

The Wheel of Misfortune  
Compulsive Gambling  
Its affects on the family

GAMBLERS ANONYMOUS  
GAM-ANON

By

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To non-gamblers, even more to controlled gamblers, the idea that gambling may become compulsive (an addiction or a sickness) is incredible. It is not so difficult to believe that people can be alcoholics or drug addicts because, in those cases, something gets into the physical system. Nonetheless, the condition is real enough.

It begins for some when they are still young. It overtakes others later in life. It is more than just having an irresistible itch to gamble. Those who are affected vary considerably both in their personalities and in their positions in life. Their experiences of gambling and of its results in their lives have much in common but in detail there are considerable differences.

The onset of compulsive gambling may be prompted by circumstances. The beginning for some is an introduction to gambling which they recognise immediately as an inviting world. They enjoy the excitement and the whole atmosphere. Others win when first they gamble, and become convinced that they are lucky gamblers, a conviction which prompts irrational action. Others cannot endure being under pressure for money. The move from ordinary to compulsive gambling for these may start when they get married, when a child is born, or when for some other reason their responsibilities, domestic, financial or otherwise, are suddenly increased so that they are not sure how to handle them. They are faced with bills and not enough money to meet them. This is a common human experience but the compulsive gambler feels that the only answer is to gamble and try to win enough to pay them all at once.

However all that may be, the onset of compulsive gambling waits for an introduction to what may be called 'real' gambling, which is continuous and circular in its action. That 'action' moves rapidly and without pause from staking to the tension which is experienced while the card or wheel is turning, the dice rolling, or the race is being run, and so to release of tension when the result is known and then on to staking again. For those who can endure the extremity of excitement which this engenders, the 'action' produces an unbelievable degree of arousal of the whole person, so that it is like entering a new and wonderful world.

Compulsive gamblers are carried away by this and for them it becomes a squirrel's cage. Win or lose they cannot escape - this distinguishes them from heavy and professional gamblers. As time goes on they develop a need for the action. Because it contains the elements of tension and release, some observers have made a comparison with orgasm, and decided that, as an experience, gambling has more in common with breaking and entering than sexual intercourse.

If you must have the action and, win or lose, cannot leave it, then, because the odds are against you, you must lose till it hurts. This leads some, mistakenly I think, to say that compulsive gamblers are masochists. It is certainly a humiliating experience. It makes compulsive gamblers swear that they will never gamble again. They do though because their dream world capacity obliterates bad memories.

This dream world enables a compulsive gambler, on his way to the action with money in his hand, to know without any peradventure, that today he will advance, win after win, to that glorious consummation of the ultimate win which will cut down to size the man who broke the bank of Monte Carlo.

There can be no ultimate win for those who must continue to gamble. (When in Sydney, Australia, I heard of a man who cleaned up in a two-up school, and was so frustrated that the action had ceased, that he divided the money among his fellow gamblers to make a fresh start). However much is won on any occasion, or over a period, the end is the same: "...as usual I came out skint".

But the dream world continues into the aftermath. The gambler creeps away dejected, but later in his imagination goes over the proceedings again, making right decisions instead of wrong ones. then he emerges, widely smiling, smoking a large cigar, driving off in a splendid limousine, owning houses in every desirable place, and showering benefits on family, relations, friends and acquaintances. So confidence is re-built for the next time.

This kind of gambling is expensive. If people possess them, fortunes go. Those compulsive gamblers who have no fortunes find ways and means of financing their gambling. They use money

which ought to be used for other purposes, and then borrow money more. This adds a new dimension, and both their indebtedness and their compulsion progressively increase. At first they must get money to gamble. Later, they must gamble to get money back.

There is no chance to stop and examine the situation. Their unusual degree of impatience makes them fretful to meet all demands now. They must gamble themselves out of the mess they have gambled themselves into. This is a new merry-go-round: to borrow, to gamble, to lose, and borrow again. Debts can reach staggering proportions because a compulsive gambler can charm money out of people. His dream world capacity enables him to concoct, quite believe and tell convincingly quite incredible stories. He develops a desperate urgency which overwhelms those whom he cannot quite convince.

Compulsive gambling eats into every part of the gambler's life. It destroys his integrity; it ruins his relationship with his family and he loses his friends. It crushes truth and consideration for others and his own self-respect. This is inevitable when his gambling costs far more money in a day than he earns in a week. This may mean the end of his job, but not of feverish activity.

He begs, borrows, lies, deceives, and in the end cheats, defrauds, and steals. He must find money each day to gamble. Sometimes he wins even enormous sums of money but none is sufficient. He tells himself that he is gambling to win enough to clear all his debts but even if he succeeded in that he would never pay more than the most pressing ones. The rest is money for more gambling. Even if he repays a debt he may well borrow more from the same person a few days later when his winnings are gone.

He has crisis after crisis, and until they can do it no longer his family feel compelled to help him out of his financial difficulties. Actually they do him more harm than good. He will promise never to gamble again, and even believes that he will not, but he will. He uses blackmail of a kind. His requests for money are urgent and come without warning. He will say to his in-laws: "If I don't have £100 before tomorrow I will go to prison." He is their daughter's or sister's husband. It is no concern of his that they put themselves in debt to get him out of trouble.

He endures mental suffering and physical deprivation. He suffers terrible remorse for the harm he does his wife and particularly his children. He is also despised and rejected and quite alone.

He continues gambling only because it is his only hope of getting out of trouble and so justifying himself and all he has done. In time he hates not only gambling but also himself.

Eventually there is a crisis he cannot deal with. There is no one left from whom he can borrow and his creditors are pressing hard. He is in a corner. He may commit a crime. There are many compulsive gamblers in prison. He may attempt suicide. There are compulsive gamblers in psychiatric wards of hospitals. He may go to Gamblers Anonymous, where he would have the chance of finding a new life.

The compulsive gambler has been spoken of consistently, in this article, as a man. Only a few women have joined Gamblers Anonymous. There may be fewer women who suffer in this way. Certainly the social stigma attaching to excessive gambling is far worse in the case of a woman. Perhaps for this reason many hesitate to come forward.

## **Compulsive Gambling As It Affects The Family**

Wives and other relatives suffer desperately. Wives are in most cases left short of money and the necessities of life, but that is only a small part of their suffering. They live with a Jekyll and Hyde, and do not understand him. As time goes on they are lost in a mist of uncertainty and this tends to erode their will to find a way out of it. They cannot plan, and their capacity to trust is destroyed.

They develop self-loathing as they become prey to bitterness, contempt and hatred. They despise themselves for what they say and do when bitter rows develop about money and domestic responsibilities.

The burden is made all the heavier because shame prevents them from sharing it with friends. Her family tell her that her husband is no good, and that she should leave him. In such a home there is no trust. Bewilderment gives way to bitterness and hatred. The stigma haunts them. Even if they have to ask for help in connection with material need, or physical or mental illness, they never mention the gambling, even if it all springs from that. They are likely to be ill-thought of as sluts or hypochondriacs, - the cause of circumstances of which they complain. Their health is impaired, sometimes permanently. Parents, when gamblers are single, are worn down financially and psychologically. Children, as they grow older, often suffer in their personal development from the inevitable tensions in the home.

Such people and such families somehow manage to overcome crisis after crisis. There comes a time, however, when the pain is too great and can no longer be endured. For both gamblers and their relatives there is a rock bottom, and they know when they have reached it. Then they look around for help, and in these days they can find it.

### **Help Is At Hand**

There are psychiatrists, psychologists, probation officers, social workers, prison staffs and others who are aware of the problem and are doing what they can to help. More and more members of the statutory and voluntary caring agencies are now recommending those with a gambling problem to Gamblers Anonymous and Gam-Anon.

Incomparably the most successful source of help is Gamblers Anonymous and its sister organisation Gam-Anon which is for relatives of compulsive gamblers. These are fellowships rather than organisations and they were formed in the USA in 1957 and came to London in July 1964. Today there are over 150 GA groups in England, Ireland Scotland and Wales, and nearly as many Gam-Anon groups.

Compulsive gamblers and their relatives, who all tend to hide from themselves, come face to face with themselves when at last they attend these meetings. Other peoples' therapies (personal accounts of their own experiences) tell them, that however much they felt alone, others have shared their suffering, and in giving their own therapies enable them to face themselves and their situation. They recognise that their lives are unmanageable, and that they have no control over gambling, either their own or their partner's. Yet they recognise that there is another way of living and thinking and if they give themselves to it they can find it.

### **Gamblers Anonymous**

The methods of Gamblers Anonymous are simple. The programme of recovery was taken from Alcoholics Anonymous. The steps of recovery are read at weekly meetings and the chairman, one of the members, invites each to speak of his own experiences. This is called his therapy. He describes something of his gambling days and of his better life now. As a new member listens he hears his own life story time and again. He gains self-recognition. The meeting is his mirror. He learns that he is sick, yet he must not act sick. His compulsion may owe much to his being sinned against, but he alone is responsible for his future actions. He must not gamble again. In this atmosphere of understanding he can confess his misdeeds. He begins to tell the truth. This is the beginning of a new life. His wife must know everything. His creditors must be faced and a reasonable agreement be made with them, so that they will eventually all be paid. This is repentance, amendment of life, and forgiveness is implicit in it all.

From this time on self-respect increases. He can meet people freely once again. He no longer starts at every knock at the door and can walk down the street and not be afraid no matter whom he should meet. In this stage members speak of new discoveries; of the fact that honesty pays, the joys of parenthood newly discovered or of taking pleasure in their work and family life. The understanding dawns that a pound is a pound, and that the bookmaker, the gaming club or the gambling machine is not going to get even one of them. One will speak of decorating a room at home, and another take pride of having a real hand in preparations for Christmas. They are painfully growing up.

Others who have been longer on the road may find the freshness of the new life fade and experience to the full the arduous nature of the climb to rehabilitation. The commitments of the past must be paid, and those of the present be met. A budget which includes all this is made and must be adhered to. Above all, no debts, however shameful may be hidden, and the budget must be flexible enough to avoid the possibility of the pressure of a financial crisis. Such pressures from any source too easily becomes an excuse for renewed gambling. There is little to spare either for holidays, Christmas or birthdays. This is a difficult and uphill road; impatient people who tend to escape into a dream world now have to deal with hard reality day after day, year after year. This requires honesty and humility.

Some members return a second time - even a third or fourth time - after intervals of months and sometimes years. Their problems have usually increased, and they are ready to face all that is involved in seeking a new life. Too often it is left too late, and their new resolution has to be tested behind prison doors.

Members are not referred to any other organisations. They help themselves and each other to stop gambling and recover their lives. Still, some need more help than the fellowship can give because they have additional problems which block their recovery. These may seek the help of other agencies.

Some psychiatrists have attended meetings in an honorary capacity, but they do not take an active part. They have not led. They seek to understand the nature of the problem involved. Their opinion may be sought and individuals sometimes consult them privately.

There is a considerable failure rate for which there are several reasons. For instance, not all who come are ready to break with gambling. People arrive at Gamblers Anonymous because they have problems. Basically, that is what they want to get rid of. But to each one the essence of the message is that he must keep the troubles (his debts, or worse) and deal with them, and get rid of the gambling. He may find that instead of this he wanted someone to take away the troubles and leave him with the path of recovery, at least this time.

### **GamAnon**

An even smaller proportion of gamblers would succeed in rehabilitating themselves were it not for the sister organisation, Gam-Anon, to which members of their families, usually the wives, may belong.

They have needs of their own. It is impossible to live with a compulsive gambler, especially if you are dependent on him, and not become bitter, cynical and unloving. If their husbands are to succeed as they walk away from the past, the wives must be content to leave the past for the future also. Because of past experience, many find it difficult to believe the promises and to hope for their fulfilment. Still it is not unusual to hear one say that when she woke that day she realised that she was happy - and she had not experienced that for many years. The work of recovery is shared between man and wife. Single - or separated or divorced - gamblers find the way much harder.

The wife has to change the pattern of her relationship to her husband. Previously she has probably helped him financially by taking responsibility for his debts, borrowing from her family or by working herself, and giving him home and food, even if he brought no money home. In addition, she would nag him and question him. She learns how to make him accept responsibility, and to encourage him in his new efforts, rather than blame him for their difficulties. In Gam-Anon she finds peace, courage and understanding.

But the struggle in both GA and Gam-Anon is worthwhile because it brings back self-respect and the respect of others. It provides peace of mind and a sense of being human again. It gives purpose and pleasure in ordinary relationships and responsibilities. It is beginning to live. It is healing. It is good.

There are established GA and GamAnon groups throughout England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales (and also USA, Canada, France, Germany, Australia)

This present publication is the result of the author's combination, with minor revisions, of his two leaflets, Gamblers Anonymous, and Wheel of Misfortune. These were first published by "Crucible" and "Interface" respectively. The author developed these themes further in "Quit Compulsive Gambling" published by Thorsons in February 1989 and available from Gamblers Anonymous.

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