



DISCUSSION PAPER

SEEKING HELP FOR GAMBLING PROBLEMS

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RESPONSES TO THIS PAPER

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“Gambling was a massive problem for me. It used to frighten me when I went on a bender... I never knew how long it would last.”

– **Anna Knappe, 50.**

Anna is a 50 year old mum who has struggled with a gambling addiction for 11 years.

When Anna joined the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation’s ‘Fight for you’ campaign in 2013 she had mixed feelings.

Both apprehensive and excited, she needed something new to strive for and the 100 Day Challenge gave her just that.

Recording her thoughts and feelings every day on camera was confronting but this new daily ritual helped Anna to search within herself, and not hold back or keep things inside.

Sharing her story helped her to not feel alone or isolated. The support she received from friends, family and the public was overwhelming. It helped keep her going through tough times, and strengthened her sense of purpose.

Anna is the first to admit the road to recovery has been long and challenging. At first she found it tough to complete the 100 days. She had a few setbacks along the way, but has successfully completed the challenge and hasn’t gambled in over 100 days.

If there’s a lesson from Anna’s story, it’s to remind us that people who make the decision to stop or reduce their gambling shouldn’t expect it to happen instantly. Everyone needs different support to get there. It takes dedication and perseverance. Most importantly, it is about seeking the support that’s right for you.

For Anna, seeing a counsellor has been an integral part of her recovery program.

Her advice to anyone who takes the brave step to seek help is to stick with it.

“Fighting the urge to gamble is incredibly hard, but I’ve kept my goals in sight and stuck with it,” said Anna.

“Recovery isn’t something that happens overnight, it’s a journey of self discovery. I know the hard work isn’t over, but I’m determined to keep seeing my counsellor and continue celebrating the days I’ve been gamble free,” said Anna.

First launched in March 2013, the ‘Fight for the real you’ campaign has inspired over 3,000 people to sign up for the 100 Day Challenge and attracted over 300,000 visitors to the website.

CASE STUDY

MATT TAKES CONTROL OF HIS GAMBLING

“I’ve been seeing a Gambler’s Help counsellor every week since completing the challenge, and it’s really helping me keep on track. I’ve not gambled for over 325 days and I couldn’t be prouder.” - Matt Torcasio, 27.

Meet Matt, a 27 year old tradie who has battled with gambling for seven years.

What started as a flutter on the horses or a spin on the pokies, grew into a habit Matt couldn’t control. After a big win on the pokies in his late teens, he was hooked on gambling.

It was only a matter of time before things got worse. He started borrowing money to pay for his gambling, and quickly got into debt. He estimates he was spending about \$1,000 a week over a period of six or seven years.

His gambling problem had begun to take its toll on his relationships and his life. His girlfriend, Lauren, helped him wake up to the reality of how his gambling was affecting his life. Things had to change.

When Matt joined the foundation’s ‘Fight for you’ 100 Day Challenge last year, he set himself some goals. And with support from his girlfriend, family and friends, he’s now well on his way to overcoming his problems with gambling.

His candid anecdotes reveal he’s had good days and bad days. Sharing his story on video helped him face the issues, stop the urge to gamble and fight for the real him.

He’s not gambled in over 365 days, a fantastic achievement for anyone battling an addiction. He says he hasn’t looked back since starting the 100 Day Challenge.

“I can now go to the pub to enjoy a beer with my mates and not even think about playing the pokies,” said Matt.

With a renewed sense of confidence, he has savings for the first time in his life, and hopes to buy a house with his girlfriend in the near future.

Matt’s journey has now taken on a new purpose. As an ambassador for the foundation, Matt is sharing his experiences with high school students and sporting club members through the Foundation’s ‘Gambling’s not a game’ programs.

He wants to inspire others to follow in his footsteps and seek help, and he hopes his experiences will help raise awareness of the risks of gambling to people of all ages throughout Victoria.

“Recognising you have a gambling problem and making the decision to do something about it isn’t easy. But once you do, there are many services available to help, including counselling and the 100 Day Challenge,” said Matt.

First launched in March 2013, the ‘Fight for the real you’ campaign has inspired over 3,400 people to sign up for the 100 Day Challenge and attracted over 300,000 visitors to the website.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Problem gambling is increasingly being recognised as a public health issue.

In Victoria, there are approximately 31,000 people with problem gambling issues, with a further 105 thousand people at moderate risk of developing a problem with gambling. It is estimated that for each person with a gambling problem, seven others are also affected.

Evidence suggests some people with gambling problems successfully recover without seeking formal treatment however, for many, seeking help is an important part of the recovery process.

Despite this, only a small minority of problem gamblers choose to seek help.

Research suggests that in the past twelve months, as few as 10 per cent of problem gamblers have sought help.

The research tells us this reluctance is due to a range of barriers.

Help seeking is further complicated by a range of co-occurring conditions often associated with gambling.

A variety of types of help for people with gambling problems is available including counselling in many forms, pharmacological (medicinal) treatment and self-help.

One of the primary functions of the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation is to provide treatment services for people experiencing problems with gambling in Victoria.

This paper provides an overview of research relating to recovery from problem gambling and seeking help, as well as research on the types of help that are available and their effectiveness.

This evidence highlights key actions the foundation can take to encourage more people to seek help and to ensure those who do seek help achieve the best possible outcome.

This includes:

- Increasing prevention and intervention efforts to reduce gambling related harm
- Raising awareness of the help available for gambling problems
- Tackling the barriers which may prevent problem gamblers from seeking help
- Providing a variety of options for problem gamblers to seek help, to allow for individuals to seek the help which best suits them
- Improving accessibility and flexibility within Gambler's Help treatment services
- Providing online self-help programs as an alternative or in addition to face-to-face counselling
- Working with mental health and alcohol and other drug sectors to provide integrated care for problem gamblers with co-occurring conditions
- Conducting world leading research to ensure help options for problem gambling are based on sound evidence.

By focusing on these key actions, the foundation is supporting recovery from problem gambling in the Victorian community by building greater awareness and providing easy access to a wide range of assistance.

A PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE

Gambling and problem gambling is increasingly recognised as an important public health issue with negative impacts for individuals and communities.

There are approximately 31,000 problem gamblers in Victoria, with a further 105 thousand at moderate risk of developing a problem with gambling (Department of Justice 2009 p54).

Problem gambling also has a negative impact on families, friendships and workplaces. For each person with a gambling problem, the Productivity Commission estimated that seven other people are also affected (Productivity Commission 1999).

Each year, 16,000 Victorians develop a problem with gambling while a quarter of problem gamblers recover (Department of Justice 2011).

The Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation was established in 2012 in part as a response to growing awareness of the impact of problem gambling in the community.

The foundation's two key goals are:

- to foster responsible gambling and,
- reduce gambling-related harm in the Victorian community.

To achieve these goals, the foundation provides treatment and support options for people with gambling problems however little is known about the role seeking help plays in the recovery process.

This paper sets out to explore the process and options for seeking help for problem gambling. By examining help-seeking in detail, the foundation aims to find ways to encourage more people to seek help and to identify new and better ways to provide treatment and interventions for problem gambling.

This paper contains three sections.

Section 1 examines recovery from problem gambling, both with and without formal help being sought. This section also identifies barriers and motivators for seeking help, as well as the implications of co-occurring conditions (such as mental health conditions) in terms of recovery and help seeking.

Section 2 examines the types of help available for problem gambling. It examines the effectiveness of these modes of help, as well as the likely role that a mix of approaches may have in supporting recovery.

Section 3 of this paper outlines actions the foundation will take to support recovery from problem gambling and help-seeking in Victoria.

SECTION 1

RECOVERY FROM PROBLEM GAMBLING AND SEEKING HELP

Section 1 of this paper explores problem gambling recovery and help-seeking.

It contains an overview of research in relation to recovery and seeking help, as well as a summary of the barriers and motivators for seeking help. This section also includes a discussion of the implications of other health conditions that co-occur with problem gambling, and the implications of these in terms of seeking help and recovery.

The information contained in this section underpins the discussion in **Section 3** which explores steps the foundation will take to support problem gambling recovery and the seeking of help in Victoria.

RECOVERY FROM GAMBLING PROBLEMS

The recovery process for problem gambling is complex and not well understood (Nower 2008).

Some researchers consider that abstinence from gambling is necessary for recovery from problem gambling. However there is evidence that some people are able to recover from problem gambling while continuing to gamble in a controlled way (Slutske 2010).

While researchers broadly agree that recovery from a gambling problem requires a decrease in both frequency and expenditure, it is also recognised that recovery involves more than spending less time and money gambling.

Recovery also includes a broader improvement in financial, legal, interpersonal and social functioning, as well as changes in motivations to gamble, thoughts and beliefs about gambling and coping skills (Nower 2008).

Research suggests there is a process which people with gambling problems use to make a decision to reduce their gambling and recover from their gambling problem. This process is described through a six stages of change process, shown in **Box 1**.

Like with any recovery however, the pathway to recovery from gambling problems is not necessarily smooth or sequential. Individuals may experience rapid movement between stages as well as relapse.

Box 1: Stages of change in problem gambling recovery

Prochaska 2001

Pre-contemplation – in this stage, the problem gambler has no intention of changing his or her behaviour and may not have recognised that he or she has an issue with gambling.

Contemplation – in this stage, a problem gambler recognises that there might be a problem, and is considering taking action, but has not yet made any concrete steps to change their behaviour. Problem gamblers who are considering taking action in the next six months are in the contemplation phase.

Preparation – in this stage, the problem gambler prepares to take action to reduce his or her gambling. Problem gamblers who are intending to take action in the next month are in the preparation stage. Problem gamblers who have unsuccessfully taken action to reduce their gambling could also be in the preparation phase.

Action – in this stage, problem gamblers take action to change their behaviour and modify their environment and experiences in order to respond to their gambling problem.

Maintenance – this stage occurs when a problem gambler has reduced his or her gambling, and is working to prevent relapse and consolidate their recovery.

Termination – this phase occurs when a problem gambler has completely recovered, and is no longer at risk of relapse.

Natural recovery

Many gamblers recover without seeking formal help from others. This is described as a natural recovery.

Slutske (2006) found that over a third of people with a lifetime history of problem gambling had experienced natural recovery, compared with about three per cent who recovered after seeking treatment. However, there is only limited evidence about the process of natural recovery, and how it may differ from recovery after treatment.

What the research does show however is natural recovery can occur where people with gambling problems engage in a number of different strategies to reduce their gambling many of which mirror those utilised in formal treatment programs.

Hodgins (2000) reports that gamblers engaged in a variety of actions other than formal treatment to resolve their gambling, including:

- limiting access to gambling, for example staying away from gambling venues,
- taking up new activities such as exercise or reading,
- cognitive strategies such as focusing on the negative aspects of gambling, and seeking social support.

While natural recovery occurs, there is evidence that relapse may be more of a risk for those who choose the natural recovery pathway than those who seek and complete formal treatment.

Seeking help for gambling problems

Although natural recoveries is a common form of recovery, formal treatment and other types of help play an important role in recovery from problem gambling.

A study conducted by Hodgins in 2000 found treatment was an important reason for the resolution of gambling problems for 28 per cent of gamblers. Similarly, treatment helped 28 per cent of gamblers to maintain their recovery.

For these gamblers, treatment may be essential to achieving and maintaining their recovery. It is also possible that some gamblers may not be able to achieve recovery without treatment. In addition, Nathan (2003) suggests that natural recovery may be associated with a greater risk of relapse than recovery assisted by treatment.

When thinking about seeking help for problem gambling, it is common to focus on formal treatment options, including counselling. However, people with gambling problems may also seek informal help from friends or family.

Further details of the types of help available for problem gambling are discussed in **Section 2**.

Seeking help from others, including both formal treatment and informal assistance from friends and family, may therefore be an important part of the recovery process. However, previous research suggests very few problem gamblers seek help.

Previous research in Victoria has found only about a quarter (25.6 per cent) of problem gamblers have sought help, either formally or informally in the past twelve months (Department of Justice 2009).

Rates of formal help seeking are even lower. The Productivity Commission (2010) estimated that only eight to 17 per cent of people with gambling problems were seeking formal help based on a comparison of prevalence rates and rates of usage of gambling help services.

Similarly, Delfabbro (2011) found less than 10 per cent of problem gamblers seek formal help for their gambling. As shown in Table 1, low rates of seeking help for problem gambling have been found around Australia.

There is also evidence that people with gambling problems often do not seek help until they have reached a crisis point (Bellringer 2008).

Such a crisis could involve serious negative consequences for the gambler or their family, including suicidal thoughts or relationship break down (Carroll 2011).

Many will experience significant financial hardship before they choose to seek help, and may have reached the point of not being able to afford essentials such as food or rent payments (McMillen 2004).

Consistent with a public health approach to problem gambling (Korn 1999), the foundation is committed to encouraging prevention and early intervention to reduce the potential for gambling to become a serious problem. Steps to achieve this objective will be explored further in **Section 3** of this paper

Table 1: Rates of seeking help by Australian jurisdiction

Publication	Location	Year conducted	Timeframe studied	Methodology	Proportion of people seeking help
Department of Justice (2009)	Victoria	2008	Past 12 months	Random digit dial survey of 15 000 Victorians aged over 18.	25.6% of problem gamblers
Allen Consulting Group (2011)	Tasmania	2011	Past 12 months	Random digit dial survey of 4,303 Tasmanians aged over 18, with a quota of 400 participants in 8 specified local government areas.	0.5% of all Tasmanians
Sproston (2012)	NSW	2011	Past 12 months	Random digit dial survey of 10,000 adults from New South Wales.	17 per cent of problem gamblers
Office for Problem Gambling (2013)	South Australia	2012	Past 12 months	Survey of South Australians aged over 16 using 7,133 random digit dial landline and 2 375 list based mobile phone interviews.	24.5 per cent of problem gamblers
Productivity Commission (1999)	Australia	1999	Past 12 months	A telephone survey of more than 10 600 Australian adults selected randomly from the White pages.	32 per cent of people scoring 10+ on the SOGS and 12 per cent of people scoring 5-9 on the SOGS
Productivity Commission (2010)	Australia	2010	Not applicable	Based on a comparison of prevalence estimates and numbers of people seeking help from gambling help services.	Between 8 and 17 per cent
Davison (2010)	Australian Capital Territory	2009	Lifetime	A random digit dial survey of 5,500 residents of the Australian Capital Territory aged over 18.	28.1 per cent of problem and moderate risk gamblers
Hing (2011)	Australia	2010	Lifetime	National telephone survey of 242 regular gamblers	22 per cent of problem gamblers
Delfabbro (2011)	Australia	2011	Not applicable	Based on a review of the literature on gambling and problem gambling.	Less than 10 per cent.

¹ For some studies, this includes people who tried to seek help, but were unsuccessful.

BARRIERS AND MOTIVATORS TO SEEKING HELP FOR GAMBLING PROBLEMS

BARRIERS

A range of studies as well as clinical experience from the gambling help sector have identified a variety of barriers as contributing to the low rates of seeking help for problem gambling.

These include:

- denial that a problem exists,
- belief that the individual can solve the problem themselves,
- stigma and shame, and,
- barriers relating to the help that is available.

Box 2 lists and categorises the barriers to help seeking identified in literature.

Box 2: Barriers to seeking help for gambling problems

Suurvali (2009 p.18-20) and Hing (2011 p.37-38)

Subjective perception of gambling behaviour

- Not acknowledging problems associated with gambling or minimisation of such problems

Concerns around dealing with the problem

- Desire to handle problems themselves and/or the belief in ability to do so
- Issues of shame, secrecy, embarrassment, pride and fear of stigma
- Not wanting to stop or to give up benefits of gambling
- Difficulty in sharing problems or talking about personal issues

Perceptions of treatment options

- Concerns about treatment itself
- Practical issues around attending treatment, such as cost or lack of time
- Lack of faith in effectiveness of treatment
- Lack of knowledge about different help options available

Environmental factors

- Pressure from others to continue gambling or lack of support to make a change
- Low awareness of opportunities for seeking help

Denial, or a belief that gambling is not a problem, can be a barrier to seeking help.

Not acknowledging the existence of a problem obviously means help will not be directly sought. Bellringer (2008 p.7) found 42 per cent of problem gamblers calling a helpline believed this was a barrier to seeking help.

For some who do acknowledge having a gambling problem, seeking help is still something to be avoided. Many would prefer to handle their problem themselves, without outside assistance.

Bellringer (2008) found almost four in five people (78 per cent) with gambling problems who did call a helpline, said they had wanted to resolve the problem on their own or were too proud to seek help.

Perhaps the first step in help seeking for a client is recognising they have a problem and understanding there are effective treatment options available.

STIGMA

One of the most commonly cited barriers to seeking help is the stigma associated with problem gambling with almost three quarters (73 per cent) of people who called a helpline saying feeling ashamed or embarrassed had prevented them from seeking help earlier (Bellringer, 2008).

Other barriers to help seeking relate specifically to the treatment services themselves (Suurvali 2009) including:

- lack of knowledge about what treatment entails,
- fear of failing at treatment,
- doubts about the quality or effectiveness of treatment or providers,
- concerns about confidentiality and anonymity in treatment settings,
- fears of discrimination or insensitivity in treatment programs,
- lack of knowledge about treatment options or availability, and,
- difficulty finding information about treatment services.

Research suggests a lack of knowledge about treatment options, and difficulty finding this information, may also be a key barrier to seeking help.

In a survey of regular gamblers, Hing (2011) found less than half were aware of telephone counselling services for problem gambling, while only a third (35 per cent) were aware of their local face to face counselling service (such as Gambler's Help in Victoria).

In the same survey, very few people with gambling problems were aware of other options for seeking help, and only six per cent were aware of online counselling and support.

It is clear there a number of barriers to help-seeking that can be addressed with changes in the way help is offered, perceived and delivered. To encourage more problem gamblers to seek help, and receive help that suits them, the foundation is actively addressing how it promotes and provides help. This will be explored further in **Section 3**.

MOTIVATORS

While rates of seeking help are affected by a number of barriers, there are also a variety of factors that motivate people to seek help.

The most often cited reason for people with gambling problems seeking help is financial difficulties with more than four in five (82 per cent) help line callers in one study identifying this as a motivating factor (Bellringer 2008)

However, other factors such as negative emotions like depression, shame or anxiety, or the influence of other people are also motivating factors for people with gambling problems to seek help (Suurvali 2010).

Box 3 contains a list of possible motivating factors for seeking help for problem gambling.

Box 3: Motivators for seeking help for gambling problems

Suurvali (2010 p14-18)

- Financial difficulties
- Relationships with/influence of others
- Negative emotions
- Evaluation and decision making
- Changes in environment or lifestyle
- Work or legal difficulties
- Physical health
- A traumatic, humiliating, personal event or other specific event
- Conflict with self image or goals, sense of personal failure
- Loss of control; desire to regain control
- Recognition that it is not possible to win at gambling
- Loss of interest in gambling

CO-OCCURRING CONDITIONS AND SEEKING HELP FOR GAMBLING PROBLEMS

Previous research suggests many people with gambling problems have other health conditions including mental health issues such as depression or anxiety (Miller 2014). The existence of other health conditions may affect help seeking for problem gambling for a number of reasons.

Firstly, gambling problems may not be recognised as an issue due to the co-occurring condition.

Secondly, the person may already be seeking help for the other condition and problem gambling is not the priority. For example, high rates of problem gambling have been reported among people seeking treatment for alcohol and substance use (Cowlshaw 2014).

Engaging with help for a co-occurring condition may result in someone with gambling problems being unwilling to engage with additional, gambling specific, help services.

Additionally, experts providing help with co-occurring conditions, such as substance use or mental health conditions may not have the required knowledge to provide help for problem gambling.

This situation can have a compounding effect with the person not only missing out on help for their gambling problems but it can also undermine their treatment for the co-occurring condition.

Thirdly, if the focus is on gambling issues to the exclusion of other conditions, the degree to which gambling is causing or exacerbating co-occurring conditions may be missed.

Overall, high rates of co-morbidities associated with problem gambling may result in poor outcomes for people experiencing problems with gambling in terms of recovery and seeking help.

Given the link between problem gambling and other conditions it is important for the foundation to ensure integration between gambling help and support services and a range of other support services. This idea will be explored further in **Section 3** of this paper.

SUMMARY

PROBLEM GAMBLING RECOVERY AND HELP-SEEKING

The recovery process for problem gambling is complex and, while previous research has shown that many problem gamblers recover without assistance from others (natural recovery), those who don't seek formal treatment may be at higher risk of relapse.

While seeking help can be an important part of the recovery process, only a minority of problem gamblers seek help and many problem gamblers wait until they have reached a crisis point before they choose to seek help.

At the same time, many problem gamblers have co-occurring conditions which may impact on their seeking of assistance, its effectiveness and their recovery.

The research makes it clear that overcoming barriers to treatment is a key step to improving rates of recovery.

By analysing why people do (motivators) or don't (barriers) seek help we can identify a number of strategies to improve the rate of help seeking and its effectiveness.

These range from increasing awareness of the signs of problem gambling to providing and promoting more treatment options that address the barriers to help seeking as well as making it clearer that treatment can offer hope of effective outcomes.

Key steps to increasing help seeking include fostering more supportive environments that encourage rather than stigmatise help-seeking. At the same time, actions to modify community attitudes and support peer and community networks would provide positive encouragement for gamblers to seek help.

Section 3 explores steps the foundation will take to address barriers to seeking help and to inform community attitudes around gambling and the help available.

PROBLEM GAMBLING HELP AND ITS EFFECTIVENESS

Section 1 of this paper outlined the recovery process for problem gambling, provided an indication of help seeking behaviour, and explored the implications of co-occurring conditions in terms of recovery and seeking help.

Section 2 will build on this background, providing more detail about the types of help that are available for people with gambling problems. In addition, this section explores the likely characteristics of effective help for problem gambling.

TYPES OF HELP FOR GAMBLING PROBLEMS

A variety of types of help are available for problem gambling. These include professional assistance, such as counselling, and a variety of options for self-help.

The following sections provide information about the most common forms of help available to people with gambling problems. **Box 4** provides detailed information about the forms of help available in Victoria.

While problem gambling help is available for the family and friends of problem gamblers, this is not fully discussed in this paper.

COUNSELLING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TREATMENT

Seeking help for problem gambling through counselling or psychological treatment is one of the most researched forms of help for problem gambling (Cowlshaw 2012). This type of treatment is available in a variety of forms including face to face, online or over the telephone.

Two common types of psychological treatment used in problem gambling treatment are cognitive therapy and behavioural therapy. Cognitive therapy aims to change thought processes and address erroneous beliefs about gambling (Cowlshaw 2012).

For example, cognitive therapy may challenge inaccurate beliefs about randomness and the odds of winning at gambling by providing evidence about the actual likelihood of winning.

Underlying this approach is an attempt to substitute a more realistic understanding of gambling to produce more rational behaviour.

Behavioural therapies on the other hand focus on gambling as behaviour learned over time in response to positive and negative stimuli from the environment (Cowlshaw 2012).

For example, behavioural therapies attempt to change behaviour by reducing urges to gamble through urge therapy (Battersby 2013). It is the motivation to gamble being addressed regardless of its particular cause. There is no assumption that motivations will be rational or even conscious. The logic is more that they have been learned and can be un-learned, perhaps even with a different behaviour substituted for them.

Evidence from several studies suggests that combining both approaches (cognitive behavioural therapy) can be an effective treatment for problem gambling (Cowlshaw 2012).

There are many other approaches to psychological treatment for problem gambling which have shown some effectiveness in research, including Dialectical Behavioural Therapy (Christensen 2013) and other mindfulness-based approaches (de Lisle 2011), Interactive Drawing Therapy (Zhang 2012) and motivational interviewing (Cowlshaw 2012). All of these approaches aim to help problem gamblers to achieve recovery with the assistance of a trained counsellor, psychologist or other health professional.

GROUP THERAPY

As well as being provided in one on one sessions with a counsellor, psychological treatment for problem gambling may be provided as part of group therapy where a number of problem gamblers meet with a counsellor acting as a facilitator.

- Group therapy has a number of benefits, including:
- Enhancing participants' social skills,
- Providing opportunities to learn and practise new behaviours prior to application in real life and,
- receiving feedback and support from other group members' (Coman 2010).

Group therapy may be particularly useful for gamblers whose gambling has led them to be detached from social contacts or whose gambling may have been prompted by loneliness.

BRIEF INTERVENTIONS AND CRISIS SUPPORT

Brief interventions are a type of psychological treatment for problem gambling, delivered in one or a small number of sessions only (Petry 2005).

Brief interventions are often delivered over the telephone using an approach called motivational interviewing, a client-centred counselling style focusing on encouraging behaviour change through the interviewing process.

Studies have shown despite its brevity, this type of intervention can be effective in treating problem gambling (Abbott 2012).

A brief intervention might help in a number of ways including building motivation to change by emphasising change as desirable and possible (Abbott 2012).

Brief interventions can also be delivered through telephone help lines to people in crisis (Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation 2014a). When combined with appropriate referrals, this type of support can give problem gamblers immediate help to cope with a crisis.

Both brief interventions and crisis support have benefits in terms of being readily accessible, comparatively non-challenging to take up and being compatible with other forms of help.

PHARMACOLOGICAL TREATMENTS

A variety of medications are used to treat people with gambling problems including medications used to treat alcohol and drug addictions, anxiety and depression, impulse control disorders and bipolar disorder (Westphal 2008).

Medications such as naltrexone can be used to reduce urges to gamble and help people with gambling problems to change their behaviour.

The underlying logic is that stopping gambling is both difficult and painful in a physiological manner not just psychological one.

In other words, the actual circuitry or chemistry of the brain is sending signals related to the gambling behaviour and medications may alter the intensity or effect of these signals.

To date, there is only preliminary evidence that medications are effective in treating problem gambling (Westphal 2008) and its use has not been widely adopted in Australia.

SELF-HELP PROGRAMS

A variety of self-help programs are available for problem gambling using electronic or hard copy tools and workbooks made available online or through help and support services.

Both internet self-help programs (Gainsbury 2011) and printed workbooks (LaBrie 2012) may be effective in helping people to recover from problem gambling.

Self-help programs help gamblers by providing information about problem gambling as well as strategies to help with behaviour change (Gainsbury 2011). Some programs also allow for online interaction with a counsellor (Gainsbury 2011).

Similar to assisted forms of counselling, self-help programs can provide the gambler with a way to understand the nature and extent of their problem and provide strategies to overcome it. The gambler can enter into a dialogue with themselves to modify his or her behaviour.

Self help programs may also incorporate aspects of counselling and peer support. For example, gamblers may be provided with online counselling through a website (e.g. Gambling Help Online). Online forums can provide peer support as well as professional guidance.

TWELVE STEP PROGRAMS

Twelve step programs were originally developed to assist with recovery from alcohol addiction.

They involve self-help by working through a program of twelve steps with assistance from peers. Twelve step groups for problem gambling, such as Gamblers Anonymous and Pokies Anonymous, aim to help people to achieve abstinence from gambling.

There is some evidence that these programs can be effective (Marceaux 2010).

FINANCIAL COUNSELLING AND FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Financial counselling is professional counselling aimed at helping with the management of financial problems.

A financial counsellor can help someone with a gambling problem to restore some level of financial security (Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation 2014b).

In Victoria, problem gamblers may be eligible for financial assistance from the Recovery Assistance Program to help them through their recovery (Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation 2014c).

Given that financial crisis is frequently cited as the reason many people with gambling problems seek help, financial counsellors are an important avenue of help. There is currently however no available research to indicate the extent to which financial counselling and financial assistance are effective in helping problem gamblers.

SELF-EXCLUSION

In Victoria, gamblers are able to self-exclude from venues as a way to manage their gambling problems.

Gamblers who want to self-exclude from a venue sign an agreement not to enter or use the gambling areas in that venue (Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation 2014d).

The agreement gives the venue the legal authority to remove the person if they enter the venue.

A Canadian evaluation of self-exclusion programs has shown they may provide multiple benefits for gamblers, including:

- reducing the urge to gamble,
- increasing perceptions of control over gambling, and,
- decreasing the intensity of the negative consequences of gambling (Ladouceur 2007).

However, a Victorian evaluation found self-exclusion may not be well enforced (SACES 2003) effectively making it a form of self-help with fewer benefits.

Further research is therefore needed to better understand self-exclusion and its role in problem gambling recovery.

ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES

Alternative therapies, such as such as acupuncture (Turner 2005), have been suggested in conjunction with more traditional counselling approaches for problem gambling however, there is currently no evidence to show whether this type of approach is effective.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF HELP FOR GAMBLING PROBLEMS

Approaches to helping problem gamblers have not been widely studied, and there is only limited evidence about the effectiveness of some approaches.

In addition, there is almost no evidence on which types of help are most effective for different groups of people including people from different age groups, genders or cultures.

Ultimately, it is likely that the best form of help, or combination of help types, will vary from individual to individual.

Although there is limited evidence about the relative effectiveness of different types of help, it seems likely that most types of help provide some benefits to people who want to overcome a gambling problem.

Previous research has shown cognitive behavioural therapy is an effective treatment for problem gambling (Cowlshaw 2012) while brief interventions based on motivational interviewing may also be effective (Abbott 2012). There is also some preliminary evidence that self-help programs can be effective in helping people recover from gambling problems (La Brie 2012).

In addition to single forms of help, it is likely that seeking help from multiple sources may also lead to better outcomes for people seeking help with gambling problems.

For example, combining psychological counselling with financial counselling and self-help programs is likely to provide a stronger foundation for recovery than counselling or self-help alone. Again, the best combination of help and support is likely to be different for different people.

The critical factor in terms of effectiveness may be the gambler's decision to change their behaviour.

A gambler acknowledging that they have a problem and deciding to take action is a very important step in the recovery process. This decision may be as, if not more important, than the type of help they choose to overcome their gambling problem.

This does not mean that for any individual one type of help is as good as another, however it suggests that a combination of help types are likely to be more effective than a single help type.

Ultimately, the ideal scenario is that a variety of help options exist so people can access the range and combination of help services that work best for them.

Box 4: Current options for gambling help in Victoria

Face-to-face, telephone and online help

Gambler's Help provides free, confidential face-to-face counselling and financial counselling services at over 90 locations throughout metropolitan area and regional Victoria.

Gambler's Help telephone help line provides 24 hour, seven day telephone crisis counselling, support, information and referral to all Victorians via the national 1800 858 858 telephone number.

Gambling Help Online provides 24 hour, seven day chat and email-based counselling and support, web-based self-help information, and paper-based referral and support materials including information on gambling counselling and local support services across Australia.



Phone



Family & friends



Face to face



Financial counselling



Online support

Self-exclusion

Gambler's Help services and gaming venues can help people with gambling problems ban themselves from gaming venues or internet gambling via the self-exclusion program.

All gambling providers must provide customers with the option to self-exclude from their venue or products.

Self-exclusion is a free service.

Online self-help - the 100 Day Challenge

The 100 Day Challenge is an online self-help program which also allows participants to access a range of other help options.

During the challenge, participants:

- Set personal goals
- Work out how much money and time they spend gambling
- Sign up for weekly tips and advice
- Rate their mood
- Write or record a private video diary
- Use tips (sent by email) to reach their goal
- Write a private diary
- Learn more about the range of free help available
- Use a variety of counselling options
- Ask a friend or family member for support

Introduced in March 2013, the 100 Day Challenge was supported and promoted by an award winning statewide advertising campaign which attracted more than 3,000 people to register for their own challenge. Its effectiveness as a treatment program is currently being evaluated.



Online support



Help yourself

Peer connection

Peer Connection is a confidential, anonymous, telephone peer-support program staffed by volunteers. The program provides over-the-phone support to people who are experiencing gambling problems as well as to their partners and close family members.

The Chinese Peer Connection program is a Chinese telephone program developed to support recovery for problem gambling in the Chinese community.



Phone



Face to face

Statewide Problem Gambling and Mental Health program

The Statewide Problem Gambling and Mental Health Program aims to improve treatment options for people with co-occurring gambling and mental health problems through educational workshops delivered to both problem gambling and mental health clinicians.

The current program was designed in partnership with Alfred Health and follows on from an extensive study of the impact and influence of mental health on gambling behaviours. The program covers a range of education, professional development and clinical support initiatives.

For more information on the range and types of help available go to www.gamblershelp.com.au

SUMMARY

PROBLEM GAMBLING HELP AND ITS EFFECTIVENESS

Section 2 of this paper has demonstrated that a variety of types of help are available for people with gambling problems in Victoria and elsewhere.

These include psychological treatment and counselling, group therapy, brief interventions and crisis support, pharmacological treatments, financial counselling, self-help, self-exclusion from venues, twelve step programs, as well as alternative therapies such as acupuncture.

Although evidence is limited, it is clear that a range of different help options, including psychological treatments based on cognitive behavioural therapy, can be effective.

Ultimately, it is likely that the best type of help, or combination of types of help, will vary for each individual.

The final section of this paper explores the role of the foundation in ensuring people who want to seek help can get it and identifies actions the foundation is taking to ensure this occurs.

A STRATEGY TO SUPPORT HELP-SEEKING FOR PROBLEM GAMBLING

Sections 1 and 2 of this paper have explored the nature of problem gambling recovery, the role that seeking help plays in recovery, the types of help available and the characteristics of effective help.

This section outlines actions the foundation will take to support recovery and the seeking of help for gambling problems in Victoria.

The strategy draws on the evidence presented in this paper, recent reviews of gambling service delivery, as reported in KPMG (2013), and ongoing consultations between the foundation and help services, community educators, academics, local government and the broader community in Victoria.

This section also outlines how other stakeholders in the community can raise awareness and encourage help seeking for gambling problems.

Foundation actions to support the seeking of help for gambling problems

As part of its legislated responsibility to reduce harm resulting from gambling, the foundation recognises it plays a key role in ensuring people with gambling problems have access to appropriate help.

To address the harm associated with gambling, and to support help seeking, the foundation is:

1. Increasing prevention and intervention efforts
2. Raising awareness of the help available
3. Tackling the barriers which may prevent people from seeking help for problem gambling
4. Providing a variety of options to allow individuals to seek the help which best suits them
5. Improving accessibility and flexibility within Gambler's Help treatment services
6. Providing online self-help programs as an alternative or addition to therapeutic counselling
7. Working with mental health, alcohol and other drug sectors to provide integrated care for people with gambling problems and co-occurring conditions
8. Conducting world-leading research to ensure help options for problem gambling are based on sound evidence.

1. Increasing prevention and intervention activities

In keeping with the foundation's public health approach, we recognise that prevention and intervention activities play a critical role in ensuring people who gamble do so in way that does not create problems.

We are therefore providing increased funding for prevention and intervention activities through a new \$2.4 million grants program. This program will fund innovative projects that promote responsible gambling in gambling settings or environments, with a focus on the determinants and risk factors associated with gambling-related harm.

The foundation is also investing in prevention activities through a school education program, a sporting clubs initiative and funding for community education activities.

2. Raising awareness of help

The research presented in Section 2 of this paper identifies that a lack of awareness is one of the key issues contributing to low rates of help seeking for gambling problems.

To address this, the foundation is supporting a range of awareness raising activities. From April this year, the foundation is launching a new campaign focusing on the range and types of help available through a statewide advertising campaign.

The campaign points to the foundation's new website which provides direct links to various types of help including new self-help tools.

At the same time, the foundation is undertaking a broad range of media and publicity activities to raise the profile of gambling as an issue, and increase awareness of the help and support that is available.

3. Tackling barriers to seeking help

The foundation has a strong commitment to overcoming the known barriers that prevent people from seeking help for the gambling problems identified in **Section 1** of this paper.

These barriers include denial of a problem, people's desire to solve issues on their own, stigma and shame, as well as real or perceived inadequacies of the help that is available.

The foundation is taking action to address these issues through the awareness raising activities as well as specific campaigns designed to challenge the stereotypes associated with gambling problems.

For example:

- using real people in the Fight For You - 100 Day Challenge campaign to show that real people have issues with gambling,
- sharing stories on our website of people who have developed gambling problems to promote community awareness and understanding,
- adopting non-stigmatising language to refer to people with gambling problems e.g. not using the 'problem gambler' label

The aim of these strategies is to reduce the shame and stigma associated with admitting to a gambling problem so people feel safer to seek help.

The foundation also recognises that many people want to work through problems on their own and we will continue to provide and develop information, resources, and self-help tools to support people to achieve recovery on their own.

In partnership with key organisations across Victoria, the foundation is also delivering high quality help services to meet the needs of the people using them.

4. Providing a range of help options

The information presented in **Section 2** demonstrates that a range of help options can support recovery for people with gambling problems. The available information suggests that a variety of help options may be effective, and, in many cases more effective, when used in combination.

The foundation is committed to ensuring a range of help is available to meet the needs of all Victorians and will continue to enhance and further develop the range of help described in **Box 4**. This encompasses the range of help options discussed in **Section 3**, including face-to-face, telephone and online counselling, crisis support, peer support, self-exclusion and self help tools.

5. Improving accessibility and flexibility within Gamblers Help

In line with person centred service delivery, the foundation is focusing on improving choices about how and when people can get help and the intensity of the help received.

- Accessibility of help services is being improved by:
- providing and promoting a range of help types,
- expanding the modes of service delivery,
- extending service hours to provide more access outside of standard business hours,
- developing new services such as group peer support options, and,
- expanding self-help resources.

Accessibility will also be improved by supporting greater emphasis on collaboration between Gambler's Help and the broader health and human services.

This key recommendation of the 2013 KPMG service review is aimed at increasing the likelihood that problem gambling issues will be identified and responded to wherever people present for services.

Moving to aligned service catchments and a single service provider per catchment model are two recommendations being implemented to achieve this goal.

As people's needs and preferences change, the Gambler's Help service system aims to respond by providing an accessible and seamless client journey between service elements where the need for the client to re-tell their story is reduced.

Improving integration across Gambler's Help services will support this with a simplified client intake process being developed to better focus on the client's immediate needs.

A new web based information management system will also streamline referrals and bookings to facilitate the flow of client information.

6. Providing online self-help options

Given that **Section 2** identified stigma and shame, as well as a desire to resolve problems on their own, as barriers to seeking help, the foundation is expanding its range of online self-help tools and resources.

In March 2013, the foundation launched the 100 Day Challenge website which offers a range of tools and resources to help people address their gambling problems. The website connects to a range of self-help tools provided on the Gambling Help Online site.

To date, the *100 Day Challenge* program, promoted by the award winning Fight for you campaign, has attracted more than 3,000 people to register for their own challenge.

As part of its new website and latest service promotion campaign, the foundation has developed new self-help tools and information for people with gambling problems who may not be ready to undertake the 100 Day Challenge.

7. Working with non-gambling specific help services

This paper has identified that many people with gambling problems also have co-occurring conditions, which present a number of issues in terms of help seeking and recovery.

To help address these issues, the foundation is funding a number of initiatives to drive the development of cross-sectoral approaches to the identification and treatment of problem gamblers with co-morbid mental health, alcohol, and other drug, and family and relationship issues.

This includes a Statewide Problem Gambling Mental Health program as well as a strategy for engaging problem gambling clients and their families through cross-sector collaboration.

The foundation's move to realign service catchments broadly in line with the health sector and moving toward a single service provider in each catchment as part of the implementation of the KPMG service review is also aimed at improving service coordination and collaboration with other services in the help sector.

8. Conducting research to underpin gambling help

This paper has highlighted both the existing evidence around gambling recovery and help seeking, as well as gaps in current research.

The foundation is addressing these gaps through the implementation of a comprehensive research agenda.

The research agenda includes funding of research to better understand the recovery process as well as research to investigate the effectiveness of help options.

WORKING WITH OTHERS TO SUPPORT HELP SEEKING

The foundation will continue to work with key groups in the community to reduce harm from gambling including local government, community services, doctors, the media and the gambling industry.

These key groups can have a role in increasing community awareness about gambling and the help services available as well as have a positive impact on community attitudes to reduce the stigma associated with problem gambling.

They can reduce stigma and shame by delivering messages about the reality and causes of problem gambling. At the same time, they can deliver messages of hope, particularly in relation to the help options available and the positive outcomes that are possible.

Community organisations can also provide social support to ensure sustained recovery from gambling problems.

The foundation recognises that the gambling industry has a key role to play in help seeking and recovery by providing responsible gambling environments that assist in the early identification of problems.

They can refer those at risk to help options and support decisions they might make, such as self-exclusion. The foundation will continue to offer co-operation to the industry to make gambling a safer activity.

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to explore recovery and the seeking of help for problem gambling.

Section 1 of the paper found that a number of people with gambling problems go through a process of natural recovery without formal, external help.

What the research shows natural recovery can occur where people engage in strategies to reduce their gambling which mirror those utilised in formal treatment programs. It also shows that around a quarter of people with gambling problems who do seek help report it as critical in supporting recovery.

Research presented in **Section 1** suggests a number of barriers contribute to a low rate of help seeking. These barriers include shame, stigma and denial as well as a desire to resolve the problem without outside assistance or doubts that treatment options can be effective.

Section 2 of the paper canvassed the variety of treatments and other help available for problem gamblers.

These include formal psychological treatment, various forms of self-help, and options such as self-exclusion and group therapies. While acknowledging the limitations of available evidence, it is likely that some types of help for problem gambling, such as cognitive behavioural therapy, motivational interviewing and self-help programs are effective in helping problem gamblers to achieve recovery.

In addition, it is likely that the best type of help, or combination of types of help, will vary for each individual. Given this, it is important that a range of options are available for people with gambling problems.

Based on the information contained in **Sections 1 and 2**, **Section 3** identifies key actions the foundation is taking to ensure effective help is available to support help seeking and recovery for people with gambling problems.

These actions include raising awareness about help options, tackling barriers to seeking help, supporting a diversity of help options and undertaking further research to better understand the effectiveness of help for gambling problems.

In addition, this paper highlights the need to better integrate help options for problem gambling with help that may also be sought for a range of co-occurring conditions such as mental illness and substance abuse.

Overall, this paper highlights the importance of the foundation's existing programs that encourage people with gambling problems to recognise that they have a problem and to seek help.

It emphasises the importance of providing high quality and diverse help that is responsive to the needs of individuals and demonstrates that a one size fits all approach to problem gambling help is unlikely to be effective.

The paper validates a number of decisions and directions taken by the foundation over the past 18 months.

It demonstrates that key recommendations of the KPMG review of treatment services and actions to implement those recommendations will support the development of more flexible, adjustable, accessible services to better meet the needs of help seekers.

This review led to an extensive change program which will deliver a new service and funding model to deliver these services to the Victorian community.

The paper speaks of the need for greater awareness of gambling problems to encourage people to seek help earlier before their issues reach crisis point. This need is being met by the foundation's decision to increase funding for prevention activities four fold with a focus on local community prevention activities.

The paper also demonstrates the need for awareness campaigns like the award winning Fight for you which challenge negative perceptions of people with gambling problems to address the shame and stigma that are a barrier to help seeking.

It also illustrates the need for a new look for Gambler's Help services which speaks of hope and positive change. This need is being fulfilled by the unveiling of a new service brand which will be promoted throughout the state to increase awareness of the many ways there are to get help with gambling problems.

The paper demonstrates the need for integrated and seamless help options that offer a range of self-help tools online but also link to more formal help options for people who need to embrace a number of help strategies.

This thinking has informed the development of the foundation's new website being launched in April 2014 as well as the popular 100 Day Challenge website launched in March 2013.

These strategies demonstrate the foundation's commitment to putting the needs of people with gambling problems at the centre of what we do.

While there's more work to be done, the strategies outlined in **Section 3** show the foundation is on the right track.

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