



Gambling

By Dan Kohn

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Introduction

Anne started with the slot machines. There was power in being able to pull that lever and anticipate the sound of all those quarters falling into the tin tray. There were a few wins. There were a lot more that weren't.

A friend told Anne that the really big money was in cards. Black Jack and Poker replaced the slots. More money – lost.

But a “big win” is bound to happen. It has to – to pay off the credit cards that are maxed out and to get the money back into the savings account before the recent withdrawals are seen. The fun of playing is being replaced by the desperation of just salvaging a financial future.

Anne has a problem. Gambling is taking far more out of her life than it will ever give back! Fear, guilt, and shame interfere with the necessary decision to end the pattern of gambling – of losing – that is out of control.

Where It Begins

What's the first thought that comes to mind when you hear the word “rich”? Now consider this question: How much money would it take for you to feel “rich”?

The business of gaming has, at its very center, the vision of “getting rich.” Though people play for different reasons, those who progress into a deeper pattern develop a belief in their potential to get rich through gambling. One “big win” equals financial security. It's the illusion that keeps far too many playing longer than they ever envisioned.

Gaming is a gamble! There are losers and winners – with far more losers than winners. Big losses are figured in to allow for the few big wins. Gambling businesses will never lose money, but the players do and the big profit goes to those who manage the outcomes.

Our culture places a strong emphasis on money. There is a focus on security through money, on the possessions it can buy. Additionally, an interwoven focus on independence drives the gambler, with money as the vehicle to achieve this priority.

It's all an illusion.

People who develop a gambling problem go beyond mere security. For these individuals, it's about winning big, often to offset the debt they have created by their preoccupation with playing. Like Anne, it's less about fun, and far more about desperation. Their dreams and nightmares become interwoven. The losses far exceed the winnings for those who have progressed into a gambling problem. Fear, guilt, and shame are tied to what has already been sacrificed in an effort to fulfill this elusive dream of financial freedom. They have become slaves to gambling instead.

Financial security is put on the line for the sake of "one big win." A vicious, destructive cycle is formed. It is reinforced by a growing need to win to offset losses – hidden losses that the gambler attempts to deny and that loved ones know nothing about. Love relationships are at risk.

Are you caught in this cycle? Then do keep reading as we take a look at both the power of the addiction itself and the transforming power of recovery. If this struggle is present in your life, know that there *is* hope!

Caught in the Cycle

Preoccupation with gambling is one of the key symptoms of a growing problem that often ends in a full-blown gambling addiction. It's likely that your thoughts and activities have become more and more centered on the next "fix" (i.e., gaming experience).

Defensiveness is also a clue to this progressive problem that is taking over your life. After honest assessment, you'll begin to see that defensiveness has manifested itself in behaviors such as:

- minimizing your last loss
- projecting blame onto others or the circumstances of your life
- rationalizing a continued pattern of playing regardless of losses
- denying that a problem exists

All of the above offer strong evidence that the dark side of addiction is taking over. These defenses are feeble efforts to reduce the reality of truth and to offset the fear, guilt, and shame that are becoming daily, dark emotions stealing from love, hope, and joy.

Many who are involved with gambling will emphasize the last win, without any reference to the financial losses that occurred prior to this "one big win." For the typical addict, this is a constant merry-go-round of deception. Is that true for you? Have you attempted to hide your hurtful pattern from others, from yourself, and even from God? If so, it is all to no avail.

Deception does not promote freedom – truth does. The world offers many sources of truth – some even influencing you to believe that you are the source of your own truth. But when you and I are left on our own we will always fail. The same weaknesses that lead to addiction are the very ones that also lead to false sources of truth. That’s because the weaknesses themselves come from that very part of each and every one of us that leads us away from what is right, just, and perfect. It’s called sin.

The one source of truth that will never let you down is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whom we learn about in the Christian Bible, God’s Word to us. The **B-I-B-L-E** can be seen as **B**elievable **I**nsights **B**efore **L**eaving **E**arth. In the Bible we see these words of Jesus: “... *the Truth will set you free*” (John 8:32). He also said “... *I am the Way and the Truth and the Life*” (John 14:6).

On the other hand, Satan, the “... *father of lies*” (John 8:44) is the source of deception. And he is winning – at your expense. Satan is working within the trap. The Bible also says, “*For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs*” (1 Timothy 6:10).

Like other addictions, gambling is predictable and progressive. And when overwhelmed by the complex financial, emotional, social, and spiritual problems brought on by the addiction, some may even choose suicide. Losers *can* lose it all.

The losses from the addiction of gambling far exceed the gains. A practical definition for addiction is when one’s repeated at-risk behaviors lead to repeated, significant losses. Such losses could be in any – and many – of the following areas:

- Financial insecurity and debt
- Disruption in your family relationships and friendships
- Doing things that go against your own values and beliefs
- Physical and medical concerns tied to the stress of a growing gaming problem
- Sacrifice of a quality of life
- Loss of spiritual focus and priority
- Giving up on life itself

Gambling has been found to be one of the most powerful forms of addiction. This is tied to several dynamics:

- All five senses are frequently activated. This is especially true with casino gambling. Flashing lights (sight); clinging of money in metal trays and other intentional noises (sound); the aroma of food and its flavor (smelling and tasting); and the feel of the cards, slot machine lever, etc. (touch).
- It taps into a deep human need for security. Our culture interprets this as being largely financial in nature. What is missed is the warning shared by Christ: “*No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money*” (Matthew 6:24).

- Its availability continues to increase. Now there is access through casinos, the internet, gas stations, bars, and even grocery stores. It is consumer and money driven, but most “scratch offs” (i.e., lottery tickets) end up adding more to trash cans than to bank accounts.
- It is largely socially accepted. There is now even government support for certain forms of gambling.
- It is easy to hide the consequences of a growing problem (at least until the latter stages of addiction).
- It arouses emotional and hormonal responses that can manipulate and override rational choices. Greed is fed by deep desires for more. In the Bible this is called “*coveting*” (Deuteronomy 7:25) and is indeed a sin: separation in nature from God and from the holiness He desires.

Steps to Recovery

But do not despair. There *is* hope. Though challenging, the destructive pattern of gambling can be overcome. Several key steps offer a *valuable beginning*.

- Admit you have a gambling problem that needs immediate attention.
- Accept that outside help will make successful recovery more likely and lasting. This action also makes needed life transformation more efficient.
- Turn your life over to God as a loving source of power and hope. In many 12-Step programs **G-O-D** is viewed as **Good Orderly Direction** for life. Far more, He is Triune God – Father, Redeemer, and Counselor.
- Be willing to take a deep, honest look at yourself. This is necessary in order to uncover hidden patterns, deep-set reasons for at-risk behaviors. It is also an active process to get past the dark emotions of guilt, shame, and fear. When you accept God as an active player in the process, His grace is the motivator, rather than guilt.
- Confess past sins to God and others. The goal is the restoration of love relationships, which is essential to consistent, supported recovery. Accountability within these relationships is vital. Just as self-centeredness interfered with love relationships and helped define your addiction, so submission (voluntary self-sacrifice) in these relationships is a sign of healthy life transformation. A strong start for this process begins with submission to Christ: “*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ*” (Ephesians 5:21). Reinforcing this are the inspired words from an earlier section of this letter written by the apostle Paul, “*Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ*” (Ephesians 4:14–15).
- Submission and sacrifice are a part of love in action. And where does this ability to love come from? It comes from God who “is love” (1 John 4:8,16). He anticipates that active, vibrant love is at the root of holy, healthy living. It is also the most powerful force there is when it comes to lasting life transformation.

- Accept forgiveness from God and others. Forgiveness from God is possible because Jesus Christ took every sin ever committed to the cross. There He died to pay each and every penalty. God assures everyone who believes in Jesus as Savior and who confesses his or her sin, that He will forgive and forget. Consider these assurances God gives us in Psalm 103, verses 11-12: *“For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.”* And in 1 John 1:8-9, we read these encouraging words of promise: *“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”*
- God sets the example for both forgiving and forgetting our sins. Once they are forgiven, we have a “clean slate” – our sins are not brought up again to interfere with God’s relationship with us. He asks that we do the same thing with regard to others who sin against us, and the forgiveness we give to ourselves. One way to view the word forgive is to see it as such: “for” you I “give” a chance to be fully loved again. This is the model Christ sets for our lives. Yes, forgiveness is powerful indeed!
- Develop a daily pattern of thoughts and actions that reinforce life transformation. Spiritually this includes prayer, time in Bible reading, attendance in worship and Bible studies, and active involvement in at least one support group.

Lasting Life Transformation

It may seem like recovery and hope are not within your grasp – and they aren’t, if you rely solely on your own efforts in order to control the outcome. It’s time to face the truth that you cannot control this, but God can.

God makes lasting life transformation possible. Find reassurance in these words: *“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will”* (Romans 12:2). It’s not anything you do, but what God has already done for you through Jesus Christ. Because of Jesus, you can be forgiven for every wrong choice you have ever made and for every person who has been hurt by and through your addiction. What an incredible source of hope!

Renewed by hope in Jesus, you can forge forward toward lasting life transformation. Find a partner with whom you can share the depth of your pain and who can help you set goals for making the necessary changes. Count on that partner to hold you accountable – to push, stretch, and nudge you, because they care. Know that you cannot do this on your own. Join a support group of others who will relate to the depth of your struggle and encourage you along the way. In so doing, you might be strengthened in your own opportunity to help others. For more information, call Gambler’s Anonymous at **(213) 386-8789** or visit **www.gamblersanonymous.org**.

There are many sources for in-depth help that go beyond what we are able to share with you in the pages of this booklet. I urge you to talk to a counselor or pastor and explore treatment options they can recommend.

And if you would like to learn more about God’s love for you in Jesus, contact us at Lutheran Hour Ministries. Call **1-800-876-9880** or visit **www.lhm.org**.

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