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NJ addicted to gambling

Young people are particularly susceptible to betting online

Many people are unaware of the devastation caused by a hidden illness known as compulsive or pathological gambling or, as it is now identified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, "Gambling Disorder."

Although most people gamble for enjoyment, for others it causes serious social, economic, physical and psychological problems for themselves and their family. A disordered gambler has no saturation point as there is with alcohol and will not stop gambling until there is no money.

Gamblers, when they finally run out of money, will have maxed out credit cards, sold personal property, or borrowed or stolen from friends, family or work. Some will have enormous debts that they will never be able to repay. The inability to stop gambling often confuses them since they remember a time when they could just walk away.

Suicide becomes a real possibility. Although there are similarities to drugs and alcohol, the one thing that separates gambling is that it is "hidden." Most families are unaware of the problem until there is a financial crisis since personality changes can be excused by work stress or other problems.

In past years, individuals had to drive to a casino or call a bookie to make a bet. Research suggested that people living within 10 miles of a casino were twice as likely as others to become addicted to gambling. That has changed due to the increase in technology.

Today with legal internet gambling, all that is needed is access to a computer or a smartphone. If you don't have a phone, there are always library computers. Today the number of youth gamblers exceeds the number of adult gamblers.

According to Dan Trolaro, assistant executive director of the Council on Compulsive Gambling of New Jersey, "young people starting today on apps, mobile devices, even videos games. Xbox or PS4 are finding there are gambling components embedded in the games." Because of the relative ease and comfort level that adolescents and young adults have with today's technology, many are being sucked into a vortex of online gambling.

There are no age restrictions with gaming and this younger generation is particularly susceptible. The technology itself is attractive to younger people due to the speed of play and the absence of time limits. Online auto-play lets you play instantly without the click of a mouse. It lets you totally lose touch with how much money you're spending. Research shows 4 to 8 percent of persons between the ages of 16 and 28 years of age will have a gambling-related problem or addiction."

The fact that people can now gamble legally on their cellphone has moved many gamblers — young and old — to cross over the line into compulsivity, escalating debt and sometimes suicidal thoughts. Suicide among gamblers is very real and death certificates don't list gambling as a cause of death.

Gov. Phil Murphy has proclaimed March as Problem Gambling Awareness Month. Neva Pryor, executive director of the Council on Compulsive Gambling of New Jersey, has partnered with the New Jersey Lottery to encourage "the people of NJ to have a conversation about problem gambling — a treatable disease that affects millions of Americans, yet few talk about it."

According to council estimates, there are at least 480,000 people in New Jersey with a gambling problem. Electronic slot machines that dominate casino floors are known as the crack cocaine of gambling since they can turn gamblers into addicts in an even shorter period of time. For some, gambling can become the gateway drug or can trigger a former addiction.

This month, agencies and private practitioners throughout the state will offer gambling assessments for gamblers and/or family members because education gives families options as to what they can do to help themselves and the addicted individual.

Since 1982, the council has operated the 800-GAMBLER number to offer support, treatment and hope to the problem gambler and their families. Individuals can call or text 800-426-2537 for help regardless of insurance coverage.

Additionally, information will be available at St. Catharine's Church, Holmdel, on Saturday, March 9, and Sunday, March 10, after all the Masses and on Monday, March 11, at the Monmouth County Library, Broad Street, Shrewsbury, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. In Asbury Park, information will be available at Carla Gizzi at Sunset Point, 1301 Memorial Parkway.

Become educated – Save a Life.

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Your Turn

Frances L Gizzi Guest columnist