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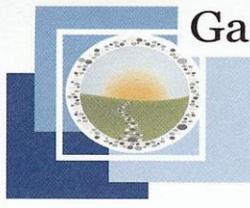
### **Stop the Gambling/Addiction Train**

Many envision stopping an addiction to be quick and easy but it is more like stopping a train. A newly recovering addict or gambler may tell me in psychotherapy that they are willing to make a few changes until they feel better or the crisis is over. If you are the conductor of a train and want to stop going in one direction, it will take miles and an enormous amount of braking power to stop the train. The stopping time and distance is also dependent upon the amount of freight (perhaps the severity of the addiction) that is involved. The train, or addiction does not stop as soon as the brakes are applied; it will take some effort and time to stop the train. The recovering gambler or addict may feel that just not drinking or going to the casino or old hang outs for a while will stop the addiction. The train or addiction is slowing down but it is not stopped easily. To take the analogy further, one may need to sound the emergency horn to warn others of the danger and possibly the need for assistance.

I liken recovery to totally stopping the train in one direction and starting it up again in the opposite direction. As stated above, it takes some time and lot of energy to stop the train/addiction. It is necessary for most to have abstinence, supportive people and many changed behaviors for a long period of time. Further, many agree it is necessary for a daily commitment to abstinence and keeping the brakes on. Involving others and new healthy behaviors are part of switching directions toward health and happiness. The addict will chose new travel companions that are excited about going in the opposite direction. Some of the "old, former" travelers that were part of the addiction will get off at the next train station, and some will change and be able to continue in the new direction.

Our culture today is so quick and impetuous but recovery takes time and diligence. The 12 step programs offer medallions of encouragement at the first meeting, and at subsequent days: 15, 30, 60, 90, 180 and then each year thereafter. There are more rewards in the beginning because it is usually more difficult when the addict is reversing the direction of the train and getting "up to speed" in the new direction. Most importantly, rehabilitation programs were often short and now we realize that it takes months before we get established and comfortable in the new direction of life down the tracks of life and living.

Unfortunately there is no quick fix for addictions. Even Alcoholics Anonymous's big book says that for some craving can be present for a long time... Just as the alcoholic is safer when he/she is not around alcohol or drinking friends, it is better for a newly recovering gambler to stay away from the old "playgrounds" where they gambled or engaged in their addictive behavior. It is best for gamblers to stay away from lottery tickets, casinos, online betting games and any kind of wagering. The



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methamphetamine addict should not hang out at places where meth-amphetamines are consumed.

Can the family get them to stop? We intuitively know that the answer is no, yet families and friends can help. Statistics show that when family members are involved in the gambler's recovery process, his/her chances of recovery are doubled. Positive encouragement, better choices and behaviors are crucial. Behavioral assistance and help with decision making can interrupt the cravings. Most of us know that a desire for a late night snack can be very strong. Family support, compassion and patience can help with the impulsive urges. Psychotherapy helps with decision making, communication, and dealing with old unresolved feelings. Making healthy, safe and positive choices in early recovery builds confidence. Having a child, pet or supportive family to come home to is a great incentive for the gambling addict to come straight home rather than stop at the casino or old hang out.

Human beings are "herders," and we survive and function better with the help of others. For example, from an evolutionary standpoint, we literally "survived" because supportive humans helped fight off the lion. A support group empathizes with human pain and can offer a safe and nurturing environment to deal with feelings and issues. Many who successfully find abstinence utilize 12 step or church programs. Both offer higher goals than a quick, but temporary fix.

So, how can the family or friends help? They can be members of the "pack" or support system and practice relaxation so they can eat, sleep and concentrate rather than obsess about others, the past or the negative. Many studies show how contagious a smile or act of kindness can be. GamAnon, AIAnon, Codependents Anonymous, Celebrate Recovery, Smart Recovery and Recovery Couples Anonymous are all groups that help family members. Again, when families and friends are sane and centered they can truly help by offering a listening ear of compassion and support.

We love our financial freedom and of course we can spend money 24/7. In the beginning stages of recovery, it is risky for a gambler to have access to too much money. Most would agree that it is ludicrous for a newly sober alcoholic/addict to have alcohol or cocaine in one's pocket. Professional counseling facilitates communication and negotiation between the gambler and his family to help monitor financial resources. One recovering gambler might contract to entrust his pay check and debit card to his spouse while he only carries \$40 cash and a gas card. Another might hire an accountant or financial advisor. "Joint" cooperation is necessary and again, no family member, therapist or IRS agent can keep a gambler from gambling if he/she wants to gamble. Supportive family members can only practice by helping and supporting the gambler/addict.

Please do not throw out the gambler/addict like a coffee maker that isn't brewing good coffee. It takes years to develop relationships and blood family members will always



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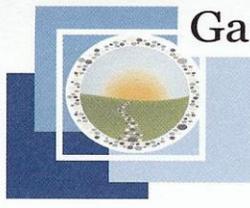
have at least emotional ties. In my psychotherapy practice, not a day goes by when someone doesn't talk about the heartache with a family member. But with help there is hope.

Treating disordered gamblers is more difficult than most alcoholics and other addicts I have treated over the past 25 years. Gamblers are usually in their desperation phase and seek treatment later than alcoholics do. Of course their "money is on fire" from their mounting debts as they continue lying during their progressive gambling problems.

Four helpful and effective (largely) Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) (Petry, et al. 2006) treatment techniques assist gamblers and their families in getting a start on the road of recovery. Functional analysis involves diagramming triggers that lead to gambling and evaluating both the positive and negative consequences of gambling (Petry, 2003). Disordered gambling clients are often surprised by the question of what are the positive aspects of gambling and may have to be prompted to think about the escape, the excitement or the "big-win dream". Negative consequences such as loss of job or spouse, guilt, depression are easier to identify when the gambler is sober and hurting. The functional analysis helps the gambler see the larger picture with both positive and negative consequences. As AA says, "Think it through."

A second technique is to reinforce non-gambling (Petry, 2003). Abstinence from gambling is usually seen as the goal although harm reduction theories obviously provide assistance. "Lapses" for gamblers tend to be more common than the lapses for other addictions; our therapeutic challenge is to help them get "back on the saddle" ASAP. With this technique, the gambler is encouraged to keep track of gambling behavior on a daily basis and reward non-gambling behavior. In my practice, I review a long list of pleasant, safe activities with the clients. As with other addictions, by the time clients seek treatment, their world and choices have narrowed greatly. They can only think of a few things they like to do (except gamble). As we brainstorm, their list of safe activities grows exponentially. If they have a non-gambling day, they can select a reward like a relaxing bath, a favorite TV show, or dessert. A client once said she forgot how much she loves to take her dog on a hike, which is obviously good for the both of them. Longer-term abstinence is reinforced with larger rewards like a new CD, time away with a friend, watching a sporting event, dinner out, or a new item of clothing. CBT recommends withholding such rewards if the gambler/addict gambled that day, and of course we need to help assess how appropriate this may be at this time for this client, especially if there are suicidal.

A third technique to assist this very complex addictive behavior involves utilizing supportive relationships. We all know that, as indicated above, not all family members are supportive and we may need to assist our clients in determining who is supportive of their non-gambling. Religious affiliations, support groups and Gamblers Anonymous can help with the building of relationships. My experience is that GA is not yet as strong and helpful for the gambler as AA is for the alcoholic. But it certainly is better than



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building a relationship with a former poker buddy. I have clients list all of their relationships and we mutually focus on those who are supportive. Notwithstanding, sponsorship, the twelve steps, helping others (in service) and giving “therapy” at meetings will help gamblers with their daily commitment.

Of the many possible techniques, a fourth technique focuses on stress management. Clients often need help assertively telling their gambling aunt not to visit, confronting a co-worker, having a GA Pressure Relief meeting, or telling a spouse about a debt. Gamblers, who often trust no one, need direction with decision making, relaxation and perhaps systematic desensitization. Their emotional and physical health is often in shambles and may need encouragement to see a physician, monitor “awfulizing” thoughts, choose healthier nutrition and expand their exercise program.

Families of disordered gamblers are quite codependent and often passively dependent. Treatment for them may need crisis management and direction along with support groups like Gam-Anon and Codependents Anonymous. Monitoring for their safety may be necessary, yet their involvement with the gambler in treatment often doubles the gamblers’ recovery rates.

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