

CHAPTER 20

A PERSONAL JOURNEY

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The challenge for me in writing from the ‘significant other’ viewpoint is to reflect on my journey. It had its impact on me, and it was not a mild impact. Had I not been with a problem gambler I would never have understood the issues that are at stake. Had it been a friend telling me about the situation, I would likely have told them to leave the relationship, as it seemed obvious that it would keep spiralling downward and take others with it. I look back on that sort of advice now and realise just how wrong that statement would have been for me and my partner, and how far this journey has taken us.

In the next few pages I will try to share my experiences and insights gained from being a significant other to a problem gambler. My partner’s gambling problem was compounded by an alcohol problem; these share many similarities in terms of their impact on family members. At this point, it has been just over a year of recovery – a year we may never have had if there had not been someone to help us take the initial step. My thanks go to the faceless person on the end of the gambling hotline who took my initial call; to our face-to-face counsellor whose first encounter with the two of us gave us the support and understanding that allowed us to move beyond ‘living the problem’ to starting our recovery; and to our gambling support group whose shared stories helped my partner and me comprehend, accept, and grow.

On being significant

I know now that I am a ‘significant other.’ In the early stages there was a sting to the word ‘significant.’ For those of us who wake up one day to find ourselves out of our depth with a partner, sibling, parent, or friend who is a problem gambler, we feel insignificant. We feel that if we counted more they would not continue their behaviour. We lay out our expectations

honestly, full of raw emotions and absolute frustration, and then we hurt more when the gambling continues. We hurt when the lies unfold, we hurt at the embarrassment of the bills unpaid, we hurt when we can't get the kids a new pair of shoes, but most of all, we hurt at our family member's inability to see us as significant. A huge amount of self-doubt is evoked in significant others faced with the incomprehensible consequences of what seems on the surface to be highly selfish behaviour.

Developing an understanding of the gambling addiction freed me from feeling like I was out of my depth. Looking back I remember there were many times when I felt that perhaps I was not doing enough to stop my partner's behaviour. It is interesting to reflect that somehow the responsibility drifted from him to me, and for some reason I felt guilty that I was allowing this to continue to pervade our lives. This was compounded by my feeling threatened and useless, since I couldn't offer anything to compete with gambling.

My partner knew that I felt these feelings, and he had to add his own feelings of self-disgust, powerlessness, and guilt. So much weight was on his shoulders knowing that he was risking everything, including my support. And yet he returned to gambling, and with that came the suicidal thoughts, for it was all too much for him to continue knowing the impacts of his behaviour. Fortunately for us, we got help before that final noose was around his neck.

Looking back on those times I hated being significant as it was such a responsibility to bear, but it was equally painful being insignificant. Without any knowledge of gambling (i.e. an addiction and what that meant), I saw what was happening to both of us as an affront on all that I held important in our relationship, and dangerously self-destructive for him. I could not bear to stand by and watch, and yet I could not leave him to self-destruct.

Now I see a gambling addiction as an amazingly powerful challenge to a person who has to deal with it. It is a challenge that can be faced, but only when it is understood that it is not their decision to hurt themselves and those around them. There is no 'intent'; rather there is a problem that needs addressing. As a significant other, I cannot address the problem for them, just as I cannot breathe for them. Having established those two separate issues, we were able to move beyond the first stage of anger and denial into a form of acceptance that at least alleviated the initial hopelessness of the downward spiral.

On broken trust

One of the fundamental difficulties that need healing is trust. Trust impacts on relationships so heavily. There is a bottom line and once you go below that you hit hard dirt, which you can't dig your way through without a shovel. You can claw away trying, but progress is indistinguishable and there is no reward for the effort. A lack of trust festers like an untreated sore; at first it was just the money, then, like blood poisoning had set in, the lack of trust infiltrated all aspects of life.

I questioned my ability to trust my own judgment. My ability to trust the 'where,' 'what,' 'who' and 'why' of every little issue made relating to my partner a struggle. This was simplified when we both accepted that, as part of my partner's treatment, his access to money was going to be restricted. This was a mutual agreement – not an enforced decision over a lack of trust, but an honest acceptance of the need for help. I did not want to be responsible for all the money. I wanted an adult-to-adult relationship, not a caretaking role. To be honest, at first I resented the notion that I would have to be 'metering out the change.' Money issues had become so emotional, and there was a need to separate our history and his treatment.

To explain what I mean, imagine a sign over a hospital bed saying 'nil by mouth,' but a jug of water is left on the bedside table next to the thirsty patient. That would be irresponsible; a much better treatment would be to remove the jug as a temporary measure. So an imaginary 'nil in wallet' sign was posted on this patient's chart. I played 'nurse' for as long as was required. Gradually my partner could take on more and more control, and the 'nil in wallet' sign could be removed. Trust can be regained. I do not control the bank accounts any more, but would do so in a blink if it were needed again.

It is so easy to accept treatment for physical illness to recover. It would be wonderful if the world could see a gambling or drinking addiction in the same way. If the stigma and the lack of understanding could be removed, the treatment would be so much easier to accept. I learnt this first hand. There was so much I had to challenge about the way I viewed addiction, and if my story can help someone see it in a different light, at least there will be some benefit to my disclosure here.

With the removal of the money, other trust issues had to surface before they could be resolved. All things don't get resolved by restricting the money, but at least the pattern stops and the other issues start to settle.

The physical stresses that had become so much a part of responding to the consequences of his addictions are gone. I no longer worry when my partner is off doing other things and is late returning home. My physical and emotional health is back to where it used to be.

I don't know that I can say I fully trust my own judgment yet. There are times when I still doubt my ability to trust, but I am working towards it. I don't make blatant statements about how I would react to a relapse. I just accept that I don't know, and I think it would be the trust issue that would be the greatest hurdle for me to overcome.

On facing addiction

I remember my inability to determine if I had the right to make the presumption that my partner needed help. His behaviour was not acceptable to me, but I had no gauge to know if it had reached the level where intervention was needed, or whether it was just a case of not suiting me. The honest promises that he wouldn't go back to the machines again were wearing thin when I rang the problem gambling hotline, almost apologetically, to determine if I should be ringing them. That in itself was a huge step. It shouldn't have to be so huge, but I am sure I am not the only one who has felt this way. It was a mixture of relief and fear that resulted from that call. Someone had determined what I could not; I was living with an addict. I was sent information about problem gambling, which confirmed what I knew but couldn't seem to accept without confirmation. I took close to a week absorbing the information, with my partner still unconvinced he had a problem. Then another huge binge session occurred, and with the card sitting on the table he called and made an appointment and invited me to come along. It was less than 24 hours between that final binge and the first appointment. With a hint at, but not a total comprehension of the gravity of the situation, we rocked on down to the first appointment. His blood alcohol level would still have prevented him from driving, and the bank still had not processed just how much of a binge it had been. His recollections were not very accurate at that first meeting, but he took the step and has no regrets.

It was a struggle to accept he had an addiction. There was all the opportunity in the world for his brain to say things like: "oh yes, bit of a problem, just got on top of me, but I am an intelligent person and will be over this soon. I don't want to overreact." Acceptance is not instantaneous. It takes time, but it is a vital part of the process of facing addiction.

A two-dollar coin is a not a loaf of bread

I wonder if you have to experience an addiction yourself to fully comprehend it. I am a smoker, so this is how I relate to it. A non-smoker looks at a cigarette on the table and does not crave it. Now if that person's partner were to be in the early phases of giving up smoking, and still craving one, then that cigarette takes on a whole new persona. The 'cig' could be seen as a trigger, and a person might act quickly to get rid of it so they don't start smoking again. Now the cigarette is still just a cigarette, but it takes on different meanings, emphases, and emotive content depending on the observer. We don't all comprehend it the same way.

I see a two-dollar coin sitting on the table. To me it holds the potential to be a loaf of bread, or a chocolate bar. It holds no power over me, but to a gambler it can be a trigger. It is not about the need to win money, nor the need to lose it. The money is not what is important at all. Sure, the impact of not having the money is important, but for significant others the gambling is not about money. If having the money was key, the money would never be fed to the machine.

Until I understood gambling addictions, I thought it was related to money. I hear new members join the group and try to convince themselves it is a money issue, but this doesn't last. They move beyond the two-dollar coin and the jackpots won and lost, and start to see what other needs the gambling is servicing. Gambling in itself is not a bad thing. I can walk into a casino, put in one two-dollar coin and then walk away, either two dollars down or maybe a few dollars up. It is irrelevant – I put the money in to have a turn, just to play. And to me, it is just a game. To my partner, gambling is not the issue – the problem is his gambling addiction. He does not respond as I do to the 'game.' It is not a game for him, but a means of escape. It blocks out the world, or blocks him out from the world, and masks some greater issue. For him, gambling develops into an unsustainable pattern. A year down the road to recovery and we still don't know what issue it masked, and we may never solve this puzzle. But more importantly, we have broken the pattern.

Looking back, I can see there was a little whisper before the whirlwind hit. There was a 'niggle' that hinted that a gambling session was creeping up (it is not uncommon that partners pick up on this retrospectively). In the end, there was the inevitable fight invented to find a reason to go and seek solitude with the machine, escaping life and becoming absorbed and irresponsible. Once I even went so far as to throw the keys on the table,

with the bank card, and dared my partner to skip the fight step. It was my way of saying “you don’t believe you have a problem!” Looking back can be painful at times, but not nearly as painful as if it hadn’t stopped.

On dealing with history

When you are the significant other of a problem gambler you are likely to have a history of emotive issues that haunt you. How you deal with these issues is important to the recovery of both you and your partner. I believe that it is important to recognise this. We need to allow ourselves the release of resentment. Like a pot simmering on the stove, every now and then there is a little boil-over. I refuse to say that when I boiled over it didn’t help. Sometimes it did help me: it wasn’t good, but it helped me, and it prompted me to explore how to separate the present from past history.

While it can be very tempting to throw it in the problem gambler’s face on occasions, there are ways of dealing with the allocation of blame, the lost dreams, the ‘I am so sick of your issues,’ without throwing it in their face and causing current problems. It hurt, and that hurt can still surface as anger and resentment. It is okay for me to regret the money that is not here because it went down the throat of a pokie machine. It is okay for me to mourn the loss of opportunity to be where we thought we would be at this stage of our lives. It is reassuring and a relief to know that the gambling has stopped, but that doesn’t make our history more bearable, since our history still relates to the present. History has a way of surfacing without any desire on my part. I don’t gain anything by pretending our history does not exist.

I do gain by being able to acknowledge that I have a response to the history, and by acknowledging it can separate the past from the present. The expectation that it would be better to be patient and understanding negates our nature on occasions, but I think it is vital to recognise how to deal with the past in a non-destructive manner. One important discovery I made was to distinguish that there is a difference between resenting the consequences of an illness, and blaming the person with the illness. As simple as this distinction sounds, it has a huge impact on how recovery for my partner and I progresses.

This distinction allows me to accept that what happened was difficult to deal with and that there is a residue that rises every now and then. But when it does rise, it does not turn into an attack on my partner. From my

partner's perspective, identifying the difference between resentment of him, as opposed to resentment of the consequences of his illness, reinforces for him the need to recognise his addiction as an illness, not a character deficiency. This allows him to move forward and to heal his self-esteem.

There will no doubt be many more occasions when history will be discussed between us, when we can share the pain that it caused for each of us, but it is powerless now to inflict more pain. It is only residual, not building. It will conceivably even dissipate over time and take its place in the archives of our lives.

On support groups

Gambling doesn't just impact on the gambler. If they are lucky enough to be looking at recovery before it is all gone, then it is a path to recovery that the significant others need too. My perception was that gambling is not an 'acceptable' addiction to discuss with friends and family. I seem to be more of a 'champion for the cause' now in trying to persuade others not to judge a person with a gambling problem as a selfish idiot. This is a limited view that does not take into account the complications of having an addiction.

My most immediate memory of my first meeting with the support group is of some simple words spoken by someone else's partner looking over the room and saying: "I know what you mean, when I was first dealing with this I wondered about that too." It was stunning how relevant some of the next few things I heard at the group were. It was a comfort to get things off my chest and get some understanding (not pity), some empathy (not sympathy). Realistically, I knew I was not the only one who had struggled with the mixed emotions of dealing with the impact of a gambling addiction, but this support meant that I felt that I was not the only one any more.

Once a fortnight, casually sitting around talking with a varied group of people (never the same from fortnight to fortnight) has been so healthy. Healthy for me, for my partner, and for them. This chance to laugh at ourselves and at our predicaments has a way of diminishing the problems. As different gamblers describe their lapses or their triumphs, and their significant others agree or challenge or just listen for the first time, 'little pennies drop around the room,' and healing takes place. For those gamblers whose significant others are not up to attending, it is a chance to hear from others what likely impacts they may have had, not in

accusation or despair, but in the reality of dealing with it. Sometimes it is the significant others that come alone. It's a reminder, it's a relief, it's a burden shared.

We don't know the reasons for the gambling. Sometimes it's discovered along the way, but we don't care while we are there. We can accept that it has its moments, and that's enough. I know I don't save things up for when I get to the group, but things definitely come to the surface there, in a time and place where they can be exposed. This is much healthier than at home, where confrontation may be on the agenda.

The combined group helped me assimilate and understand gambling while I was coming to terms with it. It helped my partner come to terms with his addiction and to comprehend what makes him different to me, and what steps he needed to take to alter his life to a more positive focus.

There is, I believe, a place for addicts to share their comments with other addicts only, or for significant others to share with other significant others only. But personally, I question the validity of that when much of the healing needs to be from comprehension, and you can't comprehend by looking at only one side of the coin. The one-side-only meetings had a way of making me feel more isolated, not less. In the very first stages of recognising a problem existed, I attended one Al Anon meeting, and never returned. I attended one problem gambling foundation meeting and have rarely missed another. My partner still goes to his AA meetings occasionally. We still go to our gambling meetings. We won't keep going forever, but I hope the group does continue. I would recommend it as the best therapy for those on a recovery path, and I believe a recovery path is needed for both the problem gambler and their significant others. It provides an avenue to comprehend, an avenue to validate your feelings, and an opportunity for all to heal.

In closing I will leave you with a poem I wrote regarding being a significant other which sums up the nature of our journey.

“How could she do it if she loved me?”
Poor George, I knew just what he meant
The words rang such a bell in my head
It forced reflections and memories
For I had been there not so long ago ...

I had lived that driving incessant fear of trust
That disillusioned hurt at shared dreams lost

Angry, uncertain, pondering my guilt
Perhaps my acceptance was making it worse
A lack of faith in a future had risen steadily within
And all the time just wanting to know why
Pleading for an answer, I was secretly screaming ...

Do you not care about the pain?
Can you not simply just refrain?

I could not just get angry and leave
Was there not more to us than this?
An explanation I had sought was finally forthcoming ...
A faceless stranger's voice at last confirmed
There was no intent, it was real, it was common.

"Addiction," no intent to offend,
But oh so much to comprehend

With trust near shattered and emotions depleted
I questioned if this was justification for that which made no sense.
Was it meant to excuse, to exclude accountability?
More importantly to me how could I save him from himself?
I had found my answers and many more questions

Identifying Triggers, not futility
Recovery now a likely possibility

So together we have walked this path
Gradually learning to trust
And I can say now without doubt
We do see new days and share dreams again
We have survived and grown.

So I pen my words and offer them
To answer George who wants to learn.