

The Intersection of Gambling Addiction and Mental Health: A Deep Dive into Georgia's Landscape

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(The names of the respondents have been changed as per their wishes)

„It all started with a simple wish - I had some time on my hands and a little extra money, so I thought I'd try my luck with a bet. At first there were wins and losses, but mostly it was the losses. You tell yourself it'll be your last try, that it could change everything, but then you lose again, sink deeper into debt, try to fix everything with more gambling, until you're far from reality. “- Aleko, aged 46, can't remember when he started playing online. He doesn't play anymore, but the effects of shame and debt remain, now compounded by his battle with alcoholism. His situation isn't dire, but he's still trapped - not by online gaming, but by alcoholism. It's a cost that doesn't show up on a bank statement, but takes a toll on his health and the wellbeing of his family.

Compulsive gambling, also known as gambling disorder, is marked by an irresistible urge to gamble despite its negative repercussions. Influenced by various factors such as mental health, age, gender, family history, medications, and personality traits, its complications include strained relationships, financial instability, legal entanglements, job loss, deteriorating health, and even suicidal thoughts.

Then there's Emzar, 29, looking pale and exhausted from nights spent glued to his screen, barely leaving his room. For him, online poker is a source of income, his job. But to his mother, it's nothing but self-harm. Once a promising student, Emzar turned to online poker after graduating because he had no steady income. He was intelligent and enjoyed the game, was careful with his bets and occasionally won big. But his mother, Nona, complains, "I don't want this money. I want my boy to leave home, to communicate with people, to have a girlfriend, to have a normal life. I just want him to be happy” - She said. Emzar always seems tired, avoids interaction with others, cuts ties with friends, relies on online communication alone.

The latest statistics on gambling in Georgia reveal concerning trends. According to a recent 2022 survey from UNICEF, young people between the ages of 14 and 17 are significantly involved in gambling activities. Shockingly, 61% of young people claim to know at least one person who gambles. In addition, more than a third (38%) personally know someone in their immediate social environment who is involved in gambling activities, with friends/acquaintances accounting for 24% and family members for 21%. Interest in gambling among young people is mainly driven by the attraction of winning money, with 40% citing this as their main motivation. Notably, boys are more likely to initiate gambling activities than girls, with 44% of boys and 24% of girls initiating gambling. The survey also shows that one in three young people gamble mainly to pass the time, with 32% of respondents doing so. There are notable differences in leisure motivation, with girls more likely to gamble for leisure purposes than boys. Specifically, 42% of girls are motivated by the desire to pass the time, while only 25% of boys share this tendency.

There are currently 17 online gambling sites available in the Georgian market. According to the latest data from the Georgian Statistical Office in 2022, there are 2,475.2 officially registered gambling places in Georgia.

The Georgian government is trying to reduce the number of gambling addicts, there is a list of prohibited persons. A "prohibited person" is defined as a person who is prohibited from participating in gambling or winning games of chance, it includes individuals under the age of 25. According to information provided by the Revenue Service of the Ministry of Finance, the list of prohibited persons currently contains information on 1,475,075, (39% of Georgian population) individuals. 10,793 persons are officially registered as prohibited, meaning they have voluntarily chosen to prohibit themselves from playing. It should be noted that the submission of personal data for inclusion in this list is possible both by physical and electronic means, facilitated through the authorised user's page.

Engaging in gambling activities can lead to adverse effects such as low self-esteem, stress, anxiety, and depression, especially when gambling becomes compulsive. Similar to substance addiction, compulsive gambling alters the brain's dopamine release, making winning bets addictive and diminishing pleasure from other activities. However, the brain's chemistry can revert with time, restoring enjoyment in everyday life. Problem gambling is also linked to suicidal thoughts, requiring immediate intervention if feelings of self-harm arise. Those with

existing mental health issues are at higher risk of harmful gambling, using it as a coping mechanism for depression or to distract from negative emotions.

In 2022, Georgia passed a law focused on mental health, aiming to enhance monitoring and increase accessibility to services for the population, within the law, Georgian government conducted research as part of the mental health strategy from 2022 to 2030 revealed that individuals with mental health problems sought help from various professionals. Specifically, 17.24% turned to psychiatrists, 38.31% sought assistance from neurologists, and 40% consulted psychologists. Surprisingly, only 10.5% sought help from a family doctor, indicating potential gaps in the healthcare system's response to mental health issues.

In Georgia, there are several centers dedicated to helping people with addiction, one of which is Gamosavali. Specializing in various types of addiction, including gambling, Gamosavali boasts over 12 years of experience and has successfully treated 90% of its patients, who are attended to by specialists in the field.

Bako Magularia, with 17 years experience, is one of the psychologists at Gamosavali, "There is no recovery, but addiction can be treated. " - he said. Magularia discussed the factors that may trigger addiction, noting that the development of gambling tendencies can be influenced by genetic vulnerability during childhood. Additionally, parenting style and early childhood mental health issues play significant roles. Furthermore, gambling addiction can severely impact mental health, leading to mood disturbances, social challenges, indebtedness, isolation, and, in extreme cases, suicide. Individuals with gambling addiction often experience intense anxiety regarding initiating or winning a game.

Magularia, describes that it's a misconception that gambling addiction can seamlessly transition into another addiction. „ Instead, individuals may remain addicted, and their addictive behaviors may manifest differently or be substituted with other addictive behaviors, " he said.

Magularia highlighted the significant role of the social environment as a facilitator of gambling, citing influences from street advertisements, social media, peer pressure from friends, and family circles. "It is an illusion that people start gambling to solve financial problems." – he said. Magularia explained that addiction is a chronic, progressive disease without a definitive cure, and even if a person stops briefly, they may relapse. Recovery involves learning to cope effectively with addiction and aims to achieve emotional balance and fulfillment, addressing the emotional emptiness and internal struggles that often underlie

addiction. He highlighted cognitive-behavioral therapy and the 12-step program as the most effective therapy methods for treating addiction, commonly used globally for gambling, alcohol, and drug addictions. Magalari emphasized that the most optimal approach often combines these methods. Unfortunately, overcoming addiction typically requires undergoing rehabilitation.