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Throw out the Old Coffee Maker or Just Fix It, Now!

Helping Families of Problem Gamblers

Families of gamblers or other addictions often want their loved one to be fixed immediately. If he/she is not rid of the addiction *pronto*, they want to move on. *Hasta la vista*, Baby! They sometimes view a “broken relationship” like a broken coffee maker that’s no longer brewing good coffee—just get rid of it (because it is so easy to get a new one.) This spouse/parent/child/friend has a brain illness called addiction and it will take some time for the addicted brain to heal and for him/her to make healthier decisions and behavioral changes.

Unfortunately there is no quick fix for addictions. Even Alcoholics Anonymous’ Big Book says that craving can last a long time. Just as the cocaine addict is safer when he/she is not around other users, it is better for newly recovering people to stay away from the old “playgrounds” where they used their addictions. It is best for gamblers to stay away from lottery tickets, casinos, online betting games and any kind of wagering.

Can the family get them to stop? We intuitively know the answer is “no”, yet families and friends can help. Statistics show that when the family members are involved in the gambler’s program, his/her chances of recovery are doubled. Positive encouragement, better choices and behaviors are crucial. Assistance with decisions can help interrupt the cravings. Most of us know that that late night sweet tooth can be very strong. Addictive urges can be overwhelming, but family support, compassion and patience can help with the impulsive urges. Professional counseling helps with decision making, communication and dealing with unresolved feelings. Making healthy, safe and positive choices in early recovery builds confidence. When a gambler has a child, pet or supportive family to come home to, it is a great incentive for her/him 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. From an evolutionary standpoint, we literally “survived” because supportive humans, for example, helped fight off the lion or threat. A support group empathizes with human pain and can offer a safe and nurturing place to deal with feelings and issues. Many who successfully find abstinence utilize 12 step or church (or faith-based) programs. Both have higher goals than a quick, temporary fix. As the saying goes, addiction is a “temporary fix (cover) for a permanent problem” which often leads the person back to the gambling or using.

So, how can family or friends help? They can be part of the “pack” or support system. Family members can keep themselves “sane and centered” with their own support group, practicing self care and mindfully staying in the present. Focus on the “now” today. Focus on what is better or improving these days. Practice relaxation so they themselves 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, AlAnon, Codependents Anonymous, Celebrate



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Recovery and Smart Recovery are all groups to help family members. Again, when they are “sane and centered” they can truly help and can offer 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 his pocket. Extra cash in the pocket feels just like gambling chips (access) to the problem gambler.

Communication and negotiation are necessary for the gambler and his/her family to help monitor financial resources. One recovering gambler might contract to entrust his pay check and ATM 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. Supportive family members can only practice helping and supporting.

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 feel emotional ties. In my psychotherapy practice, not a day passes when someone doesn't talk about heartache with a family member. The challenge is to become healthier people so we can carry the message of hope and recovery to a spouse, neighbor or even an acquaintance.

Gary Lange, Ph.D. is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in private practice in Rancho Mirage, CA. He holds an International and California Certification as a Gambling Counselor and is Chair of the Training Committee for the California Council on Problem Gambling. Additionally he has been a professor of Psychology with Cal State University, San Bernardino for the past twenty years. Dr. Lange has done numerous professional presentations on problem gambling as well as supervision of counselors seeking their Certification as Gambling Counselors with the FREE California Gambling Education Treatment Program (CalGETS). Dr. Lange supervised the Family Program at the Betty Ford Center where he completed his dissertation on the recovery symptoms/patterns of family members. He has published articles for [The Counselor](#), [The Therapist](#) and other publications and is currently writing a book for treating families of gamblers. Contact him at Gary@GaryLangePhD.com or 760-773-1014.