



Problem Gambling Language Guidelines

The Language We Use Is Important

Adopted August 22, 2018

For decades the image of the “degenerate” gambler has been fantasized and stigmatized. But with the recognition that there are as many as 6-8 million people suffering with a gambling disorder, there is a new reality emerging. These individuals are no longer strangers---they are our neighbors, our friends, our family members.

Too often, sensational news stories and the language employed can alienate and dehumanize those with gambling disorders and induce fear or scorn of them in the public eye. This increases the stigmatization of gambling disorders, which in turn can be a barrier to treatment-seeking, not only by those who have a problem but also by those who are affected by another’s gambling problem.

Using appropriate language in discussing disordered gambling includes rejecting sensationalism in favor of more accurate narratives, avoiding stigmatizing language, and acknowledging evidence-based solutions. The following are some suggested guidelines that the National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG) has adopted for disseminating useful information about problem gambling:

- 1. When addressing the issue, professionals and the media should endeavor to use the term “gambling disorder” as utilized in DSM 5 whenever practicable.** Depending on the audience, the term “problem gambling” may be an appropriate substitute, given its long history and the broad “catch-all” nature of this term, which encompasses a number of other labels that are more stigmatizing. This term also reflects NCPG’s name and long history as the national advocate.
- 2. When discussing an individual, use language that puts the person first and the disease second.** Describe the individual with a “gambling disorder” or a “gambling problem.” Understand that someone in treatment is a patient with a health condition. This terminology clearly demonstrates that the disease is a secondary attribute and not the primary characteristic of the individual’s identity.
- 3. Avoid using stigmatizing terms.** Rather than using the term “enabling,” state that loved ones can unconsciously reinforce gambling behavior. Rather than talking about a relapse, refer to the recurrence of the disorder.
- 4. Share the solutions that exist.** State that recovery is possible and many with a gambling disorder go on to live productive lives.
- 5. Provide details of these solutions.** Provide information and narratives of how treatment and self-help programs work. Discuss what the limitations of the various solutions may be, and focus on the need for additional funding for prevention, treatment, research, and education.
- 6. Humanize the disorder.** Use language that is relatable and that humanizes and personalizes the condition. Avoid fear and blame tactics that portray those who are suffering as alien.
- 7. Communicate information about multiple pathways to recovery.** Everyone’s path to recovery will look different, and that’s ok!
- 8. Emphasize the global view.**

Illuminate gambling disorder as a chronic disease, not as an acute condition. Gambling disorder is widely recognized as a brain disease, and as such can require continuing treatment and maintenance, and significant time to achieve recovery.

It is imperative that we begin to linguistically shift the “blame” for gambling disorder away from the people afflicted. We need to redefine the way we discuss this issue, so that it is the disorder that carries the focus of this burden, rather than the person. This is more than just semantics or political correctness. Widespread media misunderstanding of the fundamental nature of disordered gambling has led to misconceptions by the public.

It is incumbent upon us to present an accurate representation of gambling disorders, not only in the information that we provide, but in the language that we use, in order to help reduce the stigma associated with this illness. The focus should be on creating better public awareness of issues surrounding prevention, education, treatment and recovery.