

# Psychological care for people experiencing gambling harm

Community Resource







Gambling harm occurs when repeated gambling leads to negative consequences for the person who gambles or for their family members or friends. Many people can successfully quit or cut back their gambling, especially with the right treatment and support.

Gambling can also affect the family members and friends of people who gamble. A psychologist can help people affected by their own or someone else's gambling harm by supporting them to reduce their gambling, manage their emotional distress, and improve their overall wellbeing.

# What is harmful gambling?

Many people who gamble do so without any serious negative consequences, but gambling can be harmful for some people. Harmful gambling is repeated gambling that leads to negative consequences for the person who gambles or for their family members or friends. Signs of harmful gambling include gambling more and more money to feel the same level of excitement, thinking about gambling all the time, trying to win back lost money by gambling more, and gambling when feeling sad, anxious, or stressed. Many people with harmful gambling have tried to cut down or stop gambling but feel irritable or restless when they try. Some may lie about their gambling, lose important relationships or jobs, or rely on other people for money because of the money they've lost gambling.

## How many people experience harmful gambling?

In Australia, gambling problems affect around 1.2% of adults, while an additional 9.7% are at risk. Men are more than twice as likely to have gambling problems compared to women, with young men aged 18 to 24 years being most at risk. Even though it is illegal, about 30% of young people under the age of 18 gamble in any given year, with 1.5% having a gambling problem and another 2.2% being at risk.

## Can people recover from harmful gambling?

Although harmful gambling is a long-term problem for some people, others recover after only one episode. Some people can also move in and out of harmful gambling over time. However, relapse is common—about half of those who recover start gambling again within a few years. How serious the problem is, how long it lasts, and whether someone has other mental health issues can all affect if gambling becomes a long-term issue.





# What are the causes of harmful gambling?

There is no single factor that contributes to the development of harmful gambling. Instead, it is usually due to a combination of multiple factors.

## Gambling-specific factors:

- The gambling environment, including government policies and social attitudes, can cause harm and influence how often people gamble.
- Exposure to gambling, such as how easy it is to access and how much it is advertised can make harmful gambling more likely.
- Types of gambling, like pokies, sports betting, and casino games, are riskier than others because of their design and how people use them.

## General factors:

- Cultural factors, such as traditions, beliefs, and community attitudes, can shape how people view and engage in gambling.
- Psychological factors, like mental health issues, past trauma, and personality traits, can make someone more likely to develop a gambling problem.
- Social factors, including age, gender, family, and friends, also play a role in gambling behaviour and its effects.
- Biological factors, such as genetics and brain differences, can make some people more vulnerable to harmful gambling.

## What are the harms from gambling?

Gambling can affect almost every aspect of a person's life, with approximately 15% of people who gamble experiencing at least one gambling related harm. Financial harms, like reduced spending money or being late paying bills, are the most common harms from gambling and are the most common reasons why people decide to change or seek help. Relationship issues, including conflict or tension, spending less time with family members and friends, and neglecting relationship responsibilities, are also common. Many people also report emotional harms, such as feeling distressed, ashamed, or regretful about their gambling. Some people also report harms to their health, cultural practices, and work or study performance.



# Which psychological treatments are effective?

Psychological treatments can help people who are experiencing harm from their gambling. The most effective treatments are Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy and Motivational Interviewing. Mindfulness-based treatments, also show promise but need more research. People who stay in treatment and attend more therapy sessions usually have better results.

**Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT)** is a type of therapy that teaches people skills to change their unhelpful thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. It teaches people to recognise and change unhelpful thinking patterns, such as believing in “lucky streaks” or chasing losses, and replace them with more realistic and helpful thoughts. CBT also includes practical strategies to help people manage their gambling, like educating them about addiction and how odds and chance work. It also can provide guidance on budgeting and managing money better and encourages people to seek help from family, friends or support groups. Psychologists may also use CBT to help people find practical solutions to gambling-related issues, such as money or relationship troubles, understand their triggers for gambling and create plans to handle setbacks.

**Motivational Interviewing (MI)** is a type of counselling that helps people make positive changes in their lives. Instead of giving direct advice, the therapist listens, asks questions, and supports them to find their own reasons to change. MI helps people become more aware of their problems, resolve any uncertainty they



have about changing, and encourages positive self-talk. It also helps people feel more confident in their ability to change and increases their motivation and commitment to making lasting changes for a better future.

**Mindfulness-based treatments** help people focus on the present moment without judgment. They teach skills like deep breathing, meditation, and awareness of thoughts and feelings. These treatments can reduce stress, improve self-control, and help people respond to challenges in a calmer, healthier way.



### What other support is available?

Many people experiencing gambling harm prefer other forms of support, including self-help treatment, peer support, or self-exclusion.

**Self-help treatments:** Many try to manage their gambling on their own using self-help treatments. Most self-help programs are now available online or through app. These programs are often based on CBT and include helpful information along with practical skills to support change.

**Peer support:** Some people find it helpful to talk to others who have experienced gambling harm. Many people prefer self-help groups like Gamblers Anonymous and SMART Recovery.

Peer support from gambling harm services and online forums can also help people connect with other people who share similar experiences.

**Self-exclusion:** Self-exclusion programs help people take a break from gambling by blocking their access to gambling venues or betting sites. For land-based gambling, people can ban themselves from multiple venues. For online gambling, BetStop is a free national self-exclusion program that allows people to block themselves from all licenced online betting services.



# How are family members and friends harmed by gambling?

Gambling doesn't just affect the person who gambles. It also affects their family members and friends. In Australia, one in 20 adults have been harmed by another person's gambling. Family members and friends of those who gamble, often have higher rates of mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, higher rates of alcohol use and lower quality of life. They also commonly experience financial stress and relationship problems which can be long lasting. Partners and children are usually the most affected, but the level of harm depends on how emotionally or financially connected family members and friends are to the person who gambles and the seriousness of the gambling.

## What treatments are effective for family members and friends?

Psychological treatments can help family members and friends support the person who gambles and manage the effects of gambling on their own lives. The two main approaches include:

- **Community Reinforcement and Family Training (CRAFT):** This approach, which is based on CBT, helps family members improve their own wellbeing and encourages the person who gambles to reduce their gambling and seek treatment.
- **5-Step method:** This approach supports family members by helping them manage gambling harms, gain confidence, build coping skills, find social support, and access additional resources.



Other approaches include training focused on helping family members and friends develop better coping strategies to reduce emotional distress. Family members and friends who do not want to seek professional help can also access online CBT-based self-help treatments. Couple-based treatments are also available but more research is needed to confirm their effectiveness.

# Seek additional support when needed

If you feel that the harm from gambling you or your family members are experiencing is getting too much, a psychologist may be able to help. Psychologists are highly trained and qualified professionals skilled in helping people with a range of mental health and wellbeing concerns, including gambling harm. There are a few ways you can access a psychologist. You can:

- Use the Australia-wide [Find a Psychologist](#) service or call 1800 333 497
- Ask your GP or another health professional to refer you.

If you are referred to a psychologist by your GP, you might be able to get a Medicare rebate. You may also be able to receive psychology services via telehealth so you don't need to travel to see a psychologist. Ask your psychologist or GP for details.

You can also get free support from gambling harm services in Australia. Most of these services offer therapeutic counselling, financial counselling, helplines, and online services for anyone experiencing harms due to their own or someone else's gambling. Some states and territories have dedicated multicultural and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services, criminal justice services, peer support programs, residential treatment, and legal support. Several state and territories also offer apps to support people with harmful gambling. To access these services, you can contact:

- Gambling Helpline: 1800 858 858
- Gambling Help Online: [gamblinghelponline.org.au](https://gamblinghelponline.org.au)



# More information

## Organisations

There are many additional resources available to help people manage their gambling.

### Gambling Help Online

Website providing information, resources, and self-help material for people who gamble, their family members and friends, and health professionals. [gamblinghelponline.org.au](http://gamblinghelponline.org.au)

### GambleAware

Website providing information, resources, and self-help material for people who gamble, their family members and friends, and health professionals. [gambleaware.nsw.gov.au](http://gambleaware.nsw.gov.au)

### BetStop

The National Self-Exclusion Register, which is a safe and free Australian Government initiative to block people from all licenced Australian online and phone wagering providers in a single process. [betstop.gov.au](http://betstop.gov.au)

### Kids Helpline: 1800 551 800

Provides free counselling, useful self-help information and other support options for kids and young adults. [kidshelpline.com.au](http://kidshelpline.com.au)

### National Debt Helpline: 1800 007 007

Provides free telephone legal advice and financial counselling. [ndh.org.au](http://ndh.org.au)

### Headspace

Online and telephone services for young people aged 12-25. [headspace.org.au](http://headspace.org.au)

### 13 YARN: 13 92 76

National crisis support line for mob providing confidential yarning opportunity with a Lifeline-trained Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Crisis Supporter.

### Lifeline: 13 11 14

Provides support and advice for anyone experiencing a personal crisis.

### Beyond Blue: 1300 224 636

Provides mental health support.

### Mensline: 1300 789 978

Provides support for men.

## Useful Links

- [Seeing a psychologist: FAQs](#)
- [How much does seeing a psychologist cost?](#)

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