

Gambling: Why a Drug of Choice?

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Gambling is certainly the most misunderstood and perhaps the most complex and complicated of addictions. Indeed for some time it was considered to perhaps not be an addiction at all and was classified with 'Impulse Control Disorders' by DSM-IV [1]. The updated version of the same manual, DSM-5 has now reclassified gambling and it has been moved to the category 'Substance- Related and Addictive Disorders' [2]. This confirms what I have come to believe having treated hundreds of men and women in my clinical practice since 2001; for those who suffer the devastating consequences of gambling and yet despite the emotional pain, psychological turmoil, destruction to life and relationship which it causes, crave more of the gambling experience, gambling truly is a very real addiction. Gambling is every bit as serious in its presenting issues as dependency on drugs or alcohol, and frequently, in its long term consequences including colossal level of debt, and lack of understanding from family and friends of its motivation, much harder to recover from.

Still, even if now officially classified as an addiction do we not still debate whether gambling addiction is the result of genetic make-up, has its roots in neurobiology or should be viewed from the perspective of a disease model? Or whether since the Gambling Act relaxed restrictions on advertising of gambling [3] particular product promoted by the gambling industry and increased level of advertising might be to blame? Ofcom's latest published research figures indicated that television gambling advertisements had increased from 152,000 in 2006, to 1.39 million in 2012 after greater market liberalisation was permitted [4]. As a psychotherapist working extensively and exclusively in this area, the findings of my practice time and time again are that gambling addiction is a learned coping mechanism, a way of alleviating perceived intolerable emotion triggered by thoughts about a here and now situation with which the person with the addiction feels unable to cope, or as a way of attempting to dissociate from intrusive thoughts and feelings from past trauma.

The relief experienced from gambling is gained from two distinct ways depending on the mode of gambling chosen and the desired effect. Firstly, the preoccupation and exhilaration from anticipation of a win and the high gained from a win itself. These feelings being intensely rewarding, the behaviour is repeated until there is, of course, eventually an unaffordable financial loss made. The financial loss causes an instant low; feelings of depression, anxiety, self-loathing, guilt and shame. Repetition of the gambling behaviour is then craved in order to have the experience of the anticipation and the high as a lift out of the low caused by gambling and to continue to avoid the original set of problems through gambling.

The above description of becoming addicted to the high from gambling is more likely to be that of a man who has developed a problem with gambling than that of a woman with a gambling problem. Men who seek a high from gambling tend to choose modes of gambling which cause a high degree of anticipation and thrill, such as betting on sports or casino games whether in betting shops or via the internet. Women tend to prefer modes of gambling that offer less emotional and psychological excitement but seek escapism through complete absorption in a particular gambling activity. Historically the majority of women I have treated with addiction to gambling have played traditional slot machines in adult gaming centres or bingo halls.

Women are now equally, if not more likely, to present for treatment with addiction to internet gambling. The attraction and addiction lying in the fact that when she is engaged in gambling whether on a slot machine or her computer screen, her smart phone, or her tablet, she is not thinking her troubling thoughts and therefore blocks out any distressing feelings which accompany them. The choice of gambling mode for the majority of women may be different to that of most men but the consequence the same; eventual unaffordable loss of both time and money to gambling, the accompanying shame, guilt, depression and anxiety, the craving to gamble again to escape the original problems and the misery caused by gambling addiction.

When I speak of the highs and lows of gambling in a betting shop or casino, or the relaxing effect of gambling via the internet, as a perceived way of coping with and escaping from an intolerable inner or outer world experience, you might be thinking that I could be describing a drug or alcohol dependency and of course, you are right. In Great Britain there may be as many as 450,000 problem gamblers, so why are so many men and women turning instead to gambling as their drug of choice? If we focus initially on gambling in women it is significant to note that over 85% of women I have treated have experienced child abuse or domestic violence [5]. For such women they chose gambling over drug or alcohol dependency as unlike consuming drugs or alcohol, gambling to excess leaves them feeling physically in control. This feels exceptionally important to the women who have suffered an attack of any kind on her physical self.

A key reason both men and women depend on gambling as a form of self-medication for stress, depression and anxiety, rather than on drugs (of a prescribed or recreational kind) or alcohol is that unlike with drugs or alcohol, there are few visible physical evidence of gambling addiction; by comparison to substance dependency, addiction to gambling is so easily hidden. Especially so, now that in the UK for example, gambling via the internet is so easily accessible, as long as the screen to the computer, tablet or Smartphone remains hidden, so does the gambling problem. In a recent UK Gambling Commission survey of gambling participation [6] 55% of respondents had gambled in the last 4 weeks and 15% of those had gambled online.

Men and women with stressful and demanding jobs find that the focus of gambling online can help them to switch off from spiralling thoughts and feelings associated with stress and anxiety without leaving their office desk or whilst taking the train home from work. Gambling can at first help them to take time out and to self sooth, it can be an aid

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to maintaining their weighty burden of responsibilities until, of course, too much time and money is spent in the gambling activity which only adds to the weight of their problems and then we see begin the drive to addiction I described earlier in this article.

For those for whom owing to cultural or religious reasons, alcohol consumption, drug taking or indeed gambling of any type or degree is taboo, the ability for gambling to remain largely hidden is appealing. I have frequently treated men from, for example, an Islamic background, who have developed a gambling problem having initially used gambling as self-medication for depression, stress and anxiety, or to experience the thrill of breaking a cultural or religious taboo, without the risk of shaming themselves or their family as they might were they to take the higher risk of being discovered taking the equally taboo but more easily detected drugs or alcohol.

As I began by stating in this article, gambling is a complex and complicated problem which goes far beyond the limitations of this written piece to describe in any depth of detail. I only hope that this piece has gone some way to clarify some of the common

misunderstandings; that gambling addiction is not about greed for money, or lack of understanding of the odds of a win. More often than not, just as with drug or alcohol dependency, gambling begins as an attempt to cope with thoughts, feelings and day to day life a little better, which ends in making things a whole lot worse, before a true desire and determination for long term recovery can start.

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