

CHAPTER 19

THE EFFECTS OF GAMBLING ON FAMILY MEMBERS: SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERVENTION

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This chapter on the family is dedicated to the work and experiences of clinical staff and clients of the Familial Trust located in Christchurch. This agency provides support to family members whose lives have been affected by another person's addictions. In this chapter the focus is on the effects of gambling on the family, and several case studies are presented to show how the Familial Trust helps family members. (The identity of these clients is protected by using pseudonyms.)

The family

Gambling (unlike alcohol or drug abuse) has no visible effects, thus leaving the family of a problem gambler in the dark about the extent or even the presence of any disorder. Therefore, as the problem progresses for the gambler the family seems relatively unaffected. The average family with one adult in the early stages of problem gambling may look like any other hard-working, functional family.

The spouse or partner

When someone is in the early stages of problem gambling, the spouse or partner may notice some unrelated yet bizarre incidents. If these are brought to the notice of the gambler, they either divert attention to something else, or provide plausible excuses. Typically the incident gets overlooked. Examples of such occurrences include:

- Bank statements or credit card bills never arriving
- The gambler racing to collect the mail from the mailbox each day
- Unexplained withdrawals from bank accounts or EFTPOS machines
- Cheques randomly removed from the cheque book
- The gambler spending more time away from home than with the family.

These are a few of the signs that there may be a gambling problem. The unexplained ‘mysteries’ become more frequent and more ‘bizarre’ as the problem progresses. The spouse may feel that they are losing touch with reality, as slowly over time the gambler’s stories become more believable but increasingly bizarre, making their truth less likely.

The spouse may, at this time, begin to exhibit behaviours such as checking pockets for evidence (e.g. betting slips, bank statements, letters from loan companies, etc.). They may find themselves driving to the nearest or most frequented bar to see if their spouse is there, or driving to known associates just to see if the car is in the driveway. As time goes on more and more of the spouse’s thoughts, time and energy are expended on the whereabouts and behaviour of the problem gambler. Eventually the spouse’s mental health will be affected, other family members will be impacted, and family relations will deteriorate. Several case studies are presented in order to illustrate this process and to show how the Familial Trust can help to arrest this negative spiral.

Liz’s story

I have been happily married to my husband for 22 years, and we have three children, aged 16, 13, and 9 years old. My husband and I both hold well-paying professional jobs and we live in a four-bedroom house in a new subdivision. For the first 15 years of our marriage things were great; we respected, loved, and trusted each other.

I first suspected that something was not quite right when my husband began staying out at night, sometimes all night. On a few occasions he went out drinking and did not return home, but I knew that he was consuming alcohol. I smelt it, saw the physical effects, and eventually became familiar with the signs.

It was so different with gambling. I started to become hyper-vigilant about his whereabouts and the company he was keeping. My behaviour in the house and as a mother became more volatile and unpredictable. I became completely focused on my husband – controlled by his moods and behaviours. As a result of this, the children began to withdraw from both of us.

My first hint of difficulty was noticing the time that he spent away from home. Later, the total change in his personality aroused my suspicions and I felt sure he was having an affair with another woman. I began smelling his clothes for perfume when he came in, and checking his pockets for evidence. On several occasions I found betting slips and receipts from the

casino for drinks, but never once did I think of gambling as the problem. We had always been so good with money. I thought about checking the bank statements and credit card bills. The thing is they never seemed to arrive. I noticed that my husband would, when he was home, race to the mailbox, which made me even more suspicious. One day I did get the mail before him and there were two letters from loan companies. I had no idea what this mail could be, so I opened them. They were overdue notices for loans of \$5,000 and \$7,000.

My heart sank as I was faced with the possibility that my husband could be gambling. I still thought that this was about another woman. When he returned home that evening I confronted him with the letters and asked for an explanation. What I heard was devastating. Part of me would rather have heard it was another woman.

My husband broke down and told me he had a gambling problem. He had been gambling with money from our savings accounts and there was nothing left. He had taken out these loans in desperation to get the money back before I learnt about it. Unfortunately, he had gambled the loan money to try and make more, as the loans only covered some of the money from our account. My husband had taken out a caveat over our property to get these loans. I could have taken him to court for fraud, as he had forged my signature. Over a period of time the full extent of his gambling addiction came to light as I discovered he had borrowed a lot of money from both our friends and my family. The total amount was in the tens of thousands of dollars. Our marriage and family were in tatters. The children were angry and resentful and I was unsure as to whether I could or even wanted to make this marriage work.

Since then it has taken a lot of hard work and commitment to regain any form of normality in our lives. Slowly the trust is rebuilding. The children and I have set some clear boundaries around what behaviour we will and will not accept with respect to gambling, and my husband is aware of what will happen if he chooses to gamble again. We have gained a lot of understanding about the behaviour of the problem gambler and how this impacted on us. We have also made some wonderful friends through our support groups. We are learning once again how to laugh – both at ourselves and the things that happen in everyday life.

The children

For the children in this family life may go along quite smoothly for a period of time. However, as the volatility and unpredictability of the non-gambling parent progresses children will find ways to meet their needs. When money is not available for basic necessities such as school stationery, school fees or sometimes even basic personal needs such as socks, underclothes or toiletries, children may become resentful at the lack of parental support. As the resentments build the non-gambling parent may vocally condemn the gambling parent, making them the focus of all the family problems and providing the children with too much information about their parent's inappropriate activities.

For the children caregiving roles may be reversed, with one child – usually the oldest – becoming overly responsible for the other siblings' welfare. This may be as simple as getting them ready in the morning for school, or organising baths and bedtimes. These conscientious children often engross themselves in schoolwork or hobbies, becoming A-grade students and high achievers. These grades, however, only mask the anger, isolation, fear and loneliness that they are experiencing as their parents become totally obsessed with the increasing chaos in their own lives.

Other children may start exhibiting behavioural problems at school and in other environments. They may change their social circles and become involved in inappropriate activities, such as bullying or stealing. These children are also searching for ways to cope with the lack of parental support. Children may become withdrawn, spending a lot more time than usual on their own, engrossed in books or solitary activities. Younger children may develop relationships with imaginary friends for companionship. These children experience loneliness and a sense of abandonment because of emotionally unavailable parents. Some will learn the power of humour – making light of seemingly serious situations by using jokes or funny stories. As the issues in the family become more complicated, children often believe that somehow the angry resentful atmosphere is their fault, thus creating and building a huge amount of toxic shame.

Many children adopt these coping strategies to mask the pain and fear experienced by any child that grows up around addicted parents. The saddest part is that if there is no treatment some children will continue to act out these roles as adults, not knowing why their relationships do not work, or why they continue to exhibit the same or similar dysfunctional

behaviours as their parents. Often these children will enter into relationships with addicts as adults.

Hamish's story.

I am the 16-year-old son of a gambler. My dad's gambling has only been detected in the last two years. Now that I understand a lot more about the behaviours of a problem gambler and the gambler's family, I can recognise that the trouble in our family has been an issue for much longer.

I can remember a time when my dad was always around. Life was great then; we would go out on family outings and picnics. My dad would take me fishing and we would go camping together – just him and me.

It seems like those activities stopped slowly over a period of time, but looking back now it seemed like it happened suddenly when I was about nine or ten years old. Dad would make promises to do things, but something would always be more important. Although I was hurt at first, I would accept this and learned to just stuff the hurt down and to find other ways to fill in my time – usually with computer games or play stations.

Mum's behaviour changed as well, and she always seemed uptight and stressed. She would say awful things about dad and that made me feel really bad. Everything in our house changed. I felt pretty depressed at times and would spend more and more time away from home.

I felt like some of the stuff that was going on in the home was my fault. I also started taking care of my younger brother and sister, who would get really upset when mum and dad argued. I would tell them not to worry and that it was just mum's and dad's stuff. I would cuddle my sister when she cried. After a couple of years, when my brother was older, we fought a lot. Sometimes I would stand between mum and dad when they were fighting just in case dad hit mum. This whole situation was so hard for me to understand at the time, and it is still hard to deal with now I am older.

The family as a whole

When one person in the family has a gambling problem, all members will be affected. At the same time as the problem progresses, other family members begin to exhibit inappropriate or disordered behavioural patterns. In some instances the family member (brother, sister, parent or wife/husband/partner) may recognise the problem before the gambler themselves does, or before the gambler is ready or willing to receive help themselves. There are a number of ways that the family member can begin

to deal with the problem. Most importantly, they need to gain knowledge and support for themselves so that the problem gambler will be forced to become responsible for their own actions. In a lot of ways family members can enable or even make the problem worse by propping up the behaviour, either out of fear, shame, or lack of understanding.

Treatment for the family

It has been estimated that one addict can affect up to ten other people. When a family member presents for counselling he/she is screened for the following:

- The financial situation and who controls the money
- A list of assets and liabilities
- What support systems the family member has in place
- What 'stage of change' level the gambler and family members display (and what amount of denial is still present)
- The presence of family members or friends willing to engage in family intervention (if appropriate).

Once the issues for the family member have been identified, suggestions for appropriate interventions and support are supplied to the client, including GamAnon (a 12-step support group for the families of problem gamblers). Family members are encouraged to take charge of all finances if possible, including EFTPOS or credit cards.

Counselling sessions take place following the screening. A variety of strategies are used, including client-centred, motivational interviewing and cognitive behavioural techniques. With support from the therapist an action plan is formulated. Some of the topics dealt with in these sessions include feelings of isolation, fear, resentment, anger and depression, as well as trust and boundary issues. At the same time, ongoing counselling and advocacy is offered to the family member, together with referral to other agencies where required. Attendance at the support group is encouraged for ongoing care, and family or relationship counselling sessions can also be arranged.

Family interventions

A meeting is set up with all significant parties, including family members, employees, clergy (if appropriate), police (if involved), friends, or any other key participants. Attendees of this meeting are asked how they can contribute and are requested to compose a script noting changes they

may have noticed in their relationship with the gambler. Eventually a preferred outcome is agreed upon and a contract is put together by the group for the agreement of the gambler.

Meetings are established to practise the intervention procedure without the gambler being present. A time is set up for the intervention to take place and the gambler is brought in, either knowingly or unknowingly, depending on the participants' wishes. At this meeting a facilitator establishes an agreement with the gambler that he/she will listen to the attendees, and also has the opportunity to speak at the end. Each individual member (in a pre-arranged order) will read their script to the gambler. At the end of this part of the process the gambler responds to the information presented. The facilitator verbally presents the contract to the gambler and either gets an affirmative or negative response, and the process continues.

Conclusion

Regardless of the outcome from these interventions, family members usually remain united and a strong bond is formed with ongoing support being provided to them. Many family members have returned to a healthy lifestyle using the intervention methods provided. This is not to say that all marriages and families remain intact. However it does mean that even if the gambler decides to forgo any form of help, the family can move on to leading a normal lifestyle, making positive choices about their own future.