

COMPULSIVE GAMBLING NOW DEFINED AS A BRAIN DISORDER, NOT A BEHAVIOR ISSUE

Compulsive gambling is a chronic brain disorder and not simply a behavior problem, experts contend in a new definition of addiction, one that is not solely related to problematic substance abuse.

The American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) just released this new definition of addiction after a four-year process involving more than 80 experts.

At its core, compulsive gambling isn't just a social problem or a moral problem or a criminal problem. It's a brain disorder whose behaviors manifest in all other areas, said Dr. Michael Miller, past president of ASAM who oversaw the development of the new definition. The problems that are driven by gambling are real problems and sometimes criminal acts are involved. The disease is about brains, it's about underlying neurology, not outward actions.

The new definition also describes compulsive gambling as a primary disease, meaning that it's not the result of other causes, such as emotional or psychiatric problems. And like cardiovascular disease and diabetes, compulsive gambling is recognized as a chronic disease, so it must be treated, managed and monitored over a person's lifetime.

The disease creates distortions in thinking, feelings and perceptions, which drive people to behave in ways that are not understandable to others around them. Simply put, compulsive gambling is not a choice. Gambling behaviors are a manifestation of the disease, not a cause.

Because there is not a pill which can cure compulsive gambling, choosing recovery over unhealthy behaviors is necessary.

"Choosing recovery" is akin to people with heart disease who may not choose the underlying genetic causes of their heart problems but do need to choose to eat healthier or begin exercising.

We have to stop moralizing, blaming, or trying to control the person with the disease of compulsive gambling, and start creating opportunities for individuals and families to get help.