Reducing gambling harm for families

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Welcome to the summer edition of the Family Drug Help newsletter in which we focus on reducing gambling harm for families.

Here at Family Drug Help we have seen the impact of gambling on families, often co-occurring with substance use – financial hardship, relationship breakdown, loss of trust, family violence, social isolation and stigma. In response to this impact, Family Drug Help has developed a new family education program called Gambling InFocus with accompanying support groups, to help families impacted by someone’s gambling.

Gambling InFocus

This is an exciting new project that has been funded by the Ian Potter Foundation. Read on to see the positive benefits our Gambling InFocus Program is having for families, and what steps can be taken to reduce gambling harm.

Some sobering statistics about gambling in Australia:*  
• Australians lost more than $800 million in 2014/2015 on sports betting  
• Gambling advertising expenditure has nearly doubled since 2012  
• More than two-thirds of children aged 8-16 can recall the name of at least one sports betting brand  
• Australians spent $1.4 billion on online gambling, an increase of 15%  
• Australians lose more than $31 million a day playing the pokies  
• An estimated five to 10 other people will be significantly affected by one person’s gambling – this often means family and friends

We are saturated by gambling advertising. It is relentless and insidious. Gambling advertising pervades media, sports venues and public events. Gambling is as easy as a tap, swipe or click on your tablet, smartphone or computer. What is the impact of one person’s gambling on family and friends? We explore the impact of gambling, ways to minimise harm and options for support.

Remember, our Helpline is always there for immediate support – 1300 660 068.

On behalf of everyone here at Family Drug Help, we wish you a happy and safe Christmas and New Year!

Robert Campbell  
Program Manager Family Drug Help

* Statistics taken from Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation website  
https://www.responsiblegambling.vic.org.au
Dear family and friends

After running our first Gambling InFocus Program to reduce gambling harm for families, we are not surprised to find there are similarities in the work we have been doing at SHARC for many years.

Whether a family is affected by gambling or alcohol or other drugs, we hear the same catch cry -

“If only I had stopped paying the debt when it was $1000 I wouldn’t be paying off $300,000 now”

or

“All I have done is allow him to keep on using for 20 years by paying for his rent, food and fines”

The similarities between the family and friends gambling group and alcohol & other drug groups were:

• Generational issues often prevailed and that alcohol & other drugs often went hand in hand with gambling
• Both groups kept providing the resources to bail their family members out of debt or trouble
• Both kept pretending it wasn’t all happening by keeping it secret
• Both often covered up the mess from other family members
• Both kept making excuses why they needed to do this... “yes but”
• Both kept bearing the physical assault on their own health and well being
• Both came to our programs when they recognised this only allowed the harm to grow and GROW & GROW.

The differences came from the gambling group whose biggest challenges were:

• The financial issues that had occurred for families which in some way changed their lives dramatically. One wife reported selling the family home and moving in with her partner’s parents. The children were relocated to new schools, the wife hated it and the children didn’t want to go to school.
• The legal issues over ownership of property and assets, banking arrangements and many other financial problems.
• Deep sense of stigma and social isolation

Our four week program has been specifically designed to deal with these barriers and emotions and we evidenced change in the families who attended.

We follow on at SHARC with our monthly “gambling information meetings” for families and friends where we engage specialists to provide insight into managing the serious financial and legal issues that evolve.

Gambling harm has had a huge impact on families’ lives and those around them.

Our goal at SHARC is to reduce the lament of families “If I had only reached out for help in the early stages then the damage would never have become so great”

When people are working on changing their problem gambling behaviour, the involvement of those close to them can really help. Having a gambler in the family can have negative effects on close relationships and can create financial difficulty, damage trust and increase stress. These effects don’t go away overnight and the change process can take time. When families work together, gambling problems and negative effects can be dealt with more quickly. Research has shown that individuals do better when families are involved.

Here are some of the benefits of our InFocus Gambling Program and Monthly Information Meetings

• Families and friends can share their concerns and get information, advice and support.
• Families and friends often feel safer and less stressed when they learn about the warning signs of problem gambling
• Relationships can improve more quickly when the stresses are discussed and dealt with
• Relapse is less likely and if there is a slip, getting back on track can be quicker.

Our four-session program addresses the following topics:

• financial security and safety
• communication
• boundaries
• self-care and support
• trust

Angela Ireland
Reducing Gambling Harm for Families Project Lead
Family and friends’ health is affected when they constantly...

- **WORRY** about their financial affairs
- **WORRY** about the gambler’s mental health
- **WORRY** about the gambler’s work, sport or school
- **WORRY** about the gambler neglecting themselves
- **WORRY** about the company they keep
- **WORRY** about the gambler isolating themselves
- **WORRY** that they can’t trust the gambler

When stress is at its peak, it’s hard to stop and regroup. Try to prevent stress and depression in the first place, especially if the holidays have taken an emotional toll on you in the past.

1. **Acknowledge your feelings.** It’s OK to take time to cry or express your feelings.
2. **Reach out and seek support.** If you feel lonely or isolated, seek out community, religious or other social events. They can offer support and companionship.
3. **Learn to say no.** Saying yes when you should say no can leave you feeling resentful and overwhelmed. Friends and colleagues will understand if you can’t participate in every project or activity.
4. **Don’t abandon healthy habits.** Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself feeling persistently sad or anxious, plagued by physical complaints, unable to sleep, irritable and hopeless, and unable to face routine chores. If these feelings last for a while, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional.

Some tips to help reduce worry and stress

- **Have healthy snacks on hand** to help make healthier choices easy.
- **Get plenty of sleep.**
- **Incorporate regular physical activity** into each day.

5. **Take a breather.** Make some time for yourself. Spending just 15 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything you need to do. Find something that reduces stress by clearing your mind, slowing your breathing and restoring inner calm.

Some options may include:

- Taking a walk at night and star-gazing.
- Listening to soothing music.
- Getting a massage.
- Reading a book.

6. **Seek professional help.**

Worrying is like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do but it doesn’t get you anywhere.

~ Van Wilder
At a recent monthly meeting for family and friends of gamblers, we were provided with an electrifying event. A dramatic interpretation from a gambler of his gambling life, side by side with a stunning story of the life of a gambler’s wife. We also invited the gamblers to this meeting along with their loved ones.

A member of the audience shares their comments here.

“I guess right now I am trying to find the words to see how it feels. Trying to take myself back, last week, to the gambling support group night at SHARC, where I watched one of the most moving performances of my life. As a recovering addict, dissociating from my feelings is a lot more natural to me, I normally opt out before the tears even have a chance to form. Watching the performance by The Three Sides of The Coin, I felt an overwhelming relation to the pain and shame of the “gambler” and having to face the consequences of what he had done to his family. As I empathised, my eyes welled up and I struggled to fight back the tears.

Thoughts of what I have put my mother through got triggered when I listened to the families open up, hesitantly at first. It seemed they were as unfamiliar about their feelings around this stuff as I was. The director kept it simple by asking for a one word feelings check. It started slow, but it wasn’t long before the tears came rolling out. I heard them share about the difficulties in talking to their friends.

They spoke about their feelings of helplessness. They were able to talk to the performers, who had lived experience. That of the gambler’s perspective and on the flipside the perspective of a gamblers wife – both equally powerful. They asked both performers questions and shared their stories and their struggles. They expressed their gratitude for the performance, the tools they had picked up since they started to reach out for support and said it was great to have a “safe place” to be able to talk.

What started out as a tense heavy atmosphere, now felt gentle and light with compassion, and an element of hope started to creep into the room. Maybe it was the realisation that recovery might actually be possible, after seeing where these actors have been, what they did to recover and where they are now. I’m not sure, but whatever it was, it was beautiful.”

Nicki
The saying is that you should always go with your gut feeling. That is so easy to say but in actually following that process is so very hard. My gut feeling had been telling me for sometime that something wasn't quite right but I was always assured it was all me and that there was nothing going on!

I was a divorced single mum and had put myself out there on the dating scene again. I met Adam and I felt like I had met my soulmate. We decided that the next step would be moving in together.

I couldn’t believe that my new partner fitted in so well with my family and even shared the love of the horse racing environment that I had been brought up in. Going to the horse races very often was the usual. Race days on the TV and playing on the radio was my childhood growing up. This for me was everyday normality.

I started to notice that my partner’s moods were becoming very up and down. He never really spoke about why he and his first wife divorced, only that they grew apart.

Fast forward a little over four years ago my partner and I were planning our wedding. One week before we were due to be married he called me, very stressed, nervous and I could tell something was wrong. The words gambling problem came out of his mouth. He told me about the secret that he had been keeping for our whole eight year relationship, that he was battling a gambling addiction and that it had contributed to his last marriage failing.

I was relieved that he finally had the courage to tell me as I had always had that gut feeling something wasn’t right, but I was also saddened that he felt like he couldn’t share his struggles with me earlier. I had seen many signs through the years, had even caught him lying and questioned him many times but he always denied everything.

My partner was already a month in recovery before I found out the reality of his addiction. The courage he has displayed and the support Gamblers Anonymous meetings have provided my partner in his recovery has been wonderful. It’s not only changed his life and mine but our whole relationship. I truly am proud of him for admitting his illness and seeking help for it.

He is now almost four years in recovery - bet free for nearly four years! - and attends Gamblers Anonymous meetings every week.

You really can get your life back. Seek support and never give up.

Louise
The program provides the opportunity to pause and reflect on where our focus has been and how this has impacted ourselves and our families. We explore addiction, family dynamics, communication, boundaries, coping strategies and most importantly our own wellbeing, safety and supports.

InFocus is facilitated by professionals who have also been impacted by someone’s drug and alcohol use and provides the opportunity for people to connect through their shared experiences.

“I couldn’t cope before. I felt like I’d tried everything but now I’m able to put boundaries in place and stick to them, most of the time. It has reduced conflict with my daughter and I’ve started thinking about my own needs again. I have hope now. It’s been a long time since I’ve been able to say that.” – Participant.

You don’t have to do this alone – we’ve been there.

We invite you to register for an InFocus in your local area. This program is free.

For information about upcoming delivery of the InFocus Education Program near you or please call Family Drug Helpline on 1300 660 068 or go to www.familydrughelp.com.au

InFocus Education Programs coming in 2018

Call the Helpline on 1300 660 068 for more information

Carnegie Tuesdays 23 January to 27 February 2018
Coburg Wednesdays 24 January to 1 March 2018
Sunbury Mondays 5 February to 12 February 2018
Shepparton Tuesday 6 & Wednesday 7 March 2018
(2 day program) 9am - 3pm

www.facebook.com/Family-Drug-Help
We regularly post articles related to addiction, families and the drug and alcohol sector.
A Devastating Loss

The Supper Club is a club that none of us ever wanted to join. Losing a child to drug/alcohol overdose is a complicated and life long grief. It is a stigmatised death in our society where there continues to be judgement and ignorance around addiction.

The Supper Club has provided friendship, validation and a freedom to share during the last nine years since Sam’s death. This sharing diminishes our sense of isolation and guilt (at least for two hours per month). It provides us with an opportunity to talk about taboo areas without judgement and gives us the opportunity to talk about issues that we frequently confront such as how to respond to questions such as ‘how many children do you have? We also provide and share our difficulties and strategies re coping with anniversaries, birthdays, Christmas and significant family get togethers.

A common theme that comes up is the high level of guilt, remorse, self-blame and regret that we all have. We accept that as parents this will never leave us. Just as many parents enjoy the success and achievements of their children, we harbour a deep sadness that we could not keep our children alive.

One of the complications that accompanies the death of a child through overdose is that most of us experienced many years of disenfranchised grief before confronting the final loss. My experience was 10 years of hyper vigilance watching my beautiful boy playing ‘Russian roulette’ with the needle. He also did many good things during this time re family, relationships and career building, but for me it is all overshadowed by the trauma. Having a child struggle with an addiction puts a great strain on the bond between parent/child. It also negatively impacts on other family relationships. How can a parent be truly present for others when the most pressing issue that never leaves you is the constant fear for your child. The 10 years (prior to Sam’s death) impacted on my relationships within the family, friends and workmates. The dilemma and isolation of not wanting to tell people and hoping that Sam would recover while also protecting his privacy. The risk that he would be judged by others. Feeling judged when you do disclose and thereby failing to protect his privacy. The sudden self-inflicted nature of the death violently severs the bond without any hope of repair to the relationship.

There is so little research about identifying the needs of parents who have lost a child through drug/alcohol overdose. There are also very few professionals who have expertise in this area and who we can get support from regarding the high levels of PTSD that affect this group. Over the years I have witnessed Sam being resuscitated by paramedics. There was no opportunity to recover from these traumatic incidents as there was always the likelihood that another incident was imminent.

At times I have heard friends, family and work colleagues talk about ‘druggies’ in a derogatory manner. When we are feeling so vulnerable and isolated this language from those who should know better is sure to silence us.

I personally have a deep sadness and profound regret that I did not support Sam without judgement. This was due to my ignorance about addiction. My fear and hyper vigilance impacted on our relationship and I would desperately go through his things, invade his privacy, all in a futile attempt to try and save him. If I was to give advice to a parent struggling with a child with an addiction, I would say that addiction is an illness, and your child needs your love and support, not judgement. Then if the worst does happen, at least you will be thankful that you were there for them.

The best thing about the Supper Club is being with others like myself. The thing that provides me with some healing is having a friendship with these really decent, good people who are continuing to do their best to overcome and cope with our shared lifelong loss.
ARE YOU IMPACTED BY SOMEONE’S DRUG OR ALCOHOL USE?

Sometimes you may feel you need to talk to someone who knows what it’s like to love someone who’s misusing drugs and/or alcohol. Family Drug Help offers a confidential telephone service which provides support to family members in need. We are staffed by trained volunteers, ordinary people who are just like you - mothers, fathers, grandparents, siblings, partners, sons, daughters and friends.

Family Drug Helpline
1300 660 068

24/7 confidential support
Information and referrals
Speak to trained volunteers with lived experience

“The Helpline and the volunteers who have lived through similar circumstances were a godsend during those early months of not knowing where to turn or what to do”

Where Do I Go For Support?

Family Drug Help
1300 660 068
sharc.org.au

GamAnon
1300 306 975
Support for friends and family of gamblers
gaaustralia.org.au/gam-anon/

Gambler’s Help Helpline
1800 858 858
Therapeutic and financial counselling
responsiblegambling.vic.gov.au/getting-help

DirectLine
1800 888 236
Counselling and referral line
counsellingonline.org.au

Lifeline
131 114
Telephone crisis support
lifeline.org.au

Reach
03 9412 0900
Support for young people with life’s issues
reach.org.au

Headspace
03 9027 1011
Mental health for 12-25 years
headspace.org.au

Safe Steps
Family violence response centre
1800 015 188

1800 RESPECT
24/7 Family violence counselling, information & support
1800 737 732

Beyond Blue
1300 224 636
Resource for all things mental health
beyondblue.org.au

Suicide Helpline
1300 651 251
Families can call for support
suicideline.org.au

YoDAA
1800 458 685
Youth Drug and Alcohol Advice
yodaa.org.au

WHR Do I Go For Support?
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