Does Someone Close to You Have a Gambling Problem?

One of the most disturbing aspects of problem gambling is that people can develop a serious gambling problem without anyone else knowing, including those closest to them. For others their gambling will not be a secret, although many will strongly deny that there is a problem despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

In situations where problem gambling has remained hidden there are some observable signs that when considered together may point to someone having a gambling problem. It should be noted however that in some situations this will not be the case, or these signs may be pointing to a different problem.

There are two indicators that may suggest gambling problem.

The first indicator is a disturbing sense that something is not quite right. While people with a gambling problem can develop complex strategies to cover their tracks the people close to them will sometimes have a strong sense that something is wrong, but be unable to put their finger on exactly what it is. Sometimes it can be an unusually defensive attitude when what the person says is questioned, or they offer explanations that just don’t add up. People who develop a gambling problem can become extremely dishonest and secretive, invent complex stories to hide their gambling, and offer seemingly plausible reasons to explain anomalies such as unexplained absences from home or the workplace. They can also become aggressive and deflect blame on to others for their ‘unreasonable’ questioning. This behaviour is generally noticeably contrary to the person’s normal honest behaviour.

The second indicator is financial incongruities. While people with a gambling problem will have isolated wins, and sometimes big wins, the nature of problem gambling precludes people from coming out ahead financially in the long term. There will therefore be an ongoing need for funds to support their gambling. Some people will gamble on several occasions each week, some irregularly and some only on pay day.

The most telling sign of problem gambling is missing funds. A family which should be reasonably able to live within its means will often be struggling to pay bills. Sometimes bills which were thought to have been paid remain unpaid, loan repayments are found to be in arrears for no good reason and bank accounts are empty. Hidden debts to friends or financial institutions may also be present with correspondence directed to a post office box which no-one else is aware of. Another common feature is people asking friends and relations for loans for very worthwhile reasons, never for gambling or paying gambling debts.

People with gambling problems will also sometimes steal money to gamble with or pay gambling debts. This will usually involve embezzling from the workplace with a belief that the money will be returned once they have a big win. This is also behaviour that is contrary to their normal honest behaviour and often comes as a terrible shock to the people close to them.

Government funded free counselling, and financial counselling services for people with a gambling problem and their families are available throughout Australia. Registered psychologists who specialise in this area can be accessed through the APS ‘Find a Psychologist’ service.