

#2221 - Thomas Baber: Gambling, Addiction, and Public Health

Thomas Baber: Brain activity tends to react to gambling wins, much like a shot of heroin. Some fixes.

George Velky: Did you hear that gambling is so addictive, winning money affects your brain the same way heroin can. That was Thomas Baber, a leading expert in the field of addiction sciences and PhD at, UConn Health. I'm George Velke, and this is what's on the Line this episode. I spoke with Baber about how gambling addiction has become a dangerous disease and how similar it is to alcohol and drug addiction. We also spoke about how young people are so susceptible to succumbing to this addiction and what UConn can do to help keep their students informed.

George Velky: Can you tell me a little bit about your background and how you got into addiction science?

Thomas Baber: Yeah. So I'm trained as a social psychologist with additional, training. Have an MPH in Public Health and Psychic Epidemiology. And I've worked in departments of psychiatry and public health departments at, UConn, for over 40 years. I'm retired now, but I still do research and writing.

George Velky: I saw that most of your work has focused on alcohol addiction. When, did you decide to look at gambling, addiction as well?

Thomas Baber: After spending, a lot of my career on looking at, treatment effectiveness and also the policies that governments can implement to prevent drinking problems. I,

got into on drug abuse, including heroin and marijuana. And, it was a logical experiment to move over to gambling, particularly in the policy area where there are similarities with alcohol. So, And there's a group of social epidemiologists who work, in the areas of poverty, and often they move from drugs to alcohol. And some of them have taken up gambling as it's become a more significant public health problem.

George Velky: Yeah. Can you, explain some more of the similarities, of gambling addiction and addiction to a substance like alcohol or drugs?

Thomas Babor: Well, the World Health Organization and the American Psychiatric association both, do, work on refining the diagnostic criteria for different behavioral and psychological problems, including, drug and, alcohol dependence. And as gambling has increased around the world and, there's been more interest in looking at behavioral disorders connected with gambling. And they've used alcohol and drugs as a model because there are lots of similarities in how people develop these conditions and how, they get in. People with psychiatric. So loss of control, inability to keep your life free of the behavior is a sign of both drug addiction, alcohol dependence and gambling. People get to the point where they find it difficult to stop once they've started. And they also, have other problems with their behavior which make, it Problematic in their life, kind of takes over their thought process. They're always thinking about the source of supply and it gets to the point where it kind of takes over their life. And so those are similarities though. Physical addiction is obviously more characteristic of drugs and alcohol because they're pharmacological substances. But there are lots of similarities

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Thomas Babor: with gambling and people get a lot of, of stipulation euphoria. brain

activity tends to react to gambling wins much like a shot of heroin, some fixes. So there's a lot of similarity with these behaviors and they're called behavioral addictions. And now that they are codified in the diagnostic criteria that are used to diagnose psychiatric problems around the world, we're in a better position to count them and to come up with prevalence estimates and how much damage they're doing.

George Velky: So in your book *Setting Limits*, you kind of outlined policies that governments should take to kind of protect its citizens from addictions and gambling addictions. What kind of policies did you suggest in that book?

Thomas Babor: One of the bigger ways of dealing with gambling is to limit availability. And here's another similarity with drugs and alcohol. The more that you control the supply of the behavior, substance, the fewer people get introduced to it and the lower the rate of problematic behaviors connected with that particular substance or behavior. So in the case of gambling, we've had a tremendous increase in the frequency and amount of gambling around the world. And that's mainly a function of changes in legal restrictions which have made gambling options more available. Not only the increase in national, state and local lotteries, but it's more casinos and in particular now online gambling. So your cell phone has almost become a portable casino. And in this case the restrictions on availability have been relaxed to such an extent that people can access games, and gambling opportunities which make it very easy for them to slip into a pattern of spending time online on machines. And when that happened, the reinforcement that comes from those behaviors can develop into an addiction. So controlling availability, number one, by not further relaxing the controls that have been in place for centuries, but going beyond that and finding the types of gambling that are most and limiting. Young people now can access gambling opportunities through the Internet on their cell phones. And it's often very easy to circumvent the age gating

mechanisms that are already in place because people want to win money and winning money reinforcing,

George Velky: Hesitant to use a self exclusion list or other resources that are provided m.

Thomas Babor: and the stigma Take money away from people, part of it that become to be the control and access the marketing machines. Gambling in young people opportunities and products is deceptive. And it leads people to believe that everybody has chance to become a millionaire. And so the more you lose, the more you need to gamble to make back your losses. So people are reluctant to seek help. They think they can solve the problem themselves just by good luck or the skills that they think

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Thomas Babor: they have in order to make more money. And certainly stigma is a major limiting factor on people's tendency to admit they have a problem.

George Velky: So why are college aged men so susceptible to gambling addiction and like specifically sports betting, you know, as a college age man myself, it's, it's almost a part of the culture now. so what makes like people my age, men my age, so susceptible to these dangers?

Thomas Babor: that's a good question. I think since gambling is marketed as an activity that's fun and low risk and it adds to the excitement of what college students already like to do, which is to participate as a fan in college sports. So I think the acquiescence on the part of the people who run the university college system, without taking into

account the enormous damage that does, it's a way for university administration to make more money to lower tuition and at the same time college students themselves are encouraged to support university athletic programs. So it's a vicious cycle where the administration is making money, and it increases the attractiveness of university sports and the reputation of the university. And at the same time you have young people who are often away from their families. So there's a limited control on supervising their free time. And it seems to be becoming an increase problem as you suggest among college students.

George Velky: So what could Yukon do to help inform its students of the risks? I mean based on what you just said, is there even any incentive for them to you know, kind of guide their students into betting safely?

Thomas Babor: Well I think the university system itself needs to look carefully at how much damage gambling is causing to students. And there are organizations that could take positions against the increasing liberalization of gambling opportunities. And certain sports betting at a state level could be controlled better through age restrictions for example and limiting opportunities to the extent that it depends often on state regulation. Supreme Court has taken away states ability to for example ban sports betting. it is increasingly becoming a federal issue with, would have to be addressed at a federal level.

George Velky: All right, thank you so much for listening to this week's episode. Tune in next week as we dive into the science behind slot machines.

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