

Opinion Editorial – March is Responsible Gambling Awareness Month: Recovery is Possible

Contributors: Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs, Office of Compulsive and Problem Gambling, Council on Compulsive Gambling of Pennsylvania, National Council on Problem Gambling, Pennsylvania Lottery

As we live through unprecedented times, many of us are facing struggles – one of which may be an issue rarely talked about, but one we know exists: problem gambling.

“While millions of Americans, and hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvanians experience gambling-related problems, it is important to know that help is available and recovery is possible,” said Josh Ercole, executive director, Council on Compulsive Gambling of Pennsylvania. “A Gambling Disorder is a serious condition that is identified as a persistent and recurrent problematic gambling behavior that has led to clinically significant impairment or distress.”

To understand problem gambling, we first must understand what it looks like. Problem gambling is any gambling, betting or wagering that causes family, financial, legal, emotional or other problems for the individual, their family or others. Gambling problems can be mild, or quite severe, and can worsen over time.

In a time where we see increased access, availability and participation in gambling, it is also important to recognize there is also an increase in the number of individuals whose lives are negatively impacted.

“It’s considered a “hidden addiction,” meaning it is more difficult to detect than other addictions, which can often be identified by a number of physical signs. Problem Gambling Awareness Month is an annual reminder to know important warning signs of a gambling problem,” said Liz Lanza, director, Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board’s Office of Compulsive and Problem Gambling.

Warning signs include:

- Gambling more frequently or for longer than intended
- Lying about where money goes
- Declining work or school performance
- Borrowing money in order to gamble
- Increasing preoccupation with gambling
- Distancing or isolating from family or friends
- Unable to pay bills or cover expenses
- Chasing losses, or returning the next day to win back what was lost
- Committing/considering committing a crime to finance gambling
- Making repeated unsuccessful efforts to control or stop gambling

In Pennsylvania there are free and confidential resources available for those who may be suffering from a Gambling Disorder or compulsive gambling. By picking up the phone to call 1-800-GAMBLER®, texting or using chat, players who may have a gambling problem can reach out knowing there will be a professional on the other line ready to help them.

“Problem gambling is a very real issue that affects millions of people in the United States,” said Keith Whyte Executive Director, National Council on Problem Gambling. “Gambling-related problems not only affect the player, but family, friends and co-workers can be affected too. People of any age, race, education level, religion, culture and socioeconomic status can develop gambling problems.”

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In observance of National Responsible Gambling Awareness Month, groups such as the Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs, Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board, Council on Compulsive Gambling of Pennsylvania, National Council on Problem Gambling, and the Pennsylvania Lottery are once again coming together to echo the message that recovery is possible, if you reach out for help.

“We take great pride in the fact that our mission is to generate funds that pay for the vital programs that older Pennsylvanians rely on every day. While we know most adults can play Lottery games without issue, we do understand that gambling can be problematic for some,” said Drew Svitko, executive director, Pennsylvania Lottery. “We always remind our players to please play responsibly.”

That means setting a budget, not chasing losses or take a break, or stop playing altogether.

“The most important message for Pennsylvanians experiencing problem gambling is that help is available, regardless of insurance,” said Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs Secretary Jen Smith. “Our department contracts with more than 70 problem gambling treatment providers throughout the commonwealth offering services to uninsured individuals.”

The first step in recovery comes from recognizing there's a problem and asking for help. We hope Pennsylvanians who may need help, or know of someone who needs help, will take advantage of the free, 24-hour helpline, 1-800-GAMBLER® (1-800-426-2537), or use the chat/text feature on pacouncil.com.

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