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The Faces of Gambling Recovery

By Bill Stein for Northstar Problem Gambling Alliance

Each person's addiction is unique, as is each story of renewed hope. Gambling disorder, also known as gambling addiction or compulsive gambling, continues to be misunderstood as being caused by a simple lack of willpower in which gamblers are blamed for their disorder. These myths need to be debunked.

To illustrate the insidious way that gambling disorder can take hold — as well as to show how recovery is possible — here are several stories from Minnesotans impacted by gambling:

Milestone birthdays are often a rite of passage. For “Eddie,” about to turn the legal betting age of 18, this would be no exception.

It was late in the evening on July 16 and outside the Mystic Lake Casino Eddie and several friends waited anxiously for the clock to strike midnight. Eddie had already watched many of his friends celebrate their eighteenth birthdays at the casino, and he was excited that his day had finally come.

When midnight arrived, Eddie entered the casino, driver's license in hand. Once inside, he went straight to the blackjack tables. As he placed his first bet on the table – two \$1 chips – he immediately felt the excitement. The thrill was instantaneous – and lasting. Eddie played blackjack through the night, not leaving the casino until after sunrise.

“I fell in love when I got there and fell deeper in love with every bet,” says Eddie. “I won \$97 that first night and thought I could come back and win \$100 every night.”

Eddie visited the casino throughout the summer as well as the next summer, “winning more money than I'd ever made in my life.” He later dropped out of college so he could resume gambling, thinking it was the way for him to make money.

Instead, he began to lose money consistently. “I was financially destroyed,” recalls Eddie, now 27. “I began to write bad checks, lie and steal ... I'd do anything I could do to get gambling money.”

Still, he was able to conceal the extent of his gambling. “While everyone knew that I gambled,” says Eddie, “they had no idea how much I bet, how long I spent at the casino, and how often I went.” Eddie would gamble for two days nonstop,

go home to sleep, and then return to the casino for another day or two. “I binge gambled very frequently,” says Eddie.

Eventually, Eddie’s family staged an intervention and he ultimately received inpatient treatment. “The concept of an illness called compulsive gambling – let alone that it was something I had – was something I’d never heard of.”

“I kept trying to convince myself that I was not a compulsive gambler even though I had all the symptoms. Eventually, though, I began to gradually accept that gambling was causing so many of the problems in my life.”

Eddie has not gambled since beginning treatment and considers the three crazed years of gambling as “back then” – almost a lifetime ago. He is immensely grateful that he learned about his illness – and began to deal with it – at such an early age. “A lot of people I see in the 12-step programs are in their 40s and 50s. If I were dealing with this for 20 years, I’m pretty sure it would have killed me.”

Like many other gambling addicts, I was literally on the brink of suicide before I was ready for change.

If I wasn’t gambling, I was drinking. My addiction had taken total control of my life. One night after being in the bar, I came home to find that I just couldn’t live this way any longer. I called a friend, told her I didn’t want to live any more, and said I was going to take my own life. She told me to hold on, and within five minutes she arrived at my house. She took me to a friend’s house and let me cry all night.

The next day I made a call to my old counselor from an outpatient treatment group. She asked me a single question: “Have you had enough?” I had. She told me that I had to call Vanguard. They wouldn’t take me unless I went for a Rule 25 alcohol assessment and agreed to inpatient CD treatment as well. I went in on September 18, 2002, and have not gambled or drunk since.

Of course it was a long road that took me to that fateful day. My mother took me to play Bingo at age 12. In fact, both of my parents were gamblers and alcoholics, so I learned early.

After a time, I began to play Bingo three to four times a week and knew I had a problem. I lied to a credit union to get money I couldn’t pay back, borrowed money from friends and couldn’t pay my final bills. I did this over and over.

When I wasn’t gambling, I was drinking. I went to outpatient treatment off and on for both my addictions for several years, but that never worked for me. I stayed

clean and sober for months at a time but relapsed. After winning a \$2,500 jackpot, the first big money I'd ever won, I spent every penny to continue gambling. This started an endless search for money that eventually led to the day I was ready to end my life.

It's been more than 10 years since I've been in a better place. I've been a keynote speaker at the Minnesota GA conference. I am the trustee of my area and represent some of the finest people I know. I talk about gambling issues and how they affect our area. This is something I could never have dreamed of. I started my own business in 2007 and it is thriving. I got remarried and have a wonderful relationship with my children.

I can't believe how different my life is now. It is so much better. I never want to go back to the way things were. I don't have to, as long as I choose not to gamble, one day at a time.

Looking back on it, I guess it's not surprising that I developed a gambling problem.

I had a risk-taking personality and was exposed to various forms of gambling as early as age 9. My father was a bookie and sold football tickets. I'd spend my allowance and purchase tickets from him.

I became insanely addicted to gambling in my early twenties. I was working at a charity bingo hall when casinos opened in the '80s, and a lot of us would go to the casinos after work.

One night in the mid '90s, I had a dream that I put \$20 in a slot machine and won a huge jackpot. Shortly after that dream, I went to the casino, put \$20 in the slot machine and won \$15,000.

Compared to blackjack, it was a bigger, faster win, and I liked that I could isolate myself more. I kept chasing that feeling of the huge win.

Although I had a business that was financially successful, I still ran out of money. After selling stolen goods to cover losses, I ended up in prison.

After prison, I was released to a halfway house, where I stayed for six weeks before I had to move out. I had nothing but a car. I'd lost a beautiful home, a great marriage, and had never previously wanted for anything. But I was angry, and the first thing I did was drive straight to Mystic Lake Casino.

Less than nine months later, I was back in prison for violating probation by gambling at casinos. I was sentenced to 15 months in a higher security prison. But this time it was different.

Something clicked the day I was shackled off to jail and I had a spiritual shift. I decided that I would never gamble again, no matter what.

My life is so much better and calmer now. I meditate every morning and am very involved in GA meetings. I listen to others and share my story whenever I can. I am available to my family and my friends, some of whom have gone through recovery with me.

It means a lot to me to be very honest about this disease and what it's done to me. A lot of things about gambling made me feel like the scum of the earth. It was much worse than anything I felt as an alcohol and drug addict.

I focus on my recovery at every opportunity. I hope to make a difference to others who similarly never expected they would go through the horrible things we do as gambling addicts.

These are just a few stories of gambling addiction. While each situation and personal struggle is different, the common thread is that treatment works and recovery is possible. In Minnesota, gambling treatment is provided at no cost by state-certified counselors.

March is Problem Gambling Awareness Month. If you or someone you know may have a gambling problem, please contact the Minnesota Problem Gambling Helpline at (800) 333-4673 or visit NorthstarProblemGambling.org. Gambling treatment works and is available at no cost for individuals and families in Minnesota.