

GAMBLING: A Hidden Addiction

by Chris Ashabo, ICADS, CRPS)

Pathological gambling is often a hidden addiction. It cannot be detected by a blood or breathalyzer test, it does not leave needle marks, nor can it be detected by simply looking at a person. It is relatively easy for the compulsive gambler to hide lottery tickets, sports picks, visits to casinos, etc., from family, friends, community members and co-workers. Gambling may be a means of escape from personal conflicts or problems in the community, at work or with others.

Gamblers can be placed along a continuum that ranges from no problems at one end to “pathological” at the other. In between are varying degrees of addictive behaviour. Problem gambling is a catch-all term used to cover all patterns of gambling that compromise, disrupt, or damage personal, family, community or vocational pursuits. Pathological gambling is described by the American Psychiatric Association as “a continuous or periodic loss of control over gambling; a progression in gambling frequency and amount wagered, in the preoccupation with gambling and in obtaining monies with which to gamble; and a continuation of gambling involvement despite adverse consequences.”

Differences in the characteristics of problem and non-problem gamblers are not always clear-cut. However, studies show that some groups within the general population are more at risk than others. The risk is never absolute; what for many is one of a host of recreational pastimes can turn from recreation into pathological behaviour for others. Not everyone who drinks alcohol becomes alcoholic, but everyone who becomes alcoholic started by drinking alcohol - most likely socially. The same can be said about gambling. For the majority of people, gambling is a harmless social activity that has little impact on their lives. Just as many people can have a glass or two of wine with dinner without risking a pathological addiction, so too can they buy a lottery ticket, visit at the casino or play bingo in the local hall. For others, the tickets, casino visits and evenings spent wagering become an obsession, a money pit into which they end up tossing their entire life's security because the gambling does something for them.

There are four kinds of gamblers: social, professional, pathological and antisocial gamblers. In turn, there are two types of pathological or compulsive gamblers, namely “action-seeking” gamblers and “escape-seeking” gamblers. Both have the same predictable course of addiction and same outcome, but have very different motivation. The action seeker is most often male and enjoys the adrenaline rush that accompanies high risk, high stakes gambling. The escape-seeking gambler is more likely to be female with strong avoidant personality traits experiencing difficulties with interpersonal relationships and seeking relief from painful emotional experiences. Escape gamblers are particularly drawn to the numbing effects of repetitive play machines, especially video poker.

Regardless of whether they are seeking action or escape, pathological gamblers have difficulty coping with the details and stressors of everyday life, solving problems, and engaging effectively in relationships with others. For them, gambling often represents a refuge where they can escape from their day to day problems and alleviate their deepest psychological pain. Most of the time they believe they can influence, predict or control the outcome of the game, giving them illusion of control and a sense of security, at least for that moment.

Often, pathological gamblers will describe feelings like “they have been in a trance” or, “taken on another identity”, or, “were outside of themselves”. According to California behavioral scientist Dr. Durand Jacobs, when gamblers experience these dissociative feelings early in their gambling careers, it indicates a



predisposition to becoming a compulsive or pathological gambler.

Some signs of compulsive gambling include:

- Large amounts of time spent gambling and little time for family, friends, community or other interests;
- Placing progressively larger and more frequent bets;
- Borrowing money from different sources and debts beginning to grow;
- Repeated promises to “cut back” but unable to stop gambling;
- Frequent high and low moods. If they are not able to gamble, they may be depressed, restless or withdrawn;
- Lying about their whereabouts;
- Showing preference for gambling over special occasions. Gambling addicts begin to miss or be late for important gatherings and events.

Although occasional visits to a casino do not indicate a problem, the risk of problems with gambling increase when gamblers are depressed or present with issues such as anger, rebelliousness, sense of entitlement, avoidant personality, workaholism and narcissism. What starts out as a social occasion and entertainment can become highly problematic for individuals with these disorders, due to their increased vulnerability.

Gambling in North America once was largely a male preserve. However, the expansion in gambling opportunities over the past decade has coincided with a greater acceptance of gambling among women. Women are now as likely as men to be classified as problem gamblers. This trend is evident among religious communities where women religious are beginning to emerge as the gender group most likely to experience gambling problems.

There are several reasons why more and more women religious are gambling. Besides the easy access, convenience and opportunity to socialize, for some it is an inexpensive way to dress up, get out of their community and avoid loneliness. It can be an expedient way to escape depression, anxiety, boredom and isolation, or simply, as a reward for a hard day’s work. Recently, I met a woman religious who had won a brand new car worth \$24,000, but traded it in for less than \$2,000. For this Sister, gambling was not social recreation, nor was it about winning money. Rather, it was for the excitement of the “action” and escape from worries, depression and pain.

Women religious with gambling problems are aware of the stigma that society attaches to female problem gamblers – especially in view of their chosen vocation. Sisters hold high expectations of themselves and feel shame about their imperfections. While women religious have a strong sense of responsibility for others, often they tend to neglect their own needs; hence Sisters who are problem gamblers are often isolated from support. The hidden nature of their gambling means the problem is not readily identified until it reaches the desperation phase when they can no longer finance their gambling. They begin to experience hopelessness, emotional breakdown or even suicidal thoughts and attempts.

Efforts to discourage gambling are not new; a thousand years before the birth of Christ there were warnings about excessive gambling. An ancient Indian Vedic hymn quotes the god Savitr in the hymn, *Gamesters Lament*.

“Don’t play with dice, but plow your furrow!
Delight in your property, prize it highly! Look to
Your cattle and look to your wife, you gambler”.

Even back then, it was evident that problem gambling takes one away from loved ones and other important activities. Regardless of the nature of gambling, the inescapable truth is that there are ultimately no winners because in the end “the house always wins”.

