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“My Car drives itself to the Casino”

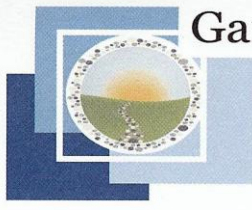
Dealing with Problem Gambling

I often hear this capricious phrase from problem gambling clients: “I don’t know how I ended up there; my car must have driven itself to the casino!” Denying the power of the obsession/addiction often leads the problem gambler to almost believe their vehicle has mysterious powers and acts on its own. Those who want to quit gambling can seek psychotherapy, attend supportive groups like Gamblers Anonymous but still are amazed how easily they can find themselves inside of a casino or placing a bet. Staying away from all gambling environments is a major first step in recovery.

In therapy the “recovering” gambler makes behavioral contracts, which involve commitments, and specific plans for safety. For example, a client may make this kind of an agreement: “I commit to you my therapist, sponsor or spouse, that I will drive this specific route to the pharmacy, this route to the supermarket and then directly home. I expect to be home by 4:30 at which time I’ll call you.” While this scenario seems incredibly simplistic, it is more crucial, in my experience, for gamblers than other addicts and alcoholics. Since Disordered Gambling is an addiction, monitoring one’s impulses and setting up structured plans helps them avoid gambling behavior. Being able to trust another, make commitments and get “through” visceral urges are important steps in recovery. Many believe that handling their gambling urges 24 hours a day is a tall order, but we find most addicted people really only have strong cravings about 4 hours per day. Having a “safety” plan during those 4 hours helps prevent a relapse to old destructive behaviors. To accept one’s powerlessness (as in Gamblers Anonymous's first step) and make non-gambling commitments are prodigious steps for many problem gamblers.

Those addicted to gambling have an impaired brain much like alcoholics and drug addicts which interrupts the normal balance of the brain and neurotransmitters. With addiction, the communication between the prefrontal cortex and the midbrain is impaired. The dopamine induced midbrain seeks “survival” during the active addiction and shuts down the normal higher intellectual functioning. Impulses and ethical decision making are unchecked as part of the addict’s myopic goal. This can create lasting negative effects on the addicted person. “Innocent” trips to the casino, wagers on basketball or sporting events, playing video games or online gambling can develop into serious financial and emotional problems for the gamblers and their families. Fortunately, with recovery and abstinence from the addiction, the brain resets itself rather quickly so that the recovering person can again find joy and fulfillment in other things and lead a happy and productive life.

More than 1.5 million youth and adults in California are considered problem gamblers according to the California Research Bureau. It is estimated that each problem gambler affects



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as many as eight other people in his or her life and need help as much as the families of any addict or mentally ill person. Spouses and family members often believe the gambler is having an affair or is a mythomaniac because of their lying and deceit.

Using, the acronym PERC, gamblers or family members can get more insight into whether the gambling has become problematic. The “P” is for Preoccupation with gambling and multiple intrusive thoughts about ways and times to gamble more. Many gamblers “E”scape problems, feelings like boredom, guilt or sadness. Problem gamblers are involved in behaviors that tend to “R”isk important relationships. Lying to spouses or gambling money that was intended for something else often jeopardizes close relationships. The “C” involves “C”hasing what one may have lost previously. Most problem gamblers will chase the money that they lost. At other times, they may also chase the feeling from a great win or the numb feeling that they received while gambling. If a person has had some of the symptoms of Preoccupation, Escape, Risked relationships and Chasing, he or she may have a potentially serious gambling disorder.

Abstinence is a major factor in assisting gamblers in getting nourished, rested and more prepared to deal with anger, guilt and sadness. The floods of these feelings may need careful monitoring. As appropriate, family members can help decrease the chances of further financial losses and assist in contracts for safety. Spouses, parents and friends tend to be very slow to trust especially since the gambling was so often deeply concealed.

Over time, many recovering gamblers are particularly positive, generous, and quite willing to “carry the message to other problem gamblers who still suffer.” They even come to humorously accept that their car is just an inanimate object that only goes where it is driven, just as they only go where THEY drive themselves! For more information about FREE counseling for gamblers and their families through a program funded by the California Gambling Education and Treatment Services program and UCLA at no expense to the individuals, contact opg.org or 1-800-GAMBLER.