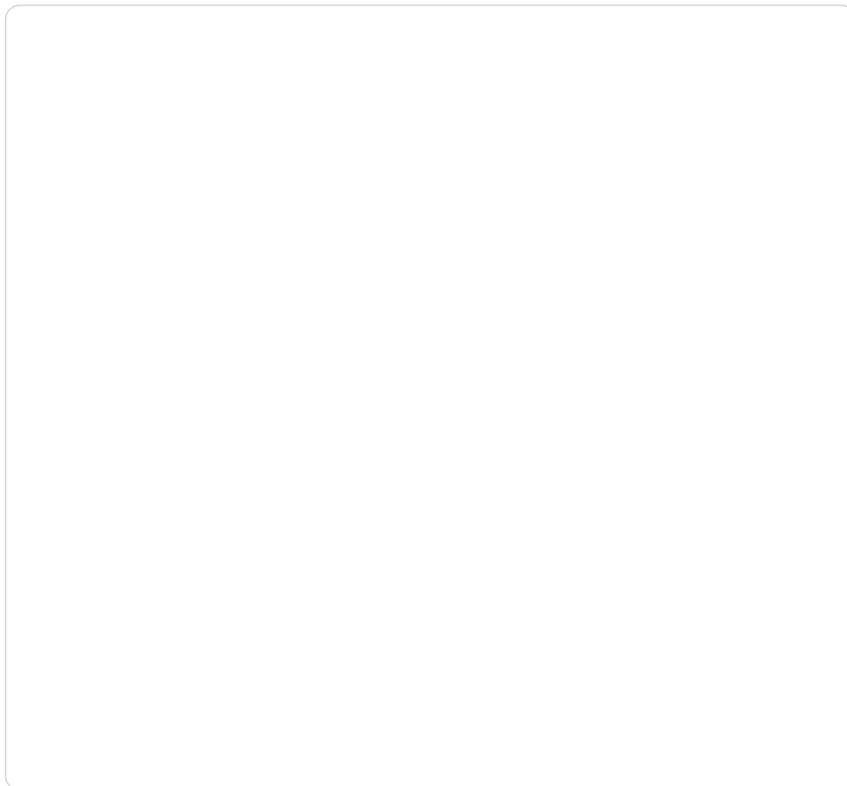
Sometimes we need to do comprehensive family work focusing on issues of boundary setting, addiction, shared responsibility, and accountability. We also need to discuss questions about their lives in terms of education and career.

I'm also big on helping clients develop patience and learn to delay gratification. Some strategies to help include day-at-a-time meditation tools and getting gamblers to text me each day to tell me why they're not gambling that day. In time, I compile those so that they can read back over them.

Lately, I've been using the idea of pushing toward discomfort as progress. Instead of talking to women on dating apps, I tell my clients to go to a café and ask someone out. It's more uncomfortable and requires risking rejection, but it's getting them off their phone and sofa and helping them be discerning about their choices.

The [National Council on Problem Gambling](#) operates Helpline Network (1-800-522-4700). The network is a single national access point to local resources for those seeking help for a gambling problem. Help is available 24/7 and is 100% confidential.

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