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WHAT YOUR PATIENT IS THINKING

Offer me hope to overcome gambling harm

Sue Acton describes the harms she experienced from gambling, and how she was able to get help

Sue Acton

I developed a severe gambling problem in 2006. Before then, it was just the odd lottery ticket or a small bet on a horse at a corporate awayday. As a child, I can remember begging my mum for one more tombola ticket at the church fete or another handful of pennies at the amusement arcade on family holidays, so perhaps the signs were there.

My gambling went from nought to a hundred almost overnight. Within a couple of weeks, I was staying up all night playing slot machines online. I was losing thousands of pounds. I was neglecting my work and my wellbeing and lying to friends and family. Desperate, I remember telling myself that if I could just win back what I'd lost I would stop. I did win back what I'd lost. But I didn't stop, and it just kept getting worse.

The next five to 10 years were a blur. I lived a kind of double life. Even now I can't explain it. I was in my early thirties and lucky in so many ways. I was a senior manager within financial services, I had an Oxbridge education, I had just bought and moved into a new home, and I had a wonderful family and circle of friends. Instead of going on holiday during annual leave, I had week long gambling binges where I wouldn't wash or get dressed. I would eat junk food, chain smoke, and fall asleep at my computer while gambling. There were periods of abstinence, and periods of deluding myself that I could gamble in a controlled way. At the same time, I would put on a suit and make up, go to work, and be corporate Sue. I supported my mum when my dad was diagnosed with dementia. I spent time with family and friends. I did lots of "normal life" stuff.

Looking for help and hope

As I came out of yet another gambling binge and surveyed the financial and emotional damage, including letting my young nieces down, I realised I needed help. I went to a Gamblers Anonymous meeting but as a woman I was mistaken by the all-male group as being there to support someone else, so I didn't go back. I called GamCare's helpline, which was a very positive experience because for the first time I felt heard and understood. I also tried therapy, but the counsellor looked so shocked when I disclosed my financial losses that I felt I couldn't trust her to help me.

In what felt like a last resort, I went to see my GP. To this day I still don't know whether he was blindsided, disapproving, didn't understand, or was just having a bad day. Back then neither the Primary Care Gambling Service nor the NHS Gambling Clinics existed. My doctor muttered a few platitudes, printed

off details for Gamblers Anonymous, and then let me know the appointment was over by opening the consulting room door. I remember standing outside the surgery sobbing. There was nowhere left to turn. Ashamed and appalled at what I'd done, I felt like it was all over for me, that there was no hope. What I needed most at that first appointment was to be taken seriously and to be offered hope. I didn't expect my GP to fix the problem, I just wanted to leave the surgery with a tiny glimpse of light at the end of the tunnel.

Finding hope

In the end, it was a combination of Gamblers Anonymous (a different meeting in a different town) and therapy from a counsellor trained in gambling harms together with peer support through a charitable organisation called Gordon Moody that helped me turn things around, as well as the support of family and friends when I eventually came clean.

I'm still dealing with the "legacy harms," or long term consequences, of gambling; recovery is a lifelong journey. I have money worries, housing issues (my home was eventually repossessed), health issues, and feelings of sadness and regret around lost opportunities and lost time with loved ones. But there are new and unexpected opportunities too: the chance to rebuild old relationships and forge new ones, and the joy of rediscovering a love of travel and being outdoors. And I have perhaps the most important thing: hope.

What you need to know

- Anyone can experience gambling harm (or can be harmed by another's gambling), so put aside preconceptions and ask about it. Your patient may have spent months if not years building up the courage to ask for help
- Remind patients that there is hope. It may not be easy or linear and it will almost certainly take time, but people can and do recover from the bleakest of gambling situations
- Offer choice. Everyone is different when it comes to treatment and support options, and it may take time to find the right solution for each person

Education in practice

- How can you create an environment where people feel able to share their concerns without fear of judgment?
- What support are you aware of locally and nationally to assist people seeking help with gambling?

- How can you empower and enable people to access self-referral and community based resources?

Additional information

- Gamblers Anonymous. <https://gamblersanonymous.org.uk>
- National Gambling Support Network. <https://www.gambleaware.org/tools-and-support/support-in-your-area/>
- Primary Care Gambling Service. <https://www.primarycaregamblingservice.co.uk>
- NHS. <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/addiction-support/gambling-addiction/>

Competing interests: Sue Acton is a trustee of StepChange, a charitable organisation that supports people experiencing problem debt. She has been a lay member of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence committee on gambling harms and is a member of the GambleAware Lived Experience Council. Sue has been employed by Betknowmore, and has also undertaken consultancy work for charities Gordon Moody, Money and Mental Health Policy Institute, and Money Advice Trust, as well as the Civil Service, Three Hands Insight, and the National Centre for Social Research.