

When gamblers get younger and the stakes get higher

Online gambling is not easy to address, targets the young and sees debts getting racked up faster. But help is at hand.

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When the idea of having integrated resorts (IRs) with legalised casinos was mooted in 2004 by then Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong as part of the competitive remaking of Singapore, ministers and MPs spoke up and shared their personal views (with the party whip lifted), community groups voiced reservations, and many individuals like myself signed a petition against the move.

Gambling in various forms has existed in Singapore for a long time, and there have been attempts to regulate it since the 1800s under Sir Stamford Raffles' administration, and through the 1950s until today.

The advent of casinos in the IRs brought a fresh and urgent focus on the risks and consequences of uncontrolled gambling as casinos are designed to be attractive and fun. This led to the formation of the National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG) in August 2005 which, 20 years on, has built a comprehensive social safeguard network.

Yet, it faces new challenges as illegal online betting platforms target younger demographics who can accumulate debts very quickly due to the insidious mechanics behind them.

NCPG will continue to play a critical role in adapting its



Illegal online gambling operations target anyone with internet access and are hard to eradicate. There are also emerging trends of physical blind boxes and loot boxes in online games, exposing youth to gambling early. ST FILE PHOTO

prevention education and treatment services to protect vulnerable groups from these emerging risks.

Informally, gambling has been and continues to be part of our social fabric, with mahjong parties at home, and card games when relatives get together during Chinese New Year. My maternal grandfather ran a mahjong den in Geylang's red-light district with colourful patrons in the 1970s and 1980s. During our visits, he would ask the grandchildren to pick numbers for "chap ji ki" (an unregulated betting service run by informal networks), believing we would bring him good luck.

I also remember my widowed mother lending money to friends who were problem gamblers at illegal gambling dens to bail them out of hairy situations with the "ah longs" (illegal money lenders).

Witnessing the impact of their uncontrolled gambling on their children who lived in a world of

fear and uncertainty sensitised me to gambling and its ills early on in life. When I was older, I persuaded my mother that lending her friends money was doing more harm than good, and thankfully, she listened to me.

FAMILY PROBLEM, FAMILY SOLUTION

It is too simplistic to think of problem gamblers as having moral failings only. More importantly, this thinking may lead to limiting beliefs about help-seeking for the individual and those affected by their uncontrolled gambling.

Research indicates that problem gambling affects not just the individual, but up to six to 10 people around them. This figure is likely to be higher in Asia, given closer ties with the extended family and our sense of collective responsibility. Families play a critical role in preventing and

curbing problem gambling, alongside the NCPG and its partners in the community.

Every year, about 300 families apply to the NCPG for a family exclusion order or visit limit order, seeking help for a loved one whose gambling appears to be problematic. The NCPG sees applications from spouses, siblings, parents or children who are worried about their loved ones.

The NCPG is thorough when reviewing applications and also ensures both the applicant (that is, the concerned family member) and the respondent (the person with the gambling behaviour) have a reasonable opportunity to state their case.

Over time, we have heard heart-breaking stories of families who endured financial hardship or harassment from illegal moneylenders for years, and lost family heirlooms or jewellery that were pawned (sometimes without their knowledge). They suffered broken promises and dashed hopes that each financial bailout would be the last one.

Coming to the NCPG was often the family's way of drawing a line for themselves and the respondent that they need help in managing the gambling behaviour and its consequences.

Interestingly, a large number of these family-initiated applications are not challenged and the respondent often consents to the order, indicating that family intervention is helpful.

Respondents who demonstrate that they are not financially vulnerable may be asked to consider self-exclusion or voluntary visit limits, as a way to encourage self-regulation.

In instances where the respondent is adamant about continuing gambling despite the family's concerns, the NCPG

grants the family exclusion/visit limit order with compassion for the families. We often also ask about the safety of the applicant and offer support in case the respondent becomes agitated or aggressive at home when the order takes effect.

Currently, about 3,500 of these family-initiated orders are in place, providing some measure of protection from the harms of problem gambling. This is on top of the 44,000 self-initiated exclusion/visit limits that are active today.

It is heartening to review applications seeking to revoke these orders when it is apparent that they have served their purpose – the families are in better financial shape, relationships are less tense, and they all feel they can manage without the exclusion/visit limits as trust is slowly rebuilt. Sadly, some of these reviews happen because families have broken up, and the applicants no longer want to be involved in the lives of the respondents.

Supporting a friend or family member with uncontrolled gambling is challenging with many ups and downs, and requires patience with clear boundaries and accountability (rather than control and criticism). Offering loans or covering gambling losses of the friend or family member is usually not helpful, as that enables the problematic behaviour to continue.

Recovery is possible with intervention from professionals and good community support. Research in the local context by the National Addictions Management Service under the Institute of Mental Health indicated that 76 per cent of those who sought help for problem gambling improved after three

months of treatment. It often takes a concerned family member or friend initiating a calm conversation that it is time to get help, that will start the ball rolling towards recovery.

THE ONLINE DIMENSION

Over the past 10 years of serving on the NCPG's board and then on the board of the Gambling Regulatory Authority, I have been privy to the sustained efforts of public service officers keeping a tight watch on gambling so it does not become a social problem. I have witnessed families and various community partners come together to reach out to problem gamblers.

There are also emerging trends of physical blind boxes and loot boxes in online games. These pose risks to our youth in particular as they are exposed to gambling early. To mitigate these, the NCPG has been conducting upstream education in schools and army camps.

Illegal online gambling operations are global and target anyone with internet access. These are hard to eradicate, despite the Singapore Government's efforts to block gambling websites.

Social service agencies on the ground report that problem gamblers seeking help are now younger, with those in their late 20s or 30s requesting individual counselling and support group services for illegal football betting activities. So while the young face more risks, the awareness and availability of support services reduce the barriers to and the stigma of seeking help.

The journey ahead will require the concerted partnership of the NCPG, other government agencies, families and friends, and community partners to look out for the vulnerable in our midst. With compassion and by offering timely help, we hope to make room for problem gamblers to bounce back. We are in this together (as the SG60 National Day song goes).

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