

What to Do If Someone You Care About Has a Gambling Addiction

If you do nothing, you may pay a heavy price.



The prevalence of casinos and ease of gambling on online sports betting sites could cause more people to become gamblers than in the past.

By [Geoff Williams](#) Oct. 1, 2015 | 11:22 a.m. EDT

If you have a family member or a friend with a [gambling problem](#) – and you ignore it – you're making a risky bet. Particularly if that person is heavily involved in your life, since his or her financial problems could more easily become your own.

Gambling, as you likely know, is often treated as a brain disease by doctors. That's appropriate, because while the desire to bet can't be transmitted to you from a gambler, the consequences of gambling can sure spread like a devastating virus. If your spouse loses his or her house or retirement to gambling losses, odds are, you've [just lost yours, too](#).

The signs of problem gambling. Some red flags are so obvious that they hardly seem worth mentioning, like when your friend or family member disappears into a casino for days at a time. But

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the problem with problem gambling is that with the advent of technology, the signs have become more subtle, says Joe Schrank, who runs The Williamsburg House, a sober living facility in New York City, which treats addicts for everything from gambling to alcohol and drugs.

And unfortunately, gambling often goes hand-in-hand with other addictions, especially alcohol.

"I've done a lot of interventions, and I've never seen one without the gambler having a drink in their hand," Schrank says. "If you think about it, there's a reason casinos bring people drinks when they're playing. That's not hospitality; that's by design, and it has a pay-off. It's a pretty minor investment by the casinos. You're much more likely to bet more when you're drinking."

The culture is changing and evolving, too, Schrank points out. [Fantasy football](#) is a billion dollar business, according to some estimates, and there's plenty of betting on basketball.

And the prevalence of casinos likely causes more people to become gamblers than in the past, Schrank says, adding, "You used to have to wait for a three day weekend, and you'd book a flight to Las Vegas. Now all you have to do is drive down the road to the riverfront casino or the Indian-owned casino."

But back to technology. "Online sports betting sites have really changed the landscape for gambling, and that's actually the case for a lot of addictions," Schrank says. "A generation ago, if you were going to become addicted to pornography, people had to go to a theater in a seedy part of the city. Now, you just look at your phone all day, and nobody knows. Accessibility has changed everything, and it's the same with gambling."

In other words, you could have a family member or friend betting online 24/7, and you would never know until the signs became obvious. Still, there probably are some subtle clues to look for.

"With any addiction, erratic behavior is always a red flag," Schrank says. "When words don't match actions, and when every excuse for doing or not doing something has a story."

Save yourself first. If you've been talking to a loved one about his or her gambling problem and how it's affecting your finances, but you're getting nowhere, you need to protect yourself first, even if you're worried about damaging your relationship.

Remember the rule about putting the oxygen mask on yourself first in an airplane? You get the air, so you can then help your kid get a mask on – as opposed to passing out before you can help your child, who then passes out, too. You need to protect yourself before more damage can be done. It'll be harder to help a gambler if you've just lost your house, say.

So what can you do to protect yourself?

Michael Chadwick, a certified financial planner from Unionville, Connecticut, suggests that if your husband or wife is gambling, [lock your credit](#). "This way no more credit can be taken out in your name," he says.

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It isn't ideal, Chadwick says. Your credit and finances are kind of in a limbo. "But this will limit the collateral damage if it gets out of hand," he says.

Mike Brady agrees. Brady is the founder and president of Generosity Wealth Management in Boulder, Colorado, and says that when he was working for another firm in the early 2000s, one of his clients was a problem gambler, although [his downfall was investments](#) and not the slot machines. Brady's client frequently was investing day and night, routinely seeing his and his wife's investments fall and rise, hundreds of thousands of dollars at a time (trending downward more often than not.)

The client was aware of his problem and was OK with his wife putting controls on his spending, which helped. But if you're not so lucky and are married to or living with a gambler, Brady has some suggestions.

1. Open up a new credit card and/or bank account in your name only. If you don't tell your spouse, it won't be a secret for long, if your bank is sending you mail to your home, Brady points out. That said, many banks will, if you ask, have your debit or credit card sent to your branch, where you can pick it up. What's more, banks prefer it when you opt out of paper statements.

2. Be on the lookout for assets the gambler can convert into cash. It's scary to think about, but if your family member is finding that their money and credit are drying up due to whatever protective steps you've taken, desperation could set in.

"Whatever you have that you don't want sold, you could put it in a safe-deposit box or pay for one of those self-storage things," Brady says.

3. Remember your investments. If it's your spouse doing the gambling, versus an adult child or parent or family friend, think about your 401(k). Your kids' college savings accounts. Any account that has his or her name on it.

"Now is the time to think about them and whether you can make them inaccessible," Brady says.

You may not be able to do much, if your spouse isn't cooperative and willing, to say, have their name removed from an account, but if you're contributing money to either account, this may be the time to start putting it into another vehicle. If you have a [financial advisor](#), this is the time to set up an appointment.

Because any damage your gambling partner creates with your name attached to it can't be undone. So if your spouse maxed out credit cards at a casino, and your name is on them, that's money you owe, too.

"What has happened up to today, we can't take back," Brady says.

Get help – or get out. You can't and shouldn't endure the consequences of a loved one's gambling forever. Even if the steps you must take are complex.

"Everything that I've said isn't easy," Brady says. "Especially if you're doing it behind their back."

But that may be the only way you can get someone's attention, Brady says. His client's wife sat down her husband and gave him an ultimatum: get divorced or give her full control and final say over 95 percent of their investments. He could have the other 5 percent to invest as he wanted.

"She said, 'You get 5 percent or 100 percent of me walking out the door,'" Brady says.

Schrank agrees. "When people see the writing on the wall, they often do something about it," he says, adding that treatment can help. "People do get better," he says.

But you can't enable a gambler – or ever feel guilty for putting yourself first.

"It's self-preservation," Schrank says. "You have to let a gambler know that you can't go down with them, and you won't help them go down."