

# visions

Vol. 14 No. 2 2018

## problem gambling and video gaming

is growing up in the digital age  
hijacking our kids' brains?

a daughter's perspective  
on gambling



START

## visions

Published quarterly, *Visions* is a national award-winning journal that provides a forum for the voices of people experiencing a mental health or substance use problem, their family and friends, and service providers in BC. It creates a place where many perspectives on mental health and substance use issues can be heard. *Visions* is produced by the BC Partners for Mental Health and Substance Use Information and funded by BC Mental Health and Substance Use Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority.

<b>editorial board</b>	Representatives from each BC Partners member agency, guest editor, and external members Jennifer Alsop, Kristy Bjarnason, Susannah Church, Stacie Weich
<b>editor-in-chief</b>	Sarah Hamid-Balma
<b>substantive editor</b>	Jillian Shoichet
<b>layout</b>	Justyna Krol
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## contact us

**mail** c/o 905 - 1130 West Pender Street,  
Vancouver, BC V6E 4A4  
**phone** 1-800-661-2121 or 604-669-7600  
**fax** 604-688-3236  
**email** [bcpartners@heretohelp.bc.ca](mailto:bcpartners@heretohelp.bc.ca)  
**twitter** @heretohelpbc



# visions

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Your latest theme triggered many thoughts for me. I well understand the “euphemism treadmill” referred to. I laughed out loud when I first heard the term “consumer” applied to people using mental health services. What did this word have to do with people with mental illnesses? My laughter at what I heard as absurdity was interpreted as ridicule and I was told, in a reprimanding tone, that this was the term people with mental illnesses had chosen for themselves. I have often wondered—does everyone with a mental illness find it appropriate to be called a “consumer”? Now you tell me the term is only rarely seen these days, so I guess not.

Now as for “use”, “abuse” and “addiction”: I think these are three different concepts and I’m opposed to the change to “substance use”. “Use” is having a glass of wine or two, or a toke. “Abuse” is using to excess, then driving, or becoming physically or verbally abusive. “Addiction” is when someone abuses substances to the point where relationships, finances, or employment suffer. I defend my right to say “no substance abusers” in an ad for shared accommodation, as I did years ago. Sharing one’s personal space with someone who is addicted can result in problems such as unpaid rent, or having to endure another person’s substance-influenced anti-social behaviour. Sharing with occasional, moderate, substance *users* is different.

—Anne Miles, Gibsons

### Correction

*Visions* would like to apologize for an error in the last print edition on “The Language We Use.” Ashley’s article inadvertently had an opening paragraph attributed to her that was from a different person. The digital editions online have been corrected.

## editor’s message

This is our ‘hot topic’ issue. It’s also the first time in 20 years of *Visions* we’ve looked at the issue of problem gambling and video gaming. Is it ironic that the issue after we change our name away from the language of ‘addictions’ to ‘substance use’ we focus an issue entirely on so-called ‘behavioural addictions’ that don’t involve substances? Perhaps not. If you weren’t already aware, the connections with both mental health and substance use, too, will become clear in the pages that follow.

Ten years ago, I don’t think I would have really connected to this theme, but in recent years, it seems around me in a new way. I’ve had two friends affected by it in their close relationships. Even more personally, I experienced a month a few years ago when I played a game app (2048) and spent more time trying to master it each evening than I care to admit. I was suddenly reminded of that period preparing this issue. How I’d say to myself: “oh, you were so close that time, just one more try...” The goal orientation and perseverance and that were drilled into me in school as virtues suddenly were a curse! Thankfully when I reached the goal, I was satisfied enough to stop. But I had a tiny window into the lure.

Since having children, I’ve also become acutely aware how early I’ve had to explain gambling to my kids. Whether it’s explaining what a 50-50 draw is at a baseball game, or how the contest scratch tickets we used to sometimes get at Safeway work, or the different risk-reward levels of the arcade games at Playland, they were exposed to all these concepts and more by the age of six. It’s easy to see the fun; I’m not sure they really understand the risk part yet. But that’s also by design. After all, many adults still struggle with that part.

The contributors in this issue are incredibly diverse, but they are all exceptionally articulate and reflective. They help us see how their behaviour makes sense in context. I also applaud their courage. Early on, I had a few people decline to write because of the shame around these issues or fear that just talking about it might do harm. Fortunately, I think you’ll see that as with other mental health and substance use problems, talking about it is one of the first steps toward recovery.

Sarah Hamid-Balma

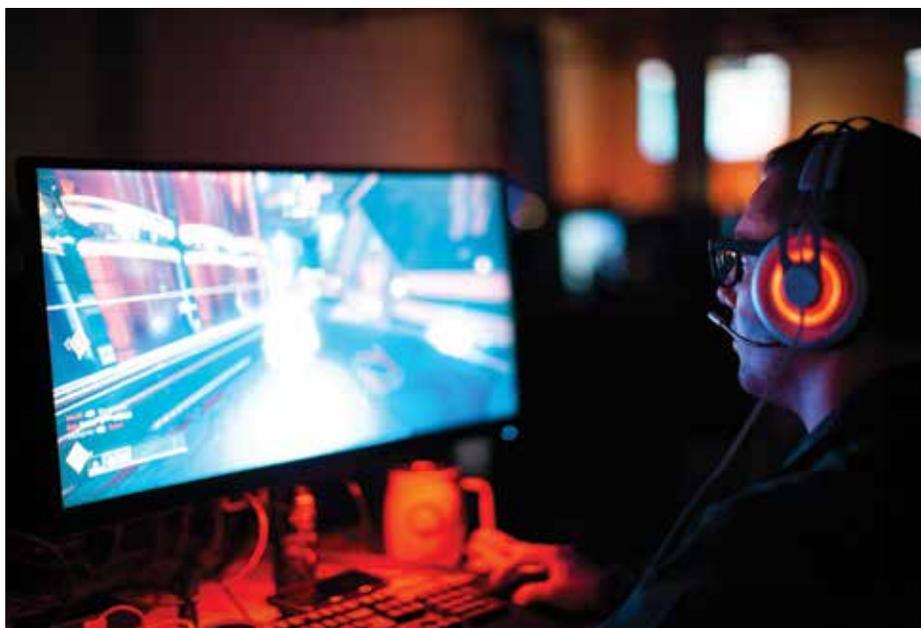
*Sarah is Visions Editor and Director of Mental Health Promotion at the Canadian Mental Health Association’s BC Division*

# Digital Roulette?

## TECHNOLOGY, GAMING, GAMBLING AND THE RISKS TO OUR SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Andre Serzisko, MA, RCC

Growing up in the 80s in a remote patch of boreal forest in northern Saskatchewan, I vividly remember playing cards for pennies with my family, betting on the outcome of a game at the local pool hall and the simple joy of escaping into video games as we watched the rise of *Pac Man*, *Space Invaders* and *Asteroids*. “Addiction” was something we attributed to those using alcohol and drugs, never to behaviours like technology use, gaming or gambling.



*Andre is a registered clinical counsellor. He is a trainer and clinical supervisor with Citizens' Counselling Centre in Victoria, BC, and the Provincial Prevention Coordinator with BC's Responsible & Problem Gambling Program (RPGP), which offers support and education to those experiencing difficulties with gaming and gambling. All services through the RPGP are free of charge and can be accessed by calling the Gam Info Line at 1-888-795-6111. Visit the RPGP website at [choicesandchances.ca](http://choicesandchances.ca)*

Technology fascinated me, and when we dumped our typewriters and liquid paper in favour of hard drive towers and a backspace button, I was in my element.

Technology heralded the way forward, a new life for everyone on the planet. Consider what this could have meant to individuals in isolated communities, and for young people

struggling to find their way in the world. It was an opportunity to be connected to everyone else, to take part in a global social community—to end the geographic isolation that plagued our northern small town. We would now determine what communities we belonged to, we were in control of whom we engaged with and how this was to happen ... or so we thought.



Photo credit: filadendron at ©iStockphoto.com

Many of us find it harder and harder to turn away from the screens that have found their way into our lives. We might think we are controlling how we interact with the world through technology, but in many ways our technology seems to be exerting control over us.

Times may have changed, but the promise of technology and the allure of escape in a video game, or a gambling opportunity, are no different today from when I was growing up. For me, the draw of technology has always been similar to the draw of substance use. It provided me with the opportunity to distance myself from my experience of poverty and isolation. Others can be attracted to a sense of gaining control over their environment, or the excitement that comes with conquering an enemy or completing a quest.

When I connected with the online gaming world as a young adult and

stood at the precipice of a limitless Internet, I felt something I hadn't felt before: a sense of belonging. I found in the world of gaming a new and fulfilling way to express myself.

For most people, participation in the gaming world is lighthearted fun, providing recreational and, often, social satisfaction. For a few, however, this sense of casual belonging and camaraderie morphs into an all-consuming activity and takes on a meaning far greater than the game itself. In my own experience, the allure of gaming required me to make some difficult life choices: Was I going

to continue to walk towards that precipice? Or was I going to try to find a new path?

Over the past 25 years as an educator, therapist and program coordinator in the substance use and gambling fields, I have seen that the opportunities for escape have become increasingly more sophisticated. Access to these opportunities has in many cases come out of advances in technology. In fact, technology itself seems to have become a problem for some. Many of us find it harder and harder to turn away from the screens that have found their way into our lives. We might think we are controlling how we interact with the world through technology, but in many ways our technology seems to be exerting control over us.

Families routinely purchase more than one television per household, many of us have smartphones and children are using tablets or their parents' phones as soon as they can hold objects. Many of us play games via technology—it might surprise you to know that the average age of the typical gamer is 36, and so-called gamers are not exclusively male.<sup>1</sup>

As the global corporations that provide these gaming opportunities cozy up with companies that offer gambling services, the line between gaming and gambling becomes increasingly blurry: we see in-game betting opportunities, offers to purchase loot boxes that contain random prizes, micro-transactions that advance us through the gaming experience. These features have made video gaming almost indistinguishable from gambling. Even *Pac Man* has been turned into a competitive player-on-player gambling

In our relationship with gaming, gambling and technology, it may be that what we are searching for is, and always has been, in front of us all along: an exploration of our self and our relationships with the people around us.

connection. Finding the balance between our need for connection with others and our desire to control or escape our environment is a task that all of us must undertake if we are to successfully navigate between the real world and the digital one. ▾

opportunity, with its release planned for sometime this year.<sup>2</sup>

We have achieved that continuous global connection that we only dreamed of decades ago—though it has taken us in a direction that many of us did not foresee. But is this non-stop access to a globalized, commercialized world worth it? What is the ultimate cost of all that connection?

Already, an increasing body of research—from academic and practitioners' organizations such as the Canadian Pediatric Association and similar groups around the world—warns us of the hazards of screen time for children. Recently, the World Health Organization has put its cards on the table, identifying a new categorization for gaming problems.<sup>3,4</sup>

While technology has certainly shaped how we gamble and game, blaming technology, or even the access that technology gives us, for our current relationship with gaming is not the answer. After all, gambling and gaming as pastimes have been around for thousands of years,<sup>5</sup> and technology is here to stay. A more relevant and meaningful question to ask ourselves is why the use of technology is becoming so pervasive for so many.<sup>6</sup>

Some researchers in the addictions field suggest that while we increasingly seek connections online, we are in fact becoming more and more emotionally disconnected from each other. The number of times we connect with others through social media has escalated dramatically, and yet studies show that we feel more isolated and are less likely to make face-to-face connections with people.<sup>7</sup>

Arguably, the online world enables us to participate in communities of like-minded people, where we can discuss everything from politics to sex. But just as people can take on an avatar in the gaming world—and be whoever they want to be—individuals can also take on an avatar in online discussion forums and on social media platforms. Ultimately, we do not know if the opinions and personalities we engage with online are real or assumed, and we have few tools at our disposal to assess their validity.

In our relationship with gaming, gambling and technology, it may be that what we are searching for is, and always has been, in front of us all along: an exploration of our self and our relationships with the people around us, and the meaning of those relationships—learning where we find the most comfort and the most

# Gaming as a Disorder

Benjamin Shing Pan Wong, MA, RCC

From my perspective as a clinician who specializes in the treatment and prevention of problem video gaming, 2018 has been an eventful year.

*Benjamin is a registered clinical counsellor (RCC), speaker, author and mental health advocate in Vancouver, BC. He serves as Principal Consultant at Mindful Digitality, a counselling practice that treats people struggling with the problematic use of screen technologies*



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This is not simply because an increasing number of people are struggling with this condition (which could be the subject of another article) or that the consequences people experience as a result of video gaming are increasingly serious (which could also be the subject of another article).<sup>1</sup>

What makes 2018 remarkable is that the World Health Organization (WHO) included “gaming disorder” as a diagnosable psychiatric condition in the 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases, published on June 18. Journalists—multitudes of them—leaped on the story. I have since given numerous media interviews, on and off camera, offering my opinions and insight.

My 18 years of counselling experience inform my rationale for treating video gaming (or, for that matter, any pathological digital dependency) as a potentially addictive behaviour. First, gaming is a behaviour that affects mood. Video gamers often see their games as a predictable, risk-free means of having fun and relaxing, unlike other, arguably riskier, pursuits that might affect mood but may not be predictably pleasurable (such as social relationships, school, work and physical fitness regimens).

Second, gaming is a behaviour that can affect one’s normal functioning. I have encountered video gamers so wrapped up in their own digital worlds that they fall into chaotic

patterns of diet, personal hygiene, sleep, exercise, work life and interpersonal relationships.

Third, like other addictive behaviours, gaming is a behaviour that can be used as a means of coping with emotional distress brought on by challenging life circumstances. When we consider how video games are designed to provide fun and pleasure, it is hardly surprising that gamers play games to numb pain and relieve stress.<sup>2,3</sup>

Fourth, long-term video gaming can result in neurological and psychological changes. MRI studies reveal that the endorphin circuit (which controls pain relief), the dopamine circuit (which controls pleasure, elation, motivation and concentration), the impulse control circuit and the stress response circuit are all affected by long-term video gaming, in a way that is similar to how our brain circuitry is affected by long-term gambling and substance use.<sup>4,6</sup>

The World Health Organization's identification of gaming disorder as a psychiatric diagnosis comes as no surprise to mental health professionals. In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) included "internet gaming disorder" in the 5th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), intending to encourage further research into the condition's etiology and potential treatment options (even before the disorder had received WHO's official recognition).

An important implication of this evolution is the increasing availability and accessibility of psychiatric treat-

In my own practice, I have noticed two particular predictors of good therapeutic progress and positive outcomes.

ment for individuals and families affected by problem video gaming. When a condition or addictive behaviour is only casually or anecdotally recognized (as in the case of sex addiction and compulsive shopping, for example), the option of seeking professional help, when it exists, tends to be overlooked or underexercised—or dismissed altogether.

For individuals struggling with digital dependencies, formal recognition of the condition by organizations like WHO and the APA is a victory. The individuals' need for quality, professional help is legitimized, paving the way to more effective, evidence-based treatment options—and, ideally, positive outcomes.

Another implication is a better understanding of how the condition is formed (its etiology) and how it can be treated (its remedy). Now that the condition is diagnosable, we can begin to conduct more vigorous and systematic research and practice in the area of digital gaming.

In my counselling office, for example, we have had success with cognitive-behavioural therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy and motivational interviewing in our support of problem gamers' quest for wellness, if not outright recovery. I expect that these and other counselling techniques commonly used to treat

other addictive behaviours will soon be more formally evaluated as effective treatments for gaming disorder.

In my own practice, I have noticed two particular predictors of good therapeutic progress and positive outcomes. First, family participation is crucial, almost a prerequisite, in considering, planning and implementing change in the problem gamer's life. This personal observation is consistent with what other clinicians have long known about addictions: family members becoming active participants in the solution is often the "game changer" in treatment.

In my practice, I help family members to identify and change behaviours that enable rather than help the gamer (like waking the gamer up so he won't be late for work, or making the gamer lunch). In many cases, problem gaming behaviours subside (and the gamer's wellness improves) even when family members engage in therapy without the gamer. This fact highlights how important an individual's emotional environment is in the perpetuation of addiction and addictive behaviours, and in the gamer's recovery.

A second predictor of positive outcome is a frank discussion (and the individual's increased understanding) of the concept of technophilia. Technophilia is the mindless



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acceptance and inclusion of every novel piece of technology into one's life without considering what value the technology adds or the purpose it serves. A technophile is someone who loses themselves in the dazzling and colourful promises of technology while utterly failing to recognize or acknowledge technology's inherent dangers.

As individuals and as a society, we habitually exercise a blind faith in technological development. To my mind, this issue is not investigated deeply enough when we search for explanations for increasing rates of psychological disorder, suicide and mental illness in the 21st century.

While WHO's formal identification of gaming disorder is a momentous step

forward, it also generates a number of relevant and pressing questions. What intermediate steps were taken, between WHO's suggestion that

gaming be studied as a medical disorder and the condition's anticipated recognition as one? How do we address fears that the identification of gaming disorder now characterizes as an individual's medical problem what might be evidence of a societal problem?

Does the psychiatric community currently have sufficient clarity and agreement about how the condition is formed to warrant a diagnosis? And if so, what is the nature of that understanding? By enabling a diagnosis of gaming disorder, must we now brace for the impact of labelling problem video gamers as "patients" who might need psychotropic medications to "recover" from their "illness"? If so, what effect might that have on our society?

Mental health professionals around the world anticipate more developments. We hope these questions will have clearer answers as more information becomes available. ▽

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An illustration of a pink e-reader device. The screen shows a page with a large, bold, pink letter 'V' at the top, followed by several lines of greyed-out text. The e-reader is set against a green circular background.

# Confessions of a Video Game Addict

Cam Adair

I was addicted to playing video games for over 10 years. Choosing to set gaming aside and move on to other things has taught me more about living a meaningful life than anything I've done before.



*An international speaker in the field of video game addiction, Cam was named one of the "150 Leading Canadians in Mental Health" by the Ontario-based Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH). He is the founder of Game Quitters ([gamequitters.com](http://gamequitters.com)), the world's largest support community for video game addiction, serving members in 92 countries*

Photo credit: Derek Heisler

Cam Adair

Growing up, I was a fairly normal Canadian kid. I went to school, I played hockey, and then I would go home and play video games. I was happy, I felt smart, and I had friends. That all changed in Grade 8, when I began to experience intense bullying, both at school and on my hockey team. The less frequently I went to school and hockey practice, the more I played video games.

Video games became my escape, a place where I had more control over my experience. When I was in Grade 11, my parents sent me from our Calgary home to Penticton, BC, to play hockey for the Okanagan Hockey Academy. The play was simple: if I

wanted to play hockey, I had to go to school. And it worked. Although I still gamed a lot, I passed Grade 11. Unfortunately, when hockey ended midway through Grade 12, I dropped out of school. I moved back home, and for the next year and a half, I was depressed, living in my parents' basement. I played video games for up to 16 hours a day.

My parents told me that if I wasn't going to school, I had to get a job, so I got a job as a prep cook in a restaurant. Every morning for the first few weeks, my dad would drop me off at work. But as soon as he drove off, I would walk across the street and catch the bus back home. I would



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Games provided me with an escape. Whenever I was feeling stressed out or needed a break from the day, gaming enabled me to temporarily forget my situation.

sneak in through my window and go back to bed—because I had been up all night playing video games. When my parents wondered where my pay cheque was, I made up some excuse. I would get another job and the pattern would resume. I would pretend to work a few weeks, and then I would tell my parents that I had “quit” or “got fired.” I was always making excuses.

Gaming only made things worse. One night, I was so depressed that I wrote a suicide note. After I wrote the note, my phone buzzed with a text message from a friend, inviting me to go see a movie—and luckily, I said yes. During the movie, I found myself

laughing and smiling and having a great time. This shift in my mood made me realize that my mental health was in serious trouble, and I needed professional support. I came home that night and asked my father if he would help me find a counsellor. The counsellor made me a deal: I had to either get (and keep) a job, or I had to go on antidepressants. I got another job—but this time, I was committed to keeping it.

The new job—in retail—gave me structure and stability. I had a schedule to follow, and accountability. Most of all, I had a second chance. Up until this point, my life had been a mess. I was withdrawn

and unhappy, and I gamed to escape. Now I had the opportunity to turn things around. In order to do this, I knew I would have to quit gaming.

For two years I didn’t play at all. I took the 16 hours a day I used to spend gaming and invested them in my goals and dreams instead. I learned social skills and made new friends. I read personal development books, attended workshops and started a business helping others.

My life was improving, but I also faced many challenges. The stress of having my own business was overwhelming at times. I experienced conflict with business partners and friends, and although my state of mind had improved significantly, I still struggled with anxiety and depression.

Then I relapsed. In the summer of 2009, the challenges became overwhelming and I just wanted to escape. Traditionally, I would use gaming for this, but since I had quit gaming, I figured maybe a change of scenery would help. I decided to move to Victoria. I found a place to live and moved in with two new roommates whom I met through an acquaintance.

One of my new roommates happened to be a professional poker player. That first night at the house, Ben and I started talking about our past gaming histories, and we realized that we used to play the same game: *Starcraft*. Ben immediately announced he was going to buy a copy of the game that night so we could play together. I told him I didn’t play anymore—that I really didn’t want to start gaming

again—but he just laughed it off. “Just one game,” he said.

He returned with the game, and over the next 30 minutes he proceeded to absolutely destroy me.

Humiliated by my defeat, I decided to improve my game so Ben could never beat me at *Starcraft* again. For the next five months, I fell back into my old habits and played for 16 hours a day, every day. I stopped working and lived off the small amount of savings I had from my business. I barely left the house other than to drive to Tim Hortons to get coffee and a bit of food.

My other roommate, James, would invite me to go to the gym, or go hiking or surfing, and I would always say no. I only wanted to game. Eventually, I realized my gaming was out of control and I needed to quit. Again.

This time, I took time to reflect on why I had been so drawn back to gaming. I realized that, for me, games fulfilled four main needs.

1. **Temporary escape.** Games provided me with an escape. Whenever I was feeling stressed out or needed a break from the day, gaming enabled me to temporarily forget my situation.
2. **Social connection.** Gaming provided me with a community. The online gaming world was where I felt welcome, safe and accepted. I think a lot of gamers feel a sense of social connection when they game, despite the stigmatizing stereotype of gamers as nerds, loners and losers.
3. **Constant measurable growth.** Games provided me with a positive feedback loop, where I could immediately see my improvement and my progress. I experienced a sense of instant gratification.
4. **Challenge and certainty.** Games gave me a structured sense of purpose, a mission and a goal to work towards. Games are specifically designed that way. I had to beat a boss, gain a weapon, acquire a new skill, complete a level. I always knew what the goal was and what I had to do to accomplish it. “Real life” isn’t that simple.

I realized that I didn’t game just because I love video games—or even because I think video games are fun. My drive to game—and the drive that many gamers experience—comes from a desire to fulfill certain needs. When gamers stop playing video games, they need to meet these needs with alternative activities—or they will continue to be drawn back to games, just like I was.

I also realized that if I was struggling to quit, surely there were many others

out there who were struggling as well. When I decided to quit gaming that second time—in 2010—I went online to research how to quit playing video games.

To my surprise, there was not much useful practical advice out there. Instead, there were banalities—“Study more” and “Hang out with your friends”—which are not very useful things to tell an addicted gamer who might be using gaming to avoid attempting challenging tasks or making in-person social connections. I felt it was important to share my experiences as a hardcore gamer who struggled to find useful support, and to share what helped me recover from my addiction.

In May of 2011, I published my story on a personal development blog. It went viral, and I started hearing from tens of thousands of people who were seeking help for the same issue. This led me to found the online community Game Quitters, launched in 2015. Today, Game Quitters is the world’s largest support community—online or otherwise—for people struggling to overcome video game addiction, with members in 92 countries.

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# House of Cards

## A DAUGHTER'S PERSPECTIVE ON GAMBLING

Heidi Morgan

My dad and I had a loving and complex relationship. Like it is for many little girls, in my eyes, my father could do no wrong. He had a giving heart and an amazing sense of humour. But he was also a gambler. Horses and poker were his favourite gambles. It wasn't just the thrill of the game or the adventure of the race. Something more than that drove him. He was addicted. I think that for him, gambling filled the emptiness that he needed to fill.

*Heidi is a Vancouver-based musician and writer with a day job in mental health. She is a passionate advocate for human connection and our own acceptance of our "enoughness." She has two cats and would like to live in a tree house in a tropical climate some day. She hopes the cats will consent*



Photo credit: PeopleImages at ©Stockphoto.com

My dad was a gambler by nature. He gambled beyond the betting arena, in other areas of his life. For example, he claimed to not know the extent of my mother's mental illness before they married, but in retrospect I think he just didn't want to believe she was ill. Here was a woman with a comparably warm and loving heart, who had been through a horrible ordeal in her first marriage. Perhaps he told himself that her illness—she had been diagnosed with schizophrenia—was situational, which of course it wasn't. Yet he took a chance on their love. On her.

My mother is brilliant, and an amazing pianist. Because of her illness, however, she also faced many challenges, which meant that she and my dad dealt with a lot through their marriage. I think he found in gambling an escape from the reality of our crumbling family life. But it's very possible that he would have ended up gambling even without the challenges at home.

I don't think my father ever felt like he was good enough just as he was. His life's journey seemed to be focused on proving his worth; he constantly looked outside himself for validation. At some

point, I believe his motivation to work hard in life just died. In the absence of grit and persistence, he hoped that gambling would net him the big golden payoff. He had big dreams.

In some ways, my childhood was difficult. Sometimes there was no food to eat at home. We spent a lot of time with my maternal grandparents, but sometimes I would be home alone (my mother was often hospitalized and my older brother wasn't around). On those days, I would walk the half-hour to the poker club that my dad frequented, in the hope that he would provide me with a meal. I was only 11 years old the first time I did so, and I remember being afraid, walking into the building by myself. My dad would add the food to his tab, and then after the hand of poker was done, he would come and sit with me. I remember one time I went all the way to the club only to find that he wasn't there. I had to walk all the way back home, which seemed to take much longer than the walk there.

He never physically abandoned us—he would always eventually come home. But I often felt that he was disconnected from us—as if he'd "checked out," mind, body and soul. He seemed unaware of the consequences of his gambling, untethered from reality, always hoping that his winning big would somehow be our ticket to a life of ease.

I remember going to the racetrack with him on several occasions. Inside the building, the halls were filled with the smoke of hundreds of cigarettes. I remember it being so hard to breathe and smelling so bad that I still don't understand why I ever started smoking.

At some point, I believe his motivation to work hard in life just died. In the absence of grit and persistence, he hoped that gambling would net him the big golden payoff. He had big dreams.

My dad was a passionate man: boy, did he ever get animated at the track—whether he lost or won. If he won, he would shake those papers towards the heavens and yell with glee. It was great to see him win. But if he lost, he would cast the folded program he held in his hand violently to the ground and scream blue murder. It was hard to see him lose. He took a hit to his self-worth every time—the house of cards he had built for himself was coming tumbling down.

My dad's gambling did result in some positive events once in a while. Once, he had a big win and surprised my brother and me at Christmas with brand-new bikes. I was so happy. I rode that bike from our house to the end of the street and back for hours! I always liked those sorts of surprises, few as they were. They were much better than the empty promises he made. There were a lot of those.

When I was 12 and my brother was 14, we went into foster care. My mother had had enough of our grandparents having to stock the fridge and pay the rent, so she asked her brother, my uncle, for help to place us. What felt like an eternity in foster care was really only a little short of a year. We eventually moved back in with our parents, but things didn't get any better. They still had trouble paying the rent and buying enough for us to eat.

We ended up staying in hotels a lot because you can pay for shorter periods of time. Sometimes, I had to be strategic about it: when the hotel staff came to demand payment, I would say, "Hey, I'm just a kid and my parents aren't home, so leave me alone." One day, that strategy didn't work. I had to pack up what I could carry and leave. That was a lonely walk out of there.

In another hotel, all four of us shared a single room with two beds, a hot plate and a bar fridge. This time, I made the choice to go back into foster care, leaving behind my mom, dad and brother in the hope of finding a better life.

Eventually, my dad decided to move from New Westminster to the Downtown Eastside. My mother followed him there—though by this time they were living apart. My brother moved out on his own, and I met and moved in with my boyfriend. In my mid-20s, when that relationship ended, I moved to Vancouver as well. It was the first time I had ever lived alone. I found a good job and rented a small bachelor-ette pad in the West End. But I felt guilt for the stability I had found in my life.

Then my dad took another big chance, one that would cost him

CONTINUED ON PAGE 33

# Dungeons, Dragons and Anxiety

## HOW A VIRTUAL QUEST LED TO REAL-WORLD REWARDS

Jose-Carlos (Joey) P. Laguio

I've always had a complicated relationship with video games. Ever since I was a child, I loved immersing myself in games that took me to different times, dimensions and places. Some of my earliest and fondest memories are of playing the first *Age of Empires* game when I was still in kindergarten. My father would sit beside me, advising me which building to construct next or which soldier to train in order to complete the next mission. The journal entries I wrote in elementary school were about which military general I had overcome in combat the night before and the strategies I had used to defeat him.

*Joey is the Engagement and Community Specialist at Anxiety Canada (formerly AnxietyBC), in addition to working as a multidisciplinary music/technology educator at various schools around Greater Vancouver. He also teaches underprivileged and under-served youth and is a co-founder of the a cappella Wings Vocal Collective*



Photo credit: Matthew Fong

Joey Laguio

In high school, my relationship with video games became more and more of a crutch that I depended on when I didn't want to deal with whatever else was going on in my life. Whether it was being afraid to connect with other people or my fear of making mistakes at school, it was always so nice to go home and just get lost in a different world. I started playing massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs for those of us in the know). These games, like *World of Warcraft*, simulate an entire fantasy world in which you

can spend many hours, designing and improving the character you play.

During university, the frequency and duration of my play sessions in these online worlds escalated. For most young people, university is a tough time—there are tons of projects, labs and exams. You're constantly meeting new people. You can spend long hours doing work that is often stressful. Getting lost in my MMORPG of choice—*Guild Wars*—was the easiest way for me to numb myself. I could forget everything else that

was going on, forget all my fears and anxieties, even just for a short time.

### How the virtual world became my real world

Soon, I started to become over-invested in my characters, relating to them on a level that was, I know now, excessive and unhealthy. I thought so much about their back story, about who they were, about their abilities and about what their goals were. As a result, I found myself being much less present in the real world; even if I was just hanging out with my friends, I was stuck in my head thinking about what I would do next in the game when I got home. In hindsight, I think on some level I was trying to live out the life that I had always wanted for myself in the real world but couldn't seem to realize. My own life was just too depressing and anxiety-ridden.

### And so I played. I played and I played and I played.

Because of the anxiety I was experiencing, keeping up with my studies and sticking with jobs was a challenge. And whenever I had to take a break from schooling or work, I would game. Gaming distracted me. If I didn't have to think about a job, for example, or about feeling anxious, then I could convince myself that the issue didn't exist. I would wake up in the morning, head straight to the computer and play for the entire day until I went to bed. The next day, I would repeat the whole thing again. And the more I played, the less desire I had to change things.

But despite my early conviction that gaming was helping my anxiety, my symptoms actually got worse the longer I used gaming as a way to avoid other things. By avoiding my anxieties and my

fears—by not actually facing them and working through them—I was silently telling myself that I lacked the strength to tackle them. They continued to grow, looming larger and larger in my mind.

What was even more distressing to me at the time was that the anxiety I felt in the real world started to seep into my gaming life as well. I never wanted to use voice chat (the feature of multiplayer online games that allows you to talk to your teammates and coordinate more complex, cooperative manoeuvres)—I was too scared that people would judge my voice (which is ironic, considering that I belong to an a cappella singing group) or my skills and capabilities. I never wanted to take on challenging missions—I was too scared that other people would deem me to be a failure.

Essentially, I started to fear that my life in the virtual world was just as limited as my life in the real world. I stopped challenging my online characters—I chose not to advance in the game. I just repeated the same trivial tasks again and again, killing the same creatures in the same areas of the online world, avoiding opportunities to level up or challenge myself.

### Using the virtual world to practise real-world skills

Things began changing for the better when I began seeing a psychologist for

my anxiety, soon after I graduated, and started applying some of the principles I learned in our cognitive-behavioural therapy sessions to my daily life.

In the beginning, applying those principles to my daily life in the real world was too overwhelming, so I used them in my daily life in the virtual world instead—where the stakes were lower and I typically wasn't as anxious. I began to practise principles of gradual exposure. For example, I would start with things that made me slightly anxious and slowly progress towards accomplishing things that made me more and more anxious in the online gaming environment. Even if I spent most of my gaming day doing relatively trivial things, I made a point to do just one thing each day that challenged me. I would step into a dungeon for five minutes, and then resume easier tasks. Or I would challenge myself to take part in a voice chat for a few minutes.

At times, I failed missions and embarrassed myself. And I took it personally. I beat myself up. I would think, "Wow, Joey, you can't even succeed in a virtual game? No wonder you're a failure in the real world." It was tough—the negative self-talk continued, even when I did things right. Sometimes I had to stop playing. Sometimes I had to stop progressing because I just couldn't do it.

Gaming distracted me. If I didn't have to think about a job, for example, or about feeling anxious, then I could convince myself that the issue didn't exist.

But I always forced myself to try again. The gaming world is set up so that you can try a task again and again until you accomplish it. In some ways, it was actually a good place for me to start building my confidence. Over time, I was able to tackle more and more challenges and take more risks in the virtual world. I was able to get in-game rewards that were once completely unobtainable—like that fancy legendary sword I had always wanted. The process of overcoming my own reluctance to challenge myself, and of permitting myself to take on some semblance of agency in my life, was extremely empowering for me—even though it was just a virtual experience. And as I discovered, there was nothing “virtual” about the very real self-confidence I was building.

Over time, I became much more adept at breaking the negative thought and behaviour cycles. I experienced fear,

identified what was feasible to attempt, overcame my fear and felt the feeling of victory that was oh-so-sweet. What was even sweeter was that I began to see the value of these virtual-world experiences for my real-world life. The quests and the battles were virtual, but the skills I was learning were applicable to the real world, too.

### Escaping the virtual world with real-world magic

As I became more confident overcoming challenges in my online world, this new attitude slowly started to permeate the rest of my life—yes, my life in the real world! I had always been afraid of many things: driving, cooking, working, socializing, exercising—the list goes on.

By analyzing my online gaming experiences and taking specific, conscious actions in the gaming world in combination with the help I was receiving in therapy, I learned the true value of

doing things gradually. I didn’t have to do things perfectly on the first try. I gave myself permission to make mistakes and learn from them. I was kinder to myself, and I learned how to show my vulnerability—to myself and to others. The small victories I experienced in these virtual fantasy worlds gradually trained me to believe that I was capable of doing things in the real world that I had been afraid to do my whole life. I just wish I could show my younger self how much progress I’ve made—using the same online games that inspired both of us.

To this day, I still play video games, but now I do it in a much healthier way. I am more aware now of how I’ve used playing video games as a method of distracting myself. This awareness has led to me moderating the time that I play, viewing it as a complement to my real-world experiences rather than a replacement.

Playing games is just one of the ways I build self-confidence. I no longer consciously think about the process; I just do it automatically. I associate the feeling of victory and accomplishment with overcoming something difficult. I no longer need to push myself so hard to tackle a challenge. When I encounter a challenging situation at work, for example, or if I feel anxious about an upcoming social event, I think back to how satisfied and proud I felt beating that big boss in that dungeon. It reminds me that I am able to overcome my fears and that the rewards on the other side are truly worth it. ▾



Photo credit: Matthew Fong

Joey Laguio

There was nothing “virtual” about the very real self-confidence I was building.

## CONFESSIONS OF A VIDEO GAME ADDICT—CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

Game Quitters has 200 free videos on YouTube, addressing the most common concerns, such as how to deal with cravings, how to avoid replacing one addiction with another and how to overcome boredom. We also have a free community forum where people can connect with others, and online programs that walk gamers and parents through the quitting process step-by-step, including finding new activities, adding structure to the gamer's day, overcoming withdrawal symptoms and connecting with like-minded people.

I haven't played a video game for seven years, and my life has never been better. I spend my days

travelling around the globe speaking to students, parents and mental health professionals about the challenges and rewards of quitting. I love to surf and to DJ. I have a great group of friends, and my family has never been closer. Most of all, I'm happy, and although I still experience challenges every day, I do my best to face them.

My dream is to ensure that anyone who is struggling with a video game addiction, or anyone who simply wants to stop playing for any reason whatsoever, has the best support possible. That's why I created Game Quitters, and that's why I wake up every day looking forward to doing the work I do.

If you have any questions about game addiction and quitting, you can find hundreds of resources on Game Quitters ([gamequitters.com](http://gamequitters.com)), or you can contact me at [cam@gamequitters.com](mailto:cam@gamequitters.com). **v**



**IS THIS HOW YOU FEEL?**

It's time to check in on your mental health

take the quiz at **[bouncebacktoday.ca](http://bouncebacktoday.ca)**



# Losing It All—and Winning It Back

## HOW A GAMBLER TOOK CONTROL OF HER LIFE

Lynda

My name is Lynda, and I am a compulsive gambler. I have not placed a bet since August 3, 2000. I am also an alcoholic. I have not had a drink since January 18, 1986.

*Lynda lived in Langley until three years ago and now lives in Lake Cowichan, BC*



Photo credit: Ababsolutum at ©iStockphoto.com

I agreed to contribute as an author to this issue of Visions so that people will realize that gambling is an insidious disease that can be hidden from everyone—including family—for many years before the gambler hits rock bottom. For me, it was a slow and subtle descent to the bottom—over probably 40 years.

The longer I am clean, the further back I realize my gambling started. Gambling was not a serious issue in my life until I was in my 30s, but I did have a lot of the traits early on.

It certainly started innocently enough. Going to bingo once a week with girlfriends was typical.

My problem was I wanted to win so bad. I would play so many cards that it was exhausting. I never wanted it to be over. I was never happy when other people won, either, even if it was a friend.

When I got together with my second husband, he took me on my first trip to Reno in about 1978. Oh my gosh, I was in paradise. All the glitz and lights and

noise—and no clocks. I couldn't wait to sit at a slot machine. Before we left, I had filled four envelopes with \$500, one envelope for each day we were going to be there. But after we'd been there about 20 hours, I had not slept, and I was already reaching into my fourth envelope. I got indignant when my husband wouldn't loan me any money. He said it would bring him bad luck (maybe worse luck than he was already having).

We both started getting cash advances on our credit cards to keep us going, but by the end of the trip, we both had nothing. I am so grateful we had some cash left to get the car out of the parking lot at the airport. We'd left some in the glove box.

As rocky as it was, our first Reno experience certainly didn't deter us from revisiting Sin City. We made three subsequent trips, driving down to Nevada instead of flying in order to save money. Two of the trips we made were in December and the vehicles we drove were both sketchy: a Cadillac with a leaky gas tank and our old Volkswagen van, which had minimal brakes.

Driving in those vehicles through the snow in the Sierra Nevada mountains was scary, but not scary enough to send us home. Each trip, we gambled until all our cash was gone and took cash advances on our credit cards. We lost everything. On both occasions we made the 900-mile drive home with no money. And not much talking.

The last trip we made to Reno was in the summer, in the Volkswagen van we had named Cherry. It was a beautiful weekend for a trip. We headed out

For compulsive gamblers, any win just fuels our addiction. Money has no real value. I never thought, Gee, I had to work for two hours for that \$20 that I am feeding into this machine.

and got as far as Tigard, Oregon. We stopped for gas, and the van wouldn't start again. The mechanic wasn't on duty until the next morning. Thank God, Cherry had a bed.

When we woke up the next morning, my husband said, "Do you think I should try it?"

I said "For sure."

He turned the key in the ignition and Cherry fired up. My husband turned to me and said, "North or South?"

"South," I said. "And don't stop until we get there!"

We made the rest of the trip filling up Cherry with gas while her engine was running, going through drive-thrus for coffee and taking our bathroom breaks in shifts at rest stops so we could always keep the engine going. When we pulled into our hotel, I was so relieved. I couldn't have cared less how we were going to get the van fixed or what money we were going to use to pay for it, or even how we were going to make it home. I was in Reno, and I was ready to gamble!

I hardly need to tell you that this trip ended just like the last three: no money, maxed-out credit cards and not much chatting on the long trip home.

It was at about this time that we heard that casinos were going to open in Vancouver.

Oh boy, oh boy: this was our solution! No more flights, no more long drives, no more exchange rates.

We could just go to Vancouver and drive home, right?

In theory, yes, that's what we could have done. But once we got to Vancouver, we would stay until our last dollar was gone. We were not the unluckiest couple. In fact, we had some pretty substantial wins. But instead of taking our winnings home, we would stay, and our bets would get bigger.

For compulsive gamblers, any win just fuels our addiction. Money has no real value. I never thought, Gee, I had to work for two hours for that \$20 that I am feeding into this machine.

By this time in our lives, we were in pretty rough shape financially. My husband was going to Money Mart between every pay period and I was getting a \$500 advance on every pay cheque. We had blown through all our savings and all our RRSPs, and we had combined credit card debt of about \$75,000.

The insanity of the gambling disease is that we keep doing the same things over and over and expect different results. I would get my pay cheque, head to the casino, stay until everything was gone, drive home, try to grab a couple of hours of sleep, and then wake up and wonder where I could get some money to get me through the day.

The end of the road for us was August 3, 2000. Sometimes I think you just know when you've had enough. We were lucky we realized it while we were still able to do something about it. That day in August, we attended our first Gamblers Anonymous meeting. We both belonged to AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) already, so we knew the basic approach worked for us. In my opinion, the support of their 12-Step program is absolutely essential.

Our families were also supportive. Fortunately, our financial ups and downs had never affected them very much and we were on good terms.

I have not gambled on anything since that day. I was so happy to discover that there were other people like me; I found myself relating to almost everyone in the GA program, finding hope and inspiration in everyone's story.

Unfortunately, my husband had a few relapses before he really understood. I got upset every time it happened. I know you're supposed to do the program for yourself, but when your partner goes off the rails, it has an impact on your relationship—and not just financially! But we got through it together, and by the time he passed away in 2009, he had been gambling-free for six years. During that time, we

were able to pay off our debts, build up our credit and restore our RRSPs.

I am sharing my experience, and the story of how I found my strength and renewed my hope, with the thought that if just one person reads this and thinks to themselves, "Gee, that sounds like me—maybe I should look into getting some help with Gamblers Anonymous," they can be assured that my friends and I will be there to welcome them with open arms and listen to their story!

For more information about Gamblers Anonymous, call 1-855-222-5542 (toll-free) or visit [www.gabc.ca](http://www.gabc.ca). ▼



Photo credit: Hello I'm Nik on Unsplash

# Beating the Odds

## HOW I FACED MY PAST, EMBRACED MY CULTURE AND LEFT THE SLOT MACHINES BEHIND<sup>†</sup>

Wayne\*

I'm treaty Status Indian in my late 50s. I belong to a reserve in BC. I didn't grow up there. I left at an early age because I was being abused. So I grew up in Vancouver most of my life. And then I got reintroduced to my reserve in later years when I was about 25 years old.



*Wayne belongs to a First Nation in British Columbia. He currently lives in Kamloops*

*\*pseudonym*

*†As told to Sarah Hamid-Balma. Visions would like to thank counsellor Janice Mercredi Murphy for helping us find and support an Indigenous contributor for this issue*

It's been about 18 years since I hit a casino for the first time in my life. I went with a friend in Kamloops. I didn't play cards, just slot machines. It was the sounds and the lights and the colours of the slot machines that got me. And the chance that maybe I was gonna win something. I just found it exciting; I never looked back.

But saying that, I look back at my childhood and I can remember in elementary school playing marbles for other kids' lunches, so I could have what they had to eat because I didn't have that in my home. So in Grade 4, I learned how to play marbles and do other things to win

other kids' lunches and stuff. I guess that's where some of this started.

### **Shame, loneliness and desperation**

At the casino, it was all happy-go-lucky at first. But within the first year, I was spending my rent money, I'd pretty much maxed out my cards and everything, and it wasn't fun anymore. I would be out all night, all hours, it didn't matter. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I avoided people, my family. Only the people close to me knew I gambled—but they didn't know I was in debt. I didn't want anybody to know I was in debt.

My family all knew how much I loved gambling. They knew I ran to the max:



Photo credit: Minerva Studio at ©Stockphoto.com

Mostly I gambled by myself. I would go to the casino because I was just lonely; gambling was my escape from my loneliness. I guess I was a little depressed, too. And it was really just a place for me to be safe without drinking or using drugs.

every penny I could spend, I spent in the casino. I could never set a limit. Any time I had money in my pocket I'd be out the door, you know. Sometimes I told stories about where I had been. It just escalated from there. There was a lot of shame, for sure.

I didn't let anyone know I was in debt, not until I was desperate, when I didn't have anywhere else to turn. I had to let my family know eventually. I had to borrow money off my sister in order to pay my rent, so I had to let her know. My sister didn't give me heck, but she let me know she couldn't do that anymore if I went down that road again and used up all my money.

Mostly I gambled by myself. I would go to the casino because I was just

lonely; gambling was my escape from my loneliness. I guess I was a little depressed, too. And it was really just a place for me to be safe without drinking or using drugs. You have choices: you either go to a baseball game, or do some gambling, or you go drinking, and the last thing I wanted to do was go back to drinking and re-fund [re-finance] my misery out there in the streets. I knew I would have died out there. I never drank over my gambling debt, but I could see myself returning to drinking if I kept up the gambling because of the stress that gambling was causing in my life.

So I signed myself up for self-exclusion for a year. (The program enables individuals to ban themselves from casinos across British Columbia for

various periods of time). During that year away from the slots, I got real busy with the gym as well as competition sports.

I don't know how long it was before I went back to the casino; I think it was right after my year of self-exclusion ended. It was a New Year's bingo thing and they were having \$1000 games. I thought, "I could go to that. I won't be playing on machines. I'll go play bingo. I'll be safe there." But you had to walk past slot machines to get to the bingo hall, and of course that didn't work.

I got into more trouble with my debt and stuff, so I signed myself up for three years of self-exclusion and this time I asked for counselling [from the BC Responsible & Problem Gambling Program]. I didn't want to start drinking again. I knew that's where it was going to take me if I kept this lifestyle up.

I had never talked about my past before and I needed to find out why I was in the casino. Gambling was also getting me in trouble with the relationship I had. I knew I needed to talk about my feelings because I was shutting down, isolating, which was the worst thing I could do. I seen the signs of potentially going back out and picking up that bottle. It was going to ruin my life.

### Understanding the root causes

That's when I started seeing a counsellor, about five or six years ago. I finally wanted to talk about my childhood and what brought me to gambling, and drugs and alcohol and stuff. I went through some really deep counselling for quite a long time.

I can't say enough about how much I've learned about myself. I used to find it hard to talk about myself, about the past. Counselling let me get past that, where I'm not afraid about what you're going to say about me. It doesn't hurt me anymore for people to know what kind of person I was. I was just ashamed of gambling, drinking, that kind of lifestyle. When I started seeing my counsellor, I started talking about my childhood and where it all stemmed from and where it was going to take me if I kept it up. I would've never thought that the roots were so far back.

My drinking started when I was a child, about 15. It was just another addiction I picked up. But I never drank when I gambled. I've been clean and sober now for 16 years. When I was gambling, I had already stopped drinking. Gambling was just another way to fill a void in myself. Gambling was like burying it, not talking about it. With my alcohol, it was a very visible thing: I was a fall-down drunk, whereas with gambling, I hid it.

Gambling was always a hidden thing. I was ashamed. I didn't want people to even know that I gambled. The

only time I talked about my gambling was at group meetings at Gamblers Anonymous. I couldn't talk to anyone outside of the group; I didn't think they'd understand.

### Real recovery

My recovery really started when I went to an all-Native college in Merritt, 20 years ago now. That's where it all started for me, being around my own people for the first time. I was never so comfortable, and that's what changed my life around. I seen a friend from my past, from the streets, who was in the AA program. That's when I joined Alcoholics Anonymous, otherwise I knew I was going to lose my schooling because I was drinking in the first year of school and I was just going downhill real fast. When I went to the [all-Native] school, it finally gave me enough confidence and courage to move forward and join the AA program and do something with my life.

Today, I'm back at the gym. I'm also in a Native "wellbriety" AA meeting. Those are the things I do. My spirituality as well, through my Native ways: that's what keeps me out of the danger zone. And seeing

my counsellor. And being able to go to Gamblers Anonymous. When I get lonely now, I'm learning how to talk about it instead of holding it all in.

I don't think a lot of people realize why they are in the casino. It really opened my eyes when I went to counselling and saw how my gambling stemmed from my abusive childhood, that that's why I was feeling what I was feeling. The same with the drinking: being able to talk about it, put it on the table, really opened my eyes as to how I traded one addiction for the next. And how dangerous that was for me.

There's always help out there: there's a handshake around every corner, you just need to be able to reach out for it. That's the message I have for people today, especially the kids out there that I see turning left when they should be going right—because I recognize all the signs.

When I was abused as a child, I was ashamed. The feelings I had towards my abusers, I guess I kind of blamed myself. I had those feelings so deep that I wasn't able to talk about it until seeing a counsellor. But I couldn't live with hatred in my heart. So being able to finally let go is really powerful. I know there's help everywhere I turn. I just need to be able to open up to reach out to find it.

My culture's been helpful in the biggest way. I started going to my Native sweat lodge, to pray, being at all the ceremonies, and that's when I met the Creator. That entered my life, that changed it. All I know is, when I left that sweat lodge one day, I never thought about drinking again. I knew someone was looking out for me after



Photo credit: milehightraveler at ©iStockphoto.com

getting down on my knees and asking for help. That word, “God”: all my life I couldn’t stand to hear the word until it was introduced to me in our Native ways. That’s the Creator. And once I introduced the Creator into my life, there was no turning back.

I knew from then on, I had to keep up the work in order to keep what I had, and that meant going to AA meetings and talking about myself and being able to help others. Being in that [all-Native] school, that gave me confidence in myself again, that there

was hope out there for me, that I had a chance, that I could learn, that I wasn’t that stupid person people kept telling me I was my whole life. The biggest thing was just being around my own Native people. It changed my life. ▼

## supports, resources and education for gambling in BC’s Indigenous communities

*Angela Voght*

*Provincial Indigenous Coordinator, Responsible & Problem Gambling Program*

The BC Responsible & Problem Gambling Program offers a wide range of services, including in-person and telephone counselling for individuals, couples and family members dealing with gambling problems. We also offer various support groups, educational workshops, day treatment and resources on gambling and gaming.

The Indigenous stream at the BC Responsible & Problem Gambling Program is currently hosting discussion circles in Indigenous communities and organizations to learn more about what additional programs and services it could offer and how to respectfully do this. We regularly request feedback about how we can improve our services to address the unique needs of the distinct and diverse Indigenous peoples, communities and organizations across BC.

From our discussions, we have heard how important it is to ensure that we collaborate with Indigenous communities about the content and delivery of our programs and services. We have also heard how important it is that intergenerational and community-focused programming be based on a wellness approach that is rooted in local community knowledge and understandings about ways of living in balance. We are interested in starting here, to co-create community initiatives that are relevant, holistic and appropriate for the participation of all age groups.

Early on in our discussions, we received requests for training related to working with addiction, trauma and grief and loss. In response, we have designed five new narrative therapy and community work training sessions, exploring topics such as working with addiction, trauma and loss, community work and ways to document traditional knowledge in Indigenous communities. Narrative therapy focuses on developing listening, questioning and story-telling skills. From a narrative perspective, we assume people are experts in their lives, and that some of the most relevant knowledge to respond to problems that people face is the knowledge they already have. This perspective supports significant partnerships with communities.

From a narrative perspective, we understand the problems faced by individuals and communities as separate from the people themselves. We are interested in helping those who consult with us to develop a sense of agency, exploring effective ways for individuals and communities to reconnect with their own knowledge, skills and understanding.

We look at addiction, trauma, grief and loss within their wider context, considering how inequality and marginalization have set the stage for contemporary challenges. We also explore how Indigenous traditional and local ways of knowing and being offer unique tools to face these challenges. Narrative therapy is particularly well suited to an Indigenous context, where learning and teaching through stories has a long cultural history.

Our training sessions have been met with enthusiasm from counsellors, health workers and other community workers in various support roles. We are building on this positive response as we continue to enhance our Indigenous-focused supports for gambling and gaming, and our broader resource library.

To learn more about our Indigenous services, training sessions and resources, please contact me, Angela Voght, Provincial Coordinator, at 1-604-657-8604 or [angelavoght@gmail.com](mailto:angelavoght@gmail.com).

# Betting on the Brain

## SLOT MACHINES, GAMBLING DISORDER AND RESPONDING TO BEHAVIOURAL ADDICTION

Luke Clark, PhD

Gambling originated in human societies thousands of years ago. The determination of a prize on the throw of a dice or the spin of a wheel taps into our basic fascination with chance, fate, hope and luck. Modern, commercial forms of gambling, including lotteries and casino slot machines, are designed with what is called a “house edge” — a negative expected value (in economic terms), which makes these games profitable for gambling operators and governments.



*Dr. Clark is Director of the Centre for Gambling Research at UBC and an associate professor in UBC's Department of Psychology. The centre was launched in 2014 with joint funding from the Province of BC and the British Columbia Lottery Corporation. Find the centre at [cgr.psych.ubc.ca](http://cgr.psych.ubc.ca) and Dr. Clark on Twitter at @LukeClark01 and @CGR\_UBC*

The flipside of this design is the inevitable financial loss sustained over time by gamblers. The harms associated with gambling arise from these losses. One of the hallmark features of problem gambling is “loss chasing,” or repeated gambling in an effort to recoup earlier losses. Loss and debt also fuel the negative consequences of gambling: a gambler might lie about money, borrow money or argue with family and friends about money.

### The first behavioural addiction

As a medical illness, gambling disorder was first recognized in 1980 and termed “pathological gambling” in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders by the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-3). In 2013, a surge of research from psychology and neuroscience led to the DSM-5 re-positioning the condition — now called gambling disorder — alongside

the substance addictions.<sup>1</sup> Gambling disorder thus became the first behavioural addiction.

Recent decades have seen a gradual increase in the number and type of gambling opportunities, but this increase in opportunity is offset by an increased awareness among the general population of gambling harms and increased attention on treatment and prevention. Strategies to mitigate gambling harms are sometimes collectively termed “responsible gambling.”

Like many jurisdictions, British Columbia undertakes regular surveys to assess the prevalence of gambling problems among its residents. In a 2014 BC survey, 3.3% of the sample (3,058 adults) met the threshold for problem gambling, with 0.7% meeting the criteria to be diagnosed with gambling disorder.<sup>2</sup> Men, younger adults and lower-income individuals were more likely to report problem gambling behaviours. The results of this survey mirror observations in many other parts of the world. These rates appear to be stable over time, and slight fluctuations from one survey to the next may be explained by subtle changes in the survey design.

### The brain basis of gambling cravings

The reclassification of gambling disorder as a behavioural addiction was prompted by several lines of evidence. Some of the research in my lab at the University of British Columbia’s Centre for Gambling Research has examined personality traits (including impulsivity and decision-making biases) as well as brain changes (such as those in the dopamine system) in people with

gambling problems.<sup>3</sup> Personality traits and brain changes are associated with the development of gambling disorder as well as with the development of substance addictions.

In a recent experiment,<sup>4</sup> we studied the brain basis of cravings in men with gambling problems. We used a technique called “cue reactivity,” where the participant views photos associated with gambling during a brain scan. We also tested a healthy group of non-gambling men. All participants saw some neutral photos as well as the gambling photos. The group with gambling problems showed heightened reactivity to the gambling images in the brain’s frontal cortex, the striatum and the insula. These areas of the brain are also frequently observed during similar tests in research on substance addictions.

In our experiment, we found that activity in the insula was directly related to how much each gambler craved while they viewed the gambling photos. This suggests that the insula may be especially important in generating the urge to gamble. The effects of visual gambling images on the brain are very relevant to the treatment and prevention of problem gambling behaviours. For example, gambling advertisements often contain such cues and can often trigger cravings and relapse in people with gambling problems.<sup>5</sup>

### Different forms of gambling

In my lab, we have been paying increasing attention to the differences between different forms of gambling. We regard modern slot machines as one of the most harmful forms of gambling.<sup>6</sup> For the people we see in

Vancouver with gambling problems, slot machines are by far the most common preferred form of gambling.

When the Centre for Gambling Research was launched in 2014 at UBC, the BC Lottery Corporation donated a number of authentic slot machines to aid our research. These are housed in our Casino Lab. Much of our investigation has considered single features of slot machines (such as “near miss” events, where the gambler appears to narrowly miss a big payout) to understand how people become addicted to these games.

Recently, we have also looked at the psychological processes that underlie “immersion” in slot machine play, where players enter a trance-like state. Immersion seems to be more closely linked to slot machines than other forms of gambling, and it is also associated with problem gambling.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, however, as these games contain many psychological features, it is unlikely that one specific element will fully explain the addictive capacity of slot machines.

### What we can do about problem gambling

For BC residents who feel their gambling might be getting out of control (and for family members of gamblers), there are a number of supports available, including a telephone helpline and a dedicated treatment service offered by the BC Responsible & Problem Gambling Program ([www.bcreponsiblegambling.ca](http://www.bcreponsiblegambling.ca)). There is also a self-exclusion program that enables a gambler to ban themselves from casino venues across the province.

The main shortcoming with these programs is that they are currently used by only a minority of the people with gambling disorder. Stigma may be a contributing factor: gamblers may feel hesitant to use the systems because of the shame or criticism they experience as an individual with a gambling problem. There is some evidence that problem gambling is associated with even greater levels of stigma than substance addictions.<sup>8</sup>

We also need to do much more to prevent the development of gambling problems in the first place. One of the objectives of our research on slot machine immersion is ultimately to encourage the modification of these games to reduce their capacity to immerse players for extended

periods. This kind of modification could include pop-up messages that encourage the user to take a break from the game, or display their cumulative spending levels.

Finally, the gambling landscape has been transformed by recent developments in technology, creating new opportunities to gamble in the home or on mobile devices (via online gambling), as well as increasing the exposure of youth to new gambling options, such as free games on social media platforms.<sup>9</sup> In order for our communities to anticipate and respond to these developments, a close dialogue is needed between gambling operators, regulators and academic researchers. Ultimately, the recognition of gambling as a public

health issue must pave the way for the funding of gambling services (treatment, prevention, education), akin to current public health approaches to substance use and substance addictions. ▽

### call for volunteers

The Centre for Gambling Research at UBC is currently looking for participants who gamble regularly, or who are experiencing gambling problems, for research projects. Please visit [cgr.psych.ubc.ca](http://cgr.psych.ubc.ca) for more details.



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# Gambling Fun or Gambling Pain?

## SOME RECENT OBSERVATIONS BASED ON MY WORK IN THE CHINESE COMMUNITY

Irene Tang, RCC

John\* is one of my counselling clients. This is his story.

*Irene has been a counsellor with the BC Responsible & Problem Gambling Program since 1997 and works with the Chinese community. She is a registered clinical counsellor (RCC) in BC and works at S.U.C.C.E.S.S. as the Family Service Program Manager with the Family and Community Services Division*

*\*pseudonym*



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The story begins with John sitting in his car in the parking lot of a casino. He has just gambled away his entire pay cheque, within only a few hours of leaving work, and now must go home to his family. How can he possibly face them? How can he admit what he has done?

Of course, the story doesn't really begin in the parking lot. It began many years ago and is rooted in John's personal experiences and the role of gambling in the immigrant community. As John sat in his car, he thought back over the past few months of gambling and his chasing after

money he had lost. Then he began to think about his life in Canada.

When he first arrived in Canada from China eight years ago, John was excited to begin a new life. He did not expect to retain the same professional career that he had in China, and he looked forward to trying other professional opportunities and re-establishing himself in his new country.

John wasn't fluent in English, and this made it difficult to find the right job. But he needed to support his family, so he accepted work as a labourer,

with the hope that there would be other, more suitable opportunities along the way. But long hours of physical labour meant he did not have the time (or the energy) to take English classes to improve his language skills.

Sometimes John regretted the move to Canada. But when he looked at his family, especially his children, he reminded himself that the move had been worth it. His children were receiving a good education and seemed to enjoy life here. He worked harder and hoped that one day his luck would turn around.

One evening, a co-worker invited John to the casino after a long day of work. John had not tried casino gambling before. He was curious; he decided to give it a try.

That night, he won a few hundred dollars. “My luck has finally changed!” he thought. From that point on, he visited the casino regularly. He even began to believe he could gamble for a living.

In the beginning, he certainly did win some money. But gradually, he started to lose more than he won. Then he started to chase the money he had lost, betting more and more in order to recoup his losses. His sense of guilt increased. He carried around the burden of his secret, not wanting to tell his wife and family—betting ever higher amounts in the hope that he could just break even.

### Gambling in BC's immigrant community

Stories like John's are not unusual—but this does not make them less

heartbreaking. Many who begin to gamble as a form of entertainment end up experiencing pain and loss. In my experience, stories like John's have a particular poignancy in the immigrant community.

Many new immigrants have not tried gambling in casinos before and are attracted by the excitement, the thrills and the satisfaction of that initial win, especially in a country where life as an immigrant can be very challenging. Winning in the casino can feel like a reassertion or reacknowledgement of one's abilities and worth—particularly if these aren't recognized at work or in everyday life in the new country. The casino can also provide an important social outlet—where people can meet

others who speak the same language and share the same culture.

In the Chinese community, gambling—in the form of Mahjong, dice games and some card games—is a common pastime among family members and friends. It is seen as an opportunity to socialize with others. Perhaps this is why it was easy for John to accept his colleague's initial invitation to check out the casino. But since gambling is viewed by the Chinese community as a game, people are also expected to control their gambling behaviours—as they would in a game—and to not be negatively impacted by their participation in what is generally viewed as a harmless pastime.



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Winning in the casino can feel like a reassertion or reacknowledgement of one's abilities and worth—particularly if these aren't recognized at work or in everyday life in the new country. The casino can also provide an important social outlet—where people can meet others who speak the same language and share the same culture.

In fact, in the Chinese immigrant community, there is a high degree of denial and stigma surrounding problem gambling behaviours; many of my clients tell me that they were simply not aware of gambling's potentially negative consequences. All too easily they fell into the trap of the "chase cycle"—the need to gamble more frequently, or in increasingly higher amounts, in order to win back one's losses. But the more they gambled, the more they lost—and the more they needed to continue the chase. They truly believed that if they worked harder or gambled harder, they would eventually win back their losses. By the time they fully accepted that gambling is based on luck—not hard work—much money was already gone.

The situation is further complicated in the immigrant community because many immigrants gamble to escape emotional pain. For example, some of my clients are mothers who live with their children in Canada while their spouses work in China. While these women manage life's challenges here in Canada, they worry that their spouses may be having extramarital affairs overseas. The women's loneliness, and the prospective loss of a stable relationship, can push them into the casinos. A financial loss may be a way to exact revenge against an absent spouse. It is also a means to alleviate or forget emotional loss.

Family members of those who gamble often feel helpless and see the situation as unfair. From their perspective, the gambler "has fun" at the casino while the family suffers unstable financial conditions at home as the direct victims of gambling's negative consequences.

We cannot force the gambler to change. Instead, I encourage family-member clients to take care of their own needs, to try new, relaxing and fun activities and to live as independently as possible from the gambler.

### Some practical advice for gamblers and their families

As part of my counselling program, I explain to family members that they need to protect themselves financially and emotionally from the negative impacts of gambling. Family members might consider having separate bank accounts and credit card accounts from the gambler so that the gambler can't access money that belongs to other family members. If credit cards and bank accounts are in different names, creditors may go after the gambler instead of family members for debt payment. There are also debt repayment plan options, and some of this research can be done in counselling sessions.

In my counselling practice, I see that family members of the gambler frequently seem to be at the mercy of the gambler's behaviour. When the gambler gambles, family members often become immensely angry and worried and seem to lose their sense of self. There is often an expectation that the gambler will change their behaviour. The main focus becomes to "control" the gambler (rather than always feeling "controlled" by the gambler) and to try to find ways to make sure the gambler does not gamble at all.

But this energy is misplaced. It is healthier—emotionally and

financially—for family members to put in place some practical safeguards to protect their finances and to protect and support other family members. We cannot force the gambler to change. Instead, I encourage family-member clients to take care of their own needs, to try new, relaxing and fun activities and to live as independently as possible from the gambler. Of course, in the best-case scenario, the gambler is able to stop gambling altogether. But if this isn't possible, family members can still live lives that are less negatively impacted by the gambler's actions.

Rebuilding calm communication with the gambler is also essential. Usually, this is difficult for family members, particularly if they have suffered extreme financial or emotional losses due to the gambler's gambling. But I have heard from my gambling clients that care shown by family members helps them to resist the urge to gamble and to question the purpose of their gambling. I have also had clients tell me that they gamble as a way to punish themselves, or that the act of gambling becomes a way to exact revenge against angry family members. If the gambler's sense of guilt or desperation to chase lost money is not understood, the gambler may continue to gamble in the hopes of regaining enough money to satisfy the family. If family members

communicate their distress in ways that the gambler finds difficult to listen to, then this gives the gambler more reasons to escape the situation through gambling.

Try using the following four steps to improve your communication with a gambling family member:

1. Choose a quiet time and place to bring up concerns with the gambler.
2. Assure the gambler that you understand their perspective but that you are worried about their physical and emotional well-being.
3. Enlist the gambler's help in deciding what to do, and give the gambler some time to come up with ideas to engage in their own recovery.
4. After a few days, remind the gambler that the family needs a plan for managing the gambling.

This kind of gentle, patient communication is important for the well-being of the entire family.

### Hope for John and others

John's struggle that night at the parking lot was a turning point for him. He realized that his detour into gambling had cost him financially and emotionally. He decided to tell his wife about his gambling and financial losses. She was devastated and at first had difficulty believing that her trusting and honest husband had developed such a problem. But she also accepted his apologies.

She and John worked out a debt repayment plan with their bank. She encouraged John to sign up for the

voluntary self-exclusion program with the BC Lottery Corporation, which kept John from entering any casinos in BC for three years. She also urged John to receive counselling.

Through counselling, John began to understand the reasons behind his problem gambling. He also learned how to rebuild his self-confidence, establish healthy ways to manage stress and identify strategies to prevent future gambling relapses. Today, John has a healthier lifestyle, is a happier person and is able to enjoy life in Canada.

Gambling can be fun when it is enjoyed in a responsible manner. The province's Responsible & Problem Gambling Program offers prevention services and education on responsible gambling strategies. The same program also offers counselling services for those who struggle with gambling and for their family members. See the program's website for more information, at [www.bccresponsiblegambling.ca](http://www.bccresponsiblegambling.ca). ▾

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## HOUSE OF CARDS— CONTINUED FROM PAGE 15

dearly. He began seeing a woman whom he had met at the single-room-occupancy hotel where he lived and worked in the Downtown Eastside. This woman seemed very wise, had a pretty good outlook on life, and she was funny. I liked that. I wanted to be loyal to my mom but I liked my father's new love interest.

When my dad told me that he had been diagnosed as HIV-positive, he explained that he was pricked with a used needle while cleaning one of the hotel rooms. I later learned that he'd contracted HIV from the woman he was seeing, but I never confronted him with what I knew. They were both good people, and it was hardly important.

I cared for my father in the final year of his life, as his health rapidly deteriorated. During this time, I learned deep lessons about forgiveness. Caring for my father in those last few months meant experiencing, understanding and accepting every shade of sorrow, anger and resentment that coloured my heart.

Over time, as my wounds have healed, I've learned to view my father in a different light. His struggles and his experiences provided me with an opportunity to learn from him. Today, when I see a racetrack or a casino, I think of my father and thank him: he inspired me to work on accepting myself for who I am, and to take chances on connecting with people and loving them deeply. The insights I gained from him are a gift: if we can truly accept and heal our wounds, we can transform them into blessings. Life is a gamble—but even good things can come from a house of cards. ▾

# Is Growing Up in the Digital Age Hijacking Our Kids' Brains?

Hazen Gandy, MD, FRCPC

Digital technology—such as laptops, tablets, cell phones, computer consoles and television—is now ubiquitous across the globe. Billions of people interact with digital technology on a daily basis. We are now seeing the first generation of children who have never known life without it. And from all reports, young people use digital technology a lot.

*Dr. Gandy is a child and adolescent psychiatrist at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario. He is the Medical Director of the Eastern hub site of the Ontario Tele-Mental Health Service and has a strong interest in the impact of digital technologies on pediatric brain development*



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Canadian data from 2013 indicate that 96% of youth ages 15 to 24 use the Internet, accessing it through various devices.<sup>1</sup> Research also suggests that Canadian teens spend an average of 4.1 hours of recreational time daily on screens of some form.<sup>2,3</sup>

We can easily identify how technology has enhanced our daily lives. Communication is now effortless; we can access digital information and contact people around the globe 24/7. Access to an overwhelming selection of digital entertainment is at our fingertips.

Vast libraries of information on any subject are immediately available to us. Arguably, the newest devices are as close as we come to magic, performing seemingly miraculous tasks in ways that the majority of us cannot describe and do not understand. Children seem to intuitively embrace each new digital advance. With their remarkable capacity for divergent thinking, they are capable of pushing new technologies in ever more interesting ways.

Yet despite the enhancements that digital technology offers, it's not clear

that it has actually improved the lives of our kids.

In the past several years, we have seen an alarming increase in mental health services utilization in children and youth in developed countries. In Canada, demand for child and youth mental health services is rapidly increasing.<sup>4</sup> Visits to emergency departments for suicidal ideation, self-injurious behaviour, depression and anxiety are increasing year after year.<sup>4</sup> Adolescents describe feeling increasingly stressed despite the ready access to digital technology seemingly designed to make their lives easier and richer.<sup>5</sup> An Ottawa Public Health survey suggested that as many as one in nine adolescents seriously considered suicide or harming themselves in 2012.<sup>6</sup>

We know that the root causes of mental health problems are complex. But we don't have a clear answer to the questions raised by these disturbing figures: Is there a relationship between technology use in children and youth and their mental health? Does our increasing use of technology threaten the mental health of children and adolescents?

### What digital technology does to our children's brains

From the research data emerges a picture of children and adolescents spending increasing amounts of time—largely unsupervised—in front of televisions, laptops, tablets and smartphones. Time spent with a screen may be perceived by young people as stimulating and entertaining, but it is still time not spent interacting in person with others.

Communicating face to face in person with other individuals is foundational

for initiating and building meaningful intimate, safe social relationships and ultimately forging strong attachment bonds. This is the most important task of childhood: learning social skills. Mastering these skills requires the use of all our senses and takes constant practice and repetition. If this practice and repetition does not occur, the brain simply prunes out neurons and neuronal pathways used to perform social skills.

Developing meaningful social skills requires a visceral connection to our environment and each other that cannot be experienced through texts, tweets, emails or even video calls. Much of our most important communication is nonverbal—body posture and movements, facial expression, voice tone and volume, our rate of speech. Our physical personal space and physical contact with each other can convey enormous amounts of powerful information without a single word. We have a multibillion-dollar perfume industry premised on the notion that scent is a form of communication. Ever smelled someone through a text?

Some research shows that as screen time increases, social skills deteriorate.<sup>7</sup> Many high-school teachers have observed that students who are heavy users of technology show a decreased ability to initiate conversation, make eye contact appropriately, accurately read nonverbal social cues and behaviours, identify emotional reactions in others and respond to others with empathy and compassion. Children and youth with social skills deficits are more likely to be socially anxious and are subsequently at greater risk for behavioural and emotional disorders.

Research is beginning to identify that our exposure to screens is experienced by the brain as stressful. Our “thinking brain” (the frontal lobe) may understand the sensory input as interesting, stimulating or exciting, but our “feeling brain” (the limbic system) experiences the exposure as a stress. Screen time is not restorative: it's activating.<sup>8</sup>

The blue light emitted by screens has been shown to reduce the brain's ability to initiate sleep.<sup>9</sup> If we are exposed to screens for many hours of the day, over time our brains begin to develop a chronic stress response. Our bodies begin to produce more cortisol, a stress hormone that can impair brain function, including memory, focus, concentration and emotion regulation. This potentially increases our risk of developing anxiety and mood symptoms and impairs our emotional resilience.

Screen time is also physically passive. A growing body of research links increased screen time to increasing rates of obesity in children and adolescents.<sup>10</sup> Poor physical health outcomes are associated with higher rates of mental health problems.

Screen use steals time away from developing healthy attachment behaviours and weakens attachment relationships. These constructs, first described by British psychologist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby in the 1950s, are foundational to a person's sense of belonging and validation in their interactions with others and are instrumental in developing a strong sense of psychological and emotional resilience in the face of adversity. Digital technology also tends to

promote virtual, online relationships among peers in the absence of adult supervision or input, which can increase the number of opportunities for young people to exercise poor judgement and make poor choices when it comes to their social interactions online and in person. It may even prevent young people from accessing supports that could help them develop and sustain their resiliency.

Much of the digital content consumed by children and adolescents online (like games and social media) is carefully designed to be as addictive as possible. Social media, for example, is typically developed along the same principles as slot machines, employing the most powerful mechanism of addiction: intermittent positive reinforcement.<sup>11</sup> Because of their brain development, especially their synaptic plasticity, children and youth are particularly vulnerable to the addictive characteristics of the media. They are more prone to develop excessive patterns of use, and it's more difficult for them to break these patterns once they are established.

Finally, social media continues to be plagued with challenges around promoting personal, emotional and interpersonal accountability—the extent to which individuals take responsibility for their actions, comments and behaviours online. Personal accountability in relationships is also foundational in healthy social skills development.

A recent report from the UNICEF Office of Research<sup>12</sup> reviewed a large body of research on the impact of technology on children's lives. The

report suggests that for most children and youth, slight to moderate use of technology has positive impacts. No exposure to technology has slight negative impacts, while excessive use of technology is associated with mild to moderate negative impacts. The report stresses, however, that the relationship between kids and technology is very complex and not easy to study. It cautions that there are limitations and difficulties with the research questions and methods used and that much more research is required to definitively determine how technology affects the lives and brains of children and youth.

### What we can do to counter the negative effects of digital technologies

In the face of these challenges, several strategies can reduce the potential negative impacts of digital technology on the developing brains of children and youth. These strategies encourage children and youth to think about how to use digital technologies in ways that enhance their social skills and their personal relationships. The strategies also help our children and youth incorporate digital technology into their lives in a balanced way.

#### 1. Establish and follow a healthy technology routine.

Create and maintain technology routines at home with children and youth. These routines should have clear, practical expectations and limits that everyone knows. Create digital-free zones and digital-free times and stick to them. Be a good example to your children. If you have decided there will be no digital technologies at the dinner table, leave your

own phone in another room at meal times.

#### 2. Maintain an open dialogue with children and youth about their digital activities.

Talk to your children about what they do online—not just once, but regularly. Talk about the potential hazards of online gaming and relationships, including the addictive qualities of social media platforms and the risks associated with online chat rooms and discussion groups. Establish a reasonable monitoring system so that you can see where your children are going online and how they spend their screen time. Tell them what you are doing so that everyone knows what the expectation is.

#### 3. Educate ourselves.

As parents, we must continue to educate ourselves on the broader impacts of digital technologies on our children's psychological, physical and social development. We must then use our understanding to influence educators and policymakers in their decisions about how to use these technologies in our classrooms and in our communities.

Together we need to become more deliberate, thoughtful and vigilant about how digital technology is delivered to children and youth. We must balance the benefits and risks to ensure these powerful new tools enhance and enrich our children's lives rather than impair the social development and mental health of the next generation of users. ▼

Mahboubeh Asgari, PhD, and Trudy Norman, PhD

Today, children are exposed to gambling more than ever before. They see gambling images almost every day—from the corner store that sells lottery tickets, to movie, online and TV ads for the local casino, to free-to-play mobile gambling-themed apps. Gambling is often depicted as glamorous and exciting and, potentially, a profitable career.



*Mahboubeh is a research associate at the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research (CISUR), based at the University of Victoria, and the project lead for iMinds Drug Education. She is involved in developing an online gambling health promotion resource in collaboration with the BC Responsible & Problem Gambling Program. You can find the site at [choicesandchances.ca](http://choicesandchances.ca)*

*Trudy is a research associate with the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research (CISUR) Knowledge Exchange unit. She is a contributor to an educational online gambling resource that CISUR developed for the BC government*

Over the past few years, the line between gaming and gambling has gradually become blurred. Children may begin gambling because they see it as a form of entertainment or leisure—a kind of game. Betting on culturally approved sports like hockey, for example, can seem almost patriotic. The near-universal presence of gambling activities like 50/50 draws in family-friendly environments can lead children to see gambling as a normal part of life. In fact, gambling is accepted in cultures around the world, including some of

the immigrant communities in British Columbia.

In some families and communities, recreational gambling can bring relatives and friends together, adding excitement and joy to relationships. Wagering small amounts of money on a hand of cards or on the outcome of a sporting event can add to the enjoyment of a family fun night. Responsible recreational gambling can help children learn the rules of the game and test out strategies while sharing the thrill of safe competition. A

child's focus, memory, assessment and problem-solving skills can improve as well. Moreover, children have the opportunity to learn about when and how much to risk.

Equipping our children with the knowledge and skills to make responsible choices is fundamental to their good decision-making. We cannot protect our children by protecting them from risk all the time. What we can do instead is help our children develop the skills and strategies to take risks more responsibly—in gambling and in life. We do this by opening a dialogue with them about the potential benefits and harms of gambling; we can share with them our concerns and answer their questions in a safe and comfortable environment.

The Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research (CISUR) has developed a suite of learning resources under the brand name *iMinds* to help teachers facilitate open dialogue with young people about risk-taking, substance use and gambling. This article discusses the *iMinds* learning resources that focus on gambling.

### The *iMinds* approach to gambling literacy

*iMinds* promotes a way of thinking, teaching and learning that encourages children to develop gambling literacy—that is, the knowledge and skills they will need to survive and thrive in a world where gambling is common and often promoted. The *iMinds* goal is to help students become more reflective and critical of the conflicting messages they are bombarded with every day. This can help children better understand the difference between opinion, fact and belief, and make better decisions for

themselves, no matter how challenging the situation. Having discussions in a safe, supportive context helps nurture a balance of self-development, freedom and responsibility, necessary for healthy growth and well-being.

*iMinds* follows a humanistic model. Teaching and learning approaches focus on the whole student, building individual capacity to ask good questions and make good decisions—not only when it comes to gambling, but in other areas, too. Through the lessons and instructional materials, students are encouraged to question their gambling-related beliefs, attitudes and behaviours by engaging in honest, thoughtful discussions and relevant exercises that ground learning in familiar activities. For example, *iMinds* uses simple dice games to encourage students to consider how probability works and to learn skills to manage risk—in games of chance and in other areas of life.

### *iMinds* in the classroom

The *iMinds* resources have been developed with current BC curriculum design in mind. Teachers will be familiar with the *iMinds* focus on “big ideas” (the key concepts that students explore together) and core “competencies” (the specific skills and strategies that an educated student is expected to be able to practise and employ).<sup>1</sup>

*iMinds* tackles several big ideas in its gambling resources, including the following:

- Every human society has accepted gambling, legal or otherwise, in one form or another
- Gambling can be a fun recreational activity but it can also lead to

significant harm

- As human beings, both individually and in our communities, we need to learn how to manage our gambling behaviours responsibly
- We can learn how to responsibly manage our gambling by examining the different ways people have thought about it, engaging in creative thinking and critical self-reflection and listening to each other

Because *iMinds* encourages inquiry without imposing content that must be memorized, the learning resources can be easily adapted to many subject areas, including social studies, math, language arts and science. Teachers are encouraged to incorporate examples that are familiar to students—from contemporary social issues (such as the stigma around gambling and substance use, poverty and wealth in their communities, and the socially accepted practices of buying lottery tickets and playing the stock market) to familiar pop cultural standards (music video clips, movies and books). For example, students are likely to engage in a meaningful discussion of gambling and risk-taking that considers themes from Suzanne Collins' popular young-adult novel *The Hunger Games*, in which the characters live constantly in an environment of extreme risk-taking and games of chance, and where the ominous benediction “May the odds be ever in your favour” is a common refrain.

Instructional materials that incorporate bingo-like activities provide opportunities for meaningful discussions about our emotional responses



Photo credit: iMinds

One of the visuals used in an iMinds lesson plan. It encourages reflection on ideas of chance and luck as raised in the famous children's book, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

build their gambling literacy and can begin to apply their newly acquired skills in their daily life. In this way, *iMinds* provides a safe environment to learn about and practise responsible risk-taking, setting the foundation for a new generation of responsible risk-taking individuals.

*iMinds* lessons and resources are available for free at [www.helpingschools.ca](http://www.helpingschools.ca).

in competitive gambling contexts. The discussions that stem from these lessons and the skills that students learn to manage their emotional responses in these highly charged environments are transferable and can help students manage similar feelings in their daily lives.

Teachers also enjoy the fact that *iMinds* does not require them to have expertise on the topics of gambling and drugs. With *iMinds*, the role of the teacher is not to provide all the answers. Instead, teachers create the context of inquiry and then explore ideas and issues with their students.

### *iMinds* beyond the classroom

While the *iMinds* learning resources focus on gambling and substance use, the critical skills that students develop in the classroom serve them outside the classroom as well, where risk-taking and decision-making are things we all face on a daily basis to varying degrees.

The *iMinds* instructional materials encourage students to think critically about gambling as a potential source of reward and difficulty. With multiple opportunities to consider the harms and benefits of gambling and to develop skills to manage their feelings and behaviour, students

# resources

## British Columbia Responsible & Problem Gambling Program

[www.bcresponsiblegambling.ca](http://www.bcresponsiblegambling.ca)

24/7 BC Gam Info Line: 1-888-795-6111

Find information on gambling, strategies for responsible gambling, preventing gambling problems, and problem gambling. You can use a help finder tool to find a counsellor in your area or call the BC Gam Info Line at any time for information and help. Some British Columbia Responsible & Problem Gambling Program resources are available in Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Punjabi.

## GameSense

[www.gamesense.com](http://www.gamesense.com)

Learn how gambling games work and how you can manage gambling to reduce the risk of problems. You can also learn more about finding help for problem gambling, including information about the voluntary self-exclusion program.

## Game Quitters

[www.gamequitters.com](http://www.gamequitters.com)

Information, resources, and tools for gamers and for parents or caregivers who are concerned about a young person. You can take quizzes, read stories, check out the podcast or videos, and connect with others who are changing their relationship with games.

## S.U.C.C.E.S.S. Problem Gambling Program

[problemgambling.successbc.ca](http://problemgambling.successbc.ca) (Traditional and Simplified Chinese) or [www.successbc.ca/eng/services/family-youth/counselling-service](http://www.successbc.ca/eng/services/family-youth/counselling-service) (English)

Education, prevention, self-help resource, and support for Chinese community members. The program offers free counselling for people who want to manage problem gambling and family members who have been affected by gambling.

## Staying Mentally Healthy with Technology

[www.heretohelp.bc.ca/wellness-module/wellness-module-10-staying-mentally-healthy-with-technology](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/wellness-module/wellness-module-10-staying-mentally-healthy-with-technology)

Strategies to help you find healthy balance in your technology use

and help you recognize when technology use is becoming more harmful than helpful.

## Centre for Gambling Research at UBC

[cgr.psych.ubc.ca](http://cgr.psych.ubc.ca)

The Centre for Gambling Research at UBC aims to better understand the psychology of gambling. You can read research, reports, and media articles on gambling and problem gambling, and find a directory if you need help with a gambling problem.

## Pinwheel Education Series Recording:

*Building a Healthy Relationship with Video Games*

[www.keltymentalhealth.ca/resources](http://www.keltymentalhealth.ca/resources)

An audio recording for a past Pinwheel Education Event. Presenters discuss excessive gaming and share tips to help young people build healthier relationships with games.

## In The Know education session recordings

[mediasite.phsa.ca/Mediasite/Showcase/itk/Channel/teens](http://mediasite.phsa.ca/Mediasite/Showcase/itk/Channel/teens)

The Institute for Children and Families (formerly FORCE Society for Kids' Mental Health) have recordings from two past education sessions: *Video Gaming, Social Media Misuse, and Other Related Digital Addictions among 8 to 25 Year-Olds* and *"Just One More Game..." Parenting and Video Games*.

## Gambling, Gaming and Technology Use Knowledge Exchange

[learn.problemgambling.ca](http://learn.problemgambling.ca)

Resources from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Ontario. Find research, policy, and evidence-based practices as well as webinars and other training opportunities.

## Problem Gambling resources and support

Call 211 or visit [redbookonline.bc211.ca](http://redbookonline.bc211.ca) to search for supports like SMART Recovery, Gamblers Anonymous, local support groups, and service providers.

 This list is not comprehensive and does not necessarily imply endorsement of all the content available in these resources.



Suite 905, 1130 West Pender Street  
Vancouver BC V6E 4V4 Canada

