

Chapter 1

Introduction

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Gambling has been part of the human scene since early recorded history; however, over the last two decades there has been an unprecedented explosion of commercial gambling, and with it, a parallel interest in the impact of this form of entertainment on psychological health and well-being of individuals and specific subpopulations. It is fascinating to observe the growth and development of interest in the psychology of gambling during the last 15 years.

According to prevalence surveys, gambling represents a relatively typical recreational activity for most community members, with more than 80 % of Canadian adults participating to some extent. However, it is relevant to note that, far from being a potential source of revenue, gambling is a losing proposition for the average player simply because the odds are statistically stacked in favor of the house. While most players contain losses to affordable levels, unfortunately, between 1 % and 2 % of the general population report symptoms of a severe gambling problem (Shaffer, Hall, and Vander Bilt, 1999), suggesting that problem gambling affects a relatively small proportion of adults in the community. However, such prevalence statistics are somewhat misleading because most people who gamble do so infrequently. The rates of problem gambling are much higher among “regular gamblers” and, of course, depending on how one defines “regular gambler,” the rate in this subpopulation can vary anywhere from 10 % to 80 %.

This book offers one of the first attempts to bring together leading gambling researchers to define collectively what is known in this new area of research. It focuses on both the individual and social levels of analysis to examine risk factors and, even more importantly, to identify and describe the range of personal and social conditions that appear to influence a broad range of health outcomes.

The chapters in this book are divided into two parts. The first part consists of a series of chapters that attempt to understand the reasons why some people develop gambling problems. The second part consists of a number of chapters describing effective forms of treatment for problem gambling.

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