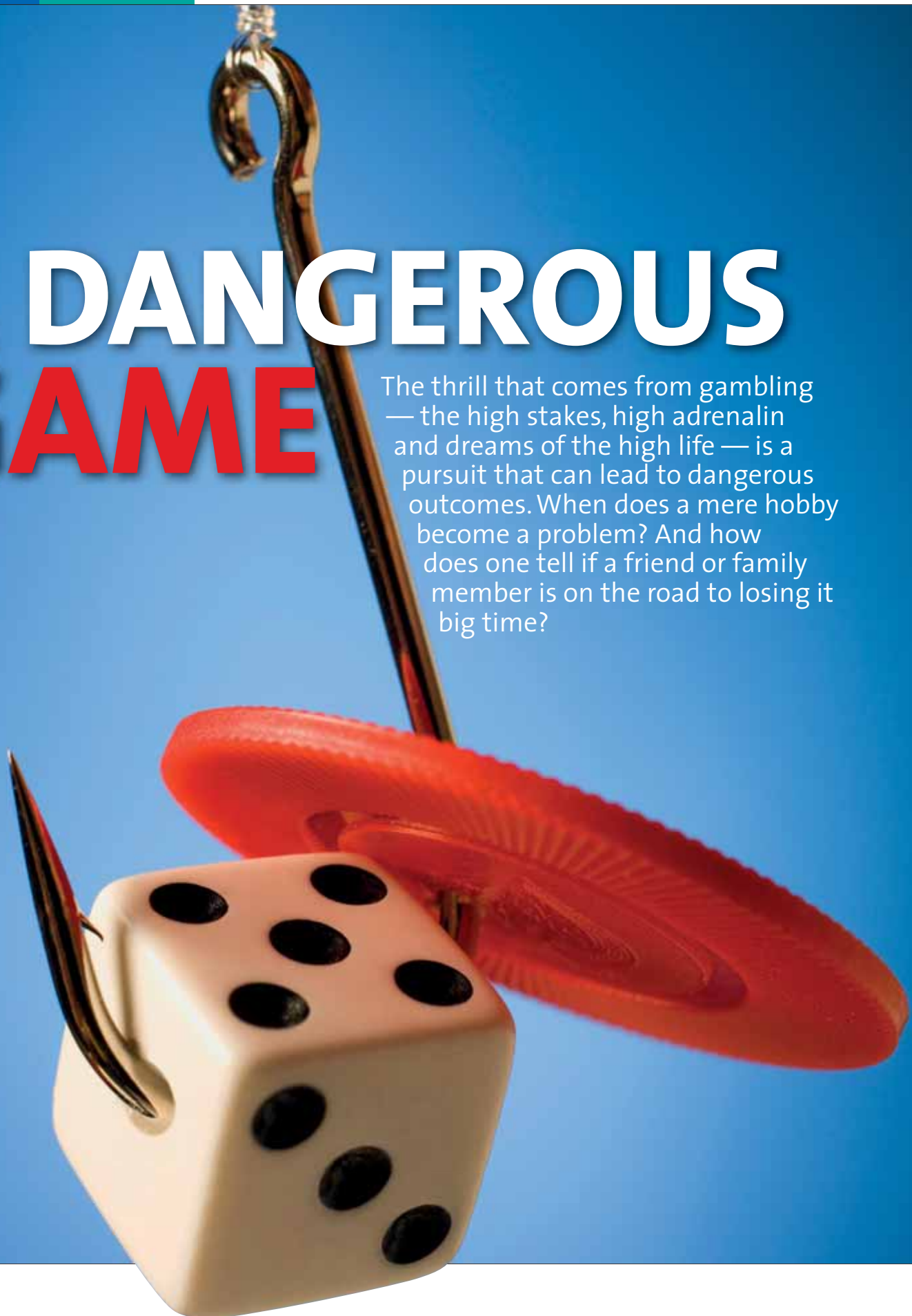


A DANGEROUS GAME

The thrill that comes from gambling — the high stakes, high adrenalin and dreams of the high life — is a pursuit that can lead to dangerous outcomes. When does a mere hobby become a problem? And how does one tell if a friend or family member is on the road to losing it big time?



BY SHERALYN TAY WITH CONSULTATION FROM DR TAN HWEI SIM, ASSOCIATE CONSULTANT WITH NATIONAL ADDICTIONS MANAGEMENT SERVICE (NAMS) AT THE INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH

In the first two days of its opening, 35,000 people streamed to the Resorts World Sentosa casino — the first in Singapore. Glitz and glamour aside, many punters were there with the aim of winning it big. While many of us ‘gamble’ casually — buying 4-D, playing mahjong or holding poker nights — problem gambling is quite another story.

According to Dr Tan Hwei Sim, Associate Consultant with National Addictions Management Service (NAMS) at the Institute of Mental Health, gambling addiction (also called pathological gambling) describes a severe pattern of excessive or destructive gambling behaviour and is a recognised psychiatric disorder. “Pathological gambling is an illness because gamblers in this category demonstrate persistent and recurrent maladaptive gambling behaviour that causes significant dysfunctions in their life,” she explained, “The course of pathological gambling is also one of a chronic remitting illness.”

Dr Tan explained that while social or recreational gamblers — those who play mahjong or card games in a social setting, or take part in the occasional lottery — gamble for fun, relaxation and leisure, pathological gambling describes gambling to a degree that is associated with significant problems. “Social gamblers are able to set a monetary limit and do not bet more than they can afford,” she said, “They see losing as part of the game. They do not become preoccupied with gambling or chase losses. Gambling also does not cause problems to their home, work or social life.”

Pathological gambling on the other hand is seen when a person is unable to control the impulse to gamble — with resulting consequences in their financial, emotional and social lives. But as the degree to which individuals gamble or wager varies along a continuum, there are also people who fall in between, Dr Tan said. “In between a social and pathological gambler, we have individuals who gamble frequently and who have encountered some, but not severe gambling related problems. The term ‘problem gambling’ is widely used in gambling research, and includes those gamblers who have a wide range of adverse consequences from their gambling, but fall below the threshold of at least five of the ten DSM-IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) criteria used to define pathological gambling.” (Refer to box story). ❖

PATHOLOGICAL GAMBLING IS DIAGNOSED WHEN A PERSON EXHIBITS AT LEAST FIVE OF THE FOLLOWING CRITERIA:

PREOCCUPATION The subject has frequent thoughts about gambling experiences, whether past, future, or fantasy.

TOLERANCE As with drug tolerance, the subject requires larger or more frequent wagers to experience the same ‘rush’.

WITHDRAWAL Restlessness or irritability associated with attempts to cease or reduce gambling.

ESCAPE The subject gambles to improve mood or escape problems.

CHASING The subject tries to win back gambling losses with more gambling.

LYING The subject tries to hide the extent of his or her gambling by lying to family, friends, or therapists.

LOSS OF CONTROL The subject has unsuccessfully attempted to reduce gambling.

ILLEGAL ACTS The subject has broken the law in order to obtain gambling money or recover gambling losses.

RISKED SIGNIFICANT RELATIONSHIP The subject gambles despite risking or losing a relationship, job, or other significant opportunity.

BAILOUT The subject turns to family, friends, or another third party for financial assistance as a result of gambling.

ONE OF THE THINGS TO UNDERSTAND ABOUT GAMBLING ADDICTION IS THAT — LIKE ALL ADDICTIONS — IT IS A DISEASE, NOT A MERE ‘WEAKNESS OF WILL’. RESEARCH ON GAMBLING ADDICTION INDICATES THAT PATHOLOGICAL GAMBLING SHARES CHARACTERISTICS WITH SUBSTANCE USE AND IMPULSE CONTROL DISORDER.



A GROWING PROBLEM

In recent years, the number of patients seeking help for gambling addiction has been on the rise. In 2007, IMH's NAMS saw 88 patients and this figure swelled to 216 in 2008. Last year, the service saw well in excess of 245 people seeking help for problem gambling. Of the 2,415 calls to NAMS' helplines, 1,518 were related to gambling addiction. Even counselling centres such as Thye Hua Kwan Moral Society, Care Corner and One Hope Centre have reported increases in attendance for gambling addicts. This increase could be due to more awareness and better early intervention systems, but experts agree — with the new Integrated Resorts offering even more avenues of temptations, the problem could be set to rise.

According to a 2007 IMH study, gambling addicts were found to be overwhelmingly male, Chinese, married, employed and with secondary school education. Betting on soccer, 4-D, horse-racing and trying their luck at casinos are their main habits. A recent study has also shown that three per cent of youths here may be problem gamblers.

A DOMINO EFFECT

The problem with gambling addiction is not just financial or limited to the gambler. As with many other addictions,

problem gambling has serious repercussions on many areas of the gambler's life.

"Gambling can cause various social adversities such as family dysfunction and break-up, domestic violence, loss of employment, criminal behaviour and poverty," Dr Tan pointed out. Research has also consistently showed high rates of co-morbid mental disorders in pathological gamblers, she added.

These additional problems include alcohol and substance abuse, as well as mood and anxiety disorders. In fact, a recent study in the United States on pathological gamblers seeking treatment showed that three-quarters of them had an associated psychiatric co-morbid disorder at the time of evaluation and about half had two or more co-morbid disorders. Suicide is also a serious consequence. "Approximately one in five pathological gamblers attempt suicide," Dr Tan noted, "The suicide rate among pathological gamblers is higher than for any other addictive disorders."

AN ILLNESS, NOT A WEAKNESS

One of the things to understand about gambling addiction is that — like all addictions — it is a disease, not a mere 'weakness of will'. Research on gambling addiction indicates that pathological gambling shares characteristics with



DRAW THE LINE

If you or a family member has a gambling problem, reduce the temptation. Apply for the casino exclusion measure at www.ncpg.org.sg.

substance use and impulse control disorder. “This growing body of evidence also supports the role of multiple neurotransmitter systems (such as serotonin, dopamine, noradrenaline and opioids) in pathological gambling,” Dr Tan said, “All these suggest gambling addiction is an illness and not merely a social or moral problem.”

The good news is that this means that gambling can be treated with a concerted programme. But the road to recovery is a long journey. At NAMS, the treatment for patients with gambling addiction is an outpatient programme.

Dr Tan explained that an integrated multidisciplinary approach is taken and combines medical and psychosocial therapy to help gamblers and their families. The team comprises psychiatrists, counsellors, medical social workers, nurses and psychologists. Each patient is assessed to confirm the diagnosis of the problem or pathological gambling disorders.

A psychiatrist will assess and manage any co-morbid psychiatric conditions found. A counsellor will then work closely with the patient (and his or her family), through counselling, motivational interviewing, and case management. Each patient is also referred to a treatment group, GAME (Gambling Addiction Management through Education) where he or she learns about gambling addiction and recovery through a series of psycho-education and discussion sessions.

“GAME’s function is to motivate cognitive and behavioural change through understanding gambling addiction,” said Dr Tan. This helps gamblers learn about money management, dealing with gambling urges, relapse prevention strategies, coping with families, and other recovery skills.

STEMMING THE PROBLEM

With public concern growing about social problems caused by gambling addiction, a national effort by IMH, community programmes and VWOs is underway to address future problems. For example, the National Taskforce on Problem Gambling was launched in 2005 and in recent months, has ramped up its campaigns to increase awareness.

Dr Tan noted that increasing public awareness on problem gambling should increase knowledge and modify misconceptions about gambling; provide information about problem gambling, risky behaviour and the availability of specialised gambling help.

“Besides primary prevention efforts, secondary prevention efforts targeting individuals with risk factors for developing gambling disorder will be important,” she said. This includes screening for at risk gambling behaviour or gambling disorder and training staff at gambling venues to identify potential problem gamblers. Already in place are helplines (1800-6668-668) and the Casino Exclusion measures (see box), to prevent those with a problem from entering the casinos.

If you or your family member has a problem, it’s also important to seek help — the losses from gambling addiction may add up to be more than you can afford to lose. +

KNOW THE FACTS!

There are many misconceptions about gambling — here’s how to separate the myths from the facts.

MYTH

I don’t gamble everyday, so I can’t be a problem gambler.

FACT

A problem gambler may gamble frequently or infrequently, but he or she has a problem as long as their gambling is out of control.

MYTH

I can afford it, so my gambling is not really a problem.

FACT

Compulsive gambling causes not only financial problems, but social ones as well. It can also lead to the loss of healthy relationships, jobs and a social life.

MYTH

I am driven to gamble because of my relationship problems. I am not to blame.

FACT

Addicts often rationalise their behaviour by blaming others, to avoid taking responsibility for their actions. This lack of acceptance is a barrier to overcoming the problem.

MYTH

I should help my relative/friend to pay off his/her debts as a way to solve their gambling habit.

FACT

Quick fix solutions such as bailing the gambler out of debt may actually make matters worse by enabling their gambling problems to continue.

WHERE TO GET HELP

INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH (IMH)
National Addictions Management Service (NAMS)
Specialist Outpatient Clinic C
Buangkok Green Medical Park
10 Buangkok View
Monday to Thursday: 8am to 5.30pm
Friday: 8am to 5pm
Tel: 6389-2000
For appointments: 6389-2200
National Problem Gambling Helpline:
1800-6-668-668