

What I Lost By Gambling

With every trip to the grocery store, I'd purchase thirty dollars worth of lottery tickets.

-by Maxi Chambers

Based on recent statistics, **Americans spend more money—roughly \$500 billion a year—on legal gambling than they spend on groceries.** But what's even more shocking are the results of a recent survey by Yankelovich Partners and the Home Testing Institute: An alarming number of those gambling—55 percent—are women. Seduced by the allure of luxury casinos, the rush of winning "easy money," or the convenience of state-run lotteries, increasing numbers of women are getting hooked. The following recounts one woman's struggle with gambling—and the impact it made on her life. --*The Editors*

I pushed the last of my red chips toward the dealer and tried to smile. But as he slowly turned over the cards, I knew I'd lost the last of the ten thousand dollars I'd borrowed in desperation. "Better luck next time!" the dealer shouted, trying to cheer me up. I quickly turned so he wouldn't see the tears streaming down my face. I was thirty thousand dollars in debt, my twenty-year marriage was nearly destroyed, and my four children no longer trusted me. I'd hit rock bottom.

The casino's neon lights shined brightly in the midnight sky as I left to get into my car. I turned back for one final look at a building that represented what had become my obsession during the past three years. I finally realized what I'd become—a compulsive gambler. Three years ago, my faith and my family had been the most important things in my life. An elected city council member, successful owner of a hair-styling business, and activist who organized youth groups and volunteered at the local schools, I was well known for my boldness in proclaiming Christ. But I'd abandoned God's input in my life and pushed my husband and children aside so I could indulge in my addiction.

As I drove the fifty miles home, I wept uncontrollably. All the excuses I'd used to justify my habit seemed lame. There were no more people or banks to borrow from, no more words to use to manipulate my husband. I begged God to forgive me, to help me overcome a compulsion that had become more important to me than him.

My gambling addiction began with a simple game of bingo. I'd seen a building sign advertising it, so out of curiosity I went in and played. That first time, I won five hundred dollars. It seemed so effortless! Since my husband, David, and I had been having some financial problems, the money enabled me to pay some bills. When I told David about my winnings, he seemed equally happy, so I took his smile of approval as an okay to play again.

Even though I was a Christian, I didn't realize gambling was wrong. I'd never heard a sermon preached against it, other than a few words by a former minister who warned against "playing too much lottery." Since I viewed myself as a disciplined person, I didn't think I'd ever have a problem.

Over the course of a year, what began as a once-a-week activity developed into an every-night event. David, who worked long hours, didn't realize the extent of my involvement, but my children, ages eighteen, seventeen, fourteen, and twelve, did. To ease my guilt about spending so much time away from home, I'd vow not to go the next week. But all my promises to stay home were always forgotten.

If my guilt became too intense, I'd rationalize my behavior: *Don't I deserve a night away from the kids? Besides, if David didn't work so much, I probably wouldn't be doing this.*

As my playing time increased, so did my debt. At first, I asked David for money to gamble with, but soon he began to object. To get him to give me the money, I'd make him feel guilty about working so much. If that didn't work, I'd use the promise of sex or lash out in anger. Eventually, David handed over the money, a hundred here, two hundred there. Bills went unpaid—yet I gambled on.

David was ashamed and hurt by my behavior, so he withdrew almost completely from our home. This only intensified my loneliness, and our relationship deteriorated.

My debt grew, and so did my desperation. I started looking for other forms of gambling in the hopes of "hitting it big." I found an ad for a new place to gamble—a nearby Indian reservation where the winnings were supposedly bigger. With every trip to the grocery store, I'd purchase twenty or thirty dollars' worth of lottery tickets. At the bingo parlor, I'd not only play the regular games but spend hundreds of dollars on "pull-tabs." I even remember spending more than four hundred dollars for the chance to win two hundred fifty.

David became increasingly agitated about my habit, so I began borrowing money from friends and acquaintances, always providing them with a good reason why I needed the money. Due to my reputation, they lent it to me without question. But while they were congenial, David was not. Every evening that he came home before I went to bed was an evening filled with angry words, promises, and tears.

My sisters and parents stepped in to fill in the void in my children's lives. But while they were of great support, each of my children showed signs of emotional wounding. Our oldest child became withdrawn, our second son rebellious. Our two youngest children cried often and became severely depressed. Because I often gambled away the money intended for necessities, they went without new shoes, clothes, or even sometimes a warm meal. Instead, I delayed each purchase until the bitter end, hoping to win the money to buy whatever they needed.

Two years into my gambling, I began to feel suicidal. I cried constantly, seldom slept, and didn't know a single minute of mental peace. My doctor treated me with both tranquilizers for sleep and antidepressants.

Even though my life was a mess, I still maintained that persona of a successful, ethical person. Local merchants who ordinarily wouldn't cash checks did so for me because of my reputation. But as the checks became larger and my losses greater, I was forced to find other ways to finance my habit. I started funneling the money I needed from my hair-styling business, and since its checking account was only in my name, I could manipulate money to cover my spending without David's knowledge.

As my sisters and family became increasingly aware of my gambling, they confronted me. "You have a problem. Please get some help," they pleaded.

"I'll go with you to Gamblers Anonymous," said another. "I'll drive."

But while I knew my family was right, not only did I not want to stop gambling, I feared the consequences of stopping—getting caught and facing my creditors.

During the last few months of my gambling, a riverboat casino came to a town near us. The casino's bright lights and music appealed to me, and I quickly became a regular. In fact, I was one of the first to obtain VIP status.

It's easy to lose hundreds, thousands, or even more in a casino. Whether you're playing blackjack, slots, craps, or roulette, it's all designed to make the casino rich—and the player poor. The more I went, the more my debts mounted. Before long, I thought of suicide constantly.

By this time, I had more than two thousand dollars in outstanding checks. I knew that if I didn't find some money fast, I could go to jail. David refused to give me any more money; he had

already borrowed from everyone we knew. We had signed for two loans from different banks, and he had on at least two occasions sought out money from professional loan sharks. I didn't dare ask him for anything.

Instead, I called a local savings and loan company and convinced them to allow me to apply for ten thousand dollars over the phone and then take the loan papers to David to sign. David never saw those papers—I forged his name and used the money to cover what I'd already spent, most of which I lost over a two-week time period at the casino.

As I drove home after losing the last of the ten thousand dollars, I cried out to God, knowing I had to do something. I could either give in to suicide or choose life. I chose to stop my behavior. I knew this decision meant having to confess some things I didn't want to. And it meant facing the full extent of my family's frustration and anger. But by the time I reached my house, I felt the first inklings of peace since my addiction had begun.

The next morning, I cleaned the house of anything that spoke of gambling. I also sat down with my checkbook, totaled my damages, and approached my extended family with one final request for a loan. They gave me a small amount of money that gave me some breathing room for a few more days.

The following day, I began to shake from withdrawal. Even the thought of gambling made me anxious. I decided I needed to keep busy, so I called my pastor and asked to see him. I confessed what was happening and asked if I could do some volunteer work for the church.

That same evening, I called my children together and asked for their forgiveness. I reassured them that with God's help, I could overcome my compulsive behavior. It was a wonderful time of sharing, but I knew my actions would have to prove my words.

Almost two weeks passed, and I knew I still had one more major thing to do: I had to tell David about the ten thousand dollars. I asked him to spend the morning with me instead of going to work. It was the first time in our marriage he'd ever stayed home even half a day from his job. "David," I said. "I have something to tell you."

I could see his body tense. I began to cry as I said, "You have every reason to divorce me. No one would have put up with what you've endured over the last three years. There are no excuses for what I'm about to tell you." Then I told him about the ten thousand dollars and the forgery. When I finished, David wrapped his arms around me and hugged me tightly. This time I didn't cry alone. David and I wept for the pain we both had endured, for our children, for turning to our own lusts for money and self-satisfaction instead of to God.

God didn't instantly deliver me from my urge to gamble. For weeks, gambling constantly filled my thoughts. I dreamed about playing bingo or standing in a casino. Even to this day, I awake in a cold sweat from these nightmares. But the dreams come less often now, and I'm thankful I'm no longer on any drugs for depression or sleeplessness.

God didn't send thousands of dollars at my doorstep to solve my financial crisis, nor did he wipe away the balance due my creditors. But what he did do was send some unexpected work my way and give me the assurance that everything would work together for good. Although God forgives, we reap what we sow—and I've had to suffer the repercussions of my misconduct. While David tried his best to pretend my gambling hadn't affected our marriage, over the next few months, it became evident it had. In February of 1996, we divorced.

Feeling isolated and abandoned, I had a short relapse before joining Gamblers Anonymous, where I found the support to help me through until I could stand on my own. My subsequent recovery has been a slow, painstaking process and enough tears have flowed to fill a thousand buckets. But all my sorrow and regret could not put my marriage or my family together again.

My three sons have chosen to live with their father and my daughter and I live in the same area a short distance away, so we're able to see each other every day. Although God has forgiven me, I still pay dearly for what I've done. My home, my children, my life will never be the same. But I'm learning what caused my addiction and how to resist the temptation that's constantly around me. And my relationship with God is growing. Every day that I resist temptation, I feel a little stronger. I no longer avoid church out of fear of feeling guilty, nor do I refuse to pick up the Word for fear I'll read something too convicting. Now God's Word comforts me and confirms my hope that through Christ, I can overcome.

I went out for breakfast recently and walked by a newsstand. I glanced at the headline of the newspaper: "Gambling Blamed for Young Mother's Suicide."

I bought the paper and read it as I waited for the waitress to take my order. I couldn't help but cry as I read the details of this young woman's story. It was almost identical to mine—except that rather than face the fact her house was being taken away because she had gambled away the mortgage money, this mother of two had shot herself.

I wept as I thought of the hopelessness this young woman must have felt. I knew her desperation and pain, the intense sorrow and shame she'd felt. Gambling—and the potential it carries to destroy lives—is all too familiar to me. But there is hope for those who seek it. And as my children and I continue the healing process, I know God can restore what was destroyed as I begin each day recognizing my total dependence on him.

-The names of the author and her ex-husband have been changed.

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