

Gambling Addiction as a Trauma Issue

Although gambling addiction affects two million Americans a year, it remains unrecognized and traumatizing to not only the problem gambler but also those family members directly in contact. Three to seven percent of our population can be classified as problem gamblers, and one to three percent meet the criteria of gambling addiction.

This lack of awareness makes it difficult enough to identify the problem gambler and connect them to treatment, much less address the impact on their loved ones. Spouses, in particular, experience traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, and the extreme stress of maintaining family stability.

The effects of problem gambling on family members are immense. Spouses and families are often innocent victims pulled into the emotional turmoil that problem gambling presents. Seemingly out of nowhere, spouses and families are stunned by lies, deceit, overwhelming debt, abandonment, and guilt. Spouses present symptoms that are traumatic in nature and can prevent both them and the problem gambler from recovering. These symptoms create hyperarousal and need immediate attention for recovery, but are largely not recognized or treated.

As a clinician, it became apparent to me over time that my clients' spouses and family members were experiencing traumatic stress. Through a mixed methods study, I discovered indications that a significant

proportion of counselors were without adequate assessments and clinical interventions primarily intended for spousal recovery. Recommendations from the conclusions of this study motivated me to advance spousal-treatment efficiency and to develop tools such as the Spousal Emotional Symptom Assessment. This assessment can be used to identify traumatic stress symptoms that result from a partner's problem-gambling behavior.

The SESA identified traumatic stress in spouses in categories of: mood (depression and anxiety), finances, lack of trust, dissociative (coping and traumatic), victimization, and guilt. These symptoms were significantly present in the study and are consistently reported to date by spouses in clinical practice.

I now strongly believe that spouses should be included in treatment for their own traumatic stress recovery. I have also found that spouse inclusion and trauma treatment improves the prognosis for the problem gambler. The traumatic stress caused by problem gambling automatically leads to emotional disconnect, creating a ripple effect in the relationship. As problem gamblers enter into recovery, they are often met by emotionally wounded spouses who, due to their own injury, are disconnected and often unable to provide an emotionally supportive environment.

More research is necessary on the traumatic stress experienced by spouses of problem gamblers. To date, very little research exists connecting traumatic stress to families. There are significant limitations to methods,

support, and education for family members. It has been proposed that posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has a direct association with the gambler, spouse, and family.

During spouse-recovery stages, one of the traumatic effects on spouses is problematic hypervigilance. According to Peter Levine (1997) hypervigilance is a direct and immediate manifestation of hyperarousal, which is the initial response to threat. Its effect on the orienting response, or the instinct to respond to a change in our environment, is particularly debilitating, setting the traumatized individual up for an ongoing experience of fear, paralysis, and victimization. It is imperative that the gambler is aware of this traumatic response in the spouse and is able to provide emotional safety, patience, and information needed for the spouse to work through their automatic hypervigilance; whether an actual threat or only a trigger.

In addition, the hypervigilant spousal response can easily overwhelm the gambler resulting in escalation such as defensiveness and shutting down from a loss of emotional safety and increased emotional arousal themselves. This trauma dynamic stops conversations and healing due to a mutual lack spousal emotional support. Therefore hypervigilance should be addressed early in treatment.

With problem gambling there is commonly a tremendous amount of anger. This being a primary emotion, often a product of hypervigilance

resulting from traumatic stress, creates a barrier for couples to communicate effectively. In the case of relapse, spouses automatically enter into fear that often leads to their attempts to manage that anxiety through control of their environment. This can then lead to gambler resistance of being “controlled” only exasperating the situation, throwing the couple back into conflict.

Treating the traumatic stress for the spouse requires the therapist to be aware of the causal relationship of victimization and emotion. While obvious to many, it wasn't to me. I needed my additional trainings in trauma and gambling addiction practice to put both worlds together. I believe a counselor with the right combination of addictions awareness, emotional intelligence, and communication psychology, can learn to recognize traumatic stress, and can teach couples how to survive traumatic stress, rebuild trust, and develop a foundation of safety for relationship rebuilding.

Through my experience working with problem gamblers and their families over the last ten years, including clinical research on spousal traumatic stress and reviewing case studies, I have the following recommendations:

Encourage spouse and family involvement in assessment and treatment. Treating the problem gambler effectively requires including a 360 degree assessment where the spouse can be provided the opportunity to share with the therapist additional symptom perspective. Spouses can be invaluable in helping to obtain a comprehensive look at the damage caused

by the gambling addiction. I have also found that enlisting them early provides additional advantages as the spouse is able to participate in psychoeducation and is more likely to stay engaged longer in ongoing treatment.

Identify traumatic stress symptoms presenting in spouses through addiction. Spouses are immensely affected by gambling addiction. Most spouses present symptoms of depression, anxiety, and panic that prohibit their ability to be available to the gambler when in need of emotional support. Spouses are also often caught in opposing emotional traps as in codependency or depression, and end up neglecting their own needs. Helping spouses see that traumatic stress is a legitimate cause for their emotional responses can be a difference maker.

Develop treatment protocols and support for spousal stress. Once spouses recognize that their emotional responses are legitimate as traumatic symptoms, they then need tools to help manage the distress. I find that a significant number of clients are overwhelmed by the gravity of change occurring all around them during a gambling addiction. Gambler lying, mood management, and emotional disconnect in combination with collection calls and intense fear regarding covering the mortgage, becomes too much for just about anyone. Spouses are in dire need of tools to help them keep themselves afloat and when young children are in the home, the support to help maintain the strength to care for them and provide a sense of

normalcy.

Treatment providers who learn to recognize the psychology of both trauma and addiction can identify problem gambling distress and reduce the impact on both the gambler and their loved ones. Effectively treating problem gamblers requires a collaborative approach where the clinical focus includes victimization and spousal well-being. Advancing treatment to include spouses can benefit the long term success for the gambler and promote the rebuilding of relationships and family security.

BIO

Damon Dye, EdD, LMHC, NCGC II, BACC, operates Triangle Resolutions, a counseling center in the Tampa Bay area and teaches for Springfield College. He has provided treatment for problem gamblers and their spouses for over ten years. His recently released book, *Know When to Hold 'Em: A Guide for Spouses of Problem Gamblers* was written to provide emotional tools to deal with their loved one's addiction.

Recognize the psychology of betrayal, victimization, and emotional disconnect

Provide communication tools that promote healing in couples.

