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Supporting Families Affected by Gambling Use Disorder

Learning Objectives

- Understand family impact of Gambling Use Disorder
- Identify trauma responses and coping roles
- Apply family-centered, trauma-informed interventions
- Support parallel recovery



**“I NEVER WILL
GET OVER THE
LOSS OF MY SON”**

Why Focus on Families and Gambling

- Gambling harm is often hidden

- Families experience shock and betrayal

- Financial and emotional trauma go hand-in-hand

Generational impact

Costs related to family

Gambling Use Disorder as a Family Trauma

- Secrecy and deception



- Financial instability



- Emotional withdrawal



- Chronic uncertainty

How Gambling Differs from Substance Use

- • No visible intoxication
- • Delayed discovery
- • Financial devastation
- • Betrayal trauma

Common Family Experiences

- Hypervigilance around money

- Fear of the next crisis

- Shame and isolation

- Emotional exhaustion

Family Roles in Gambling- Affected Homes

- • Financial monitor
- • Protector
- • Avoider
- • Fixer
- • Emotional caretaker

A Partner's Story

- **“I didn’t know we were bankrupt until the notices came.”**

A Parent's Story

- “I kept thinking if I helped more, it would stop.”

An Adult Child's Story

- **“Money was always the problem — and never talked about.”**

Emotional and Relational Impact

- Loss of trust
- Chronic anxiety
- Anger and grief
- Relationship rupture

Betrayal

- Violation of trust

- Loss of emotional safety

- Confusion and self-blame

Financial Trauma in Families

Debt and hidden losses



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graph TD; A[Debt and hidden losses] --> B[Loss of savings or retirement]; B --> C[Housing and employment risk]; C --> D[Ongoing financial fear]; D --> E[Financial Protection Plan];
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Loss of savings or retirement

Housing and employment risk

Ongoing financial fear

Financial Protection Plan

Family journey

Unfolds over time accompanied by
“adaptive” changes

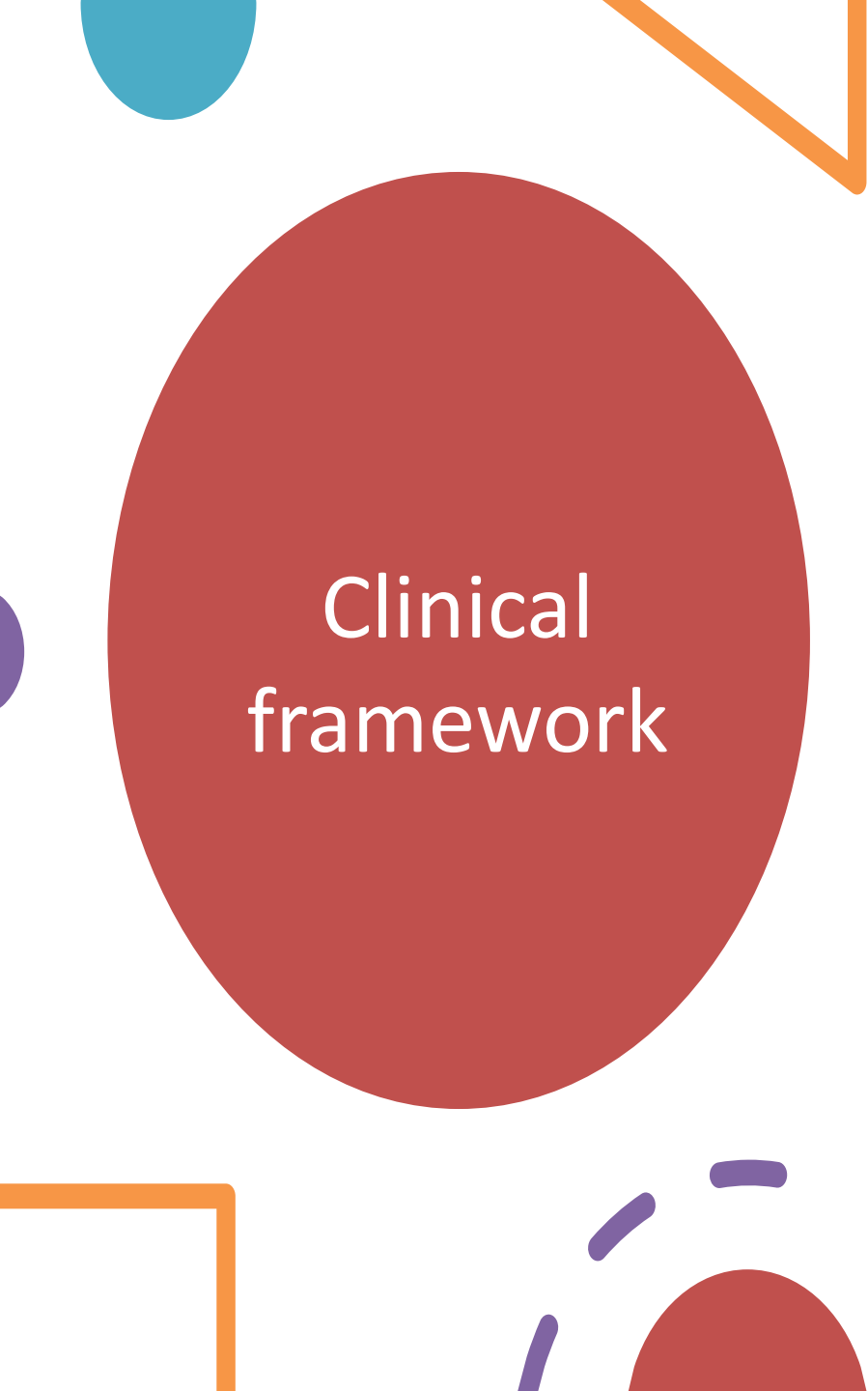
Dreams and stability

Confusion and secrecy

Financial and emotional chaos

Adaptation and survival

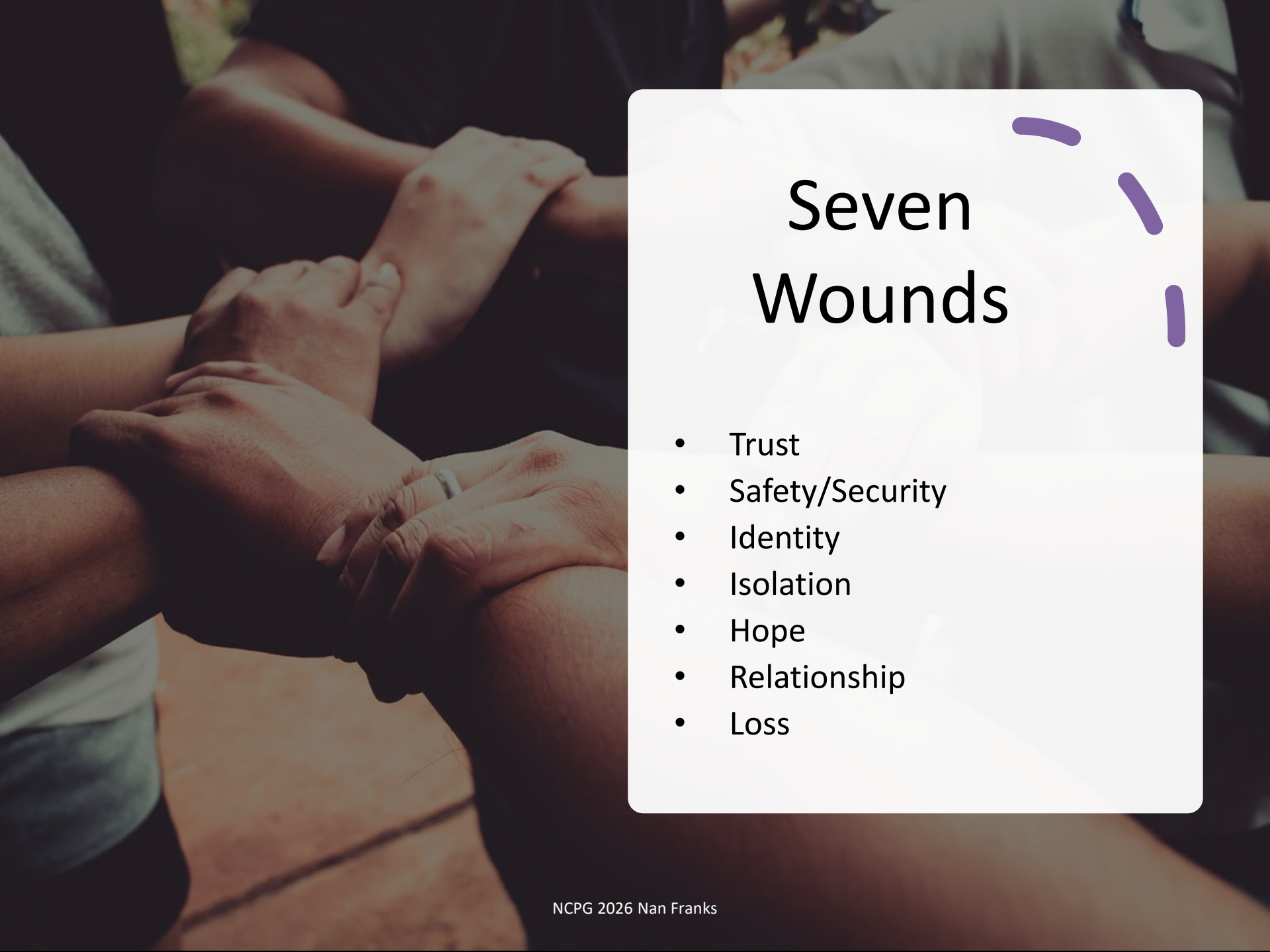
Hope, disappointment, recovery



Clinical framework

- Experience →
Meaning →
Obstacle →
Intervention →
Growth





Seven Wounds

- Trust
- Safety/Security
- Identity
- Isolation
- Hope
- Relationship
- Loss



Trust

I don't know what to believe

Partners often describe feeling as though their entire reality has been rewritten. Years of deception, hidden debt, secret accounts, promises, and repeated betrayals create profound uncertainty about what can be believed.

This wound extends beyond trusting the gambler—it often becomes an inability to trust oneself.

Goals

- Restore confidence in personal intuition
- Separate current reality from past deception
- Reduce hypervigilance
- Establish healthy transparency



- 
- What's going to happen next?

Problem gambling affects every domain of safety:

Safety/security

Financial

Emotional

Physical

Family

Housing

Signs

Panic

Difficulty sleeping

Catastrophic thinking

Decision paralysis

Hoarding

Acting out - children

Chronic stress symptoms

Attempts at control



Treatment Goals

- Stabilize immediate crises
- Increase perceived safety
- Build practical financial security
- Regulate the nervous system



Identity

**I'm not sure who I am
anymore?**

Loss of self
Caretaking
Codependency
Shame
Low self-worth
Difficulty making
independent decisions



Recovery Goals

- Rebuild identity
- Increase autonomy
- Strengthen self-esteem
- Rediscover personal values

Isolation/Secrecy

- **Who could possibly understand?**

Withdrawal

Loneliness

Loss of friendships

Avoiding family gatherings

Depression

Feeling invisible



Recovery Goals

- Reduce shame
- Increase healthy connection
- Expand support network
- Build belonging

Hope

I wonder if things will ever change

Recovery attempts followed by relapse often create cycles of hope and disappointment.

Families become emotionally exhausted.

Signs

Hopelessness

Emotional numbness

Learned helplessness

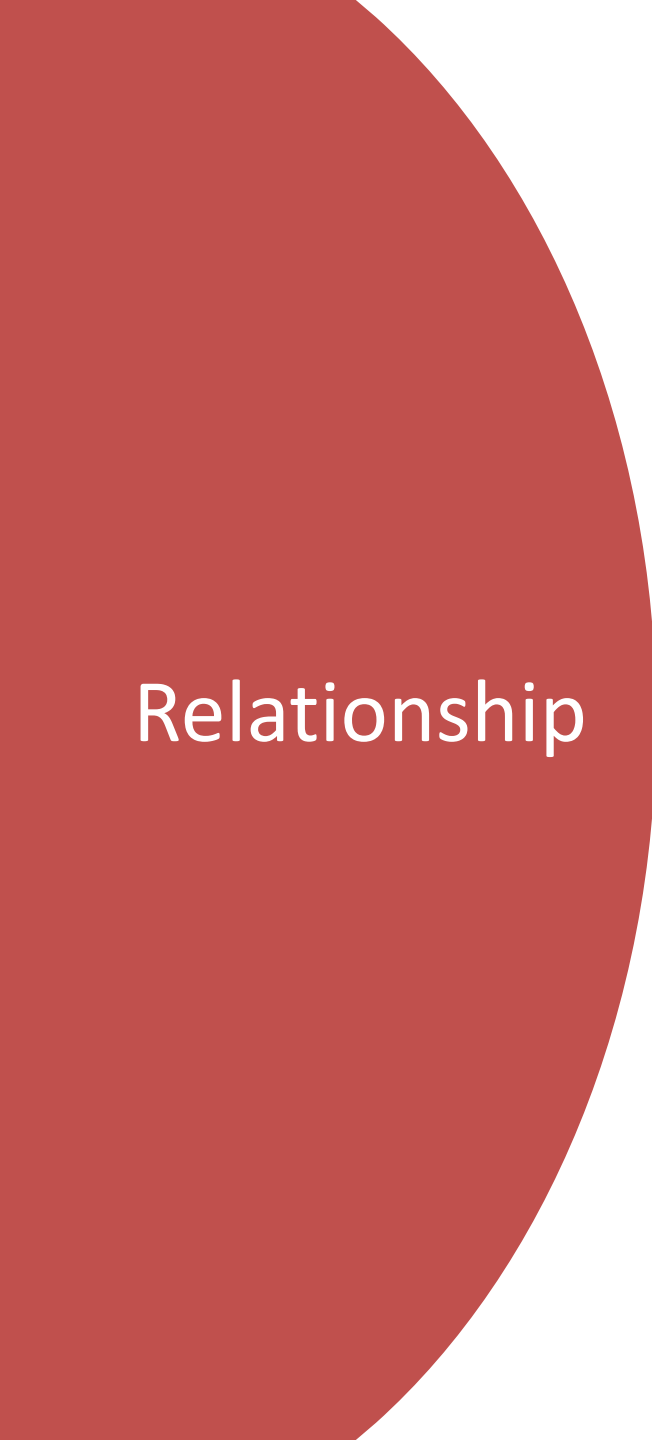
Ambivalence

Depression

Burnout

Recovery Goals

- Restore realistic hope
- Increase resilience
- Develop future orientation
- Differentiate hope from magical thinking
- Understand GD and impact of recovery



Relationship

- I don't know if we'll ever be close again

decreased intimacy
monitoring
conflict
fear
resentment
emotional distance





signs



Communication breakdown

Loss of intimacy

Parenting conflict

Emotional detachment

Anger

Grief

Recovery Goals

- Improve communication
- Restore healthy boundaries
- Increase emotional intimacy
- Clarify relationship decisions

Loss

“I have lost so much”

Loss extends far beyond money.

Families grieve:

dreams

years

friendships

security

time

innocence

Signs

- **Sadness**
- **Anger**
- **Complicated grief**
- **Regret**
- **Bitterness**
- **Emotional exhaustion**



Recovery goals

- Process grief
- Honor ambiguous losses
- Find meaning
- Integrate the experience into life without letting it define one's identity

Trauma Responses in Families

- Fight
- Flight
- Freeze
- Fawn

What Families Need First

- Safety

- Stabilization

- Validation

- Clear information

Clinical Interventions

Psychoeducation
about gambling
harm

Boundary
setting

Family systems
approach

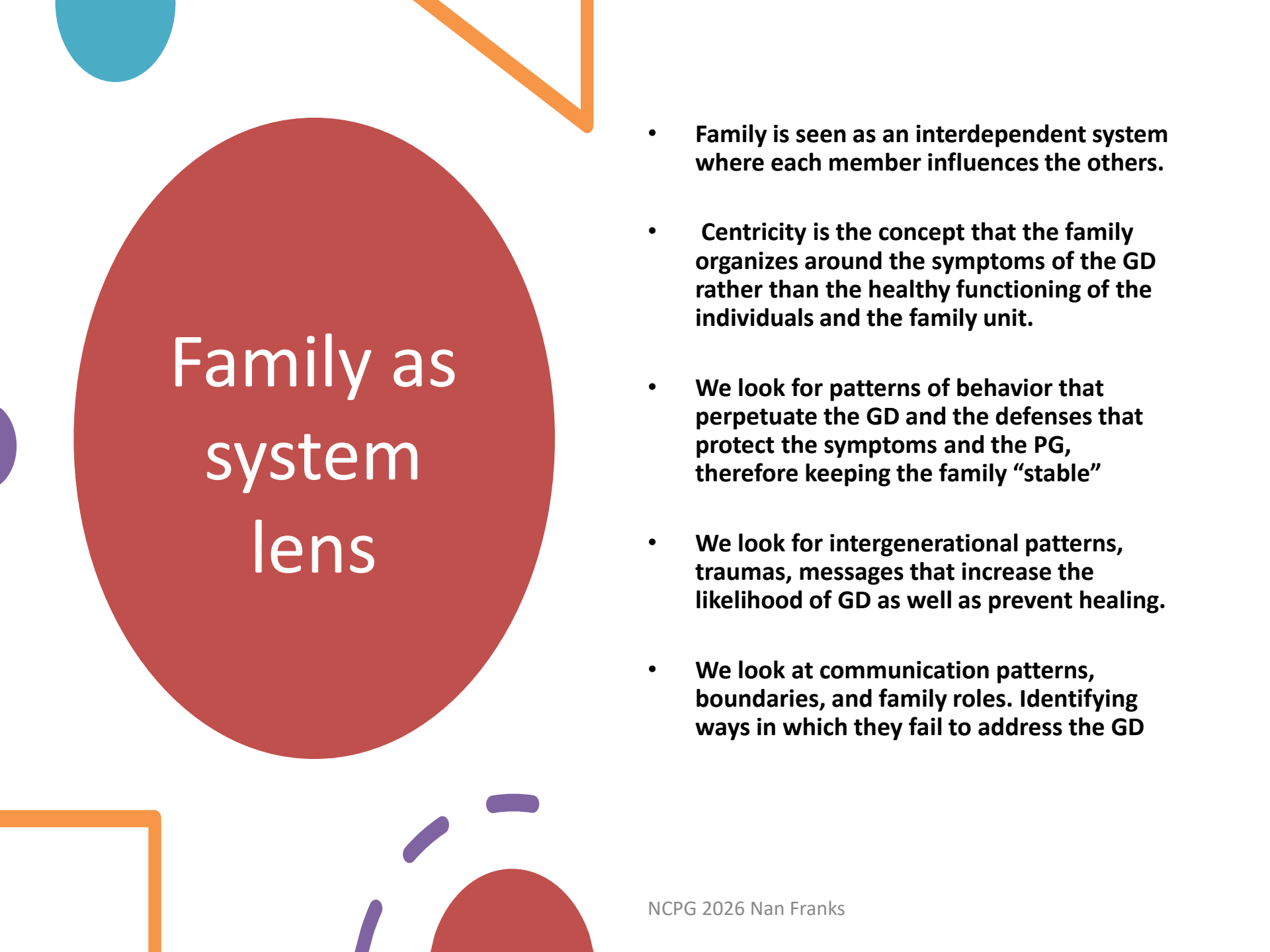
Primary disease
approach

Financial safety
planning

Family mapping

Core Principles of the Family Systems Approach

- **Family as an Emotional Unit:** The family is seen as an interdependent system where each member influences the others.
- **Identification of Patterns:** Therapy aims to uncover "enabling" behaviors where family members inadvertently support the gambling habit (e.g., paying off debts) to keep the system stable.
- **Intergenerational Impact:** Research highlights that growing up with a parent who gambles significantly increases the risk of the child developing a gambling disorder as an adult.
- **Communication Subsystems:** Strong family functioning often depends on healthy communication, particularly mother-child communication, which has been found to be a key protective factor against distorted gambling beliefs.



Family as system lens

- **Family is seen as an interdependent system where each member influences the others.**
- **Centricity is the concept that the family organizes around the symptoms of the GD rather than the healthy functioning of the individuals and the family unit.**
- **We look for patterns of behavior that perpetuate the GD and the defenses that protect the symptoms and the PG, therefore keeping the family “stable”**
- **We look for intergenerational patterns, traumas, messages that increase the likelihood of GD as well as prevent healing.**
- **We look at communication patterns, boundaries, and family roles. Identifying ways in which they fail to address the GD**



STAGES OF CHANGE

“Codependency”

a behavioral addiction associated with brain alterations

A response to chronic stress and trauma

Associated with role identity

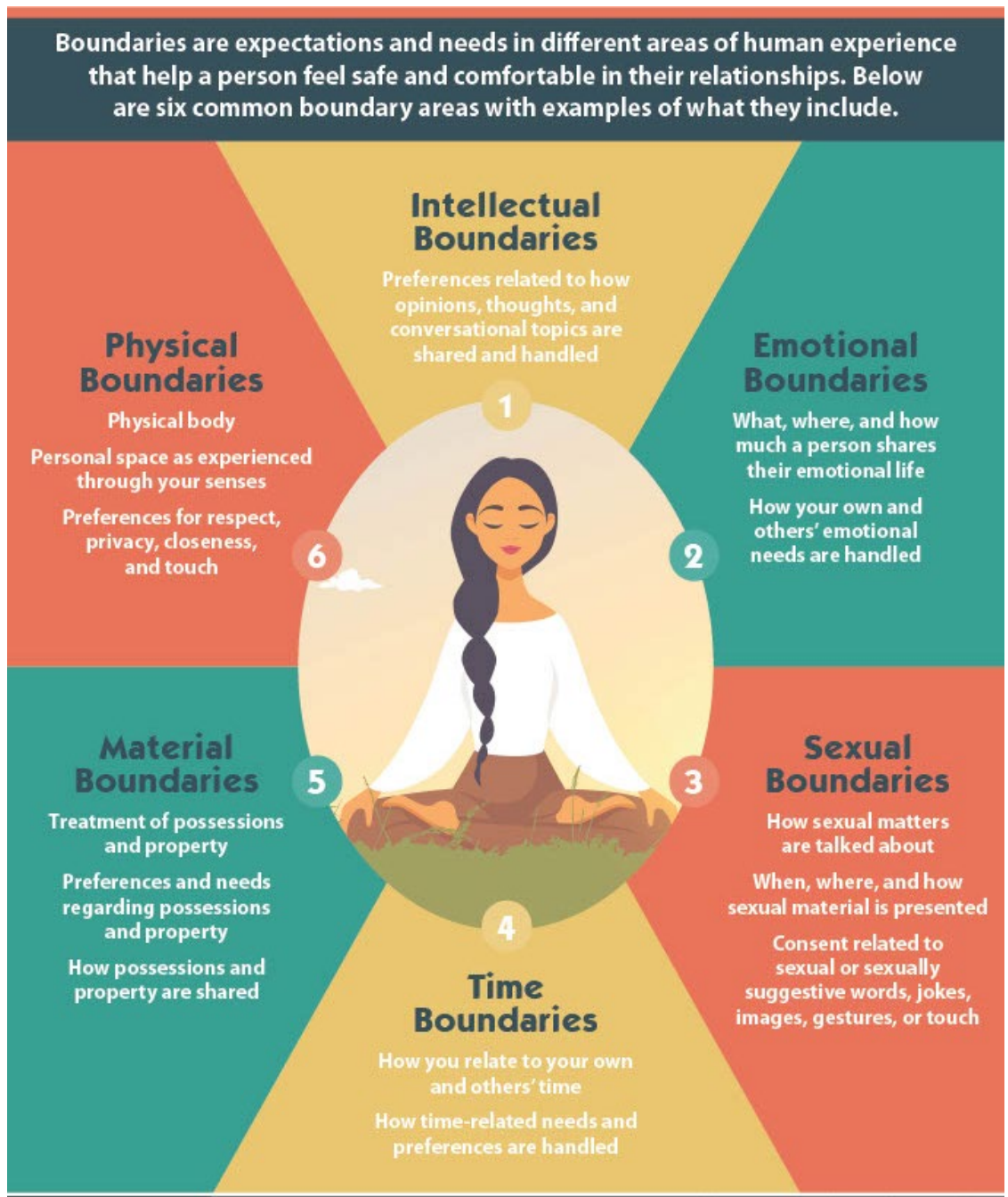
Multi-generational

It's a Brain Disease

- Family Brain- develops over time and repetitive exposure
- reactivity to affective cues – and more specifically to images of a loved-one with a substance use disorder...” showing “...important alterations of functioning in cortical regions of the prefrontal cortex...
- Shumway and Bradshaw

6 types of boundaries

pesi



Assessment Considerations

-
- Financial harm

-
- Emotional distress

-
- Family roles and boundaries

-
- Support systems

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Shifting boundaries

Practice small

What's the fear
underneath the
resistance

“What if “ practice

Primary Topics in Family Counseling

- Revealing the extent of gambling
- Developing mutual understanding of the impact and need for change
 - Mutual understanding increases mutual support
- Commitment to treatment
- Addressing of relational problems
- Commitment to recovery

Primary Goals in Family Counseling

- **Develop and maintain healthy boundaries.**
- **Facilitate cohesion and communication.**
- **Increase understanding of problem gambling**
- **Increase understanding of impact of problem gambling**
- **Promote problem-solving by a better understanding of family dynamics.**

Parallel Recovery

- Family healing is separate

- Recovery does not depend on abstinence

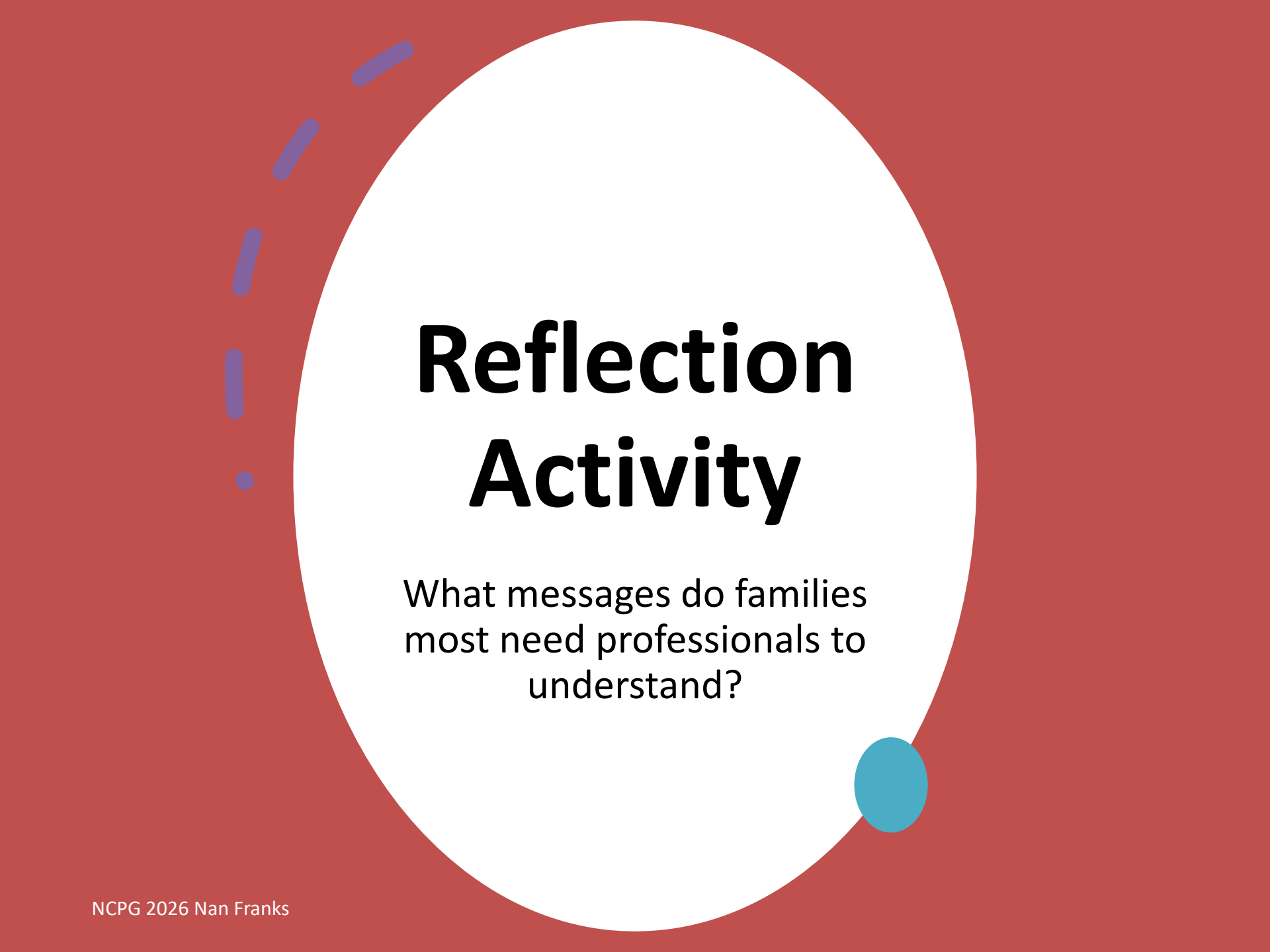
- Families deserve their own support

Supporting Financial Safety

- • Banking safeguards
- • Transparency agreements
- • Limits and monitoring
- • Financial counseling referrals

Healing Trust Over Time

- Slow rebuilding
- Consistent behaviors
- Clear expectations
- Compassion without rescuing



Reflection Activity

What messages do families
most need professionals to
understand?

Ethical Considerations

- • Confidentiality
- • Financial disclosure
- • Family involvement boundaries



Resources for Families

-
- Gam-Anon
-
- Gambling helplines
-
- Financial counseling
-
- Family support groups

Key Takeaways

- Gambling harms families deeply
- Family responses are survival strategies
- Healing requires witnessing

Closing Reflection

- **“From secrecy to safety, healing happens when families are seen.”**

Questions & CE Wrap-Up

- Thank you for walking beside families