

Teenage gambling a hidden addiction: Part One

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Less than a month after swallowing 80 sleeping pills in a failed suicide attempt, Brian doesn't hesitate in pinpointing where his descent into compulsive gambling began.

"It started as far back as I can remember at three or four years old," said the 28-year-old, who did not want his real name revealed.

"My father took me to the Fort Erie Race Track and I'd pick a horse out of the program and he'd put a couple bucks on it. I got hooked on the excitement.

"By the time I was in Grade 9, I was riding my bike to the track virtually every day to bet. I was a compulsive gambler by the time I was 18."

A growing number of studies verify Brian's story is all too common.

Canadian studies have found three to four per cent of teenagers and adolescents in their early 20s have a serious gambling problem compared to 0.8 to two per cent of the adult population. The price tag for the issue slipping under the radar is huge in terms of relationships and finances.

Brian estimates his lifetime losses are "in the hundreds of thousands."

"I'm surprised more people don't know about (teenaged gambling)," said Brian, who is completing the Problem Gambling Services three-week residential treatment program at Hotel-Dieu Grace Healthcare.

"Guys do it a lot, especially in Grade 11 and 12. Games of cards, betting on sports or playing dice were going on in high school. No one said anything to us."

Officials with the Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board and the Greater Essex County District Board admit it's an issue they rarely see.

“No one is talking about it because no one is even asking questions,” said Dr. Jeffrey Derevensky, co-founder of McGill University’s International Centre for Youth Gambling and Risky Behaviour.

“It’s the hidden addiction. You can’t see it in their eyes and you can’t smell it on their breath, but you know it’s out there. It’s common to hear problem gamblers started between 10 and 14.”

Derevensky said the danger is parents, teachers and many health professionals don’t even perceive gambling as a problem among young people.

He surveyed all three groups asking them to rate their concern about the 13 most common risky teen behaviours and gambling ranked last for each group.

Steve, who is currently being treated locally for a gambling addiction that began in his childhood years, said he was 19 years old and in his fifth year of high school when he’d see his homeroom teacher at Casino Windsor.

“I’d play all night and then go to school,” said Steve, 35, who asked that his real name not be used.

“My homeroom teacher would often come in at 5 a.m. He’d gamble and then he’d give me a ride to school.”

While the percentage of teenaged problem gamblers hasn’t shifted much according to the most recent numbers, Derevensky is concerned it could jump due to the popularity of video gaming, online gambling and the social acceptance of the one-time vice.

“This youngest generation is the first to grow up in the face of all that,” Derevensky said. “This generation is going to be an interesting social experiment.”

The University of Windsor did some research on local gambling trends among youth about 15 years ago, and found eight per cent of those in the study were classified as problem gamblers.

“It’s old research, but things certainly haven’t improved with the explosion of gambling since,” said Michelle Hatton, who has been a counsellor in Hotel Dieu-Grace Healthcare’s Problem Gambling Services program for two decades.