

Grief & Gambling: A Bad Mix

Grief can significantly increase the risks of developing a gambling problem according to Gambler's Help Southern.

Many clients who access the service's free problem gambling counselling and financial counselling have turned to gambling as an outlet for their grief.

Sometimes the person is an occasional or regular gambler whose gambling behaviour changes after a loss in their life. In other cases grief accelerates an existing problem.

Problem Gambling Counsellor Marlena Ziety has seen these situations many times.

"Grief is a normal response to life's losses but it can really test our coping skills and make us vulnerable."

"Many of my clients have described gambling as a rescue boat or a crutch. Easy to access, no invitation required, you're not alone but don't have to talk. They gambled to fill a void or for a feeling of hope. They ended up with financial losses and feelings of shame that made their emotional state worse."

Grief can stem from a wide range of recent or past experiences including bereavement, relationship breakdown and illness. The anniversaries of loss events can also trigger painful memories and the urge to gamble as an escape.

People who are grieving and also gambling are encouraged to:

- Acknowledge their feelings of loss and be open about them.
- Not gamble when feeling sad or angry.
- Set strict limits on how often and how long they gamble and how much they spend.
- Be alert for feelings of wanting to break these limits or actually breaking them.
- Make a plan for recreation time which includes activities besides gambling.
- Be aware of available support options for loss and grief or for gambling problems.

Financial Counsellors Go Back To School

Recently the Financial Counselling team went out to do a talk to a group of Secondary students. The talk related to the financial problems that gambling may have on their parents. They also discussed how young people can be affected directly or indirectly by gambling.

When a parent has a gambling problem it changes the way the family feels about each other and on the amount of disposable income in the household. There can be nothing to pay for extras and may not be enough money for food.

The classroom discussion then branched off to the problems of easy credit that in our community is prevalent. We discussed how even with a good paying job it is important not to live beyond your means. The new car every couple of years the new mobile phone (Got to have a camera phone with all the ring-tones) can be the difference between making it or not. Even without gambling put into the mix.

Credit cards are relatively easy to obtain with credit increases offered as a norm. By having multiple cards, paying off the first card's minimum payment with the second card and so on can eventually cause large financial problems.

The students were amazed how this could happen.

We then talked about what financial problems can mean to them:

- Missing out on activities at home
- Not being able to have new clothes
- Not having enough money for food
- Having to look after younger siblings more often
- Increased arguments at home
- Family violence
- Family breakdown
- Homelessness

By attending these types of sessions young people learn where they can go for help. That may start at school, their local doctor, a youth worker or social worker or the specialist service at Gambler's Help.

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MoneyWise Successful

The recent MoneyWise forum held as part of the Exercising a Wiser Choice project was a great success with over 70 people attending. Presentations by Centrelink, Consumer Affairs Victoria and Gambler's Help Southern were all well received.

GAMBLER'S HELP™ 1800 156 789

SOUTHERN

VCGR UPDATE

Gaming Venue Applications

July 2005

October 2005

Nepean Hotel, Moorabbin
For approval of premises
(New Venue)
with 41 machines
Application Refused

**Beretta's Langwarrin Hotel,
Langwarrin**
To allow increase in number of
machines from 34 to 44
**Hearing Scheduled
10th & 11th October**

This month the VCGR denied an application by the Nepean Hotel. This hotel is located on the border of three different local government areas - Bayside, Kingston and Glen Eira. The Commission accepted the City of Kingston's view of an over-supply of poker machines in the local area in refusing the application.

Help Yourself & Understand A problem gambler's advice to family and friends of gamblers

Linda H, a Gambler's Help client and operator of online support group GettingPastGambling.Com provides this advice to those who suspect a loved one has a gambling problem.

Also, if possible get counselling to help you through some pretty emotional experiences of living with a compulsive gambler.

Speaking as the problem gambler in the family, the more you, as spouses/partners/family and friends of the gambler can learn about this problem, the more you will know how to FIRSTLY help yourselves, that is maintaining your security.

If you think/feel there is a problem with gambling, as much as I hate to say it, there probably is and by "avoiding" it, thinking that perhaps you are wrong, or hoping you are, you are enabling the gambler to continue on the path they are on.

A gambler will risk all to be able to gamble, though it is NOT intentional to harm anyone, especially those that are nearest and dearest to them, in any way.

I for one wish that someone/anyone had stopped enabling me a long time ago, I would have hit the wall a lot sooner than I did and before I caused so much damage.

To say "If he/she loves you, cares for you" he/she would stop, is so easy to say, yet SO difficult to do. The gambler is only too aware of the need to stop gambling, but like any addiction, obsessive illness/disorder, try as he/she might can't.

Become aware of the "sign", the stories, the lies, the craftiness, but also let the gambler know you care for them and will support them in their recovery, if/when they are ready to stop gambling.

I would like to encourage you all to firstly take care of yourselves and your families needs and financial security. If necessary even obtain legal advice about this.

Learn what you both will go through during this time also, such as the emotional upheavals, the temptations, the lapses and maybe relapses.

Secondly, do try to gain some insight into what the addiction is about, through reading/research and even speaking to gamblers who are in recovery, to understand the gambler, but also to learn what to expect as to how the gambler feels and thinks, not only about the addiction, but about themselves.

It is not an easy road for either of you.

The long and the short of it is - while the gambler has access to cash, no matter how they are able to obtain it, they will gamble.

It may not stop the gambling behaviour right away, as the gambler has to want/need to stop before that happens, but at least you are no longer a part of the vicious cycle.

Referral Sources

**How did you find out about Gambler's Help?
How did you get the Gambler's Help number?**

After a year of asking callers these questions, Gambler's Help Southern Intake tells us that the major referral source for 2004-2005 was the "Telephone Book/Directory Assistance", at 26%.

The second biggest source of Gambler's Help contact details, at 19%, could be categorised collectively as the Gambling Industry. This grouping included information from or referral by Crown Casino, the Australian Hotels Association and TAB outlets - but the single biggest industry source nominated was "cards in gaming venues", making up over 80% of this category.

"Other organisations/services" and "Partners, Family and Friends" followed, each with 15.5%.

One caller found out about Gambler's Help from "a lady on the train". We were particularly taken with this case because, although we do not know the details of the encounter, we imagine an opportunistic conversation between travellers, a story told, information shared. Well done, "Lady on the Train"!

SHAME! SHAME! SHAME!

Monique Thomson discusses shame and its relationship with gambling.

How do you feel when someone says "shame on you"? Has that ever happened? Some of our earliest memories probably consist of events which have made us feel dreadfully ashamed. Shame is a natural part of life and like many unpleasant feelings cannot be avoided altogether. Not that shame is just a feeling – there is more to it.

Shame can be described as the glue that keeps society intact by creating necessary norms. In order to stay alive, human beings have evolved to conform. To be different meant isolation, danger and death. It also deprived people of the ability to breed and hence to pass on their genes. This primitive human need to remain connected with the group in order to survive still exists as a desire to belong; if not with humankind in general then at least with an ethnic group, a family, a work peer group, a generation or some type of sub culture. Being different or not measuring up can be a shaming experience we do our utmost to avoid.

Avoidance of pain and the seeking of pleasure is what motivates humans and shapes development from very early childhood. Shame must not be confused with guilt. Guilt is about feeling responsible for something that has happened or something that you have done which you know to be wrong. Positively, it can prevent us committing crimes and hurting others, but can also be negative and psychologically destructive in large amounts.

Shame on the other hand is about whom you are, what you look like, how you present to others, silly things that you think you have said. In other words it is about how you think others may perceive you. It is about 'not measuring up' which in large amounts causes psychological distress, and can lead to low self esteem. In a positive way shame can prevent people from 'stepping over the line' and engaging in anti-social behaviour because of how it would make them look to others

Shame is often a factor in people being unwilling to admit that they have a gambling problem. Being out of control is 'not a good look'. Sometimes shameful feelings can be so painful that the gambler cannot even admit to them self that they actually, really and truly, have a gambling problem. This gambler may do everything to hide the fact from others, lie, pinch money to cover losses, or any other uncharacteristic behaviour. Addressing these natural feelings of shame during a counselling session may be helpful and bring considerable relief to the gambler

Shame can also be a factor in the development of a gambling problem itself. Being a painful feeling which we desperately try to avoid, we may engage in a variety of destructive or at the very least unhelpful behaviours or habits in order to reduce its intensity. Generally, people are not actually conscious of an actual feeling called 'shame' but rather the anxiety that is the by product of an injured self esteem. The shaming may have come from family and societal attitudes to what is worthy and what is not. We doubt ourselves easily. We are too fat, too thin, too short, too loud, too ugly, uncoordinated, not clever enough, cannot dance, not rich enough, have a low job

status, not respected enough by our peers and so on.

Shaming life events coupled with guilt about how badly we may have behaved can lead to behaviours such as gambling which temporarily distract and relieve the anxiety. Gamblers with low self esteem may stumble upon the fact that every win, no matter how small makes them feel good. People don't usually make a decision to start gambling in order to deal with problems and anxiety. What often happens is that someone decides to gamble for whatever reason – to win money, somewhere safe to go at night, to gain independence from a spouse, for something to relieve boredom etc. and then what follows is that they discover that the gambling itself produces pleasurable feelings, be it excitement, relaxation, or distraction from pressing problems.

The human propensity to avoid pain and seek pleasure may steer the gambling in a direction to becoming a habitual coping strategy. When financial and other gambling related problems surface the gambling refuge becomes even more attractive. For example, pokie machine gamblers depressed and ashamed because they are thousands of dollars down may experience short periods of elation whenever they win minute amounts. These good feelings serve as temporary respites from the worry about previous losses and indeed life itself.

Another example may be a socially isolated woman lacking confidence (shame) who becomes attracted to a lifestyle in gaming venues with pleasant surroundings and staff that are willing to please. Then a win which brings about congratulatory outbursts from onlookers contributes to a wonderful feeling of success and luck. It beats being bored and lonely at home.

This is not to suggest that all problem gamblers are people heavily weighed down by shame. Indeed the development of a gambling problem is not so simple and there are many contributing factors. It is important to put problem gambling and shame into a context of the dealing with shame being a normal part of every person's makeup. Some of us deal with shame positively with a socially acceptable hobby such as gardening, internet technology, an artistic pursuit, exercise or working on a new invention. These acceptable activities can be very useful to help us deal with stress. In fact there's a myriad of ways to deal with stress and we all practice a mixture of both constructive and destructive strategies.

Unhelpful behaviours may include too much alcohol, drug usage, destructive relationship habits, gambling, a shopping obsession and so on. The problem with people using gambling as a coping strategy is that it is at the very least expensive and potentially financially disastrous. And gambling is all too easily available, allowing people to spend way too much time at venues creating other problems which impact on gambler's stress levels and feelings of shame which in turn, invite them to again seek refuge in gambling.

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What's New on www.ghsouthern.org.au

Expenditure Figures For Local Areas & the Southern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne

Last month's Gambling Matters talked about pokies losses. The detailed data on losses for all local government areas in Victoria, and in particular those in Gambler's Help Southern's catchment is now available in the InfoBase

Register now to access a wide range of published research and other resources. It's free!

Shame! Shame! Shame! continued

If someone is unlucky enough to develop a gambling problem they often need help to regain control. Counselling and financial counselling offered by Gambler's Help is one way to receive valuable assistance. Gambler's Help Southern staff members are also acutely aware that the prevention of gambling problems is paramount. This is where the gambling industry can assist. Gambling venues are not expected to take sole responsibility for the development of patrons gambling problems, where people choose to gamble for entertainment purposes and then proceed to develop problems when gambling becomes too much of a habit. However there is much that can be done to assist. Sure, people do make a choice to gamble and if they happen to develop a gambling problem as a result of life stresses etc. etc. is it the gaming venues' fault? No, but given that all human beings experience stress and all strive to cope, then surely the gaming industry can recognize that their venues are thus being used by some patrons in a destructive way which can go on to destroy their lives.

Some elements of the gambling industry regularly distance themselves from taking responsibility with the excuse that they are not responsible for people's life issues and their subsequent gambling problems. If the industry recognizes that gambling related harm can occur naturally as a result of normal human behaviour when their product is being used, then we could expect a greater effort from industry to protect gambling patrons.

A comprehensive and operational poker machine venue 'responsible gambling' policy would make a very good start. Such a policy would guide floor staff with how to respond in situations where it is apparent that patrons are getting into difficulty with their gambling. Any policy needs to be carefully planned but has the potential to assist the staff enormously so that they are comfortable with knowing what they need to do. It also encourages a consistent approach to dealing with problems and more importantly allows for venue practices which assist in preventing the development of problem gambling.

Do gambling venues really want problems gamblers inside their venues? There are many who genuinely do not. However, any part of the gambling industry that refuses to acknowledge that much more can be done to prevent problem gambling and that industry should do much more to assist as a matter of decency, then all that can be said is "shame, shame, shame!!"

Monique Thomson is a former community educator with Gambler's Help Southern

Another Poke At The Pokies (Free Registration Required)

Recently added to the InfoBase is this report by the West Heidelberg Legal Service & Latrobe University that reviews gambling policy in Victoria and stresses that much more needs to be done.

Looking for Grief Support

If you are looking for support to deal with grief issues contact:

Grief Line, 03 9596 7799 (12 noon - 3 am) for anonymous telephone counselling.

National Association for Loss and Grief (VIC), 9650 3000 for information about local grief support options.

If gambling due to grief is an issue call Gambler's Help Line on 1800 156 789

Gambler's Help Southern provides free, confidential, professional support for gamblers, their families and others affected by gambling.

Services available include:

- Counselling for gambling related issues
- Financial Counselling
- Multicultural Services
- Community Education
- Professional Development

We can also provide a wide range of resources and information such as:

- Self-help guides
- Information Sessions
- Training Sessions
- Brochures and Cards
- Posters
- Advice on gambling and gaming issues

All our staff are qualified professionals in their area of expertise and have experience dealing with gambling issues.

If you have concerns about your gambling, or the gambling of a family member or friend, call Gambler's Help Southern Intake during business hours on 9575 5353 or the Gambler's Help Telephone Counselling Service which is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week on 1800 156 789.

GAMBLER'S HELP™ 1800 156 789

SOUTHERN

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