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Gambling and the Law®: Pathological Poker

Is it fair to ask someone who plays primarily, or exclusively, poker whether he is a compulsive gambler?

Is poker even gambling? Does a person who plays day and night and wins, making a good living, have a gambling problem?

Of course, he might have a different problem. He might be a workaholic.

The tests that have been developed to uncover gambling problems are pretty good. The most famous is the Gamblers Anonymous 20 Questions. These ask about things like gambling interfering with work and home life, feeling guilty, being unable to quit, breaking the law to get money to gamble, and thinking of suicide. Most compulsive gamblers answer yes to at least seven.

But these tests are not specifically designed for poker players. For example, number 14, “Did you ever gamble longer than you had planned?” won’t work with home games. I have never heard of a social game where players did not go beyond the agreed upon end time, for “one last round.”

Poker has gotten the attention of mental health professionals. But many of these do not play, or if they do, they may not appreciate how different poker can be. Someone who plays once a month in a social game is different from someone who plays every day as a professional. Games played in private homes are different from those played in hotel rooms, which are not the same as licensed card rooms.

And then there is the Internet. You can play for free, for micro-stakes of 1 and 2 cents, as well as for big money. A player who plays occasionally at one table online is not the same as one who plays four, or even eight, tables at a time, all the time.

To help poker players determine whether they might have a gambling problem, I have created my own test. I don’t claim it is entirely scientific. But it is not made from scratch. I’ve looked at the literature and discussed this with professionals who treat compulsive gamblers.

I am interested to know what you think. Some of these questions may be way off. Let me know if any seem simply wrong, or don't tell us anything. Or if I left anything out.

I don't know how many you need to answer to be a compulsive gambler. My guess is that if you are answering yes a lot, you should call a gambling hot line, like 1-800-GAMBLER, to see if you have a problem.

Questions for Poker Players

1. Do you play for stakes that you know are too high?
2. Do you sometimes feel you can't quit because you are behind?
3. Do you sometimes feel you can't quit because you are ahead?
4. When you lose, is it often because of bad beats rather than your own bad play?
5. Do you often get angry at other players at the table, for such things as slowing down the game?
6. Have you gone on tilt more than once?
7. When you are losing, do you increase your bets to try to get even?
8. Do you often stay in too many hands?
9. Do you drink a lot, sometimes going on binges?
10. Do you sometimes forget important social obligations, because you are playing?
11. Have you misled or lied to your family, friends or at work about how much poker you play?
12. Are you increasingly using the ATM?
13. Have you lied to get money to play poker?
14. Do you feel bad about things you have done because of poker?

15. Are you more interested in poker than sex?

Send your comments to rose@sprintmail.com.

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