James P. Whelan
Meredith K. Ginley
Rory A. Pfund

Advances in Psychotherapy –
Evidence-Based Practice

Gambling Disorder

2nd edition



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From James P. Whelan, Meredith K. Ginley, and Rory A. Pfund: *Gambling Disorder* (ISBN 9781616766115) © 2027 Hogrefe Publishing.

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Advances in Psychotherapy – Evidence-Based Practice

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Gambling Disorder

2nd edition

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Dedication

We dedicate this book to two remarkable groups of people: First, to the doctoral student therapists from the University of Memphis, East Tennessee State University, and Tennessee State University who have served at the Gambling Clinic. Your compassion and commitment to learning have shaped the heart of our work and advanced the care we provide. Second, to the approximately 3,000 individuals who entrusted us with their stories, their struggles, and their hopes. Your courage, resilience, and hard work in addressing your gambling problems have been our greatest teachers.

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Preface

In 1998, a man came to our community-facing clinical psychology training clinic, burdened by periods of debilitating depression. During the intake process, it became clear that his depressive episodes were closely linked to his gambling behavior. His story was one of emotional extremes – his world would light up after a win, but it would plunge into darkness after a loss. Over time, the darker days began to dominate as his losses mounted. Despite increasing isolation and mounting debt, he clung to the hope that his luck would change and that one big win could solve everything.

This link between profound sadness and the allure of a win sparked an important question for our team: How do you treat a gambling problem? At the time, we knew very little. The existing literature was still in its infancy. While we found promising cognitive-behavioral approaches from Australian researchers and several important randomized clinical trials by Robert Ladouceur's team, we were surprised to find how little had been published on assessing gambling behavior, associated harms, or mechanisms of therapeutic change. Gambling problems had been included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) since 1980, yet the clinical treatment literature remained surprisingly underdeveloped.

Helping this man required us to get creative. We immersed ourselves in the limited research available, consulted with experts in substance use treatment (with special thanks to Mark and Linda Sobell), and developed an intervention grounded in cognitive and cognitive-behavioral techniques adapted from substance use research. Most importantly, we listened to our client. It became apparent that gambling, while sharing some similarities with alcohol and drug use, was also distinctly different. By remaining attentive to these nuances and working collaboratively with our client to track what worked, we saw improvement. As his gambling behavior decreased, so did his depression. He eventually chose to give up gambling – at least for the time being – and this decision brought emotional relief and stability. Notably, his hard-earned gains persisted over time.

This experience led to two major realizations: First, there was a pressing need for rigorous research on gambling assessment and treatment; and second, that our client was likely not the only person in our region suffering from gambling-related harm. These insights spurred us to establish both a research team – The Gambling Lab – and a treatment clinic – The Gambling Clinic (or TGC– under the umbrella of the Tennessee Institute for Gambling Education & Research. Our vision was to create a reciprocal relationship between science and practice: The questions that emerged in the therapy room would inform research, and in turn, research would guide and refine treatment.

Over the years, with each client and each study, we deepened our understanding of how to support individuals struggling with gambling effectively.

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In 2007, we published our first book, *Problem and Pathological Gambling* (Whelan et al., 2007), drawing directly from our experiences in both the therapy room and the research lab.

Now, 25 years later – learning together with dozens of therapists and nearly 2,800 clients – we present a second edition of that work, as the latest iteration of our evolving treatment guidebook. This work reflects the collective wisdom we have gained through clinical practice and research, framed within the evolving landscape of commercial gambling. Our approach remains rooted in partnership with each individual client and their unique context, always striving for treatments that are both effective and efficient.

This volume will provide you with what we hope is a helpful brief background on gambling problems and gambling disorder. It also details our motivationally enhanced cognitive-behavioral treatment guide. We hope it serves as a valuable tool for clinicians and a source of help for the many people seeking support with gambling-related challenges.

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