

Gambling As a Way of Life

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The disease concept of Pathological Gambling posits that there is an underlying sickness, the source of which resides in the individual. According to adherents of the disease concept, Pathological Gambling is a real biomedical condition with diagnosable symptoms and behaviors that differentiate Pathological Gamblers from social gamblers and non-gamblers. Akin to the disease concept of alcoholism, the disease concept of Pathological Gambling contends that there are vulnerable individuals who are predisposed to Pathological Gambling (alcoholism) and develop the disorder if they begin gambling (drinking). The disease concept holds that, for some individuals predisposed towards Pathological Gambling, the course of the disease is abrupt, hooking them with their very first bet. For others, the course of the disease is more insidious, developing gradually over time. Fundamentally, the disease concept of Pathological Gambling is characterized by an individual's "persistent and recurrent maladaptive gambling behavior" (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) where there is a progression in the frequency of gambling episodes, amount of money wagered, and preoccupation with gambling.

During the past thirty years, psychiatric researchers have authored over 2,000 studies on the topic of Pathological Gambling; but the corpus of verifiable knowledge in this area is far from substantial. The disease concept of Pathological Gambling limits our understanding of gamblers' behaviors and motivations by forcing individuals into psychological slots. As such, the disease concept of Pathological Gambling provides an inadequate depiction of the personal and social experiences of everyday gamblers. This paper seeks to extend the purview beyond an utterly reductionist disease concept, beyond those individuals who are self-selected into treatment programs, screened and diagnosed as Pathological Gamblers, and towards a naturalistic rendering of gambling as a way of life. In doing so, what we begin to see is a larger and more varied group of regular gamblers for whom the activity of gambling guides and profoundly shapes the nature of social interaction in their everyday lives.