

Boundary Guidelines for Gamblers

Most addictions must have boundaries. Gambling is no exception. While gambling is sometimes viewed as a different type of addiction, due to the fact that everyone may not have the same effects to a mind altering substance, it is nevertheless triggered by a stimulus that affects a family member and will continue providing a financial and emotional hardship on the whole family.

Gambling addicts often rely upon “bailout” from other family members or friends to relieve their financial blunder and irresponsibility. There are hundreds of thousands of other people in your situation across America, whether an addict or a victim of another family member who does not have the will power to just “stop” the ever spiraling debt and temptation to gamble.

Families are usually the ones that suffer the most by doing without, obtaining extra jobs or working overtime just to cover some of the debt incurred by a gambling member. Over time, there are added frustrations of anger, distrust, fear, discussions of separation or divorce and possibly creating domestic violence.

Budgeting becomes harder due to someone who is not accustomed to either paying bills or does not have the ability to become “hard-nose” in preventing the gambling addict from having any money. Since money is the “drug of choice” for most gamblers, one must set up tight guidelines for any addict. It is recommended that any money given to an addict must have a purpose and in small amounts (most gambling addicts have a threshold of a certain dollar amount before they start out gambling) with the addict providing a receipt for reimbursement, otherwise there is no more money given to them. It is our experience that most gamblers manipulate amounts of money and will save until they are ready to gamble again. Constantly thinking about one thing---gambling.

The area of importance of a family is two-fold. One is to restore trust that was broken (sometimes many times) and the other one is asset protection. One must clarify the debt in actual terms. Most gamblers do not know the extent of their losses but can only think about their winnings. The first area of trust is to be honest about all the debts incurred. We must then identify all the expenses and income that is available. The next step is to create a budget, establish a debt repayment plan, and then continually work forward to protecting your assets. All credit card and check writing by a gambler should be stopped immediately as well as contacting other people, such as a banker or other short-term loan agencies in your area. You may be able to contact your casino establishments and place your family member on a list to not allow in their business. (Some casinos do not have a good policy for this and most of the time, someone will have to recognize that person when coming in. Some casinos will allow people to incur debt but will take away earnings once they find out that person is there illegally. One-way street!)

Another way to protect the assets of the family is through legal separation, which means that any debts incurred by the gambling member, is not the legal responsibility of other family members. One may also work up a legal document that holds other people harmless for the debt that the gambling person goes through.

Trust is essential to rebuild in any family. Since trust is earned, one has to continually try to prove themselves to others. This may seem to last forever but nevertheless is vital to rebuilding the relationship back before it was broken. It is suggested that gamblers work “extra” to repay back what was “stolen” from the family. This adds a hardship to the gambling individual in the form of a punishment as one would do with a child or in the situation of the court room, a way to deter future dysfunctional behavior. One has to be careful to think that punishing someone by working extra is the only thing to do as it may not be harsh enough to make an individual stop gambling. See the V Chart.

Most strategies are recognized with cognitive/behavioral therapy, with the gambler trying to understand and try to change one’s behavior. A gambler is impulsive and will try to satisfy his/her thoughts and cravings by giving into the process of gambling, either in person or by internet. Some addicts have used medications that treat impulsiveness or other types of medications related to craving.

Cognitive/behavioral therapy tries to deal with irrational thoughts a gambler has. It deals with thought-feeling-behavior connections that deal with cravings and triggers. One of the goals is to provide coping skills and structured interventions or assignments for the gambler/family to complete. One of the goals for the gambler is to structure the process of recovery, increase the client’s understanding of the role and meaning of gambling in his/her life, enhance motivation and commitment for recovery, and increase honesty in self and others.

The goal for families should include an organized orderly method to bring them out of a chaotic state, provide education on pathological gambling as a legitimate psychiatric disorder, allow families to express their feelings, provide a safe platform for families and gamblers to work on their issues together honestly, and to understand the recovery process. One of the goals is to stop enabling gamblers to become more pathological. We need to look at better communication skills, accountability, loving detachment to not become manipulated, and provide resolution to meeting budgeting goals. The last goal should also include providing support to a gambling member.

Listed below are some of the strategies that may be helpful:

- One has to recognize they have a problem.
- Understand that gambling is a learned behavior with positive and negative effects. Unfortunately, the reason why there is a problem is that gambling has caused a negative effect on the whole family.
- Provide a clear understanding that no one really wins at gambling. The odds are stacked against anyone with tempting manipulations from the casinos to win at random so it will entice or encourage others to lose their money on a system that is about 66,000 to one.
- Understand winning big is about 1 in every 88,000,000, while being killed in a car accident is about 1 in every 53,000, choking to death is 1 in about 68,000, and being struck by lightning is about 1 in every 2,000,000—which has better odds than anyone winning big in gambling!!!
- The next step is to surround that person with a strong support person/group that will help a gambler through times of temptation.
- Identify distractions that lead to gambling.
- Develop social skills, problem solving, and have an accountability person/group available.
- Counseling is encouraged to resolve any immediate or past issues.

- Deal with honesty and openness. Most gamblers have false illusions of being overly optimistic, while some are narcissistic.
- Develop an environmental control in the home—money is going elsewhere.
- Maintain emotional and social support.
- If a relationship needs to be restored, focus on what caused one another to be attracted to each other, how that has deteriorated, and how to re-establish a plan to recover.
- Understand that gamblers will place family, including their own children at risk without thinking.
- Help family and gamblers to understand that relapse is inevitable.

Other Guidelines:

- Stay out of the casinos or any other form of gambling, including the internet.
- Have the gambler call spouse or another helper if the urges/temptations are being triggered or are too strong.
- Get all gambling debts paid off and have an agreement signed that all future gambling debts will be gambler's sole responsibility.
- For the spouse to handle the money and budgeting.
- Work on the budget together to understand together the process and progress in getting things paid.
- To develop honest communication between husband and spouse, each one should be totally honest with all concerns, fears, and doubts.
- For each one to be supportive of one another and develop ways to validate each other's importance, other than being the one stuck with paying off gambling debt.
- For the gambler to admit his/her mistakes and work on past issues.
- For the spouse to admit mistakes and work on not contributing to the gambler's addictions by going to the casinos or other forms of gambling her/himself.
- For the gambler to once again become responsible and accountable for all his/her actions and future actions.
- For the gambler to understand the harm that he/she is causing his/her family, other than the financial hardship.
- For both husband and wife work on coping skills to best handle stressful situations/events together.
- Both make a dedicated change in their lives and attend church regularly, depending on the strength of the Lord.

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