

Problem gambling and the workplace



Gambling is part of our mainstream culture and we know that most problem gamblers are ordinary hard-working people. More than 72,000 adult Oregonians are problem gamblers and almost all are employed.

What is problem gambling?

A problem gambler is anyone whose gambling is causing psychological, financial, emotional, marital, legal, or other difficulties for himself or herself and the people around him or her.

Co-workers – the first line of defense

Gambling and gambling-related activities are frequently carried out during work hours. The workplace is used as a shield to hide the problem gambling from family members. This leaves managers and co-workers as the first line of defense. It is important that all employers and employees develop a greater awareness of the signs associated with a gambling problem.

Workplace signs of a gambling problem

- ⌘ **Work performance deteriorates**; the person is preoccupied, has trouble concentrating, is absent or late for meetings and misses assignment deadlines.
- ⌘ **Frequent unexplained absences** or disappearances from work.
- ⌘ Eager to organize and participate in **betting opportunities**.

- ⌘ **Pay is requested in lieu of vacation time**, large blocks of vacation time are not taken.
- ⌘ **Frequently borrows money**, argues with co-workers about money that is owed to him or her.
- ⌘ **Complains about mounting debts.**
- ⌘ **Excessive use of the telephone and Internet** for personal matters.
- ⌘ **Experiences mood swings**, often related to winning and losing streaks.
- ⌘ **Credit card or loan bills are mailed to work** rather than home.
- ⌘ **Increasingly spends more time gambling** during lunch hours and coffee breaks.
- ⌘ **False claims are made** against expense accounts.
- ⌘ **Theft of company property.**

Effects on the workplace

Although not often recognized, problem gambling is a significant workforce issue. The workplace is primarily affected through lost time and lost productivity, but in desperate situations the gambler may resort to theft, fraud, or embezzlement.

Lost time

Individuals with gambling problems can become completely preoccupied with gambling. The workday is often spent either in the act of gambling, planning the next opportunity, or plotting to get money for gambling. Family members also become pre-occupied, worrying about finances and holding the family together.

Lost productivity

As a result of lost time, the company's productivity is damaged. The gambler becomes unreliable, misses project deadlines and important meetings and produces work that is of poor quality.

Physical and emotional health problems associated with excessive gambling can further diminish work performance and attendance. Depression, anxiety, high blood pressure, or stress-related illness can surface.

Individuals with gambling problems have a high rate of suicide and suicide attempts. Stressed family members also are at risk of suicide. The emotional, financial or legal problems can appear to be so severe that suicide looks like the only "way out."

Theft, fraud and embezzlement

Employees with severe problems may commit theft, fraud or embezzlement. Money is the gambler's key to action. Once all legitimate avenues to obtain cash are exhausted, the gambler, in desperation, may resort to illegal acts to acquire cash. Problem gamblers do not see this activity as theft. They see it as "borrowing money" and plan to replace it when they win.

What can supervisors do?

Express concerns in a caring and supportive manner. Do not diagnose the problem or tell the individual what to do. Be clear, non-judgmental and speak only for yourself.

- *I've been noticing changes in your work, and I am concerned about you.*

Use work-related observations.

- *I see you coming in very late from lunch every day, too distracted to work all afternoon.*

Be positive.

- *You are a conscientious person with a history of doing good work.*

Explain how the problem affects you.

- *I had to reassign two of your projects, because you missed three deadlines.*

Be clear about your position.

- *I need you to perform your job duties to the best of your ability; your performance has been slipping and without corrective actions your job is in jeopardy.*

Respect personal boundaries.

- *I don't want to pry into your life, but I had to let you know I am concerned. I would be happy to talk to you about anything that is troubling you or assist you in making an EAP appointment.*

When a gambling problem is known, provide information, not advice.

- *Here is some information about available problem gambling resources. Another resource available to you is our EAP professional; here is the name and number.*

Be prepared for denial or a hostile reaction.

- *It must be uncomfortable to hear this. It's difficult for me to bring it up, but I am concerned about you.*

What can organizations do?

⌘ Policy statements

Incorporate the topic of gambling into relevant policies on Internet use, phone use, and disallowed activities during work hours.

⌘ Provide awareness training

Without awareness, problem gambling will not be detected. Training can help employees and employers to identify and assist the problem gambler.

⌘ Make financial counseling available

It is important that financial counseling be made available to employees who are in a fiscal crisis.

⌘ Monitor the money stream

Occupations involving direct contact with money or where money can be “moved” can be high-risk for the problem gambler and a monitoring system can protect employee and employer.

What resources are available?

Problem Gambling Help Line: 877-MYLIMIT or 1877mylimit.org

Callers receive confidential, professional service from trained counselors. The line operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week and is free to gamblers and family members.

State-funded professional, confidential and effective treatment

Counseling services for gamblers and their families are available free of charge in Oregon. Contact the Problem Gambling Helpline for info and referrals.

Oregon’s Gambling Evaluation And Reduction Program (GEAR)

Provides gamblers with tools and support to change unwanted gambling patterns without traveling to a counselor’s office. For more information call 877-278-6766.

Gamblers Anonymous (GA) and Gam-Anon

Gamblers Anonymous provides people with a place to share experience, support and hope. Gam-Anon provides a support for the families of problem gamblers. A list of local meetings is available from the Problem Gambling Helpline.

Free workplace brochure download: 1877mylimit.org – click on Resources

Material in this section was adapted from Saskatchewan Health and the Nevada Council on Problem Gambling.