Emerging Adults and Gambling: A Resource for Providers

Gambling has become a widely accessible, normalized form of entertainment. But it is not without risks. Today's emerging adults (i.e., those in between adolescence and full adulthood), in particular, grew up in an age of rapid gambling expansion characterized by evolving game types, widespread advertising, and a complex digital gambling environment. Compared to the general adult population, they (especially men) are at increased risk for experiencing problem gambling and the conditions that commonly co-occur with it (e.g., mood disorders, substance use disorders). Here are some things to keep in mind when treating emerging adults who are struggling with their gambling.

What are gambling harms?

Gambling harms are negative impacts from gambling on the gambler themselves, their loved ones, and their communities.

These harms are not just financial and can include:

- Physical harms like insomnia and obesity
- Relationship issues like conflict with parents/partners/peers – isolating oneself is common
- Mental health concerns like anxiety, depression, suicidality, and substance misuse
- Difficulty fulfilling responsibilities, like missing work or poor academic performance

What are some factors that can increase or decrease someone's risk for problem gambling?

Risk factors can include:

- High impulsivity/sensation-seeking traits
- Cognitive distortions including an inflated sense of their skill/control over the game, motivating them to take additional financial risks
- Poor school performance
- Greater exposure to gambling from family members, peers, and marketing
- Substance use/misuse

Protective factors can include:

- High emotional intelligence and adaptive coping strategies
- Social connectedness and a strong support systems
- Parental supervision/family cohesion
- Higher socioeconomic status
- Education about the early signs and harms from problem gambling

Did you know?

Gambling disorder is classified under the Substance-Related and Addictive Disorders category of the DSM-5-TR.

- Gambling disorder and substance use disorders (SUD) share similar hallmarks, including loss of control and continuing to perform the behavior despite negative consequences.[1]
- Many brain regions implicated in the development and maintenance of SUDs are also implicated in gambling disorder. These include the reward system and brain areas involved in self-control and controlled decision-making that may still be developing during emerging adulthood. These areas are partially responsible for initiation and continuation of gambling and substance misuse among adolescents and emerging adults, by promoting sensation seeking and decreasing inhibition.[2,3]

1. Shaffer, H. J., LaPlante, D. A., LaBrie, R. A., Kidman, R. C., Donato, A. N., & Stanton, M. V. (2004). Toward a syndrome model of addiction: Multiple expressions, common etiology. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry, 12*(6), 367–374. https://doi.org/10.1080/10673220490905705
2. Potenza M. N. (2013). Neurobiology of gambling behaviors. *Current Opinion in Neurobiology, 23*(4), 660–667. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.conb.2013.03.004
3. Kozak, K., Lucatch, A. M., Lowe, D. J. E., Balodis, I. M., MacKillop, J., & George, T. P. (2019). The neurobiology of impulsivity and substance use disorders: Implications for treatment. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1451*(1), 71–91. https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.13977

What's the first step in identifying gambling-related problems?

The first step is screening. Even if your client does not present with a gambling problem, it is still important to screen. When discussing gambling, use examples that emerging adults are more familiar with, such as sports betting, online poker, and daily fantasy sports. Prediction markets and cryptocurrency trading are non-traditional gambling activities that appeal to many emerging adults, as does watching gambling livestreams on Twitch and TikTok. One screener you can use is the Brief Biosocial Gambling Screen. Learn more by scanning the QR code below. Remind affected clients that they are not alone and that recovery is possible.

What are some options for treating problem gambling among emerging adults?

Intervention	Purpose	Example
Motivational Interviewing	Builds motivation to change behavior by resolving ambivalence about change	*Use open-ended questions to get the client to consider their relationship with gambling, such as, "What do you see yourself doing after college?", "How does gambling fit in with your long-term goals?", and "How does gambling impact your other responsibilities?"*
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy	Changes distorted patterns of thinking and maladaptive behaviors that reinforce gambling	*Help clients address their illusion of control related to sports betting. Ask them to identify an irrational belief, determine why it is irrational, and replace it with a more logical statement. For example, "I did my research on player statistics, so my bets should win" could be replaced with, "I'm familiar with player statistics and that gives me an advantage, but I'm no match for the sports book's massive analytic operation."*
Financial Counseling	Supplements therapy by addressing money-related stress associated with gambling behavior	*Ask if clients have used student loans or credit cards to finance their gambling and, if so, work together to develop a repayment plan (e.g., taking on extra work shifts and exploring income-driven loan repayment plans).*
Family/ Partner Therapy	Helps to resolve relationship conflict and communication issues	*Involve family members, such as parents whose financial picture has been affected by the client's gambling.*

Reminder: Gambling often co-occurs with other mental health and substance use disorders. Consider screening/assessing for these other conditions as part of your treatment plan, as well.

How else should treatment be customized for emerging adults?

Today's emerging adults have been exposed to simulated gambling activities like loot boxes since childhood. They've been exposed to countless ads promoting sports betting as a natural part of sports fandom and identity (e.g., "*THE sports book for sports fans*"). Young men in particular often see sports betting as a path to peer bonding. In short, gambling permeates their lives. These are difficult influences to combat. It might be helpful to encourage emerging adult clients to...

- ☑ Become more consciously aware of how gambling has become embedded into their daily lives, such as by noting the appearance of gambling terms in social media, group chats, financial podcasts, and so on.
- ☑ Critically interpret gambling marketing tactics, especially those that minimize risk or promote sports betting as a part of one's identity.

A variety of self-help options are available to supplement these therapeutic approaches, or as standalone resources for those who want to self-manage their gambling. Scan the QR code to learn more.