

# Words can hurt

## Language guide for gambling harms

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# Words can hurt – Language guide for gambling harms

Gambling harms are the impacts from gambling that can affect the health and wellbeing of individuals, communities and wider society, and are a key public health concern. The harms from gambling are diverse and can impact not only an individual but also associated social networks (such as family and friends, known as ‘Affected Others’). Anyone can be harmed by gambling, however harms are not evenly distributed.

For each person who experiences gambling harm around six other individuals are affected, often partners and children. Women are more likely to experience this type of harm and severity increases according to closeness of relationship with the person gambling at elevated risk levels. The harms from gambling are varied, and may also be interconnected.

Harms include (but are not limited to):

- Increased stress and impacts on mental health and wellbeing (such as anxiety, depression and suicide risk)
- Relationship breakdown
- Domestic abuse
- Financial hardship.

## **The bottom line**

Everyone who gambles is at risk of addiction and is at risk of experiencing harms related to gambling.

The language we use matters. This guide offers advice on terms to use when talking about gambling, to avoid stigmatising and to encourage people who are being harmed by gambling to seek support.

For further information on gambling harms [visit the NHS webpage on gambling addiction.](#)

## **Who this guide is for**

This guide is for anyone working on gambling harm prevention and for anyone who writes or speaks about gambling harm in information they publish or share with others.

## **Why we made this guide**

Most of us talk about gambling and gambling addiction in the same way, and that is influenced by the gambling industry. There can be inconsistencies with the way language is used when talking about gambling harms, some of which can be stigmatising and can add to harm.

We need to move away from language that adds to stigma and prejudice and move towards language that increases understanding and encourages people to seek support. This guidance is something that has been requested by professionals who support (or who may support) people around gambling harms.

## **How this guide was made**

This guide was developed by professionals working in gambling harms in Greater Manchester, the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber regions (based on their expertise working in this area), and individuals with lived experience of gambling harms providing their insights.

## **A note from the editors**

Whilst reading this guide it is important to note that people with lived experience have varied insights on how language has impacted them (including being stigmatising) and the suggested guidance in this document may not speak for all individuals. This document encourages the use of terms that are from a whole person perspective to move away from labelling and blaming individuals which can be stigmatising.

## Easy dos and don'ts

Most of these language suggestions move away from individual responsibility, we don't want to suggest the person experiencing harm is the problem, the issues are the gambling industry products and practices. Blaming people affected causes more harm and increases shame – this can make it hard to talk about what's happening. At the same time, we recognise that people can be empowered with the right language and own their recovery.

Don't say	Do say	Why?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A lot of people enjoy a flutter</li><li>• Can be fun</li><li>• Social/leisure activity</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Avoid referencing any positives of gambling</li></ul>	Referring to gambling as a 'fun' or 'social' activity reinforces perceptions that there is something 'wrong' with anyone who experiences harm or addiction. It can also add to a perception that 'everyone is doing it'.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Problem gambler</li><li>• Gambling addict</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Person experiencing gambling harms</li><li>• Person who is gambling at risky levels</li><li>• Person being harmed by gambling</li><li>• Person living with gambling addiction</li><li>• Person in recovery from a gambling addiction</li></ul>	The person being harmed by gambling is more than just their experience with gambling. Remove the label (as this can be stigmatising), and make them 'a person with/experiencing...'

Don't say	Do say	Why?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Your gambling</li> <li>• Their gambling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid assigning the gambling to a person at all, say “gambling”</li> </ul>	<p>We want to move away from anything that creates blame on an individual, or anything that might cause guilt or shame. This moves away from an ‘individual responsibility’ narrative which is harmful.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem gambling</li> <li>• Harmful gambling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid describing the gambling behaviour itself, say “harmful gambling products”</li> <li>• If you need to talk about level of risk, try ‘gambling at risky levels’ or ‘gambling at a harmful level’</li> </ul>	<p>Describing the gambling behaviour can make it seem like the person gambling is at fault, it is the products and how they are designed and marketed that create addiction and keep people addicted.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safe/unsafe gambling</li> <li>• Responsible/irresponsible gambling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid comparing gambling like this, gambling is not binary. It is more complex due to different gambling activities bringing different risks.</li> </ul>	<p>Suggesting some people are fine and others become addicted adds to stigma. All gambling is inherently risky, although some products are more harmful than others.</p> <p>Currently there are no national guidelines that define or indicate what ‘safe’ levels of gambling are.</p>

Don't say	Do say	Why?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• At risk</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid suggesting any type of person is more likely to be harmed than another due to individual characteristics</li> </ul>	<p>This ignores that anyone who is exposed to harmful gambling products are at risk of harm. We want to normalise a population health approach to gambling, meaning that anyone can experience harm, no matter who they are.</p>

### **Addiction v harm**

Gambling addiction is a recognised mental health condition and ‘gambling addiction’ is a commonly used term used when people search for support. It is important to talk about gambling addiction so that it is easily recognisable to people.

However, many people do not recognise that they have a gambling addiction. Diagnosis terms such as gambling disorder can be thought of negatively. Therefore, talking about the harms people experience, when we talk about addiction, is more relatable and can allow people to recognise that they are experiencing lower levels of harm before it becomes addiction.

### **Gambling-related suicide**

There is an established link between gambling and suicide. People who are exposed to harmful gambling products or have a gambling addiction have a greater risk of suicide and suicidal ideation. We recommend including information on suicide prevention services when talking about gambling addiction.



## **Talking about support services**

If services are free and/or confidential, say it. People look for ‘free’ and ‘anonymous’ when searching for gambling addiction support. Some services, including treatment and training, are delivered or commissioned by organisations that are created or funded directly by the gambling industry (such as the charity GambleAware). If this is the case, we should let people know so they can make an informed choice about where they seek help and support from, but do not pass judgement on what support people find helpful – different things work for different people.

Support options for individuals (people who gamble and Affected Others) should be clearly signposted. It may be useful to engage with those with lived experience in your local area to understand where individuals look or have previously looked for support.

## **Support beyond gambling treatment**

Be careful when referencing other support beyond gambling support services. The main aim of providing information around gambling addiction is to signpost people to specialist gambling support services that can be tailored to individual need. If providing information about services including debt or suicide prevention, don’t explain the link between the two, but do say ‘you may need support with additional things like debt’, and then signpost.

## **Key words on websites**

If you can use key words to attract searches to your page, these commonly searched words used by people seeking support online may be useful. This is based on data on search terms in Greater Manchester:

Key words: gambling, addiction, help, help near me, gamble, online, support, stop, gamblers, gambler, problem, betting, treatment, free, rehab, groups, advice, debt

The guide was created by the three regions sharing a common approach to tackling gambling harms and stigma. A snapshot of the work and vision of each region is outlined below.



**Greater Manchester** – [visit the GMCA website for more information.](#)

Our vision is for Greater Manchester to be a place where no one experiences gambling related harms.



**North East** – [visit the APDH North East website for more information.](#)

The purpose of this programme is to develop a regional approach to tackle the harm caused by gambling across the North East. Gambling is complex and requires more than just a focus on individual responsibility. The local environment in which people live, work and socialise requires consideration to ensure that the local population is protected from the harm caused by gambling.



**Yorkshire and the Humber** – [visit the Yorkshire and Humber network website for more information.](#)

Our vision is that people in Yorkshire and the Humber are protected from the direct and indirect harms of gambling at individual, community and population level, and those in need are able to access quality and effective information, support and treatment, as early as possible and without fear of stigma.

GMCA, ADPH Yorkshire and Humber and ADPH North East have received funding in the form of a regulatory settlement to support this programme of work. Regulatory settlement funds are payment in lieu of a financial penalty the Gambling Commission might otherwise impose on a UK gambling operator for breach of a licence condition. There has been no direct or indirect involvement gambling industry involvement in any part of this research or the related programme. [More information on this type of funding can be found on the Gambling Commission website.](#)