



# Reducing gambling harm in First Nations communities – a guide for health workers

**Victoria’s Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations lead the way in addressing gambling harm in communities. Here’s what we’ve learned from them to help you support mob in your community.**

## What is gambling?

Gambling is when someone risks losing money or something else valuable for a chance to win back more.

## What is gambling harm?

When gambling makes someone’s life worse or hurts the people around them, that’s gambling harm. Difficulties paying bills, arguments in the family and stress are all common forms of gambling harm. Harm can also affect others, like family members and friends, who might not gamble themselves.

## Gambling in First Nations communities

In Victoria, about three quarters of First Nations people gamble, which is about the same as the general population. Many people enjoy gambling and do it without experiencing any harm.

Because of injustices from colonisation and the trauma this has caused, First Nations people are 10 to 20 times more likely to be harmed by gambling than other Australians.

- At least a third of First Nations people who gamble are hurt by it
- About a quarter of First Nations people have been hurt by a family member or a friend’s gambling (that’s almost four times the rate for other Australians).



# What is gambling harm?

## Money worries



- can't afford to do fun things with family or friends
- can't pay for food, bills or rent
- need to borrow money
- stressful for those who lend money

“My ex-partner was a severe gambler, majorly... at one stage he was on a higher wage than me and rent would go down the drain.”

Community member

## Relationship trouble



- lies and hiding things
- arguments in the family
- kids miss out on things they need
- may lead to family violence

“Kids have gone without a feed, wife's gone without a feed, electricity is not on. ‘Where's the money?’, ‘Oh, I spent it all betting.’ And then they start to get cranky and he starts firing back and then the violence starts.”

Community member

## Emotional effects

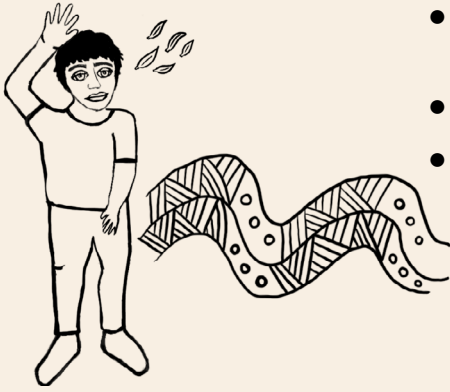


- feeling regret and shame about money lost or time away from family
- feeling anxious or depressed

“When I put that money in and it's gone, my children are the first ones that come to my head, and that hurts. It hurts the soul; it hurts the heart.”

Community member

## Health problems



- high blood pressure from stress
- poor sleep
- using drugs and alcohol to cope with feeling awful

“90% of people who gamble... wouldn't think they could develop a mental health illness [such as depression] when they started gambling.”

Community member

## Cultural harm



- takes people away from cultural activities
- damages community relationships
- missing out on time with Elders
- Elders pressured to loan money

“It is sad to watch our culture sort of spiral down due to gambling and to me that's what starts the stereotype crap about, ‘That's all blackfellas do is gamble.’”

Community member

## Work or study performance



- can't afford transport to get to school or work
- skip work or study to gamble
- too stressed to perform well

“They lost all their money on the weekend and then couldn't get to work until payday.”

Community member

## Justice-related harm



- can't pay fines
- stealing things
- police and courts get involved

“That's how I nearly lost my family, coz I was lying about my gambling.”

Community member

## Gambling has changed

Some types of gambling, like community card games, used to be a way of bringing people together and sharing money among families.

Today, gambling is big business and heavily advertised. Being able to gamble online and on the phone makes it easy for people to gamble whenever they want and without others knowing that they are gambling.

“For some of us, it can feel like the odds of winning at gambling are better than the odds of winning at life.”

Community member



### Is playing bingo or cards gambling?

Only if you have to pay or stake something to win a prize.



### How much money do we lose?

In 2021-22, \$2.24 billion dollars was lost on pokies in Victoria on over 26,000 machines.



### Popular types of gambling

Betting on races and sport, pokies, casino games, lotto and Keno.

### How do we know this?

Our information and quotes come from interviews with community members and ACCO staff, as well as Australian research. Visit <https://responsiblegambling.vic.gov.au> for more details.

## Is gambling like alcohol, smoking and other drugs?

Gambling can be similar to drinking, smoking or using drugs when people do it as a way of coping, to feel better. For some people it can be addictive. Like alcohol and drugs, gambling can lead to lies and people putting it ahead of family and community. But, unlike those things, people don't always see that gambling is hurting them or their family.

“It's not up there as a priority like drug addiction and mental health and yet they're so inter-connected.”

Community member

## Cutting down or stopping can be tough

Like alcohol, smoking and other drugs, it can be hard to cut down or stop gambling. Here are some reasons why:

- feeling guilt and shame makes it difficult to ask for help
- it seems like a way to win easy money and a way out of poverty
- giving up can mean missing out on social time with community
- people use gambling to cope with life
- there aren't enough culturally safe services.

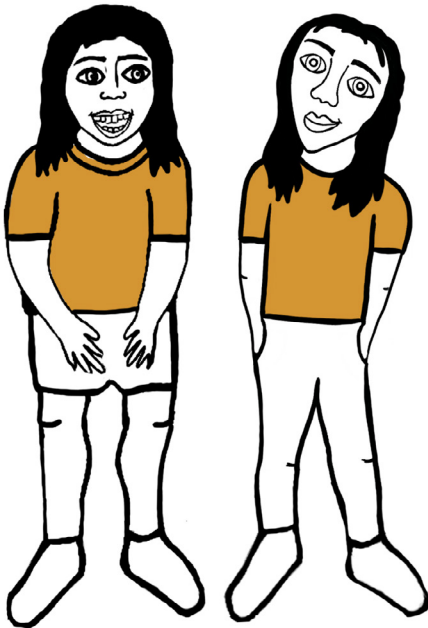
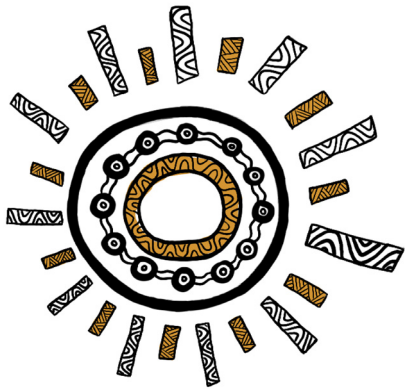
“I thought one day, stuff it, I'll go and get help... She really helped me.”

Community member

## What you can do

Simply being aware of gambling harm is an important starting point. Lots of people who are harmed by gambling also have other troubles, like drinking or using other drugs, mental health or money problems, so they may already be in contact with your service.

You can make a big difference by asking clients about gambling. You don't have to have specific training – you can use the same skills you use for the rest of your work.



## Working with people

It can be hard to start a conversation about gambling harm. Here's how one ACCO does it:

When we meet a client, we say:

*“We work with people who have a whole range of financial difficulties like not having enough money to pay for rent and living expenses, overdue loans or losing money from gambling. You can tell us if you want to talk about any of these issues.”*

Often it takes a few meetings before clients feel ready to discuss gambling. They might say,

*“Do you remember you said that you help people with gambling – what can you do?”*

When a client mentions gambling is a problem, we ask:

1. *“Would you say you spend a lot of time thinking about pokies, betting or bingo?”*
2. *“Have you gambled longer or more often or spent more money than you planned?”*

If they say yes to both, then they probably need some help with their gambling.

## Some strategies to use with clients

LISTEN	RESPOND
Encourage people to talk about their gambling (remember family and friends can be hurt by gambling too)	Listen deeply without judging Let people tell their story in their own way
Listen for mentions of gambling as you get to know a client	Most people first realise gambling is hurting them because of money problems or arguments in the family. Exploring these issues is a good start
When a client is ready to talk, use the skills you already have	Yarning, deep listening, motivational interviewing, and setting smart goals are all effective tools with gambling
Understand that gambling may be an important part of people's lives	Help clients to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• find other ways to socialise and spend their time</li><li>• develop safer ways to cope with stress, trauma and/or grief</li><li>• create other ways of feeling like a winner</li></ul>

Self-exclusion is a way for clients to ban themselves from the pokies or online gambling. You can find out how it works here [www.gamblinghelponline.org.au/making-a-change/self-exclusion](http://www.gamblinghelponline.org.au/making-a-change/self-exclusion)

## Working with community

- Talk about the risks of gambling with your community so people feel OK to share their feelings and experience less shame.
- Encourage community members to share ideas for reducing the risks of gambling harm, like setting budgets and having family events at places without gambling.
- Provide activities that strengthen people's cultural identity, which can help reduce gambling harm.
- Provide more opportunities for the community to participate in social and recreation activities that don't involve gambling.
- Offer money management programs like 'My Money Dream' or 'Money Minded'.

"When you're giving up gambling, the important thing is to hang in there. It's never too late to give up. If you stop for a while, and then gamble again, have another go at giving up. Keep doing it. You'll get better and better."

Community member



## Where do people get help?

Most people try to sort things out themselves first or ask Elders, friends or family for advice and help. When community members know about gambling, it can be easier for them to help themselves and their family.

## In Victoria the following information and services can help:



Visit **Yarning Up About Gambling** website for more advice.

### Victorian First Nations Gambling Awareness Programs



**Gippsland and East Gippsland  
Aboriginal Co-operative**

Ph: 5150 0700



**Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative**

Ph: 5820 0000



**Mallee District Aboriginal Services**

Ph: 5018 4102



**Djilang Gambling Awareness Program,  
Strong Brother Strong Sister (Geelong)**

Ph: 5202 4878



**Victorian Aboriginal Health Service**

Ph: 9403 3300

Call **1800 858 858** for free and confidential support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Find general information about harm from gambling visit **[gamblershelp.com.au](http://gamblershelp.com.au)**

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**Gambler's Help** 1800 858 858

[www.yarningupaboutgambling.com.au](http://www.yarningupaboutgambling.com.au)