

# News Release

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## **IS IT A MATTER OF LUCK? COMPULSIVE GAMBLING**

Tampa, Florida (March, 2013). The month of March brings about a day well known to Americans: St. Patrick's Day. There are parades and celebrations and restaurants serving Irish food. And there is a phrase with which we are all familiar: "the luck of the Irish." Outside of that particular day, there are many individuals who believe in the concept of "luck." This may contribute to individuals taking occasional risks of spending a low or limited amount of money on a lottery ticket, fantasy football or even in a casino. They consciously set a spending limit and are able to maintain the pre-set boundary. For some individuals, however, placing a limit on how much risk they are willing to take and how much money they are willing to lose is difficult and may lead to what is often termed compulsive or pathological gambling. These individuals are unable to recognize their compulsion and/or unable to modify their behaviors which in turn may lead to serious personal and/or social consequences. Compulsive gambling typically involves repetitive behaviors and even though it shares features of obsessive compulsive disorder, it is a different condition.

What do we know about such addictive type behaviors? Usually pathological gambling starts in early adolescence for men, and between ages 20 and 40 for women. Usually the pattern starts out with occasional gambling and then develops into a habit. In behavioral psychology many have learned about reinforcement theory. If a rat presses a lever and every time receives a piece of food, eventually the rat will become satiated and stop pressing the lever. If on the other hand, every time the rat presses the lever, there is no food reward, the rat will stop pressing the lever. This is called extinction. The most powerful pattern, however, is intermittent reinforcement where the rat presses the lever and sometimes gets a reward and sometimes they don't. This is a very similar pattern to

playing the slot machines or engaging in other gambling behaviors. Sometimes you win and sometimes you don't but you keep playing for that next win.

People with compulsive gambling behaviors often feel ashamed and try to hide what they are doing. Often there are accompanying issues like anxiety, depression, substance abuse and relationship problems. Often it is only discovered when they wind up in significant debt or get in trouble legally. The American Psychiatric Association defines pathological gambling as having five or more of the following symptoms:

- Committing crimes to get money to gamble
- Feeling restless or irritable when trying to cut back or quit gambling
- Gambling to escape problems or feelings of sadness or anxiety
- Gambling larger amounts of money to try to make back past losses
- Losing a job, relationship, education, or career opportunity due to gambling
- Lying about the amount of time or money spent gambling
- Making many unsuccessful attempts to cut back or quit gambling
- Needing to borrow money due to gambling losses
- Needing to gamble larger amounts of money in order to feel excitement
- Spending a lot of time thinking about gambling, such as remembering past experiences or ways to get more money with which to gamble

Treatment for individuals with pathological gambling begins with recognizing they have a problem. This is difficult, however, since like with many addictions denial is a part of the addiction. Often spouses and/or other family members will pressure the individual to get help. There are a variety of treatment options available as well as support groups like Gamblers Anonymous which is a 12 step program similar to Alcoholics Anonymous. Like alcohol or drug addiction, compulsive gambling is a long-term disorder that tends to get worse without treatment. Even with treatment, it's common to start gambling again

(relapse) under certain circumstances. However, people with compulsive gambling can do very well with the right treatment.

A screening instrument consisting of twenty questions is available on the Gamblers Anonymous website. Most compulsive gamblers will answer yes to seven of the questions. Many of the questions in this screening questionnaire reflect the components listed by the American Psychiatric Association

<http://www.gamblersanonymous.org/ga/content/20-questions>

If you have wondered about your gambling habits consider taking the questionnaire and if you have a higher score of seven or above, or even lower, and wonder if your gambling behaviors are out of control call the EAP. You can explore in a confidential setting the concerns that you have and receive assistance to changing the behaviors that are troubling you. Remember that the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is a benefit available to all employees and dependents of companies contracted with Wood & Associates for providing confidential free professional assistance 24-hours a day, 7 days a week. Remember that you or a dependent may contact the EAP regarding any concern that you might have – you don't have to wait until a problem becomes big to seek help. What can you do if you recognize yourself or a loved one in the above information? Call your EAP. Above all, keep in mind that concerns develop over time but the way you address them can be changed. One of the hardest decisions is in knowing what to do when you know your behaviors are developing into a problem for you but you don't know what to do.

**The EAP can help you find a new path so that the changes you need to make are realistic and manageable.**

Remember that when you need to sort out your feelings about gambling or taking any kind of risks, help is a phone call away.

EAP is also a tool for personal and professional growth. The EAP representative will help you find the best solution for your particular situation. Call: (813) 870-0392 (Hillsborough County, Florida), (727) 576-5164 (Pinellas County, Florida), or (800) 343-4670 (out of area toll free).

## About Wood & Associates

Wood & Associates is an Employee Assistance Program and behavioral health consulting firm that helps employers maintain productivity, safety and behavioral health in the workplace. Wood & Associates is a pioneer in the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) industry and has served employers and employees in the greater Tampa Bay area and nationwide since 1982. The firm's diverse group of clients includes a number of major employers who also contract for its mental health and substance abuse services.

Gary L. Wood, Psy.D., founder of the Wood & Associates consulting practice, is a pioneer in the field of Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services. Since 1979, his practice has centered on providing solutions to employee and organizational problems. Wood is a licensed clinical psychologist, a member of the National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology, and a graduate of Rutgers University, West Georgia College and Mercer University.

Patricia N. Alexander earned a Ph.D. in mental health counseling at the University of Florida. Trained in critical incident stress management through the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, she is a Florida Licensed Mental Health Counselor and nationally certified counselor. Through her work experience she has addressed all types of critical incident situations, including explosions, multiple homicides, suicides, line-of-duty deaths, serious accidents and robberies. Alexander conducts training on stress management for law enforcement and businesses, and has developed peer support programs for law enforcement and industry. Alexander is an educator and consultant on a wide variety of behavioral health concerns.