



Improving the Odds

WOMEN GAMBLERS NEED THEIR OWN PROGRAMS

BY BARBARA D. JANUSZ

Looking down at the handcuffs biting into her wrists, Marilyn Lancelot panicked at the realization that her family had just witnessed her arrest.

In her memoir, *Gripped by Gambling*, Lancelot recalls peering through the police car window at her grandson and daughters. She thought about how much she loved them, but she also lamented that she “never allowed their birthdays or holidays to interfere” with her gambling.

Like many problem gamblers, Lancelot was unable to overcome her addiction until she hit rock bottom. Charged and convicted of defrauding her employer of over \$300,000, she was sentenced to a two-year term of imprisonment in 1990.

Upon her release, Lancelot joined Gamblers Anonymous, but she discovered that “G.A. was run by men who liked to tell war stories and brag about how much money they lost.” According to Lancelot, male problem gamblers ridiculed her and other female participants for playing the slots rather than placing bets in poker games or blackjack.

“From the get-go, I realized that this is no place for a woman, particularly if she came from an abusive relationship.”

Lancelot’s sentiments are echoed in a study conducted by University of Lethbridge researchers Noella Piquette and Erika Norman. In their 2013 article “An All-Female Problem Gambling Counseling Treatment: Perceptions of Effectiveness,” published in the *Journal of Groups in Addiction and Recovery*, Piquette and Norman concluded that women-only counselling can provide an environment that allows women to deal with the underlying factors that contribute to their gambling addictions.

Female gamblers, they note, report higher rates of childhood abuse and domestic violence compared to women in the general population. Many female gamblers have also experienced compulsive eating and compulsive sexual behaviour. Piquette and Norman found that it is not uncommon for women problem gamblers to experience gambling as a “hypnotic anaesthetic” that allows them to experience dissociative states, such as blackouts, trances and out-of-body experiences to escape their troubled lives. The numbing-out effect these women

experience causes them to become emotionally invested in gaming, which in turn reinforces their addictive, compulsive behaviour.

“When I played the slots, I was zoning out,” explains Lancelot, whose kids were doing drugs and fighting at the time.

“Nothing bothered me, nothing mattered,” she recalls. “I just wanted to run away from all this mess.”

Joyce, one of the participants in the Piquette and Norman study, also gambled to escape. In her experience, “There are things that women go through, and maybe men go through the same things, but we have the common ground of escaping [circumstances] which a man would not be escaping from.”

Researchers have found that women with a gambling addiction differ from men with gambling addictions not only in their personal histories but also in their age. In a 2002 study of young, middle-aged and older-adult treatment-seeking problem gamblers, Nancy M. Petry, a psychologist at the University of Connecticut Health Center, discovered that women’s problem gambling typically begins after the age of 55. By contrast, male problem gamblers report a lifelong history of gambling.

There are other differences. Researchers report that men tend to favour games such as poker and blackjack, while women gamblers tend to favour bingo, slot machines and video lottery terminals (VLTs).

Interestingly, the reinforcing pattern of unpredictable small wins associated with VLTs is known as telescoping and has resulted, according to researcher Suzanne Koch Echenrode with the California Department of Drug Programs, in participants becoming addicted after only one year, as opposed to an average of four years for other gamblers.

Another gendered difference researchers found is that many women problem gamblers were initially drawn to gaming by a desire to assert their independence. In the beginning, they enjoyed the strong social component of gambling. However, once they became addicted, gaming tended to be a way for women to cope, escape, reduce stress, self-soothe and distract themselves.

Problem gambling is on the rise. Canada has more than 70 casinos, 30,000 lottery ticket outlets and nearly 100,000 slot machines and VLTs. Provincial

governments, firmly dependent on gambling revenue, foster a culture of gambling. According to Statistics Canada, in 2008, out of 18.9 million Canadians who gambled, more than six percent, or 1.2 million, had a gambling problem.

Gamblers often experience extreme shame. Cases where they betrayed their loved ones, lied to them or perhaps stole money are at odds with the fact that women are socialized to be caregivers and to put others ahead of themselves. As a result, female problem gamblers' shame response only reinforces their compulsion to escape, through gaming, feelings of inadequacy and grief. Says Lancelot, "I lied to everyone."

**“The other women understood and shared ... the pull of multiple relationships, the caring for children, parents, of trying to do it all.”
—Noella Piquette**

The male-dominated culture of Gamblers Anonymous was an obstacle to Lancelot's rehabilitation. Determined to turn her life around, she advertised in the newspaper for participants for a women-only problem gambling group. It proved effective. Meeting at Lancelot's apartment, she and four other women shared their deepest secrets and fears. "We had issues we could not share with men in the GA room, disappointments about our roles as mothers and wives. We supported one another without judging or ridiculing, and over time gained confidence that we could beat our addiction."

"Gender-specific intervention," confirms Piquette, "seeks to address the isolation of women problem gamblers. Responsive treatment practices provide the social network that fell apart and might have contributed to the gambling addiction."

All of the participants in the Piquette and Norman study reported that the relationships they formed with the other women were validating, comfortable and safe.

"I can relate to some of the feelings, [and] I feel the other women in the group can relate to me," said another participant, Karen.

The sharing of their experiences in a trusting environment enables female problem gamblers to learn about their addictions and the triggers that lead to gambling.

"The other women understood and shared ... the pull of multiple relationships, the caring for children, and their parents, of trying to do it all," notes Piquette, "and the guilt of using family money in gambling ventures."

An Ontario needs assessment for female problem gamblers found that 59 percent of female problem gamblers believed that women-only groups would help them; 33 percent backed mixed-gender counselling. Cultural differences are another factor that can aid gambling addiction services. The Ontario Problem Gambling Helpline website advertises multilingual problem gambling services in Arabic, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Korean, Spanish, Greek, Farsi, Italian, Polish, Malay, Serbian, Mandarin, French and Finnish. Through the program, problem gamblers who aren't fluent in English can participate in a three-way telephone conversation with a counsellor and a translator.

For gamblers who reside outside of Ontario, however, a lack of translation and culturally appropriate services may be a barrier to seeking help. The recent fraud conviction in Edmonton of Carmelita Del Rosario highlights the need for better services to address problem gambling. Del Rosario was sentenced to a five-year prison term after convincing members of her community to hand over money for a scheme that supported her gambling addiction.

Many support the views of Del Rosario's lawyer, Darcy Depoe, who believes "governments need to shoulder some of the responsibility for problem gamblers." In Canada, few gambling services exist to meet the specific needs of women or cultural minorities.

Regardless of gender or cultural background, the fact remains that gambling is portrayed as entertainment when its actual aim, Depoe says, "is to extract as much money as possible from the gamblers. Statistically, you can't win, but Carmelita thought that she would make a big score."

With more than one in 20 gamblers developing addictions, the social costs of problem gambling are ultimately borne by society and taxpayers. Depoe maintains that governments are in a conflict of interest because of their reliance on gambling revenue to fund social programs.

With public gambling not slowing down, Piquette and Norman foresee a need for the development of gambling programs that take into account factors including ethnic background and sexual orientation as well as age and gender. ❁