

Treatment of gambling addiction

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Slot machines, patience, the pools, horse races, lotto, visiting casinos etc. are for most people a harmless, occasional hobby. For some, gambling becomes a habit that is hard to break. The tolerance for gambling increases so they have to play more often and invest more money than before. Psychological dependence increases; gambling is needed for stress relief or when in low spirits. Putting an end to gambling begins to get difficult and the gambler begins to give up on important goals; gambling reduces the time spent with family or hobbies or at work. Discussing the matter with someone close may be the needed wakeup call and give back some sense of proportion, but sometimes professional help is needed.

The workers at A-Clinics, health centres or mental health offices are familiar with gambling dependency. Making a phone call and an appointment is a step in the right direction. You can even get a text message when you need some external help. You can choose either individual or group therapy and even round-the-clock treatment in a rehabilitation unit is possible. The workers use various forms of treatment. These include:

- Short therapies (look into the future, harness your positive resources, turn problems into goals). It is usually difficult to stop doing something, but easier to start doing something new. In therapy we discuss e.g. what is the first step that the gambler intends to take in order to walk past a slot machine. The stairway towards a gambling-free life may have several steps and each client may reach his goal through means that he feels work for him.
- Cognitive therapies (acquire a new way of thinking that makes it easier for you to not to gamble). During therapy written assignments are used to go over the most typical gambling situations, places of risk and pros and cons as well as to analyse an individual gambling session: where, when, what you thought, how you felt, could you have acted in another way etc. Gambling involves a lot of "faulty thinking", e.g. I will win back the money I've lost if I keep on gambling. These thoughts are identified and wrong beliefs are set straight.
- Behavioural therapies (learning new ways of acting in problem situations).
- Relaxation and mental imaging therapy (finding ways to control anxiety and stress situations)
- Networking (receiving support from loved ones)
- Self-help programmes (various groups, work books, text messages)

How many therapy sessions does one need in order to control the problem? It depends on the situation. If you have gambled almost daily for years, you will have to work more than someone who has noticed at an early stage that he uses too much time and money on gambling. Sometimes prescription medication is used to complement the therapy. The total time of therapy varies between five visits to a few years worth of individual or group discussions. Many visit the self-help group meetings for years.

The A-Clinic Foundation's [rehabilitation clinic in Kouvola](#), among others, offers inpatient treatment for gambling addicts. The treatment lasts for a few weeks. Both units have developed a treatment programme especially for gambling addicts. The methods used in the treatment of gambling addiction are the same as those used in the treatment of other addictions. However, it is important to immediately take into account the financial situation. The social services and debt counselling services will co-operate with the treatment units if needed when the patient's situation is sorted out.

In Helsinki, a GA group meets at the Kamppi service centre. [Gamblers Anonymous](#) (GA) applies the AA's twelve-step programme. The Turku GA group meets at the A-Clinic at Brahenkatu 12A. There are meetings in other areas as well.

Peluuri is a telephone helpline for problem gamblers and their friends and families. It is available weekdays from 12 to 6 p.m. on 0800 100 101. Calls are anonymous and free from anywhere in Finland. Peluuri's website is at www.peluuri.fi, and the 'Peli Poikki' self-help guide is at www.pelipoikki.fi/. Peluuri offers information and materials as well as immediate support for gambling problems. Peluuri's services are provided by the Finnish Blue Ribbon organisation and the A-Clinic Foundation.

The Social Pedagogy Foundation currently has two gambling-related projects under way: the [Pelirajat'on](#) peer group for gamblers and the Game Control project for young immigrants.

Addictionlink's [Valtti discussion forum](#) is a place to discuss gambling problems (in Finnish).

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