



Women and problem gambling

Women are more likely than men to have a gambling problem as a result of playing the pokies. Women see casinos and pokie venues as female friendly and safe, and many venues are found within the community and handy to shopping areas. Women often begin to play for fun with friends, or for time out, but an early win can create an urge to play more with the hope of even bigger wins. The more they lose the more they return to play.

Problem gambling can affect any woman and it affects as many women as men. It can be related to other life issues such as family stress, troubled relationships, a history of trauma, abuse, loss, mental health problems or correlated issues with drugs, smoking or alcohol.

Problem gambling tends to be an invisible problem and someone struggling with the urge to gamble, and the pain of losing control, may be secretive often silenced by shame, guilt and fear. They can feel isolated and overwhelmed by mounting financial, spiritual and emotional losses and lack the support to make changes or seek help. Family and friends may be judgmental or rejecting.

Women problem gamblers generally start gambling later in life, but progress to problem gambling rapidly.¹ Lifestyle changes such as retirement, divorce, or loss (such as a death), may lead to the transition from a social to problem gambler.

Women problem gamblers wager more often in response to gambling cues and advertisements than men.² Women are more likely to be responsible for the family finances. This can mean that they are able to hide their problem for longer, but also means they have access to money intended for groceries and paying bills.

Common themes from women on why they gambled are: pleasure, accessibility, power and control, hoping to change their lives, escape and also punishment.

Gambling offers women a feeling of control over their lives. After years of being at the beck and call of their families they are able to go out alone, choose where they go and what games to play without deferring to anyone. This gives them a feeling of independent and equality. Gambling (and an early win) offers them hope that they can change their lives for the better.

Problem gambling and women In New Zealand³

- In 2007 almost half (872) gambler callers to the Gambling Helpline were women.
- In 1997 only 29.1% of clients were women, but in 2004 the number face to face women clients overtook men. By 2007 it had reduced to 43 %.
- In 2007 90% of new female gambler clients cited poker machines (pokies) as their primary mode of gambling. (78.7% non-casino, 10.4% casino).
- In 2007 67.8% of significant other clients receiving face to face counselling were women.
- Over 81% of Maori women use pokie machines as their primary mode of gambling and 83% of Pacific women.
- The average loss in four weeks prior to treatment by males was (mean \$3733) and females (mean \$2763).
- Women played the pokie machines for longer periods, but less frequently than men, spending about \$531 each per annum.

Internet gambling and women

The pokies hook people in with their fast event frequency. Gamblers are able to play a new game every 15 seconds. More rapid online and interactive gambling is likely to see an increase in the prevalence of problem gambling, particularly

amongst women. Two of the attractions of online gambling for women are the opportunity to gamble without even leaving your home, and the greater sense of privacy. It allows you to lose your home without even leaving it.



Narratives from a study of gambling counsellors and clients conducted in New Zealand ⁵

Appeal of machines (escape)

I loved the flashiness of it. I didn't have to think about husband, children, home, work... as soon as the credits come up... I just adored it... It's an overwhelming desire. How many people get that euphoric feeling in the everyday? (Client)

You are in your own little cubby [hole]. You can control who comes in and who comes out. (Client)

The machine, apart from having to feed money in to it, doesn't ask anything of you...women perceive this as time out. (Counsellor)

Behaviour

I became totally obsessed. It became a daily thing. I wasn't looking after myself... I wouldn't leave the machine to go and get a drink. If I was at a machine that would be it. I'd stay for hours... I would travel for miles if I really had a focus [on one machine]. (Client)

There is a definite trend about claiming particular machines. Look out if anyone was on [that machine]. Most times I would try to wait for that machine.... I would be quite annoyed if someone was on it when I arrived.... There was a claiming of machines.... And there was an amount of aggression about [claiming] the machines. I thought I knew when [the machine] was going to come up [win]. (Client)

Manipulation of the pokie machine

Particular music of a particular machine [calling to be played].... Heart beat music. (Client)

I like to hear my machine. If the bands starts and I can't hear my machine. I have to move away. I have to hear my machine. (Client)

The thing with the poker machines is that they are quite sensory. You have got the tactile, the visual and the audio. The lights, the whistles, the bells and the little tunes. (Counsellor)

Guilt and financial loss

I've been physically sick after playing the poker machines and losing all the money. I've walked outside the casino bar and literally vomited. (Client)

I carried the guilt for years. I stopped gambling but I over compensated. I paid my [children] off... [When I was gambling] nothing was important, nobody was important except my fix. I had to get to the casino. (Client)

Shame is about being out of control...It might be about normalizing that, and then talking about the options...practical things like writing a letter to a creditor (Counsellor)

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2. Weiss L & Petry N (2008) Psychometric properties of the Inventory of Gambling Situations with a focus on gender and age differences. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases* 196, 321-325.
3. Ministry of Health. 2008. *Problem Gambling Intervention Services in New Zealand: 2007 service-user statistics*. Wellington, MOH.
4. Department of Internal Affairs (2008) *People's participation in, and attitudes to, gambling, 1985-2005. Results of the 2005 survey*. Wellington: DIA.
5. Liz Kiata. 2004. 'Playing the pokies': Women gambling on the electronic gaming machines (EGMs). A New Zealand context. Final report of findings. Auckland, Problem Gambling Foundation of New Zealand.

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