

counselling guidebooks review**Problem Gambling: The Issues, the Options**

(2005). Toronto, ON: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 36 pp., ISBN 0-88868-470-3 (softcover).

Problem Gambling: A Guide for Families

(2005). Toronto, ON: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 44 pp., ISBN 0-88868-472-X (softcover).

Problem Gambling: A Guide for Financial Counsellors

(2005). Toronto, ON: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 56 pp., appendices/handouts, ISBN 0-88868-494-0 (softcover).

Problem Gambling: A Guide for Helping Professionals

(2005). Toronto, ON: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 48 pp., ISBN 0-88868-495-9 (softcover).

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In the haze-shrouded seascape of educative brochures, booklets, and pamphlets designed to inform members of the community and their families of the signs and symptoms of problem gambling, and of the opportunities for assistance, this series of guides shines as a bright beacon. It is clear from first sight that a substantial amount of thought and effort has gone into all aspects of its spiral-bound production. This is reflected not only in the content of the guides but also in their succinct yet informative writing, layout, format, design, and quality of publication. Although the set of guides is specifically prepared for and incorporates statistical data and mental health resources limited to the province of Ontario, in Canada, it serves as an exemplary template upon which others can or should develop similar guides for other jurisdictions (with appropriate copyright acknowledgements).

As a clinical researcher treating pathological and problem gamblers over almost 20 years, often criticized as a critical and hard to please reviewer of resource materials, I found this publication to be refreshingly praiseworthy. Were its extensive list of treatment service providers and resources appropriate to my local practice, I would freely distribute the material to all clients and their families seeking advice or counselling on problem gambling, and to colleagues for their edification and for placement in waiting rooms.

Each guide in the series has been compiled with a distinct audience in mind: the gambler, the family member, the financial counsellor, and the helping professional coming to grips with problem gambling and its management. The first element that strikes the reviewer is the colourful graphic designs on the covers. These are attractive and contain themes subtly linked to the contents, with the title clearly describing the purpose and contents of the relevant guide. While the label 'Problem Gambling' is prominent, it is not intrusive, with the overall end result being an eye-catching product that obviates the need for a gambler to hide it in a brown paper bag and read it alone in the protection of a dark corner of the waiting room.

Secondly, the guides are separated by tabs bearing the chapters' titles, a very useful and practical layout that adds that little extra detail to functionality. The reader is able to access the relevant section of interest in a direct and speedy manner.

Thirdly, the style of writing is succinct, with simple information presented in a format that is easy to read and digest at a glance. Bullet points to highlight key information accompanied by coloured boxes drawing attention to descriptive statistics, definitions, and suggestions work exceptionally well.

Now let me to turn to the content and substance of each guide. *The Issues, the Options* defines gambling and lists its various manifestations, although some would question the validity of including stock market speculation. This is followed by an exposition of the meaning of low-risk and harmful gambling; the Canadian Problem Gambling Index (CPGI) for self-classification, risks, and rewards; and the impact of excessive gambling on families and anxiety and depression. Suicide is only briefly mentioned, but this mention is accompanied by a direct list of instructions and contact details (Ontario-based) to gain immediate assistance. The 'Getting Help' chapter describes the nature and benefits of counselling with a statement that the outcomes of abstinence and control are to be determined by negotiation between the individual and the counsellor. Recommendations and suggestions are offered in a simple manner that covers the general principles rather than a set of self-help procedural steps to follow. This is not a criticism, given that the guide is not intended to be a brief self-help intervention but to serve as a basic educational tool. The list of available services is of use to Ontarians only, a limitation, as noted earlier, of the series in general.

The first three chapters of *A Guide for Families* are essentially similar in content to the one written for the problem gamblers. The next chapter is geared toward a description of the stages of change and readiness-to-change conceptual models and is particularly useful in informing family members of the relative responsibilities of each party—gambler and family member—in effecting change. Fundamental steps in protecting money are outlined in addition to strategies to restore normal functioning and healing relationships. Again, it is emphasized that in keeping with the aim of the series, the suggestions offered are basic principles in the absence of practical 'how-to-achieve' steps. For example, in referring to the potential need for 'tough love', the guide hastily acknowledges that its application is fraught with the prospect of causing harm in some cases and, if this is the case, seeking additional professional advice is imperative before acting. But no information is given to assist the family member in deciding who is or is not at risk of responding in a negative fashion.

There are few available guides written for financial counsellors that I am familiar with, although I am sure that these do exist. The first few chapters of *A Guide for Financial Counsellors* are devoted to an overview of basic statistics related to the extent of gambling in the community and an outline of the dimensional classification of gambling, from non- to pathological, and information that parallels and complements that contained in the other guides in the series.

While overall the series maintains a neutral nonjudgemental and atheoretical tone, it can be argued that statistics listed in the text box on 'Facts about Problem Gambling' are marred by dramatic seepage. It is stated that 4.8% of adults have moderate or severe problems, with an additional 9.6% at risk. This figure of 14% is somewhat high and should be supplemented by a reference or at a least clear definition of what is being referred to.

Chapters directed to the financial counsellor outline an extremely useful approach peppered with practical tips that a counsellor should follow in managing problem gambling. Setting aside a few instances that border on telling a financial counsellor how to do his or her work and which may thus be interpreted as paternalistic, the contents ably serve as an introduction to the signs, behaviours, and reactions of problem gamblers for the counsellor

who is not familiar with the topic and impact of problem gambling. The set of foldout sheets accompanying this guide provide an additional resource that includes the CPGI and a monitoring sheet. For the more experienced financial counsellor, the guide is perhaps too light on substance to be of value. However, family members will undoubtedly find useful instructive hints as to matters financial.

A Guide for Helping Professionals is a useful resource for general practitioners requiring an overview of basic strategies that can be effectively applied to their clientele. It is pleasing to read the inclusion of the recommendation to routinely discuss gambling with every client presenting to their service; often the encouragement to include a probe question on gambling alongside questions on drugs and alcohol falls on deaf ears. While the guide does not cover topics in substantive depth, the breadth of coverage is pertinent to the needs of health professionals and will provide them with sufficient understanding of problem gambling and its implications to intervene in a timely and effective manner. Risk groups, risk factors, and the impact of problem gambling orient the clinician, while the chapters on engagement, motivation, and stages of change offer useful advice. These are supplemented by the client handouts and list of resources and Ontario treatment services.

As a series of educative booklets, this set of guides accomplishes its objectives with style and panache. Its strengths reside in both its content and its presentation. Gamblers wishing to gain an understanding of the concept of problem gambling and its relevance to them, family members wishing to obtain useful strategies to intervene while becoming cognizant of the limitations in their capacity to force change on unwilling recipients, financial counsellors naïve to problem gambling, and general health practitioners of all disciplines will benefit substantially from this simple but well-written and concise resource. I can highly recommend this series as a useful resource material for clinical practice and an adornment to any waiting room coffee table.

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Competing interests: I declare no competing interests in reviewing the series of Problem Gambling Guides produced by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

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