Hold ‘Em Poker: A Metaphorical Intervention for the Prevention of Problem Gambling Among Adolescents and Young Adults

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Abstract
A metaphorical intervention is introduced for counseling professionals, utilizing the terminology of hold ‘em poker, the current game of choice among juvenile populations. This metaphor serves as a guide for counselors when assisting adolescents and young adults in developing healthier life choices and deterring potentially impulsive behaviors, including gambling.

Gambling opportunities for adolescents and young adults have become increasingly accessible and, as a result, it is likely counselors will encounter individuals who either meet the DSM-IV-TR (APA, 2000) criteria for pathological gambling or who are at-risk of developing serious gambling problems. Therefore, it is imperative counseling professionals be prepared to address this potential problem before it leads to serious negative consequences in the lives of young people. Shaffer, Hall and Vander Bilt (1997, 1999) reported a significantly greater risk for adolescents and college students to develop gambling disorders than adults as follows: 1) college students had almost a 3 times greater likelihood during their lifetime to experience gambling-related problems than adults; 2) there was a 2.4 times greater likelihood for young people to experience sub-clinical gambling problems during their lifetime than adults from the general population; and 3) pre-college adolescents had a 2.5 greater likelihood than adults to experience sub-clinical or clinical levels of a gambling disorder. Data revealed that members of the adolescent and young adult populations are at a higher risk for the development of gambling-related problems than are adults, largely due to the increases in accessibility of gambling activities via the Internet (Hardoon & Derevensky, 2002; Shaffer, 2003) and due to this generation being the first raised on video gaming (Messerlian, Byrne, & Derevensky, 2004).

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the current state of gambling and possible gambling addictions among adolescents and young adults and to describe a preventative, metaphorical intervention counseling professionals might consider using when addressing this very serious issue. This strategy is designed to meaningfully engage the individual by utilizing an aspect of popular culture to reframe potentially negative or
ineffectual ways of being in the world, including potentially addictive gambling. The intervention introduced is one that is easily adaptable to any theoretical orientation or counseling environment.

Gambling Prevalence among Adolescents and Young Adults

The National Research Council (1999) reported between 52% and 89% of late adolescents gamble in any given year. Data revealed past year prevalence estimates for pathological gambling among adolescents of 6.1%, with a range of 0.3% to 9.5%. Indications are the rate of juvenile gambling has steadily increased in the United States over the past two decades. Early prevalence studies of juvenile gambling conducted from 1984 through 1988 revealed a median participation rate of 45% in gambling activities by high school students during the previous twelve months (Steinberg, 1988). More recent studies conducted between 1989 and 2000 indicated the median level of gambling participation among high school students had increased to 66% (Shaffer, LaBrie, Scanlan, & Cummings, 1994; Volberg & Moore, 1999; Westphal, Rush, Stevens., & Johnson., 2000). An equivalent prevalence rate of 67% for juvenile gambling was reported in Canadian studies also conducted between 1988 through 2000 (Adlaf & Ialomiteanu, 2000; Govoni, Rupcich, & Frisch, 1996; Wiebe, Cox, & Mehmel, 2000). The trend detailed by these reports is by the year 2000, juvenile gambling had progressively increased throughout North America to the point where at least 6 out of 10 middle school and high school-aged students had gambled for money during the previous year (Jacobs, 2000).

With the proliferation of new technologies and the related commonplace use of personal computers, the Internet is far more readily accessible to juveniles and young adults than a generation ago (Griffiths & Wood, 2000). Grumwald Associates (2000) estimated by 2005 more than 40 million U.S. youth under age 18 would have access to online gambling activities. By the year 2000 it had been reported there were over 800 online gambling sites worldwide and that estimated revenues from online gambling would grow from $3 billion in 2002 to approximately $8 billion by 2006 (Turner, 2002). In comparison, Volberg (2002) reported from 1975 to 1999 revenues from all types of legal gambling in the U.S. had risen from $3 billion to $58 billion, representing a 1833% increase. Yet while revenue from legalized gambling activities in general has seen substantial increases over the past 3 decades, online gambling in particular has grown at even a faster pace, having more than tripled in just three years.

The Internet poses a significant problem for adolescents and young adults in particular. Hardoon, Derevensky and Gupta (2002) reported 25% of adolescents with serious gambling and 20% of those exhibiting at-risk behaviors had utilized gambling type game practice sites. This coincided with the report by Messerlian, Byrne, and Derevensky (2004), which indicated Internet usage may present a special danger for individuals at high risk for developing gambling problems. In 2005, 1.6 million of the 17 million college students in the U.S. gamble via Internet poker, with Texas hold ‘em being the game of choice. College students have been targeted by the gambling industry
with online casino advertising heavily directed towards that age group. According to researchers and players alike, Internet poker is addictive, yet colleges have done very little to address this concern. In fact, colleges have inadvertently contributed to its proliferation by making high-speed Internet access readily available in dorm rooms. Furthermore, while the federal government has indicated online poker is illegal to date, no legal action has been initiated, either against players or online gambling sites (Schwartz, 2006). Research by Mitchell, Becker-Blease and Finkelhor (2005) on the variety of Internet-related problems encountered by counselors found that 15% of the sample reported client problems concerning gaming, gambling, or fantasy role-playing. Given the increased number of adolescents and young adults who actively engage in gambling activities, particularly online poker, counseling professionals serving this population need to be in a position to provide effective prevention, particularly in light of the related negative implications for academic, social and financial functioning (Dickson, Derevensky, & Gupta, 2002; Schwartz, 2006; Stinchfield & Winter, 2004).

**Psychosocial and Behavioral Factors Related to Problem Gambling**

In light of the increased prevalence rates of gambling addictions and sub-clinical levels of gambling behavior, it is important for counselors to be aware of the demographic, psychosocial and behavioral factors correlated with increased risk for potentially problematic gambling among adolescents and young adults. The research literature on pathological gambling among adolescents and young adults has noted the following related risk factors: a) high delinquency rates, poor academic performance and the disruption of family relationships (Gupta & Derevensky, 1998a; Hardoon et al., 2002; Ladouceur & Mireault, 1988; Wynne, Smith & Volberg, 1994); b) higher reported rates of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (Nower, Gupta, & Derevensky, 2003); c) higher involvement in gambling play and problem gambling behaviors among boys (Gupta & Derevensky, 1998a; Ladouceur, Dube, & Bujold, 1994, NORC, 1999; Stinchfield, 2000, 2002; Volberg, 1998); d) gambling onset at approximately 10 years-old (Gupta & Derevensky, 2004); e) reported lower self-esteem (Gupta & Derevensky, 1998b); f) more depressive symptoms (Gupta & Derevensky, 1998a, 1998b; Kaufman, Derevensky, & Gupta, 2002); g) higher scores on scales measuring dissociation (Gupta & Derevensky, 2000); h) more reported major traumatic life events (Kaufman, et al., 2002); i) poorer reported coping skills (Nower, Gupta, & Derevensky, 2000); j) higher scores on measures of excitability, extroversion, and state and trait anxiety, with a difficulty conforming to social norms and with self discipline (Gupta & Derevensky, 1998b; Hardoon, et al., 2002; Ste-Marie, Gupta & Derevensky, 2002); and k) increased risk for developing alcohol and drug addictions (Gupta & Derevensky, 1998a, 1998b, 2000; Winters & Anderson, 2000).

**Prevention Programs**

Gupta, Derevensky and Marget (2004) maintained that individuals at risk for developing problematic gambling need to be taught more effective, active coping strategies to minimize potential engagement in addictive or compulsive behaviors, including gambling.
This position is supported by Petry (2005) who stated, “treating sub-clinical gambling in youth may prevent pathological gambling in adulthood, when the problem can manifest with more significant and widespread adverse consequences” (p. 269). Identifying gambling as a form of risk-taking more commonly witnessed in boys, Petry goes on to say some young adult males may outgrow such behavioral patterns on their own and not require any formal intervention. However, others might benefit by having interventions geared towards problem behaviors in general and potential gambling behaviors in particular.

Reports have shown multi-modal and cognitive behavioral treatment approaches are effective with adolescent and young adult gambling problems, particularly in the treatment of young adult male gamblers (Breen, Kruedelbach, & Walker, 2001; Gupta & Derevensky, 2000, 2004; Ladouceur, Boisvert & Dumont, 1994; Lopez Viets, & Miller, 1997). Ladouceur and Walker (1998) reported these approaches are successful due to the assumption that persistent gambling is the result of a number of erroneous beliefs that include a lack of understanding of independence of events, perceived level of skill in successfully predicting the outcome of chance events, and illusions of control. Ladouceur et al. (1994) conducted one of the few empirically-based treatment studies demonstrating significant decreases in gambling behaviors with adolescents utilizing a cognitive-behavioral approach. The protocols provided education about gambling, addressed irrational cognitions, incorporated individual problem-solving and social skills training, and provided relapse prevention strategies. A meta-analysis of cognitive-behavioral approaches also revealed that controlled outcome data supported the effectiveness of those interventions when they incorporated both stimulus control and response prevention. However, Gupta and Derevensky (2004) suggested the small sample size of 4 adolescents in the Ladouceur et al. (1994) study made the information gleaned of limited applicability when applied to the over-all youth gambling population. In addition, they stated research with adolescents suggested a more problematic clinical picture than one merely related to erroneous beliefs and the desire to acquire money.

They recommended utilizing a multi-dimensional approach that addresses the multitude of problems facing adolescent problem gamblers. This was based on empirical support suggesting that gambling involves a complex and dynamic interaction between ecological, psychophysiological, developmental, cognitive and behavioral components and given such complexity each component needed to be adequately incorporated into any successful treatment approach. Counseling professionals are in the critical position to initiate prevention efforts aimed specifically at the adolescent and youth gambling population through myriad avenues such as individual counseling, psycho-educational groups, residence hall programming, or workshops in health and other related curricula. Therefore, the authors offer a preventive intervention technique that professionals of different theoretical orientations and work environments can utilize to not only effectively engage this population, but also to assist individuals in examining and reframing the ecological, psychophysiological, developmental,
cognitive and behavioral components associated with impulsive and potentially addictive behaviors, including gambling.

**Poker Metaphor as Therapeutic Prevention**

Given games have long played a critical role in the field of counseling, researchers have examined the impact of game playing on outcomes including improved academic achievement and visual perception skills (Thompson, 2001), and heightened interpersonal understanding (Zan & Hildebrandt, 2003). In light of the importance of games, both within a counseling context and in our society as a whole, it behooves the counseling professional working with adolescents or young adults to keep abreast of what is occurring in the individuals’ world with respect to “play” that appears to remain popular for an extended period of time. Any such game may serve a dual function: when used as a metaphor, it may engage the adolescent or young adult who has resisted intervention and may also foster a therapeutic dialogue around critical topics including the long-term consequences of gambling and addiction. Poker appears to be precisely such a game, literally mesmerizing the nation. Poker parties occur among the young and for the older participant there are poker parlors that have sprung up in many urban and suburban communities. Of even greater significance is the previously discussed proliferation of online poker games, with college students remaining the most popular target of those websites. Furthermore, in that some sites provide students with a monetary incentive to sign up another player, a formula for disaster is set up.

The use of therapeutic metaphorical approaches in treatment was primarily catalyzed by the work of Milton Erickson. The benefit of using metaphors is that there is less likelihood of arousing resistance in the client as they are built around material already a part of the client’s lifestyle, and thus are more likely to capture and maintain the person’s interest (Yapko, 2003). Metaphors have a long history of therapeutic use and are especially useful when counselors play an active role in offering ideas, instructions, possible solutions, re-framings, or other input that may or may not be immediately acceptable (Barker, 1985, O’Hanlon, 1987). Counselors can utilize the rules and terminology of poker in several metaphorical ways to engage the adolescent or young adult; both to instill healthier life alternatives and to provide a teachable moment with respect to the inherent dangers of gambling.

Playing “on tilt” for example, connotes playing more poorly than usual because ego and emotions are allowed to dominate. Playing “on tilt” is dangerous and those who fall into this trap usually lose the round of poker, no matter how strong or weak their actual hand. Not surprisingly, if play is dominated by emotions, chances are strong that hands are played incorrectly and lost. Of particular importance for the adolescent and young adult populations, playing “on tilt” is most visible after a losing streak, which commonly occurs in Internet play. The house, or owner of the website, makes a commission (“the rake”) on every pot played. In order to be a winner, a player needs to win enough money from other players to more than cover “the rake.” This is a feat accomplished by one in ten poker players at best (Schwartz, 2006). Thus, it should be pointed out playing Internet poker...
leaves one financially vulnerable to the true inevitability of playing “on tilt.” The counseling professional is in a critical place to assist individuals in determining whether the financial and related social and academic costs are truly worth paying as they prepare to enter the adult world.

There are indicators beneficial in determining whether or not adolescents or young adults have gone “on tilt,” leaving them vulnerable to playing the “hand of life” poorly. These signs include the physiological symptoms of anxiety, such as increased heart rate, palpitations, feelings of panic, and a tightening of muscles. Often there is a co-occurring tendency to react before thinking or a lack of understanding of the consequences of one’s actions. Being guided by one’s emotional state also may be related to a lack of judgment, forethought, and planning, clearly dangerous to young adults as they begin to more independently journey through life. It is precisely this state of being “ruled by one’s emotions” that is a blueprint for failure. Therefore, when emotions rule it is critical for counselors to engage adolescents or young adults in the cognitive reframing associated with cognitive-behavioral interventions. It is important to precisely examine what they are telling themselves that exacerbates emotionality, whether feelings of distress or invincibility, and the related behavioral impulsiveness, whether sub-clinical gambling or the over-zealous throwing of the self into a new relationship.

In poker, “the flop” consists of three cards all players can utilize in conjunction with the two cards in hand. With good fortune, these community cards make an individual’s hand stronger. Though “the flop” is clearly not always of great assistance, it can never destroy what an individual already has in hand. If so desired, a person can always fold (throw in your cards ending the game) for that particular go-around, thus minimizing losses or potential damage. Perhaps, the same can be said for life in general. In order to fully appreciate the nuances of this metaphor, it is necessary for the adolescent or young adult to pause and ponder some of what life has afforded. The focus is placed on those life advantages afforded to all, or “the flop.” For example, “the flop” contains many elements that are potential opportunities for all, including the possibility of love. Whether in relationships with family members, dear friends, or marital or lifetime partners, life offers the opportunity to grow and learn through the triumphs and challenges of love. The concept of work also can be viewed as a critical element within “the flop.” Here, work or vocation is broadly defined and has to do with assisting the individual in staying connected to his or her life, community, family, and friends. In this context, work means that individuals are not idle and thus strangers to the life going on all around. Taking stock of one’s life, whether by examining love relationships, friendships, or vocations is of clear value to individuals about to enter adulthood. Using the metaphor of poker, which provides a non-threatening or non-clinical language for this discussion, the adolescent or young adult can be assisted in identifying the opportunities, vulnerabilities, and gifts present in their lives. This then leads to a very specific and concrete discussion about what one is potentially losing if over-involvement in gambling, or other impulsive activities, occurs.
In poker, the “tell” is any mannerism that permits other players to know what cards or strength of hand an individual is holding. Players vigilantly notice and interpret all verbal as well as non-verbal messages that may be occurring. For example, there are several players who are constantly wearing sunglasses. This serves two very important functions: First, if the eyes mirror the soul and what one is thinking; those glasses prevent access to that critical information. Second, but equally important, is that the glasses allow the wearer to stare at another for as long a time as is necessary to glean information that would be helpful in reading “the tell.”

The useful relationship between poker and life again becomes crystallized though the exploration of what constitutes effective communication. One communication pitfall in particular can be discussed through the use of the poker term bluffing. This affords the counselor another occasion to discuss with the adolescent or young adult the hazards of pretending to be or pretending to have what in reality is untrue. It may work at the poker table, but in life there are other attributes that need to be appreciated and heightened. The adolescent or young adult may be asked, what is the opposite of bluffing? His or her response to that question engenders an entire dialogue of qualities to look for in self and others. The counselor will be able to guide the counseling session to what it means to be authentic, genuine, and truthful, qualities important to look for when acquiring intimate partners, business, associates, friends and social cliques in early adulthood. This discussion also affords an opportunity to highlight the need for the adolescent or young adult to listen to his or her inner voice when choosing friends or activities. It is precisely that inner feeling that allows a poker player to determine if another participant is bluffing or not. The counselor should stress to the adolescent or young adult it is the integration of their thoughts, feelings and behaviors that will allow them to make the best decisions possible.

In poker, it is critical to know what the best possible hand is to have at any given time (called the “nuts”). In life, it is even more paramount to determine what the best goals or outcomes to strive for are. Again using poker as the backdrop, counseling professionals may assist the adolescent or young adult in developing goals that are realistic while not dampening the related enthusiasm displayed. For example, an adolescent may express a desire to become a top math student during the upcoming semester. Yet, that same student is currently failing calculus and resides literally at the bottom of the class. Here, poker may be used to help the student appreciate what is reasonable and truly attainable. A participant looks at his hand, sees what is on the table, and makes a determination as to what might be the best possible outcome for this game. It is unrealistic to strive for a royal flush when pocket cards and the flop make that goal impossible. Yet maybe a full house is a realistic and attainable outcome. Similarly, a student may be helped to comprehend what goals and what strategies would be appropriate. In this example, an attainable and therefore less sabotaging goal would be to strive toward passing an upcoming calculus exam. This goal, being more realistic lends itself to the development of specific strategies, such as study,
organizational, and tutorial interventions, leading to its attainment. Although this goal is more modest, the possibility for success is increased significantly.

Conclusion

As counseling professionals, we are obligated both to educate youth about the potential dangers of gambling and to work to prevent the casual play of games, such as hold ‘em poker, from morphing into a type of gateway addiction. Structured games, whether poker, video, or computer games, must be monitored to determine if play is becoming detrimental to the adolescent’s or young adult’s overall functioning and development. Counselors have the ethical obligation to utilize structured psycho-educational tools, such as the poker metaphor described, to assist in the facilitation of healthier life choices and problem-solving skills, and to foster an understanding of the potential dangers of impulsive behaviors.

Some professionals might question whether the use of a poker metaphor is wise when working with individuals exhibiting gambling problems. However, the poker metaphor presented herein is meant to foster constructive dialogue between the counselor and the adolescent or young adult. It is a way to engage the client in a manner that has been shown to be less threatening and more likely not to result in client resistance. Metaphors built around content that is a part of the client’s lifestyle are more likely to capture and maintain the individual’s interest. It also affords the opportunity for the counselor to reframe the poker game itself to address and reframe the individual’s life concerns, issues and choices. It is a means of preventatively speaking to the potential pitfalls of gambling and other impulsive behaviors and is not intended as a treatment for those suffering from addiction. In that hold em’ poker is a tremendously popular game, utilizing its concepts to discuss the adolescent’s and young adult’s vulnerability to, and the related consequences of gambling activities, makes therapeutic sense.

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