

PATHOLOGICAL GAMBLING: METHODS OF TREATMENT AND PREVENTION  
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A caveat is in order at the beginning of this paper. Pathological gambling implies there is such a condition as normal gambling, which further implies that gambling is acceptable behavior on behalf of the general population. These implications have been fostered by various state governments with the underlying rationalizations that gambling revenues allow for more services to be delivered to it's citizens. We have moved from a position where gambling was illegal in most states to a situation where gambling is condoned and promoted. While it may be true that we can not legislate morality, it begs the question of whether we have legislated immorality. Current levels of gambling addiction indicate a problem of perhaps epidemic proportions with subsequent damage to the individual, the family, and society in general. The problem I see with implying that gambling is normal, acceptable behavior is that it undermines the only sure preventive measure that I know of to insure an individual will not become addicted to gambling. That particular measure is simply to never gamble.

From twenty years of working in the field of alcohol and drug addiction, I learned that energy expended in the prevention of addiction held more promise than treatment. Honest statistics indicate that treatment successes are not that high for people who undergo treatment for their addictions. This is not to devaluate treatment efforts but rather to emphasize the powerful pull that gambling addiction exerts on the individual. Relapses are extremely high in gambling addicted individuals as are instances of cross addictions to some other behavior or chemical. Prevention efforts, although difficult to measure, provide us with the most hope against gambling addiction.

As stated earlier, the only sure way to prevent gambling addiction is simply never to gamble. If a person is already gambling, then early detection and intervention regarding the potential problem is as valuable as it is in the treatment of any disease. Most casinos issue players cards which are then used by the gambler to accumulate points which can be redeemed for cash and comps. These cards are inserted into the slot machines, for example, and a computer record is kept that indicates date, time played, and money taken in or paid out by the machine. Those who spend the most money receive better comps from the casino and are on special mailing lists for casino promotions. When I work with a person who is gambling addicted, I have him or her

request printouts from the casinos they frequent. Usually, if a person requests these printouts for tax purposes there is no problem in obtaining them. These printouts are very useful for dissipating the patient's denial as it allows the progression of the addiction to be objectified. The patients can then see what dates they gambled, how long they gambled, and how much money was won or loss. It is very dramatic when a patient sees the progression from 4 days of gambling per month to 19, from 20 hours per month to 150, and from losing \$175 to \$3,000. If we extrapolate this concept, it seems to me that the casinos would truly be doing a great service by sending their preferred gambling customers printouts of their gambling behavior with each mailing. I do believe this would have an impact on earlier recognition of a gambling problem and would bring reality to bear in a most forceful manner on the recipient.

In line with prevention efforts, considering the impulsive nature of gamblers and especially addicted gamblers, the removal of ATM machines from casinos might help prevent or slow down the progression of the addiction.

The greatest force we have in prevention efforts is education. We need to educate our youth as well as our adults. We need to inform people as to the signs of gambling addiction and these signs should be posted in all casinos. In closing this section on prevention, it should be noted that when the casinos were confined to Nevada and Atlantic City it was much more difficult for individuals to become addicted to gambling. With the proliferation of so called "convenience" gambling which followed the establishment of legalized gambling in most every state, the number of addicted gamblers has exploded. Many people who would have never gone to Nevada or Atlantic City have now become gambling addicts and are in short driving distance from being able to maintain their addiction. Long range plans should consider limiting casinos to a small number of states or once again making it an illegal activity in the majority of states. This may not be practical but it is very pragmatic.

Treatment of gambling addiction is a tough process. Most insurance companies do not cover it and, if the gambling addict still has money, chances are it will be gambled away. States need to assume some responsibility in offering treatment services. These need to be inpatient as well as outpatient facilities. Many gambling addicts are suicidal and need a protective environment and administration of anti-depressive medications.

When I am working with gambling addicts I require them to cut up and cancel all credit cards. In many cases, the spouse is given all control of finances and the object is to completely cut the addict off from any access to cash. This includes checking accounts, savings, IRA's, and other retirement accounts. It is harsh but necessary. Craving is a function of perceived availability. Money in the addict's hands is equal to cravings. Since casinos are so convenient, proximity to them also promotes cravings and I advise staying far away. Don't even go there to eat or collect outstanding comps. Some patients have had to relocate their residency to avoid easy access to the casinos and subsequent overpowering urges.

I instruct all patients to begin attending GA meetings and to immediately become active in the church of their choice. I do this for several reasons. First of all, GA from its foundation tried to copy AA but with a glaring difference. GA historically has minimized the spiritual aspects of recovery and I believe this is a prominent fault. Secondly, I concur with Henry James, the famed Harvard psychologist, who said that permanent behavior change only comes from having a spiritual transformation. Those addicts who have the healthiest recovery are those who have returned to active participation in a church and a firm belief in God. It is true that I have seen many addicts recover from their primary addiction who do not develop their spirituality. Unfortunately, most of them become addicted to something else or the quality of their lives, as well as their basic character, is not significantly altered. I also suggest that men try to find an all male GA group and women go to an all female group to diminish the chances of pathological interaction, especially the possibility of acting out in a sexually addicted fashion.

The fact that I am a recovering gambling addict helps me in doing therapy. I've told most of the lies that I hear. I have felt the shames, the fears, the cravings, and given all the excuses. I don't try to play the "Wizard of Oz" or delve into their childhoods. I don't try to "shrink" them but rather strive to "amplify" their strengths and give them tough love and hope. I was and still am broke as a result of my gambling addiction and I am candid about this to those people I see. We address the financial problems of their addiction, as many of them will require referral to an accountant or attorney to consider budgeting or bankruptcy. I confront, support, and keep the sessions focused on their gambling addiction and its effects. I always tell them recovery is a reality.

I have learned that, despite our secular and scientific sophistications, there are some basic and primitive forces inside of us that propel us to seek meaning in life. It is more than a mere existential crisis where we question why we exist. It is a powerful innate force that urges and prods us to develop a sense of God consciousness. We have three basic vacuums we need to fill up in this life. It is clear that we have a people vacuum that only can be filled by people. Love, friendship, and socialization are examples which easily fall into this category. Another vacuum is the need for things and only things can satisfy it. Such items as money, food, clothes, shelter, and other material items fit into this category. Last but not most, we have a God vacuum that can only be filled by God. A major mistake made by many people, especially gambling addicts, is trying to fill this God shaped vacuum with people and things. It is an impossibility which leaves them constantly dissatisfied with their lives and fills them with the nagging notion that something very vital is missing. In regards to recovery, this is true.

The gambling addict needs tools for living. In our society, these tools were forged on the anvil of Christianity. Honesty, service, humility, simplicity, responsibility, self-denial, perseverance, tolerance, reverence, faith, wisdom, and love of one's self, neighbor, and God provides the necessary tools to build a new and healthy life. Gambling addicts are broke and broken. I know this for certain. Therapy and support groups are necessary but not sufficient. To deny the very real and awesome power of spiritual transformation in the recovery process is perhaps the greatest denial any addict or therapist must overcome.

## MISERY AMONG THE MAGNOLIAS

John M. Fades, Ph.D.

For twenty years I worked in the field of alcohol and drug addiction, acquiring extensive experience and expertise in that area. The casinos had not yet arrived on the Gulf Coast and the area professionals were not very knowledgeable about gambling addiction, nor was I. In May of 1993, I made my first trip to a casino in Biloxi with some friends of ours and had my initial exposure to legalized gambling. In retrospect, by June of the following year, I was a full-blown gambling addict. It is only upon reflection that I can determine when I crossed that invisible line into gambling addiction where all control and restraint was lost. It was as ironic as the firehouse that burns down. I was an expert in the area of chemical addiction who had become addicted to gambling. When I went to Minnesota in the fall of 1994 for training and certification in the treatment of gambling addiction, I had the unique opportunity of combining my personal experiences with the theoretical presentations regarding the various aspects of gambling addiction treatment. Like my Grandma Allen always said, "You can talk about hammering all day long but to drive a nail you still got to swing the hammer." One thing about my gambling addiction, it gave me plenty of "on the job experience" in what it is really like to destroy your life from gambling addiction. I know for sure that gambling addiction devastated me in every area of my life from economical to marital. I may not know all of the theory about gambling addiction, some of it is quite boring and easy to forget, but I do understand the terrible pain that comes with the addiction.

My progression into the depths of gambling addiction followed the classical stages of the addiction with winning (no early big wins, however), losing, chasing, bailout, and desperation. These stages are easy to acknowledge in the dispassionate atmosphere of hindsight, however, when in the throes of gambling addiction, there is very little insight that exists. In the heat of addiction, a cool head seldom prevails.

The economic costs of my addiction are staggering. In pursuing my addiction to gambling, I used numerous credit cards to their limits. Once I had "maxed" out a credit card it was not unusual for them to simply extend the limits, often actually doubling the credit line. With 15 credit cards and a savings account, I had easy access to money for gambling. When these resources dried up, I sold various items such as a gun, a truck, a motorcycle, and a boat and motor in order

to continuing gambling. Finally, I ran out of money. It was only then that I even considered I might be a gambling addict. Still, I sought money with which to gamble. One time I wrote a bad check at one of the casinos but was able to get a friend to loan me the money to cover it. I believe I thought my lack of money was my problem, not gambling addiction. Inevitably, my economic world collapsed. A Chapter 13 bankruptcy was filed and leaving the court room that day I for once realized the depth of my addiction. Only then did I decide I needed to try and recover.

The economic costs are continuing and probably will for a long time. My paycheck is garnished each payday to pay money to the bankruptcy court for distribution among my creditors. This will continue for a good while. Obviously, I have no credit. I have no credit cards, couldn't get one if I tried, and want none even if I could. I can't buy any items on time, drive an older car with almost two hundred thousand miles and a broken air-conditioner, and literally live from paycheck to paycheck. I doubt I will ever be able to retire and am more broke than when I first married almost 35 years ago. There is no need to give a figure but suffice it to say that I lost the equivalence of my gross salary for five years. Normal recreational activities, such as eating out or going to a movie, require careful budgeting as money is quite scarce at this point. My wife and I moved here to Winchester, Tennessee to get away from the casinos. Many folks up here think I must have a lot of money since I have had two books published and have a Ph.D.. I tell them I am dead broke and often they chuckle. Remembering what Shakespeare said about "a tragedy carried to its extreme becomes a comedy", I chuckle myself.

The economic consequences of the gambling addiction are terrible, but they pale beside the emotional consequences. My wife, Karen, devastated by my addiction, saw the economic security of our future disappearing in the slot machines right along with our money. One night, angry and frustrated with my continuing problem, Karen took an overdose of the sedative, Xanax, and I took her to the emergency room where her stomach was pumped. I watched her suffer through the embarrassment of being questioned by the police as they filled out a mandatory suicide report. Despite the trauma, the next day I manipulated her into going gambling to lift her mood. How sick I was! The lies, the arguments, the economic hardships, and the damage to our marriage were some of the consequences of my gambling addiction. The destruction of trust and all we had built together over more than three decades of marriage strangled my sleep with guilt as I continued to gamble. It was a long time before the brakes of reality could slow down my obsession with

gambling. Thankfully, Karen decided not to give up on me and has stood by me through the entire ordeal. I am a most fortunate and blessed man.

Gambling addiction is unbelievably powerful. It defies all logic and common sense. It debases the human spirit and is comparable to cocaine in its hold on the individual. In addition, addiction to gambling, especially slot machines, can occur with the rapidity of cocaine addiction. I remember the day I gambled away all my credit union savings and did not eat or take my blood pressure medication. I sat gambling at a slot machine until I was sick and dizzy and had to lie down on the floor to keep from falling. The security personnel came running and summoned the paramedics. They thought I was having a heart attack and an ambulance was called. I recall people staring down at me as I lay there feeling such shame as I waited on the ambulance. I had taken the money I had set aside for Christmas presents and gambled every cent of it away. At that time, I was hoping that I would die so I wouldn't have to face Karen and see the hurt in her eyes. I mean I sincerely was wanting to die. Thank God I didn't! There are other ways to stop gambling besides death. I found that out.

I am a true gambling addict and even though I am now in recovery, I always will be. Who knows, maybe I started gambling to handle depression. Makes no difference. I am not depressed now but I am certain I can't gamble again without losing control. My heart goes out to suffering gambling addicts. I know the car goes faster as it crosses the bridge into Biloxi. I know what it is like to fill up the gas tank before going to the casino because you know you won't have enough money left to buy gas. I know what it is like to lose every dollar you have on you and the reluctance to eat or go to the bathroom until it becomes a dire necessity. I know the reason why cash or credit cards are locked in the glove compartment only to be retrieved when you lose what you took into the casino with you. I know that look and feeling when the ATM machine turns down the several credit cards you hoped still had a few dollars left on them.

No doubt about it, gambling addiction is an awesome problem. Recovery is tough and relapses are common. I've had numerous relapses in the past, but I am thankful I've been able to have many months of recovery at this time. Moving to Tennessee has helped me to avoid the daily temptations to gamble that I had when I was on the Gulf Coast. Becoming involved with the church and allowing God to transform my spirit has been my mainstay. On this day, I think Grandma Allen would have been proud of me.