

A Brief Guide to Early Stage Couples Work

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Initial Assessment Template - Couples Dealing With Problem Gambling Stabilization Stage

Area for Assessment	Level of concern (0-10)	Tx Priority (e.g. high / med / low)	Notes
Safety / Security			
What is the stage of change for each partner (eg. precontemplation / contemplation?) Are they in different stages? Is gambling still a threat?			
Basic levels of functioning			
~ Financial situation and immediate impacts e.g. food, housing, urgent bills			
~ Individuals' functioning, e.g. adults able to cope with day to day tasks, make decisions, care for dependents, function at work?			
~ Other basic needs met; e.g. medical needs			
Threats to safety; e.g. suicide risk, violence, neglect, children in trouble			
Upcoming threats to functioning, such as pending charges or chances of job loss			
Stress levels in both spouses and their impacts, emotional and physical -- e.g. emotional lability, anxiety, gastric symptoms, headaches			
Self-care issues; e.g. adequate sleep, nutrition			
Substance use concerns			
Mental health concerns			
Couple's Mutual Support and Support of Family / Friends			
Partners' communication style			
~ Patterns of interaction (see EFT training)			
~ Realistic mutual expectations?			
~ Level of mutual support			

Area for Assessment	Level of concern (0-10)	Tx Priority (e.g. high / med / low)	Notes
~ Level of anger / conflict			
~ Minimizing			
~ Silences and their meaning -- e.g. uncommunicative spouse, taboo areas, unspoken fears			
~ Level of trust / belief			
~ Level of openness / secrecy			
~ Decision-making: effective? Equal? Joint or separate?			
~ Commitment to the relationship			
Family structure / organization			
~ Disorganization and confusion -- family overwhelmed?			
~ Unequal distribution of power -- e.g. family organized around gambling spouse			
~ Unequal distribution of responsibilities (i.e. one spouse overwhelmed)			
Support of family, friends and community -- available, utilized?			
Impacts of isolation -- e.g. depression, loss of social contacts and support?			
Indicators of quality of parenting			
Children's functioning -- e.g. attending school, functioning well?			
Impact of gambling on children, direct and indirect -- e.g. stressed, deprived, acting out, pulled into conflict?			
Self-Esteem / Respect			
Impacts on self-esteem			
Threats to respect of one partner for another			

Couple Stabilization: a Quick Guide

This is a list of early stage approaches for addressing common urgent issues. Note that it requires that the couple be able to work together to some extent, with therapist support. If conflict does not abate with these techniques, then separate sessions are recommended, at least initially.

These approaches are suitable for couples in which the gambling spouse is in the preparation or action stage of change. They may be of some help in earlier stages, for the purpose of clarifying issues and aiding motivation, but if those stages are prolonged, then again, individual counselling is called for.

Reflection / validation of both partners' experience:

1. Aim is to
 - a. Create empathy
 - b. Create potential for alliance based on shared goals
 - c. Reduce conflict / lower the emotional temperature
2. Process:
 - a. Following the assessment / listening to couples' concerns, reflect and validate the feelings of both, using non-judgemental, positive terms. Think of the relationship as the client; this will help maintain neutrality
 - b. Point out related feelings; e.g. "You (gambling spouse) are saying that you prefer to keep money problems to yourself because talking about them doesn't solve them, is upsetting and makes you feel helpless. You (non-gambling spouse) are finding that lack of information about the debts is making you feel very anxious and upset."
 - c. Identify points in common (e.g. both want to stabilize the finances, protect the family; have a good relationship again)
 - d. Educate couple re: stages of change; normalize the stages they are at, even if different.
 - e. Clarify and normalize couple's differing priorities (e.g. paying the bills vs. addressing the betrayal), and validate the importance of addressing both.

Reducing individual / family stress levels:

1. Aim is to
 - a. Restore family to more normal levels of functioning
 - b. Improve both partners' coping capacity and self-efficacy
 - c. Reduce reactivity
2. Process:
 - a. Identify stress symptoms in both partners, both emotional and physical

- b. Problem solve re: individual stress reduction (or ensure it's happening in separate counselling). Encourage improved self-care – e.g. adequate food, sleep, medical attention, etc.
- c. Clarify what can and cannot be controlled by each partner, and help them focus on what each can control
- d. Support the addressing of instrumental issues such as financial or housing problems
- e. If one spouse is overburdened, encourage more equitable distribution of tasks

Reducing couple's interpersonal stress levels:

1. Aim is to
 - a. Break chronic conflict cycles
 - b. Address common issues which act as barriers to change
2. Process:
 - a. Assist partners to listen to and hear each other's needs; encourage respect. Help identify what makes each feel respected.
 - b. Identify and discuss the fears that act as barriers (e.g. "If I let this conversation start, it'll never end." "If I act nice to him, he'll think the problem's solved.")
 - c. Identify the behaviours of each partner which are increasing the other's stress, and problem-solve around reducing these behaviours. Reciprocal agreements are often helpful; e.g. the non-gambling spouse will be able to stop demanding information if the gambling spouse will provide access to the online bank account.
 - d. Whenever possible, promote a collaborative rather than unilateral approach to managing finances
 - i. Gambling spouse takes shared, adult responsibility for addressing financial problems, planning, etc. -- non-gambling spouse is not saddled with unfair burden, gambling spouse is in adult rather than child role
 - ii. Gambling spouse can be encouraged to request specific support from partner; e.g.: taking on the handling of immediate cash and credit
 - iii. Non-gambling spouse can also be encouraged to request specific support, e.g. control of vital bills in order to promote sense of safety
 - iv. Address immediate fears and anxieties on spouse's part regarding gambling and related behaviours (usually related to loss of trust and of security).
 - Define these fears / anxieties in specific and concrete terms, and relating to the present time (e.g. upcoming week)
 - Help spouses negotiate realistic actions needed to reduce these fears (e.g. "When you work late I get scared;" "I'll call when I'm working late.")

- Frame assignment as taking responsibility for calming spouse's anxieties, rather than being infantilized by powerful spouse.
- Reinforce realistic expectations: will not eliminate stress but will reduce it.

Enable crucial communication about the gambling problem

1. Aim is to
 - a. Reduce fears and conflict
 - b. Enable both partners to move on with tasks
2. Process:
 - a. If the full impact of the gambling on the family has not been clearly articulated, help the non-gambling spouse to do so
 - b. Help gambling spouse to convey awareness of the impact of their gambling on their spouse and family, and genuine regret.
 - c. Help gambling spouse to communicate to their partner that they take the problem seriously and plan to address it (if they do)
 - d. Assist in the process of getting all debts, etc. revealed.

These tasks require:

- i. Information from the spouse on what they need to see and hear to feel reassured
- ii. Exploration, support, etc. for gambling spouse, to assist them in meeting their partner's specific needs

Plan processes for potential upcoming issues

1. Aim is to
 - a. Prepare couple for likely problems (e.g. actual or perceived slip)
 - b. Minimize distress and disruption, increase self-efficacy and partnership
 - c. Maintain forward progress
2. Process:
 - a. Identify potential upcoming issues
 - b. Develop and agree on procedures to address them

Initial Assessment of Couples Dealing With Problem Gambling – Stabilization Stage

This is a quick outline of some of the most immediate issues to assess for, when seeing couples dealing with problem gambling. The focus is largely on the more urgent, instrumental issues that couples tend to present with during early sessions

It is useful to keep Maslow's Hierarchy of Need in mind for the initial contact. The more basic the issues, the earlier they will need to be addressed. The stabilization stage is largely concerned with the first three levels, and perhaps a little with the fourth.

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|-----------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1st | Survival |
| 2nd | Safety / Security |
| 3rd | Support of family / friends |
| 4th | Self-esteem / respect |
| 5th | Self-actualization |

Survival / Safety / Security

Couples just entering treatment are often in crisis over the first two levels; e.g. loss of financial security, threats to housing, legal trouble. These urgent issues will have to be addressed very early in treatment, to establish enough security to allow for other discussions.

Decisions regarding future gambling will also be seen as urgent. Continued gambling can be an immediate threat to the family's security. Some brief couples work is often valuable if the gambling spouse is still in precontemplation or contemplation, in clarifying the issues and the impacts, and for purposes of motivation. If the problematic gambling continues, however, the situation will remain too unstable for relationship counselling.

Many cases will not progress past this early stage. Help with practical resolutions, resources, alternate counselling, etc. may be the extent of the intervention.

Take note of:

1. Differing stages of change re: the gambling problem
2. Financial impacts of gambling – e.g. bills being paid, housing secure? If not, how urgent are arrears?
3. Basic levels of functioning – e.g. adults able to cope with day to day tasks, make decisions, care for dependents, function at work?
4. Threats to safety; e.g. violence, neglect, children in trouble, suicide risk, neglected medical or psychiatric conditions
5. Adequate self-care; e.g. sleep, nutrition.
6. Upcoming threats to functioning, such as pending charges or chances of job loss
7. Stress levels in both spouses – emotional and physical.
8. Substance use / mental health issues

Support of family / friends

Loss of trust and security in the couple relationship constitutes a real, if more subtle crisis. The partner that would normally be a person's safe haven and support has instead become a source of serious pain, loss, betrayal and/or guilt. In the longer term, these issues may be addressed through relationship counselling, e.g. Emotionally Focused Therapy. In the short term, they need some work in order to help stabilize the family and provide a base for future interventions.

In terms of assessment, it is extremely helpful to observe how the couple interacts. However, if the level of conflict is too high, i.e. the partners are unable to sit in the same room without verbally abusing each other, even with therapist support, then some separate sessions are recommended.

The couple is often isolated from family, friends and community, because of secrecy around the gambling, conflicts over money, shame, etc. This loss of support exacerbates the crisis and intensifies the negative impacts.

Children are often severely impacted by parents' gambling problems. Their issues may or may not be raised by the couple; if they are, this may be another source of disagreement and conflict. Reports of anxiety, acting out, poor school performance, truancy, depression and other symptoms should be noted. The needs of troubled and vulnerable children should be a priority.

Take note of:

1. Partners' communication style
 - a. Interaction patterns (e.g. reinforcing each other's respective roles as 'parent vs. adolescent;' defence through mutual attack and blame leading to quick escalation; sense of helplessness leading to withdrawal or sarcasm)
 - b. Mutual expectations – realistic? E.g. gambling spouse expects partner to "get over it." Non-gambling spouse expects a guarantee of no relapse.
 - c. Level of mutual support
 - d. Level of anger / conflict
 - e. Minimizing
 - f. Silences and their meaning e.g. one spouse uncommunicative; taboo areas, unspoken fears
 - g. Level of trust / belief
 - h. Level of openness / secrecy
 - i. Decision-making: effective? Equal? Joint or separate?
 - j. Commitment to the relationship
2. Family structure / organization
 - a. Disorganization and confusion – may indicate a family overwhelmed by impacts
 - b. Unequal distribution of power – e.g. family organized around gambling spouse
 - c. Unequal distribution of responsibilities (i.e. one spouse overwhelmed)
3. Support of family, friends and community – available, utilized? Impacts of isolation.
4. Indicators of quality of parenting
5. Children's functioning -- e.g. attending school, functioning well?

6. Impact of gambling on children, direct and indirect -- e.g. stressed, deprived, acting out, pulled into conflict?

Self-esteem / respect

Self-esteem and respect have often taken a battering due to the gambling problem. The gambling spouse often feels out of control and ashamed. The non-gambling spouse frequently questions their own value, having chosen a partner whom they fear is deeply flawed, and their own wisdom in missing signals and/or putting up with the behaviour. A great deal of blame may have gone back and forth. There is often a fear that the love, respect and esteem will never be recoverable.

These concerns represent an emotional crisis for both parties. While in the longer term they may be addressed through relationship counselling; i.e. EFT, it is still worthwhile to take note of them and reflect the couples' fears and concerns.