

# The Faces of Problem Gambling

THE CAREER  
GAMBLER



THE SPOUSE



THE COUNSELOR



THE GAMBLER,  
TURNED COACH



THE DAUGHTER



KNOW  
— THE —  
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# The Faces of Problem Gambling

If you've read our earlier books, you may already be familiar with the statistics. You know that every year, more than four million United States adults experience an increased drive to gamble. You've heard that problem gambling doesn't just affect adults and that adolescents may also be at risk and benefit from increased education. You know that problem gambling doesn't discriminate and that it affects people of all races, genders and economic backgrounds.

You've heard the statistics, but you haven't heard the stories, in the gambler's own words. The stories of addiction and recovery that help us put a face to this problem.

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**UNTIL NOW.**

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Or maybe you haven't heard the statistics. There's a reason problem gambling is called the hidden addiction; it's because gambling disorders come with no visible side effects. We may not realize that our friends, our loved ones or even we are at risk for a problem. We haven't identified the triggers and the consequences of gambling. There are no examples to help us recognize the problem behavior in ourselves and our loves ones.

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**UNTIL NOW.**

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What follows are five powerful stories about problem gambling, directly from the people who experienced them. Whether you're looking to understand more about problem gambling, to hear other experiences or need help identifying a problem, it will be hard not to be moved by their personal experiences.





## The Career Gambler

*As a child, gambling was all around me.*

I grew up in an Italian family in northeastern Pennsylvania, and every holiday when the whole family was together, the young people would sit around the table playing cards for pennies and nickels, while our older family members played poker. I remember sitting and watching everyone gamble, playing when I could be included. I found these times tremendously exciting.

My dad worked at the local pool hall, and I spent much of my childhood watching people gamble for money. I got to know the bookie very well, and began gambling on sports before I was legally allowed. At the beginning, I did pretty well – I was pretty lucky. Back in the 1950s and 1960s, it was exciting to win \$10 or \$20.

When I went to college, I became a runner for my bookie, selling gambling tickets to college students who'd bet on sporting events. I'd get students to buy tickets, and receive a percentage of what I sold. That money would go straight into my next bet.

### Gambling and Marriage

My wife and I married after I graduated, and I took a teaching position at a small rural school. Back then, I gambled mostly on weekends when the football games were on, but I wasn't satisfied with that. That's when I learned I could bet on individual games through my bookie, who lived 50 miles away. Early on, we were in touch a few times a week, but soon those calls were placed every day.

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**I'd gamble on basketball games and baseball games. I belonged to the country club and would play golf for money. It wasn't any fun to play anything that wasn't for money.**

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## *The Career Gambler continued*

These were my early years of teaching. I quickly came to have four or five different loans from various banks. My family never knew the extent. There was gambling terminology that kept it a secret. *My wife would hear me on the phone with my bookie betting a “nickel” or a “dime,” not knowing those were really \$50 and \$100 bets.*

I’m not one to lie. In my heart I want to always be an honest person, but most compulsive gamblers become pathological liars. It’s just part of the game. We don’t want to deliberately deceive anyone, but we want and need to keep gambling. I had certain bills sent to a secret P.O. box in my name, and as I was in charge of my house’s finances, I could manipulate them as needed. Gambling wasn’t my only issue, and this was an ugly phase with regard to drugs and alcohol as well.

### **The Day It Caught Up to Me**

In 1980, I found myself in serious debt, adding up to more than \$25,000.

I hatched a scheme to get myself out of this debt. I had a friend at the bank and made up a story about remodeling planned for our house. I said we would be redoing the siding, adding a two-car garage and paving the driveway, among other renovations. The cost would amount to around \$35,000, and I needed to remortgage the house to get a loan.

Of course, my wife was unaware about my debt, so I couldn’t tell her my plan. I went to the bank and had the papers prepared without any conflict. I signed where needed and was told my wife’s signature had to be on each page as well.

“Oh sure, but she has a terrible case of the flu. Can I take the papers to her?” I asked.

*But I didn’t take the papers back to our home. I forged her name on each page right in the bank parking lot.*

A few nights later, we were sitting at the dinner table when the phone rang. The lady calling asked for my wife.

The lady explained to my wife the bank was going through the papers and realized a signature was missing. I had skipped a line when forging my wife's signature.

On the phone with the bank, my wife expressed her confusion and her lack of knowledge about any such loan or the suggested home renovations.

I was caught.

With steam coming out of her ears, she looked at me. *"You get help or it's over. We're done."*

## **Seeking Help and Recovery**

That's when I went to my first Gamblers Anonymous meeting. There were three other guys in the room, and it was there we'd work through the 12 Steps of Recovery. One day, there was a pressure relief group meeting with the other guys and our wives where we put everything out on the table.

*We came clean about every penny bet and every lie that had been spoken. That was hard. That was very, very hard.*

And after that began a very, very dark period of time. I had lost the trust of those around me, and damage control had to begin. My name came off of everything I owned so creditors could not come after our house and other possessions.

My wife and I divorced years later, our marriage never fully recovering from this darkness. My daughter received an A+ on a paper about problematic behavior, for which she used me as an example. Her firsthand knowledge of the addiction, its consequences, her parents' fighting, threats of divorce and more made her unfortunately well prepared for that assignment.

## **My Recovery and the Recovery of Others**

I retired from teaching in 1996 and moved to WNY. I went to work part-time as a volunteer at the local hospital's drug and alcohol facility, and moved forward with becoming credentialed as a drug and alcohol counselor.

## *The Career Gambler continued*

Within a few years, a position with a prevention agency in WNY opened with regard to problem gambling prevention. The qualifications were someone with a background in education who had familiarity with gambling, drugs and alcohol. I was the perfect candidate, and that's where I am today, working to raise awareness about problem gambling in order to prevent the addictions of more people. I still attend Gamblers Anonymous meetings on a regular basis, have spoken at many problem gambling conferences and have presented many trainings dealing with aspects of gambling.

### **Reflection**

It took me 11 years to repay my gambling debts, including everything owed to the IRS. The consequences it had on my relationships with family and friends outlasted my financial problems.

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**I used to think that I had to gamble to pay the bills, and then I believed I'd be able to take unrealistic vacations, buy whatever I wanted to buy and live in a dream world. As smart as I was, I never got it - people who gamble eventually lose.**

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We hear about the one person who wins the million dollars. We don't hear about the tragedies and the families that are destroyed, the well-off people who lose everything or the people who wager their welfare or social security checks seeking a solution to their financial problems. You'll always be told about the win, but you'll never hear about the losses.

The lack of awareness about the dangers of gambling allows too many people to sit down and place their first bets naively. If someone asks you to smoke, you can say "I don't smoke" and you won't get harassed or judged. The dangers are known, and it's normal to opt not to smoke. It should be the same feeling

when you say, “No, I don’t gamble.” It shouldn’t make you feel weird or different, but for many people, it does.

In the end, all the things I loved to do I lost interest in, because gambling had become the focus of my life. If I had used all my time gambling to study for a career, I could have become a lawyer or a doctor – with all that time, I could have become both.

I tell people today the most important thing we have to focus on is our kids. They’ve always engaged in risky behaviors – smoking, drugs, unprotected sex – but we don’t talk about gambling like we talk about those. Because of that, we are unable to prevent these addictions, and it’s a hard road to recovery.

There were periods of time I could not stop. I wanted to stop, but I just couldn’t. It wasn’t a moral or behavioral issue – it’s a disease. It’s a disease without noticeable signs or smells, like drugs and alcohol. It’s hidden, and it can be ruining the life of someone you’d least expect.

## **My Future**

Fortunately, help is available, and with guidance and support, the consequences can be limited and recovery is possible. It has been 33 years since I last gambled, and I can’t say that I miss it.

After 33 years of recovery, my relationship with my family is a lot better. I have a very good relationship with my ex-wife, my daughter and my grandson. He’s going into 9th grade, and he plays a lot of sports. I enjoy going to his games and spending time with him. These are things I missed when my daughter was growing up and I was absent.

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**I’ve made amends, and I’ve survived through the help and advice of people who were just like me. Now it’s my turn to help others.**

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## The Gambler, Turned Coach

It started around the kitchen table in elementary school. We played penny poker. That's not uncommon. A lot of people do. We never thought it would lead to a problem.

I started playing bingo in my mid-teens, which led to problems in my early twenties. A self-employed wellness consultant, I was able to manipulate my schedule to play frequently. In the stage where I should have been learning how to manage my money and bills, I was spending it playing bingo.

In my early 20s, I began chasing my losses. Playing multiple times a day in various locations, I started not going to work. Once a three sport, All-American athlete with a full athletic scholarship to a D1 college for field hockey, Bingo became my new sport. I started treating it as a game of skill rather than a game of chance, and I was trying to beat it.

### The Switch to Internet Poker

After a while, bingo became less interesting to me and I discovered Internet poker. It was something I spent all night on, every night. I wasn't just sacrificing money as I maxed out credit cards and skipped bills. I'd spend all of my time and energy on Internet poker, as well.

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**It was a tug-of-war between my life as a person working and functioning in society and my life gambling. My mind was always working on how I could get to my computer quickly to gamble.**

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My Internet gambling was short-lived. Though I wasn't paying my bills and I was writing bad checks, I stopped my online gambling because I found out it was illegal. I also had dealt with a site that made it difficult to get the money I'd won, and I felt like it was a scam.

I needed something different, and I went to the casino.

## The Effect of Bells, Whistles and Jackpots at Casinos

I hit a jackpot the first time I ever went to a casino. It made the papers, and I felt great about it. I didn't latch on to casino gambling at that time, but a few years later, it would take hold of me.

I had many casinos I could access, and I started going very frequently. The casino was a great place to escape, compete and gain excitement and a rush. *Gambling isn't about money. We use money to get our fix.* The bells and whistles, the social atmosphere and other aspects of the casino were mind-altering for me.

I was taking my money to invest in this feeling. If I won a tremendous amount of money, I wouldn't do anything productive with it. I would only walk away with winnings if I was at a racino that closed at 3:00 a.m.

## Realizing I Had an Addiction

**I was manipulating everyone, taking money from those around me.**  
**I'd act like I had no income so I could ask for money from family.**  
**I'd tell lies to get out of work and responsibilities, eventually including the death and false emergencies of friends and families.**  
*(Who's going to question family emergencies?)*

I knew I had a problem.

While gambling was my core addiction, the emotional toll led me to be irresponsible with food, alcohol and sex, as well. I sought everything that would give me relief, reward, pleasure and escape.

Things were getting bad and the negative consequences began to build. I had seen the problem gambling signs in casinos before, and I thought I should take a look into this. Maybe this was me – maybe I am a problem gambler, but what exactly is a problem gambler? *I researched gambling addiction, took the self-test and realized...*

***This is me.***

**I remembered thinking I needed to stop this now. I attempted, but my attempts were short-lived and I always failed. I couldn't do it on my own, but I didn't know that at the time.**

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Two or three years before I finally got residential treatment, I called together about 12 family members and exposed what was going on. They understood to a point, and they financially bailed me out. While that paid the bills temporarily, it did not keep me from gambling. Money to pay the bills is not the solution to making gambling addictions go away.

Back when I was seeking help six and seven years ago, gambling addiction was not understood as well as it is today (though we still have a long way to go). Therapists couldn't help me. I didn't need a bad behavior modified. I needed someone who helps with underlying issues.

## **Quitting – and Relapsing**

I went six months without gambling by abstaining. Every day was hell. None of my emotional problems that had caused the addiction were being addressed, so instead of gambling, I turned to excessive eating, drinking and exercising.

I fell back into gambling, and the fall was very, very hard. I lost my house, two vehicles were repossessed, and I lived in a tent for eight months. I minimized all of my living expenses to nearly nothing so I could gamble.

I self-excluded myself from many casinos in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Self-exclusion is a good thing if you're in earlier stages of gambling, as a problem gambler. When your addiction reaches the point mine had, you self-exclude from your nearby casino, and then end up driving a little further to gamble. I would just get my fix further away from home.

Most of the gambling addiction treatment programs I contacted told me I was too serious of a case for outpatient treatment, and so I began looking at a residential program in Baltimore, Maryland. I knew I needed to go there, and the program agreed, but the program cost \$20,000 and my family was not on board.

## The Last Six Months

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**I was depressed. The guilt and shame that had built from fourteen years of gambling became too much to deal with. I had ruined too much, lost too many things and was a disappointment to so many people. I was living a lie and a pathetic existence. I became suicidal.**

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I made plans to go on a gambling spree in Saratoga. I had pain pills leftover from a car accident I had been in years ago, and I brought them with me. I checked into an old hotel with extremely thin walls and cheap furnishing. It was disgusting.

When I went to gamble, I went on a major winning streak, accumulating \$27,000 in just a couple of days. I was hitting every single jackpot, and I was happy. I would drink beer in the morning at the casino to get a buzz and be happy while I was gambling in the afternoon. As I began to lose my winnings, I started drinking hard liquor.

By the end of those few days, I'd lost it all. I was depressed and I was wasted.

When I returned to the hotel room, I took all of the pills, swallowing them with a few small handfuls at a time and chasing them down with beer. I laid down hoping not to wake up, but it wasn't much time later than I began throwing up violently. I must have passed out because I only remember waking up the next morning in a daze, hung-over, sick and sad.

My first thought was to go back to the casino... and that is what I did.

## *The Gambler, Turned Coach continued*

I realized I had to let my family know just how bad things had gotten, as they did not know that my gambling had intensified. A few days later, I contacted my mom and a treatment program in Maryland and told them what had happened. The treatment center understood that my problem was life-threatening. They get these calls often.

They took it upon themselves to contact my family. After intense, angry, frustrating and tearful phone conversations with my family, they became very aware of my need for treatment, and everyone was on-board.

It was decided I was coming home, and from there I finally made it to the eight-bed residential treatment center. The act of gambling was never mentioned there. These professionals really treated the underlying issues.

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## **Residential treatment saved my life... I haven't gambled since.**

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### **Life In Recovery**

Going on five years, I am still repairing my life, and I may always be. I still struggle with many aspects of life, and have to survive in ways only those in recovery could understand. Things are not easy or how I would like them to be, but it's okay. That is the life of many.

Even with the struggles, I can breathe easier, have learned to calm myself, and am a better listener – not just of others, but of myself, too. I have a greater understanding and tolerance for people's differences and realize that everyone has a story. Sometimes those stories end with the need for punishment and sometimes with an opportunity to reform. Either way, I'm proud to say I am a recovered addict and that I chose to get help for a problem that caused problems for me and others.

Now an Addiction Recovery Coach, professional resource and national speaker on this issue, it is the “higher power” that keeps me strong knowing I am making a difference in people’s lives and adding to education and awareness initiatives.

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**My experience with addiction does not define me. It inspires me as I help people to understand and deal with their own addictions and lives in recovery, not just from my training but more importantly by being the example that provides proof treatment works and recovery is possible. It’s very powerful.**

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*Lesla Densmore, CCARC, RCT, specializes in coaching people to and in recovery from problem gambling and gambling addiction, and is a national speaker and educator on the issue.*



## The Spouse

We met in high school.

I leaned over to my friend when I saw him enter our social studies class and I told her, “That’s the guy I’m going to marry.”

*I didn't know anything about gambling then. I didn't know what it was, or what people did. As I got to know him, I knew that he was a sports bettor. There were always little things, significant moments you notice but don't fully understand when you're young. He was always late. Or he was on time, but would insist on listening to the sports updates on the news. He played sports, he was a good guy and it didn't matter too much to me that he was betting on sports. He was my boyfriend, and he was great.*

If he was charming and charismatic to begin with, his compulsive gambling only increased those aspects. He was everything I could imagine – sweet and very generous. He bought me a lot of nice things, and I always assumed he came from money. He dressed to perfection at 16 and 17-years-old, with a button-down shirt, dress pants and nice shoes every day in high school. He never drank, he never did drugs and he was always the most popular guy. People genuinely wanted to be around him.

*They say love is blind, and I was a young girl in love.*

### Questions

Looking back, this is what I think. When your stomach does that flip, something is wrong. And you need to listen to that feeling.

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**From 16 to 19-years-old, I thought he was cheating on me. He wasn't around when he said he would be, he never seemed to desire me physically, and sometimes he was nowhere to be found, but there was always an excuse when I asked. **Addiction mimics cheating, with many lies and stories.****

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## **I didn't understand lying and manipulating. I'm not wired that way.**

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When he was 18 and graduated from high school, he started working for one of the biggest gamblers in the world. He'd research all the statistics you could find in sports to give this man information for placing bets worldwide. Doing all this research for his boss, he'd also know what kind of bets to place himself, and he placed them.

Anytime something happened that didn't seem right, he would blame it on his boss. When there were big wads of money around, he'd explain, "It's the boss's money. It's not my money." And a lot of the time, it was, but he was simultaneously gambling, using his boss as a front.

### **Introduction to Gambler's Anonymous**

I was sure he was cheating on me. Something wasn't right.

Then he called me one day, and he told me his father wanted him to go to a Gamblers Anonymous meeting. He'd lost \$60,000. It was strange - I was shocked, but I was also relieved. He wasn't cheating on me.

So we went together, him to Gamblers Anonymous and me to Gam-Anon. The other women in the room were a lot older than I was, and I felt bad for them. They'd gone through this their whole lives. It was also weird to me when I heard their stories - everyone had the same pain, same experiences, same doubts.

He came out of the meeting and expressed gratitude to his dad for bringing him. But he worried me. He expressed pleasure in that he was not as bad as the others in that room. My stomach turned.

### **The Emotional Consequences**

That first meeting at Gamblers Anonymous wasn't the end. Through more gambling, the \$60,000 was recovered, and he continued working for the gambler. He continued to gamble, and quickly his debts accumulated.



## *The Spouse continued*

My in-laws never let me know the severity of the situation. I didn't know they were remortgaging their home and financing his addiction.

I only knew the emotional distress he was going through, and his constant thoughts of suicide. At one point, he'd taken a gun to a secluded area but he'd passed out at the thought of killing himself.

It was terrifying.

He wasn't the only one emotionally affected by this addiction. His addiction caused him to be very manipulative, and I'd question it. But the manipulation would always lead to me apologizing to him, apologizing for being a pain-in-the-butt and questioning him. I couldn't have expectations for anything – there would be a diamond bracelet for Christmas one year and nothing the next. It was a noticeable difference for someone like me, who'd never had a lot growing up.

## **Our Wedding and Marriage**

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**The day before my wedding, he lost thousands of dollars. His father told him to tell me, but he wouldn't. He wouldn't ruin my wedding day, and he knew me well enough to know even if my wedding day was ruined, I wouldn't leave him.**

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We went on our honeymoon, and when we came back, we had no money. He went back to work and back to gambling, though I thought he had stopped. That's what he'd told me.

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**There was a Super Bowl party at our house not too long after. The women went out shopping and to a nice dinner, leaving our men at home to watch the game. When I came home at 11:30 p.m., I knew something was wrong. A male friend was hesitant to leave the house and leave me with my husband.**

**He'd lost one million dollars.**

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I called my in-laws at 2:00 a.m. and told them what I'd been told. I didn't want to think it was true, but they didn't hesitate to believe the news, and I was sick for the next two hours after that phone call.

### **Finding Help**

Those next few months were the hardest, and I was afraid I'd lose him. One night, he was four hours late and I thought he was gone. I remember saying, "God, take everything we own, and let him come through the door."

He came home. We moved in with his sister, and we sold our house, cars, jewelry and everything else that had any value. We looked for rehab locations, but how do you pay for rehab if you don't have any money?

When we were living with our in-laws, he was still gambling. He had to chase his losses, as hundreds of thousands of dollars lost during the Super Bowl was owed directly to his boss.

I'd secretly stored away a few thousand dollars in case of an emergency. After evaluating my husband, a rehab facility in New Jersey agreed to admit him for the price of just \$3,000 because they believed he was extremely at-risk for committing suicide.

He disappeared the weekend before he was due to go to rehab. We didn't know where he was. It took all weekend, multiple phone calls and prayers,

## *The Spouse continued*

but we finally heard from the rehab center on Monday afternoon. They could confirm he'd checked himself in. He was safe.

I went to a support group to find help for myself, but when I revealed our million-dollar debt, the blank stares of the women around me were humiliating. How do you lose a million dollars? Were we so well off that we were that wasteful? My story didn't fit the rest of the women's.

But I was told to visit a Gam-Anon group. I told these two women how much money we'd lost, expecting to go home again without help.

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**“Honey, we’ve heard worse than that. Sit down.”**

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## **Recovery**

At the five-year recovery milestone, I finally was able to begin forgiving. He always thought that if he made it that far, he would never gamble again. It's been 22 years, and he's only missed six of his Gamblers Anonymous meetings in that time. Twice it snowed too hard to drive, once we were out of town, and once he had pneumonia. I don't remember the two other reasons, but I know he schedules his life around those weekly meetings.

We paid back the money over the next ten years. His former boss, still a gambler with millions of dollars, let him pay just back \$10,000 of the \$500,000 owed to him, and told him to never bet again. My husband went to work at the family-owned business, and I went back to school to become a counselor for people in situations similar to what I went through.

## Reflection

The consequences of problem gambling go so much further than money. For me, it was emotional abuse. For so long, I came second to gambling, but I didn't know why I was being ignored. I started feeling worthless, wondering if I needed to be prettier, skinnier or sexier for him to love me. I always looked for new ways to get his attention, going as far as wearing outfits I never would have felt comfortable in naturally. One night, I fell asleep wearing the outfit for our night together. He'd never stopped betting and come to find me.

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**I credit every day of my life to Gam-Anon and Gamblers Anonymous. The gambling would have never stopped or stayed gone without those meetings, and our marriage and future would have forever been marred by gambling, debt and emotional abuse. Finding help from people who had gone through this helped me understand I was not alone. We were not alone. We could get past this gambling addiction, and we could live the happy, healthy lives we'd always wanted.**

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## The Daughter

It was 10th grade when I started thinking something was wrong with my mother's behavior, but I wasn't sure what. I didn't know about gambling addictions, their signs or their consequences.

*What I did know was that some days after school, we'd stop at six or seven gas stations on the way home to get lottery tickets.*

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**I knew she'd always advocate for me to get the mail or answer the phone within a ring or two so no one else could answer it. She had a credit card in her own name that my father didn't know about, and she had her own bills coming to the house. Bill collectors would call and I'd remember to tell them she wasn't home, as I'd been told to do.**

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### The Escalation of Financial Problems

Our power was shut off a few times. My mom didn't have her own income. My dad was the main breadwinner, earning a living self-employed with his tractor trailer, and he was unaware she'd stopped paying every bill.

Then the bank came and repossessed his tractor trailer.

Dad had absolutely no idea about our financial woes until that night. He left the house for a week to go find work, still unsure of what had happened to our money. My mom blamed it on an error by the bank and lost checks in the mail. It would take a few months before the truth would begin to come out and they could begin working on a solution.

## Mother and Daughters' Recovery

My mother did the 12 Steps of Recovery, and she relapsed once, gambling again. That was her last bet. *We went to family counseling meetings, which helped me understand her addiction wasn't my fault, and really, it wasn't her fault either.*

She still goes to meetings, and she's still repairing relationships with family members, as is my dad, who was unfairly blamed for financial issues and lost trust by people who couldn't understand how he'd managed to be unaware of her addiction.

As I've gotten older, I've looked back and realized how often I was lying to my father. I didn't know what I was doing or what my mother was asking me to do when she had me keep things from him, such as phone calls and bills. I still struggle with that guilt, knowing how many lies I'd told my father over those years due to my mother's addiction, which I did not intentionally cover up. I just listened to what my mother asked of me.

## Being the Son or Daughter of A Gambling Addict

I was never big on talking about gambling addiction. I didn't want to admit there was a problem in my family, and often I still don't. The biggest thing I learned was that finding a person you can trust is critical to getting help. You need to be able to talk to them, and you need to be able to listen and take their advice.

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**I still work on remembering that this addiction doesn't make my mother a bad person, and never did. *She's still my mom, and while the addiction may always be there, in the recovery stage, the addiction is not who she is.***

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**I've always felt better knowing other people's stories. Whether the situations were worse or not as severe as mine, I just wanted to know it wasn't just our family.**

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I personally don't gamble, but I have friends that do. I don't preach, but I raise awareness about gambling addiction when I need to. I realize I'm more aware of these warning signs than I would have been without my personal experience. I notice when people I don't know spend \$200 on a game at the bar.

My mother always thought she'd stop after one more ticket. One win, and she'd pay off everything she owed. She'd spend \$300 to win her \$3M. But it never came.

I'd left for college when her early stages of recovery were underway, and we lost out on having a relationship during those years. My calls home were brief, and it took years for us to become close again. She has been in recovery for 10 years, and it took many of those years for us to have friendly conversations.

*Now, we talk every day.*



## The Counselor

My name is Rod Correa, and I'm a substance abuse and problem gambling counselor at the Lexington Center for Recovery, a non-profit treatment facility for substance abuse and disordered gambling.

I grew up living in an environment where substance abuse was all around me, and I lost many good friends addicted to drugs and alcohol. I hated going to the wakes of friends dead from an overdose or other consequence of addiction, and I knew they could have been saved. It motivated me to get credentialed and learn more about addiction.

Through funding by OASAS and NYCPG, the Lexington Center for Recovery was able to initiate a treatment program for problem gambling and promote its existence.

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**This program has become the focus of my work. It's my job not only to treat people struggling with gambling addiction but to also raise awareness that help is available.**

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We're the only treatment facility in Westchester County that offers gambling addiction treatment to anyone suffering from this disease. The only other way to get help is through private, expensive means, which makes it hard for many with a gambling problem to afford the treatment. The fee for treatment at the Lexington Center is based on a sliding scale that takes into account what people can afford.

### **First Interactions with a Problem Gambler**

Gambling addiction is referred to as the silent disease. Sometimes the spouse doesn't even know there's an addiction. If no one in the house is talking about it, help is rarely sought early.



### *The Counselor continued*

When I get a call, it comes with desperation. A crisis has occurred due to gambling, and immediate help is needed. The partner has said, “You stop gambling, or I’m going to leave you,” or proof of embezzlement has been found and they’re in trouble.

I speak with them on the phone, and then we arrange a meeting where he or she comes in for a talk. This is just a simple conversation to evaluate what is going on and see if this individual meets the criteria for treatment.

Assuming they do, we move forward with various forms and assessments of their biology, psychology and social patterns. We want to know if the addiction is due to the environment, genetics, other causes or a combination of factors.

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**We then set up a treatment program tailored to this individual’s specific circumstances. Everyone comes in with his or her own set of problems.**

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### **Beyond the Initial Recovery**

I usually meet with my patients one or two times per week. I strongly encourage the client to attend Gamblers Anonymous meetings, get a sponsor and talk to other gamblers in recovery to maintain their efforts. This additional support is so beneficial, because they can speak with another recovering gambler when thoughts or urges arise when they are not attending treatment. Some clients prefer not to attend Gamblers Anonymous meetings and would rather participate in one-on-one sessions, but throughout the treatment we discuss the benefits of establishing a social, sober support network of recovery.

I suggest treatment for a minimum of 90 days, as it is during this period when a person in recovery is at the greatest risk of relapsing. I utilize this period to educate that client and teach them coping skills that they can use when cravings or urges arise.

## The Family of the Problem Gambler

I interact with family members of problem gamblers frequently, and often, it's to help educate them about gambling addiction. Usually, there is a lot of resentment and anger towards the gambler.

*"Why can't they just stop?"*

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**I explain that disordered gambling is a brain disease. The gambler cannot stop gambling even though they want to. I help the family understand that the gambler will continue to gamble despite negative consequences. Rarely can they stop on their own. Recovery can best be achieved through treatment.**

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I advise these families to remove the name of the problem gambler from all financial documents. Financial planning can be arranged to find restitution with the debts incurred by the gambler, such as maxed-out credit cards and overdue rent or mortgage payments.

## Defining the Problem Gambler Demographic

Presently, my clients are men and women at nearly equal rates, people from all socio-economic levels. *One person I spoke with came from a sound background and had no problem gambling \$30k to \$40k, while another person gets distraught over the \$88 they spent on scratch-off tickets.*

**Gambling affects people of all ages.** I've spoken with retired individuals who have gambled away their entire retirement funds and adolescents who have gambled their college money. Unfortunately, the adolescents we tend to see come for evaluation are forced here by their parents. Adolescents are risk takers. They don't see the problem, and to them it's fun and exciting. They're in denial and they still want to gamble, so they don't stay in treatment.

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### **Why We Need to Raise Awareness**

*This isn't well known, but gambling has the highest suicide rate of all addictions.* Gamblers are destroying their lives and those closest to them. To some, suicide is the only escape.

We're trying to save lives and getting the gambler re-established, teaching them healthy behaviors and changing addictive thinking to cognitive thinking.

More treatment options need to be available for problem gamblers, and more awareness of ones that exist must be created. Help is available – problem gamblers and their families need to know it exists and they have to know where to find it. We're working hard to make sure that happens.

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**SPREAD THE WORD!**

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# Getting Help

**Problem Gambling doesn't discriminate.** As the stories above illustrate, it affects men, women and adolescents of all ages. While overcoming a gambling addiction isn't easy, there are programs to help. If you're worried you or someone you love may be struggling with a gambling disorder, the NYS HOPEline is available 24 hours per day, 7 days a week.

**Call 1-877-8-HOPENY to speak with a trained professional.**



**FIND HELP FOR GAMBLING PROBLEMS**

**1-877-8-HOPENY**

1-877-846-7369

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