

# Healing Relationships Affected by Problem Gambling

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This short article reviews some of the ways in which family members are affected by problem gambling, and explains how counseling can help. Families may be affected by problem gambling in different ways. Gambling problems can be hidden for a long time, so many families are stunned when they learn how much money has been lost. Some relationships do not survive a gambling problem. Other families struggle through difficulties and learn how to work together better. People can and do recover from problem gambling, but it takes time and patience to work through all the issues. It is important not to make vital decisions about relationships while individuals are under stress. Taking the time to think things through and consider the best interests of all family members can help family members explore their options and decide what will work best for them and their family.

Whether or not the person who gambles is ready to get help or even recognizes that they have a problem, family members can benefit from counselling support. Counsellors can meet with parents, adult children, siblings, friends and spouses. They understand how stressful it can be when someone close has a problem with gambling. Common issues that friends and family members struggle with are:

**Money Problems.** The most common problem is the loss of money. Savings, property or belongings may suddenly be gone. This kind of money crisis makes the family feel scared, angry and betrayed.

**Emotional Problems and Isolation:** Gambling problems can be emotionally overwhelming. Family members may feel ashamed, hurt, afraid, angry, confused and distrustful. These feelings make it harder to solve problems. The person who gambles may even deny that there is a problem. Isolation is another concern. Often partners do not want to be emotionally or physically close with the person who has hurt them. In addition, many people affected by gambling problems avoid other people, because they feel ashamed. This makes it hard to get love and support. Sometimes, friendships end because of unpaid debts.

**Physical and Mental Health:** The stress of gambling problems sometimes causes health problems for family members as well as the person who gambles. These problems can include anxiety, depression and stress-related problems such as poor sleep, ulcers, bowel problems, headaches and muscle pains.

**Burnout:** Many families under stress have trouble coping. One member may try to keep the family functioning by taking on more responsibility. This can lead to burnout. Family

members often focus on the person with gambling problems, and forget to take care of themselves or to have fun.

**Impact on Children:** When a parent or caregiver has a gambling problem, children can feel forgotten, depressed and angry. They may believe they caused the problem and that, if they are “good,” the problem will stop. Some children take care of younger brothers or sisters, or try to support their parent. This responsibility causes children stress. Children may also believe they must take sides between their parents. They may stop trusting a parent who makes promises he or she doesn’t keep. It is important to help children understand that the family’s problems are not their fault. Children need to return to a safe and balanced home life and a normal childhood. Family or individual counselling can help children deal with these changes

**Physical and Emotional Abuse:** Family violence is more common when families are in crisis. Gambling problems can lead to physical or emotional abuse of a partner, elder parent or child. Children may be hurt due to pent-up anger. If this is happening in your family, get help right away.

**Anxiety and Depression:** Stress, anxiety and depression are common both for people with gambling problems and for their families. This can make sleeping, thinking and solving problems more difficult.

On average, one person’s gambling problem affects ten other people. It is important for family members to get support because recovery works best when everyone is working together. Many family members have difficulty understanding how a behavior such as gambling can become an addiction. Some family members need reassurance that they did not cause the gambling problem. Family members also need to realize that they cannot stop the gambler from gambling. It is often a challenge for family members to trust the gambler about anything, since the gambler has usually lied about and hidden the extent of his or her gambling. Counselling can help family members find ways to accept the reality that large amounts of money have been gambled away. Counseling can also teach family members how to protect themselves financially. Most importantly, counselling can teach the family how to move toward positive change by addressing their own feelings as a result of problem gambling.

Family members in Waterloo Region who would like information on free, confidential services for problem gamblers and/or family members can call St. Mary’s Counselling Service at 519-745-2585.