



**MENTAL HEALTH
FIRST AID®**

For Anyone. For Everyone.®

**GUIDELINES FOR PROVIDING MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID TO
ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE WITH**

GAMBLING PROBLEMS

About these guidelines

Purpose of these guidelines

These guidelines are designed to help members of the public to provide mental health first aid to an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person who may be experiencing gambling problems. The role of the first aider is to assist the person until appropriate professional help is received, if needed. The guidelines aim to be respectful to cultural differences in understanding and assisting an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person with gambling problems. More information regarding culturally respectful mental health first aid practice can be found in *Cultural Considerations and Communication Techniques: Guidelines for Providing Mental Health First Aid to an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Person* <https://mhfa.com.au/resources/mental-health-first-aid-guidelines>.

Development of these guidelines

These guidelines are based on the expert opinions of people with professional expertise in assisting Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people with gambling problems. These guidelines have been developed as part of a suite of guidelines about how to best assist Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people with mental health problems. These other guidelines can be downloaded at: <https://mhfa.com.au/resources/mental-health-first-aid-guidelines>.

The development of these gambling guidelines was funded by a grant from the Australian Government.

How to use these guidelines

In these guidelines the word 'Aboriginal' is used to represent all Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Although these guidelines were produced for use nationally, it is recognised that Aboriginal culture is not homogenous and you will need to be aware of the cultural considerations specific to the community in which you are assisting. These guidelines are a general set of recommendations about how to provide support to an Aboriginal person who may have gambling problems and may not be appropriate for every person with gambling problems. Each individual is unique and it is important to learn about the way the individual Aboriginal person views gambling and tailor your support to that person's needs.

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Mental Health First Aid Australia. *Assisting an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Person with Gambling Problems: Mental Health First Aid Guidelines*. Melbourne: Mental Health First Aid Australia; 2016.

What are gambling problems?

In these guidelines we use the term *gambling problems* to refer to difficulties over time in limiting money or time spent on gambling, which leads to adverse consequences for the person, others, or for the community. This could include someone whose gambling is having a great enough impact on their life to receive a diagnosis of a gambling disorder, but may also include people with less severe problems.

Gambling problems and Aboriginal culture

When assisting an Aboriginal person with gambling problems, it is important to know how Aboriginal people understand mental health and gambling problems. Within Aboriginal culture:

- Mental health is understood within a broad context of health and wellbeing, which includes concepts of social, spiritual and emotional functioning.
- An Aboriginal person's sense of cultural distinctiveness is linked with their spiritual, emotional and social health and well-being.
- Cultural identity and connection to country is a crucial element of everyday life for Aboriginal people.
- The expectation of 'providing for family' means that other family members may provide for the person if they lose their money for rent or food.
- An Elder or community member may feel obligated to give money to the Aboriginal person.

Gambling problems are very sensitive and stigmatised in Aboriginal communities. It may be a long journey supporting an Aboriginal person with gambling problems, particularly if you are not an Aboriginal person.

Motivations for gambling

The motivations for gambling vary. Some people gamble to win money, while for others it offers fun and excitement or an opportunity to socialise. For example, card games in Aboriginal communities may function to relieve boredom, provide an opportunity to accumulate large sums of money, or redistribute money within the community. While the motivations for gambling may be the same for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, the motivation to gamble may be stronger in Aboriginal people, due to the specific pressures some Aboriginal people encounter, e.g. need to get out of the house due to overcrowding or other pressures at home, social and economic disadvantage, or welfare dependence.

However, when gambling becomes a problem, there may be some additional motivations. A person with gambling problems may be more likely to gamble in order to:

- Escape problems or negative emotions
- Build self-esteem
- Make up for gambling or other financial losses.

Any form of gambling can become a problem. However, some types of gambling can cause more problems than others, e.g. gaming machines.

How can I tell if someone has gambling problems?

It is important to know the risk factors for gambling problems, including the specific risk factors for gambling problems in Aboriginal people (see Box 1).

Box 1: Risk factors that can contribute to the development of gambling problems

People have a higher risk of developing gambling problems if they*:

- Have an early big win (leading to a false expectation of future wins)
- Have easy access to their preferred form of gambling
- Hold mistaken or unrealistic beliefs about the odds of winning, e.g. "It must be my turn for a large win" or "If I don't gamble today my lucky numbers will come up and I will miss out"
- Do not monitor gambling wins and losses
- Have had a recent negative life event or change, e.g. divorce, job loss, death of a loved one
- Often feel bored or lonely
- Have a history of risk-taking or impulsive behaviour
- Have financial problems
- Have few interests or hobbies, or feel their life lacks direction
- Have a history of mental health problems, particularly depression and anxiety
- Have been abused or traumatised
- Have previously had gambling problems
- Have a parent who also has (or has had) problems with gambling
- Have (or have had) problems with alcohol or other drugs, or overspending
- Have self-esteem that is tied to their gambling wins or losses.

Additional risk factors for Aboriginal people**

- Gambled before the age of 18
- Live in a multi-family or overcrowded household.

*This list is adapted from the "Risk factors for Developing a Gambling Problem" webpage of the Problem Gambling Institute of Ontario (<http://bit.ly/problemgamblingriskfactors>).

**This list is taken from two research studies:

1. Hing N, Breen H, Gordon A, Russell A. Risk factors for problem gambling among indigenous Australians: an empirical study. *Journal of Gambling Studies*. 2014;30(2):387-402.
2. Stevens M, Young M. Reported Gambling Problems in the Indigenous and Total Australian Population. Melbourne: Gambling Research Australia; 2009.

It is also important to recognise the warning signs for gambling problems (see Box 2). A person may exhibit a few of these signs and not have gambling problems, or exhibit only one sign and experience significant gambling problems. These signs are only an indication that there may be a problem. However, the more signs a person exhibits, the more likely they are to have gambling problems. Furthermore, the person may shift in and out of gambling problems over time.

Box 2: Signs that indicate an Aboriginal person may have gambling problems

Gambling behaviours

- Frequently thinks and talks about gambling
- Expresses thoughts about gambling that are not realistic, e.g. “It must be my turn for a large win.” or “If I don’t gamble today my lucky numbers will come up and I will miss out.”
- Gambles almost every day or predominantly gambles on payday
- Increases the time they spend gambling or has a pattern of gambling for longer than intended
- Increases the number or range of venues they gamble in or the types of gambling they play, e.g. horses, pokies, keno, etc.
- Has a significant change in their gambling expenditure pattern, e.g. sudden increases in size of bets
- Has a pattern of spending all available funds in an episode of gambling
- Expresses a strong desire or craving to gamble
- Is restless when they are not gambling
- Gambles rather than doing things they previously enjoyed
- Continues to gamble despite promising to stop
- Repeated unsuccessful attempts to control, cut back or stop gambling
- Gambles to escape problems
- Celebrates their wins by gambling more
- Demonstrates a pattern of returning to gambling in order to recover losses
- Rationalises their gambling by stating they need to pay bills, meet financial obligations, etc.
- Lies to cover up or fund gambling
- Commits illegal acts to fund gambling, e.g. theft, fraud
- Experiences legal problems related to gambling
- Becomes defensive or angry when asked about their gambling
- Blames others for their gambling or its consequences
- After losing, engages in risky behaviour or uses alcohol to forget about gambling problems

- After gambling, expresses:
 - remorse
 - guilt
 - depressed feelings
 - hopelessness
 - fear of others finding out
 - worry over where they will get money to cover living expenses
 - anger towards themselves, or family and friends
 - relief, if they have won.

Signs evident while gambling

- Gambles for three or more hours without a break of at least 15 minutes
- Focuses so intensely on gambling that they don’t react to what is going on around them
- Avoids contact with others or communicates very little with anyone else
- Gambles on two or more gaming machines at once (where this is allowed)
- Stops gambling only when the venue is closing
- Regularly starts gambling as soon as the venue is open
- Friends or relatives call or arrive at the venue asking if the person is still there
- Leaves the venue to find money so that they can continue gambling
- Borrows money from others while at the venue
- Looks very sad or depressed after gambling
- Becomes angry if someone takes their favourite gaming machine or spot in the venue.

Mental and physical health signs

- Does not look after their health as a result of their gambling activities, e.g. does not take medication or eat a healthy diet
- Has experienced negative emotions as a result of gambling, e.g. sadness, anxiety, stress, anger
- Their mental or physical health has been negatively affected as a result of gambling.

Box 2: continued

Financial signs

- Does not want to spend money on anything but gambling
- Believes that gambling will solve financial difficulties or bring material wealth
- Experiences financial hardship as a result of gambling
- Cannot explain missing amounts of money from the house or bank accounts
- Has a pattern of unexplained loss of money, or of reporting it lost or stolen
- Asks for or borrows money to gamble or to pay gambling debts
- Over time, increases the amount of money spent on gambling
- Offers themselves sexually to others in exchange for money for gambling or to pay gambling debts.

Cultural and social signs

- Does not meet their cultural obligations due to their gambling, e.g. Elders and role models neglecting to pass down traditional knowledge, lack of loyalty and respect to their culture
- Relationships, social life or reputation have been negatively affected as a result of gambling
- Becomes isolated from others because of gambling
- Disappears from social events where gambling is also available, in order to gamble
- Unable to be emotionally present or involved in social situations because they are pre-occupied with gambling
- Is criticised by others for their gambling.

Signs evident at home

- Neglects the basic care of their children
- Breaks promises to their children about buying them things or spending time with them due to gambling
- Steals from family or friends to fund gambling
- Exploits others to pay for their gambling
- Causes arguments so they can leave home and gamble
- Family members:
 - find evidence of regular gambling, e.g. gambling receipts, Internet browser history, bank statements
 - hide money from the person in order to cover living expenses
 - experience negative emotions as a result of the person's gambling, e.g. sadness, anxiety, stress, anger
 - experience a decline in their physical and mental health as a result of the person's gambling
 - experience a decline in their social life as a result of the person's gambling
 - threaten to leave or break up the family due to the person's gambling
 - experience financial hardship as a result of the person's gambling.

Signs evident in the workplace

- Gambles during work time
- Ability to work or study has been negatively affected as a result of gambling.

Approaching someone about their gambling

It is possible to recover from gambling problems. Family and friends can assist with this. If you suspect that a person has gambling problems, it is important to approach them about your concerns because there can be significant negative consequences from gambling. These can include relationship breakdown, family violence, trouble with the law, financial problems, loss of employment and poor physical health. People with gambling problems are also likely to have or develop other mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety and substance use problems, and may also experience suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

If you are concerned about someone's gambling, try to learn more about gambling problems, e.g. phone a gambling help line, talk with others or read information about gambling problems. You should also plan how you will approach the person and

gently introduce your concerns about their gambling. Choose an appropriate place to talk, ensuring that you meet in a private space that is away from distractions and interruptions.

If you have arranged a meeting with the person and they do not turn up, do not take this personally. Rather, schedule another time.

How to talk to the person

Before discussing your concerns about the person's gambling with them, have a yarn about other topics to try to find some common ground for discussion. State some positive things about the person and your relationship with them, e.g. "You've always been such a good support for me, and I value our friendship a lot". Then gradually build up towards talking about the person's gambling. Let the person set the pace and style of the interaction and talk to them in a calm and rational manner.

It is important to talk about what behaviours you have noticed and their impact, rather than suggesting that the person themselves is the problem. Ask the person for their point of view and give them enough time to tell their story, because this will help them to open up and trust you. Reassure them that you care and want to help. Avoid statements that may imply you are judging them. You should also:

- Use 'I' statements rather than 'you' statements, e.g. "I worry when I don't know when you are coming home or how much money you will have spent" rather than "You make me worry when you are late and have spent all our money."
- Make suggestions rather than telling the person what to do, e.g. "Would you be comfortable seeing a gambling counsellor?" rather than "You should see a gambling counsellor."

There are also some things that you should not do:

- Don't expect the person to immediately change their gambling
- Don't tell the person to "just stop gambling"
- Don't lecture, interrogate or argue with the person about their gambling problems
- Don't try to control the person by threatening, bribing, crying or nagging
- Don't use shame or guilt in an attempt to force the person to change
- Don't verbally or physically attack the person.

If you think that your ability to help the person is impeded by any negative attitudes towards the person's gambling, or gambling in general, you should suggest that the person talks with someone else.

Finally, if you are going to have future conversations with the person, ask them if they would like to have family or friends present during these.

Dealing with negative reactions

When talking to the person, be prepared for the full range of responses you may encounter, from relief through to anger. The person may deny, downplay, justify or lie about their gambling problems, or they may blame others. Also be aware that the person may experience shame and may not want to talk. To decrease the chances of this happening, use empathy and compassion.

If the person does not want to talk about their gambling problems, you can tell them about gambling help that is available, and that you are willing to talk when they are ready.

Encouraging professional help

There is effective professional help available for gambling problems and you should encourage the person to seek professional help for their gambling problems (see Box 3). However, keep in mind that not everyone needs or wants professional help.

Box 3: Interventions for gambling problems

Professionals who can help

A variety of health professionals can provide help to a person with gambling problems. They are:

- GPs
- Psychologists
- Gambling counsellors
- Psychiatrists
- Financial counsellors (financial counsellors don't provide counselling for the gambling problems, but can provide information, support and advocacy to assist people in financial difficulty).

Treatments available for gambling problems*

The following treatments have evidence of effectiveness:

Cognitive behaviour therapy. This is a psychological treatment that changes the way the person sees situations and their thinking patterns (the cognitive component) and also reduces negative feelings and behaviours (the behaviour component). This therapy attempts to overcome gambling specific thinking errors that may maintain problem gambling, such as a belief in particular superstitions that increase 'luck' and selectively recalling wins over losses. It can be carried out by a therapist working with an individual or a group.

Motivational interviewing. Motivational interviewing is a counselling method that helps people to explore and resolve uncertainties about whether they want to change. It allows the person to consider the gains they receive from gambling, while helping to improve their awareness of the negative aspects and consequences of their gambling behaviour, and helps them to identify reasons to choose not to gamble.

* Thomas SA, Merkouris SS, Radermacher HL, Dowling NA, Misso ML, Anderson CJ, Jackson AC. Australian guideline for treatment of problem gambling: an abridged outline. *Medical Journal of Australia* 2011; 195: 664-5.

Find out about the effective treatments available for gambling problems (see Box 3). You should also get to know the local Aboriginal resources available to help people with gambling problems (e.g. Aboriginal gambling liaison person, Aboriginal gambling services, healing programs), so that when you are talking with the person you can tell them about these. Other helpful services may include non-Aboriginal gambling services, self-help resources and support groups (see Box 4). Because financial problems can be a big part of gambling, you should also be aware of resources that can help the person to manage their financial difficulties, e.g. financial counselling services. The person may also need to access other types of help for problems related to their gambling, e.g. medical help, legal services, mental health services, financial counselling, employment services, housing assistance or Centrelink.

Box 4: Helpful Resources for Gambling Problems

Gambling help services

Some states and territories have Aboriginal gambling services. The Gambling Help Online website below provides the details of these.

WEBSITES

Gambling Help Online

www.gamblinghelponline.org.au

This website provides information about gambling and gambling problems. Anyone affected by a gambling problem (including affected family members) can also access an online chat service via the site. Every state and territory has face-to-face gambling services, with some states and territories having Aboriginal specific gambling help services. All the details needed to access these are available on the site. There are also online self-help tools and Aboriginal specific resources available on the website.

Financial Counselling Australia

www.financialcounsellingaustralia.org.au

Financial counsellors provide information, support and advocacy to assist people in financial difficulty. The FCA website enables people to search for a financial counsellor in their local area.

TELEPHONE AND ONLINE SUPPORT

Gambling Help Online

1800 858 858

www.gamblinghelponline.org.au

This free, confidential helpline provides phone or online counselling, information and referral for people with gambling problems and concerned family members.

SUPPORT AND EDUCATION GROUPS

Gamblers Anonymous

www.gaaustralia.org.au

Gamblers Anonymous provides help to people wishing to abstain from gambling. Information about meeting times and locations can be found on their website or by calling Gambling Help 1800 858 858.

Gam-Anon

www.gaaustralia.org.au/gam-anon

Gam-Anon provides support and information for the family members and friends of people with gambling problems. Information about meeting times and locations can be found on their website or by calling Gambling Help Online 1800 858 858.

Peer Connection

www.peerconnection.org.au

Peer Connection is free and confidential telephone support from people who have experienced gambling problems.

You can encourage the person to seek professional help for their gambling problems by pointing out that:

- Gambling problems can be successfully treated. Many people with gambling problems have benefited from professional help, support groups and self-help strategies.
- Seeking help for a problem is a sensible thing to do, rather than a sign of weakness.
- Any professional help will be confidential.

Aboriginal people experience barriers to help-seeking for gambling problems, including lack of knowledge about and confidence in gambling help services and lack of culturally appropriate help services. If there are no culturally competent gambling help services available, work with the person to identify supportive family and community members who they can talk to about their gambling problems. Alternatively, you can help them find other types of services in the community where they can access support, e.g. early childhood centres, women's centres, etc.

The person may be reluctant to seek help from a non-Aboriginal gambling service. Alternatively, they may not be comfortable using Aboriginal-controlled health or gambling services because of concerns about confidentiality and shame. Work with the person to identify and seek out the most appropriate supports for them. If the person is reluctant to seek help, you should:

- Ask if they want to go to gambling help services with their partner, a family member or another support person.
- Suggest they seek assistance for any financial problems, because they may be more likely to do this than seek help for their gambling problems.

Supporting the person to change

Keep in mind that the person can only be assisted if they are ready to change. You are not personally responsible for 'fixing' the person's gambling problems. However, you can encourage the person to change.

If the person expresses an interest in changing their gambling and asks for your assistance, you should:

- Give them information about available gambling services in the community.
- Offer to assist them to list the strategies that can help them, e.g. seeking support from family, extended family, kin, friends or Respected Aboriginal people to assist them to change their gambling behaviour.
- Discuss with the person possible strategies for handling gambling urges and encourage them to use these.
- Ask the person if there are any problems that have led them to increasing their gambling and give them information about relevant services in the community.
- Ask the person to tell a story about a good day when they didn't gamble.

If the person decides to use self-help strategies, offer to support them. Note any positive changes the person has made and congratulate them on these.

The person who has stopped or reduced their gambling may experience a gap in their life that gambling used to fill, e.g. reduction in social activities. If this is the case, you should suggest activities that you can do with the person that do not involve gambling, e.g. going to the movies or to a restaurant. You should also suggest that they reconnect with family and friends. However, be aware that not all family members or friends may be aware or able to admit that the person has gambling problems.

If the person does not want to change

Although it may be obvious to those around them, the person may not see their gambling as a problem or may see it as the only way to make up for losses. They may not see it as a problem until they experience a crisis that they cannot solve themselves. The person may also go through cycles of awareness and denial. To help motivate the person to change, you should sensitively ask if gambling and its consequences are getting in the way of the life they want to live.

Helping to reduce the negative impact of gambling

Whether or not the person wants to change, you can help them to reduce the negative impact of gambling by encouraging them to:

- Limit the amount of time and money spent on gambling
- Leave debit or credit cards at home
- Pay all critical household expenses before paying off gambling debts
- Balance time spent on gambling with other activities
- Take regular breaks while gambling
- Not gamble when alcohol or other drugs have impaired judgment
- Not gamble when angry or upset, or to escape from problems or feelings
- Not gamble alone
- Stop any illegal activities related to gambling
- Talk to supportive people about any successes in changing their gambling.

Talk over any suggested strategies with the person to help them determine if they will work.

You should know that some of the ways of limiting access to money for gambling may not work for an Aboriginal person, e.g. leaving money at home rather than taking it to a gambling venue may be a problem in shared households, because others may use the money themselves.

In offering help, there are also some things that should be avoided:

- Don't cover for the person by lying about their gambling
- Don't take responsibility away from the person for managing their financial problems
- Don't accept blame for the person's gambling problems
- Don't use ultimatums
- Don't gamble with the person
- Don't drop off or pick up the person from gambling activities
- Don't suggest alternatives to gambling that may become addictive or a problem behaviour, e.g. drinking alcohol
- Don't give the person money or pay their debts. Rather than giving them money, refer the person to a relief agency or financial counselling service.

Supporting the person through relapse

Be aware that the person may have tried and failed repeatedly to control, cut back or stop gambling. In the course of changing their gambling, the person may experience a relapse. Although this is a problem, a relapse does not indicate that the person cannot recover. If the person experiences a relapse you should continue to offer support. Tell them that this is not a sign of long-term failure of recovery. Explain that gambling problems took time to develop and it may take some time, and more than one attempt, to change.

Keep in mind that supporting a person with gambling problems can be difficult and you should know how to access support for yourself, for instance from a gambling help line or support group, counsellor, or trusted friend or family member.

What to do if you are concerned for the safety of the person or others

Keep private any discussions you have with the person, unless you are concerned about their safety or the safety of others. Be aware that suicidal thoughts and behaviours are more common in people with gambling problems, because the person may see suicide as a way to avoid difficult confrontations with loved ones or people they owe money to. Be familiar with the Mental Health First Aid guidelines for how to help someone with suicidal thoughts or behaviours (<http://bit.ly/MHFASuicide>). If you are concerned that the person may harm themselves or others, seek professional support before taking action to deal with the person's gambling problems.

You should act to protect any children who are being neglected as a result of the person's gambling.