

It's Truly Never Enough

I've been a compulsive gambler for a long time, so long that I can barely remember what it was like when I first started to gamble. Here's my story.

I had never traveled further than Illinois, never flown on a plane and I had definitely never been to a casino in 1989 when I was 25 years old. As things turned out, I did all of those things at once and the effect was a little bit overwhelming. A group of us flew to Las Vegas for a bachelor party. When my friends went to check into the hotel, I sauntered over to the blackjack tables. It was love at first sight. I played for quite a while. I enjoyed it so much that I was afraid to lose my spot at the table if I left. It was 19 hours before I finally mustered the courage to take a bathroom break.

Over the years, I gambled as often as I could but Vegas was expensive and I could only afford to go a couple times a year. Every trip was a disaster and I was always grateful that my plane tickets were two way tickets because I would never have had the money to buy a return flight home. My behavior on those trips was embarrassing when I look back on it now. Long hours spent at some table (any table really) and very little social contact with my friends or anyone else. I didn't throw around huge sums but I was totally addicted to the thrill of the game and the opportunity for victory. If I won, I bet more. If I lost, I knew I would win the next time. I always knew that I'd win the next time. Strange as it sounds, I was supremely confident and that confidence never wavered until I would lose my money and go home.

When casinos started opening up in Wisconsin, I took advantage of the proximity and that was bad. When a casino opened up ten minutes from my house, it was a full blown disaster. By now, I had morphed into a slots only gambler, better to play long hours without having to talk to anyone. All I needed was the machine and one more bet... which I knew I would win except you don't always win and some of my losing streaks seemed almost too incredible to believe. My paychecks started disappearing shortly after they were issued. Sure, I won some jackpots but it didn't matter how many I won because the money was never going to be enough. Besides, all I really wanted was more time—alone, unbothered and undisturbed in the wonderful glow of slot machine nirvana. I started to schedule "work trips" to other Wisconsin casinos so I could have more time to gamble. I remember being totally unwilling to spend any money on personal items because I needed everything to fuel my addiction. A routine started to develop--get paycheck, pay rent, pay bills and gamble all the rest. Soon, work became a distraction to gambling too. I got married but that was not worth thinking about when there were slot machines to play. My life was nothing but constant gambling or thoughts of how to get more money to gamble longer.

By 1999, I was gambling most every day and I soon ran out of money. I realized that I could get more money from work if I just borrowed a little from Peter to pay the casino. Yes, this was stressful to do at first but over time, you become almost immune to the fact that you're stealing someone else's money. If they never notice, and in my case they never did, then you simply make a personal promise to pay it back and continue to gamble. What a nice rationalization that was to make, don't you think? As if God doesn't know that you're stealing and gambling and only you do. It sounds pathetic because it is but it's also one of the many common threads most compulsive gamblers eventually develop. We do what needs to be done to get more money to gamble more. What I wish someone had told me was that I was doing it because I was trying to escape the reality of my own boring marriage and job. For me,

gambling was one gigantic break from reality. As soon as I put the first dollar in the machine, the switch flipped and all problems, concerns and issues simply vanished. The only thing holding me back was the limited time and money. I found lots of ways to get more money and did anything in my power to buy more time. I created a huge mess of my life and I didn't know how to fix myself.

I finally got help from God in 2008. He may well have been trying to help me before that but I don't think I was seeing the signs very well. I woke up one October morning and realized that I was going to lose my 3 incredible sons if I didn't stop gambling. At that point, they were only 5, 8 and 10 years old. You can say it wasn't God but I'm fairly certain it was God and he was telling me that I was running out of time. He was right. If I hadn't turned myself in on October 23, 2008, I might well have gone on gambling for several more years, thereby missing out on my boys and their life experiences in high school and thereafter. When the chips were finally counted, I had stolen 2.4 million dollars from a completely unsuspecting client. I cooperated with everyone and got damned lucky. I went to prison for two very boring years. I also lost my license to practice law and I owe another 2.2 million dollars to the IRS but I have my boys and that's all I really need.

God deserves all the credit for helping me to stop my compulsive gambling but it was Gamblers Anonymous that gave me the strength to move forward with my life. That first meeting is still etched in my mind. So hard to go in there and see all those happy people chatting about their day before the start of the meeting. I remember thinking, "What are they so happy about? My life is ruined." But over time, I came to realize that GA is all about helping each other and that continues to make me happy to this day. GA will give you sustenance when you need it, it will give you harmony with your fellow man and it will give you a chance to help someone at each and every meeting. May God bless you and if you have a problem with gambling or know someone who does, I pray that you do all that you can to help that person come up and out of the hole that is the life of a compulsive gambler. The rest of your life is so much more important.