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## A Field Insight Tool for Understanding the Overlap Between Gambling and Substance Use in Service Members

### Gambling & Substance Use in Active Military Populations

*A quick guide for clinicians working with service members*

#### Why the Military Is a Unique Risk Environment

- High stress + low privacy = private coping
- Boredom between deployments fuels risk-taking behaviors
- Access to gambling (on base, online, overseas)
- "High tolerance for adrenaline" may mimic impulsivity
- Culture of silence discourages help-seeking

#### Warning Signs to Watch For

- Sudden or frequent requests for loans or advances
- Late-night behavior, irritability after losses
- Skipping PT or duty to gamble or recover from use
- Justifying use as "stress relief" or "team bonding"
- Shame after wins or losses—followed by escalation

#### The Substance Use Connection

- Gambling and substances stimulate the same reward pathways
- Service members may switch between or combine behaviors
- Alcohol often used to numb gambling-related losses
- Withdrawal from one may trigger cravings for the other

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### How to Intervene

- ASK NON-SHAMING, CONCRETE QUESTIONS:
  - "When you're off duty, how do you usually unwind?"
  - "Has your spending or drinking ever surprised you?"
- FOCUS ON VALUES AND MISSION, NOT BLAME:
  - "You're good at pushing through—but sometimes pushing masks the pain."
- NORMALIZE THE EXPERIENCE:
  - "These patterns are more common than you think, especially in high-stress roles."

#### More Clinical Prompts for Engagement:

- "Do you ever feel like gambling or drinking is how you decompress after being on edge for too long?"
- "Are there times when the thrill of the risk feels easier to chase than sitting with the stress?"
- "What helps you hit pause before things escalate?"
- "If your younger self saw your current coping strategies, what might they say?"

**"If it's hidden well, it doesn't mean it's harmless. Create room in your assessments and care plans for what service members may never say out loud."**

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