

Gambling and Gaming: Understanding Risk, Reward, and Recovery

A Client Summary from Lilac Grove: Integrated Psychiatry & Addiction

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Why This Presentation Matters

Problem gambling's effects reach beyond the individual — they touch families, friendships, finances, and futures. Games young people play every day now use the same psychological mechanics as casinos, and many people meet gambling for the first time inside a video game, not a casino.

"Early gambling exposure isn't harmless — prevention starts with conversation, education, and reducing childhood gambling exposure."

The Numbers at a Glance

- **\$4.7 billion** — lifetime revenue of *Fate/Grand Order* (2015), a single gacha game
 - **\$240** — average revenue per download for *Fate/Grand Order*
 - **\$4.6 billion** — revenue of *Genshin Impact*, one of the most popular gacha games
 - **\$18.74** — average revenue per download for *Genshin Impact*
 - **\$5.45** — average revenue per download for *Stella Sora* (\$12.1 million total)
 - **25+** — identified methods of gambling, from casinos to loot boxes
 - **5 of 9** — criteria required within the past 12 months to meet DSM-5 criteria for Internet Gaming Disorder
 - **\$50,000** — reported losses of a 15-year-old client from skin betting in CS2
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Gambling Is Everywhere: 25+ Methods

Beyond slots, table games, lottery, scratch-offs, poker, bingo, and dice, gambling now includes sports betting, parlays, prop bets, e-sports wagering, skins gambling, loot boxes, online casinos, and gacha games — plus

gray-area forms such as day trading and options, fantasy sports, social casino games, prediction markets, arcade prize tickets, raffles, and informal bets.

A "win a prize, pay entry" raffle mechanic works the same way: pay to play, outcome randomized.

How Games Introduce Gambling: The Gateway Pathway

1. **Video games with loot boxes** — children pay for a randomized chance at items; the first normalized exposure to random-reward mechanics.
 2. **Gacha and randomized rewards** — spend in-game (or premium) currency for characters and weapons from a randomized pool; variable rewards, FOMO, and dopamine hits drive spending.
 3. **Skin betting and digital markets** — cosmetic items with real-world value are bought, sold, traded, and wagered like casino chips.
 4. **Sports betting and casino gambling** — the pathway ends where it always has, but the on-ramp now starts in childhood.
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Gacha, Loot Boxes, and Skins

- "Gacha" comes from Japanese capsule vending machines: pay, pull, and hope for the rare drop.
 - Games are free to start and bright and welcoming to new and young players; earning free currency is slow, and buying premium currency is always one tap away.
 - "Skins" are cosmetic items — weapon appearances, character outfits — with real-world monetary value on third-party markets, and some (like rare CS2 knives) sell for extraordinary prices.
 - The excitement of an in-game rare pull mirrors the euphoria of a casino win — and can set the same loop in motion.
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Real Stories (Anonymized Client Cases)

- Client "E," age 15 — CS2 skin betting: **down \$50,000**; parents bailed him out.
 - Client "E," age 21 — online sports gambling: **down \$50,000**; parents bailed him out.
 - Client "R," age 20 — CS2 gambling: lost hundreds, self-banned, then spent about **\$2,000** on Madden in-game purchases.
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Signs to Watch For

Gambling Disorder (DSM-5) — 9 Criteria

1. Needs to gamble with increasing amounts of money to achieve the desired excitement.
2. Is restless or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop gambling.
3. Has made repeated unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop gambling.
4. Is often preoccupied with gambling (reliving past gambling, planning the next venture, thinking of ways to get money to gamble).
5. Often gambles when feeling distressed (helpless, guilty, anxious, depressed).
6. After losing money gambling, often returns another day to get even ("chasing" losses).
7. Lies to conceal the extent of involvement with gambling.
8. Has jeopardized or lost a significant relationship, job, or educational or career opportunity because of gambling.
9. Relies on others to provide money to relieve desperate financial situations caused by gambling.

Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD)

The DSM-5 defines IGD as "a pattern of excessive and prolonged Internet gaming that results in a cluster of cognitive and behavioral symptoms, including progressive loss of control over gaming, tolerance, and withdrawal symptoms, analogous to the symptoms of substance use disorders." Meeting **5 or more of the 9 criteria** during the past 12 months would meet the diagnostic threshold. Criteria include preoccupation, withdrawal, tolerance, failed quit attempts, loss of interest in other activities, continued use despite problems, deception, escape gaming, and risking relationships or work.

Only a qualified clinician can make a diagnosis — these lists are a starting point for a conversation, not a label.

Why It Is Hard to Stop

- **The reward loop:** trigger → brain response (dopamine release via the mesolimbic and mesocortical pathways) → outcome (pleasure and motivation). Key structures include the nucleus accumbens, ventral tegmental area (VTA), and prefrontal cortex. Gambling and gacha exploit the non-conscious, automatic loop that guides habits.
- **Sunk cost fallacy:** "I already put months into this game" — past investment pressures continued play.

- **Loss-chasing:** "I already spent \$80. If I spend \$20 more, I might finally get it." The same chasing seen in gambling disorder.
 - **Harmonious vs. obsessive passion:** playing because you freely choose to is healthy; playing because you feel compelled, even to your own detriment, is associated with maladaptive behavior.
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Steps That Help

Therapist-recommended strategies for quitting or cutting back:

- Acknowledge the problem; know why you're quitting; identify your triggers.
- Self-regulate; maintain healthy supports; join a recovery group.
- Find diversions; create new routines; avoid or plan for risky situations.
- Learn to manage emotions and stressors; consider self-banning; aim for a healthy lifestyle.
- Increase physical exercise; don't give up; develop a maintenance plan.

Professional treatment includes Cognitive Behavioral Therapies (CBT) and Gamblers Anonymous. Co-occurring conditions — ADHD, anxiety, depression, PTSD — respond best to integrated care that treats gambling as a distinct condition.

Healthier Games to Play

Games with **no loot boxes, no gacha, and no gambling mechanics**:

- **Action/Adventure (story-driven):** The Last of Us Part I & II, God of War (2018) & Ragnarök, Red Dead Redemption 2, Uncharted 4
- **RPGs:** The Witcher 3, Elden Ring, Skyrim, Cyberpunk 2077
- **Strategy/Simulation:** Civilization VI, Stardew Valley, Factorio, Cities: Skylines
- **Shooters (offline campaign):** DOOM Eternal, Titanfall 2 (campaign), Metro Exodus, Halo: Master Chief Collection
- **Indie/Artistic:** Hades, Journey, Celeste, Inside
- **Horror/Survival:** Resident Evil 4 (Remake), Dead Space (Remake), Alien: Isolation, Amnesia: The Dark Descent
- **Open World:** Zelda: Breath of the Wild, Horizon Zero Dawn, Ghost of Tsushima, Assassin's Creed Valhalla

- **Calming pick:** PowerWash Simulator 2
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How Lilac Grove Can Help

If gambling or gaming has stopped feeling like a choice, help is available — and recovery is possible.

- **Call:** (844) 494-9435
- **Take the free assessment:** mylilacgrove.com/assessment
- **Contact us:** mylilacgrove.com/contact
- **Visit:** 16165 N. 83rd Avenue Suite 200, Peoria, AZ 85382

Lilac Grove provides integrated psychiatry and addiction care, including specialized gambling treatment and co-occurring disorder care.

This summary is educational and does not replace a clinical evaluation.