In Their Own Words

Problem Gamblers Speak Their Minds
Most publications about problem gambling are written for the family members or loved ones of the problem gambler. Some are written for the therapists who treat these issues. This little booklet is different—it’s aimed squarely at the person who feels that they might have a gambling problem. It’s written from the point of view of other people who have experienced this same addiction.

If you are like many others who struggle with gambling, you probably want to stop reading this right now. We can ask only that you keep on reading. Who are “we?” We are people who, despite all of our efforts, have found ourselves out of control when it comes to gambling.

The purpose of this publication is to help you realize that gambling addiction is treatable, and that there is life after treatment. There is help available, and hope can be restored. You are not alone.

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“The biggest barrier was myself.”

I remember when I first became aware, at least in the back of my mind, that the way I was gambling was a problem. I felt guilt – spending too much time at the casino, gambling with money I needed for other things.

I had an idea that I was in trouble. I may have pushed it out of my mind, but I knew it just the same. I just didn’t want others to know it. The reality is my gambling was changing who I was, and even if others didn’t know about my gambling, they knew something was wrong.

It took some time for me to come to the realization that gambling was causing a problem in my life. For a long time...
I looked at gambling as a possible solution to the issues I was facing in my life.

I kept telling myself, “It’ll be okay….I can turn it around on my own”……even though the reality was gambling continued to make matters worse. Even if I would win, it was never enough.

Seeking help from others to address my gambling was the beginning of a new and better life, toward freedom from gambling addiction, the journey back to who I truly am and the life my loved ones were meant to have.

“I just didn’t like myself. I couldn’t even look in the mirror.”
I felt this way a lot. I carried around feelings of guilt and shame brought on by my gambling. I knew I had let others down. Sometimes I found it hard to look in the eyes of others. I isolated myself from others. I thought if they knew what was really going on with me they would not love or accept me. I avoided looking in the mirror because I knew I was not going to like what I saw.

“I thought I was entitled to gamble any way I wanted to.”
I had gone through some very difficult circumstances in my life. I felt like gambling was a way to relieve myself from the stress of these problems. In hindsight I noticed that I, like others I’ve met, gambled more after experiencing a major life event - the death of a loved one, difficult divorce or other trauma related experiences.

As part of my value system I was taught to put others first, especially my loved ones. I embraced being part of my family and my community. As my gambling increased I found myself acting contrary to this value I held and I began experiencing an inner conflict. I was gambling despite my internal battle and I tried to tell myself that I was not hurting anyone but myself. As I was getting help for my gambling problem I was able to see the negative impact my whole family was experiencing.

“When I gambled, I wanted everything for nothing.”
I took pride in working to make my life better. It gave me a sense of accomplishment to do well at a job, or to make our home a better place. But as my gambling progressed I began to believe that I could use gambling as a “shortcut to the good life.” I saw gambling as an easy way to make money. Looking back, that “shortcut” shift in thinking was an early sign of my gambling becoming a problem. Eventually, as my gambling losses mounted, I saw gambling as the only way to dig myself out of the deep financial hole I had dug.

“I had a lot of pride and I thought asking for help was a sign of weakness.”
I thought asking for help was a sign of weakness. I thought I should be able to think my way out of any troubles or problems. When things were not going my way when I was gambling I would tell myself I was on a temporary losing streak. I had too much pride to admit I needed help. I would tell myself that I just needed this one win and everything would be okay. I got myself into this and I could get myself out.

It never occurred to me during my active gambling that the ability to admit that I needed help could be strength… a demonstration of emotional security and intelligence.

I now know that most people at some point in their life need help with one life issue or another. After I asked for help, I found that I was not dealing with a weakness, but rather an illness and that asking for help was my first step in getting into recovery.
Learning to ask for help wasn’t easy for me, and reflecting back it was a relief compared to trying to battle my gambling problem alone. Once I did this I found that there are others like me – most of which who are extraordinarily courageous and competent.

“I didn’t know gambling could be an addiction.”
I thought, there is no way gambling can have the same effect on my body that substances do for people that are addicted to alcohol or drugs. After all, I was not putting anything into my body. I had also been in recovery from an alcohol addiction for five years. I came to learn that like alcohol and drugs, gambling has a similar effect on the brain.

I had an idea of what a problem gambler looked like, and it wasn’t someone who looked like me. I discovered that anyone can be suffering from a gambling disorder. It can be, and is, someone just like me. I didn’t know that once I addressed my alcoholism, gambling could take its place.

“I know that gambling addiction is real. But what I’m doing is not addiction.”
I had a whole list of reasons why...“it doesn’t apply to me.” I now understand that even people who know that gambling addiction exists can convince themselves that their own problem is not really an addiction. That was what I told myself. I believed that gambling was the solution for my problems and a way for me to relieve stress in my life. I told myself that as soon as the stresses go away I will quit gambling. The reality was my life became so stressful because of my gambling that I could not see a way out. There was no shortage of ways I tried to justify my gambling and telling myself it was not a big deal.

There seems to be truth to the adage I heard that addiction is the only disease that keeps trying to convince you that you don’t have it.

“I felt alone in the world. I had nowhere to turn.”
Problem gambling is often hidden and thrives on secrets. I believed no one could understand me and no one else was like me. I felt alone in my experiences with gambling and became hopeless. At times, I thought about taking my life. I felt so terrible about what had taken place due to my gambling that I felt my family would be better off without me. Thankfully, I came to realize that this is not true.

Education is a great enemy of addiction. Through education I found out I was not alone. I was surprised at how many problem gamblers just like me lacked education on the disease of addictive gambling. I now know that I am a good person with a bad disease.

Today, I am so grateful that I am alive. I can turn to my peers in recovery for hope and give hope to others. I am so grateful that my family, even though they were angry at times, is beginning to heal and get the support they need and deserve.

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“There is always hope, and in recovery, I have found endless amounts of hope.”
Hope is a belief that things can and will get better. Hope provided the motivation for my recovery; it gave me the strength to seek help and allow me to envision a life in recovery. What started out as a small tenuous thread of hope at the beginning of recovery blossomed into something much bigger as I move forward. When I met other people in recovery for their gambling addiction, I saw the wonderful things that happened for others who turned their hopes and dreams into a new reality. I realized if they can do it, so can I.

“I now know that I have to put my recovery first. I had to find out that I was truly worth it.”
It took me a while to realize that my gambling was not a financial problem, a problem with stress, children, bosses, or a relationship problem. I know now that my gambling contributed to these problems and it was not the solution I had told myself it would be. One of the things I heard in treatment that helped me was “Come for your wife – stay for your life!” I started to believe that I deserved recovery and a chance to live. I began to have hope. I came to realize I needed to do this for me, and I was worthy.

“I didn’t get here over night, and I’m not going to fix everything overnight.”
Problem gambling, like most other addictions, can take a long time to develop, getting slowly but progressively worse. By the time many people seek help, the problems—with relationships, with finances—can seem so big and so overwhelming that there doesn’t appear to be any way out. But patience is not only a virtue; it’s a requirement for recovery. I realized progress happens one day at a time. I learned to have patience with myself and patience in

Now, what do these same people say about how their lives have changed once they sought help and began a program of recovery?

“I found out I wasn’t alone.”
If you have a gambling problem you may feel you are all alone. You may feel that you are the only person in the world with this problem, and that there is no point discussing how you feel with anyone else, because they won’t be able to understand or relate. It’s not unusual to think you are totally alone – I know I did. The great relief in seeking help for a gambling problem is that you quickly realize you are not alone. In fact, you become part of a caring, supportive community that understands where you have been and what you are going through. That is where I am today, a part of this community where I am respected and cared for.
my addiction, but my past does not have to define who I am today. I am ok in my own skin now, and I have not felt that way in a long time.

“I wish I wouldn’t have waited so long… that I would’ve asked for help sooner.”

I know I procrastinated reaching out for help for years. During that time, my troubles increased. Today, I look back at the mental and emotional anguish I went through. As time went on, my relationships with others worsened. I went deeper in debt, and I also ended up with bigger financial and legal problems. Putting off asking for help just allowed me to dig deeper holes. My advice to anyone thinking they may have a problem with gambling is to reach out now and ask for help. It takes courage but is the best thing I ever did for myself and the people around me that I love.

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What is problem gambling or a gambling disorder?

Problem gambling or a gambling disorder is defined as “persistent and recurrent gambling behavior that disrupts personal, family, or vocational pursuits.” People with a gambling disorder can’t seem to quit even though they want to – and even when they’re experiencing significant negative consequences. According to the National Council on Problem Gambling, three to four percent of the adult population in the U.S. struggle with varying degrees of problem gambling.

Problem gambling or a gambling disorder is an addictive disorder that can destroy lives, threaten family relationships, and cause financial devastation. It’s not always well understood and is often kept hidden as a family secret. Thousands of individuals and families struggle with it daily.

I used gambling to numb myself and for a total escape. I found myself gambling when I was bored, looking for excitement and a way to cope with life’s problems. What started as social recreation ended up causing problems in all areas of my life. I found a program of recovery is about discovering – or reaffirming – the good things about myself and putting behind me what’s happened in the past. I take full responsibility for the hurt and pain I caused others in my past. The journey was not easy, but it was worth it.

“I discovered that recovery is all about accepting me for who I am, warts and all.”

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A gambling addiction, like an addiction to alcohol and drugs, is a very real disease. A professional evaluation or assessment is needed to make a formal diagnosis of the addiction.

**Possible Signs of Gambling Addiction**

Below are some of the more common signs that gambling may be a problem in your life. You might have a problem with gambling if you are experiencing some of these warning signs.

- Spending more time gambling than you had planned.
- Spending more money than you had planned.
- Relying on others for financial assistance when you make enough money to meet your financial obligations.
- Having an expectation of winning or feeling you need to win.
- Money used for gambling making it difficult to meet other financial obligations.
- Living beyond your means.
- Using credit cards for gambling.
- Increasing drug/alcohol use to relieve gambling stress over losses.
- Difficulty concentrating at work and maybe having more thoughts about gambling.
- Spending less time with family and friends and more time isolating or gambling.
- Changing moods or behaviors.
- Spending time thinking about gambling and thoughts centered on gambling consequences.
- Underestimating losses and over reporting wins.
- Being secretive about how much is being spent on gambling.

**The Brief Biosocial Gambling Screen (BBGS)** To address the need for a quick, evidence-based screen for gambling disorders, researchers from the Division on Addiction, Cambridge Health Alliance, a teaching affiliate of Harvard Medical School, analyzed the largest national survey. They included questions about gambling behaviors searching for the most popular responses by people with gambling problems. Based on this data, the researchers developed the Brief Biosocial Gambling Screen (BBGS), a three-question brief screening instrument that helps a person decide whether to seek a more formal evaluation of their gambling behavior.

Answer these questions to indicate how you feel right now about your gambling.

1.) During the past 12 months, have you become restless irritable or anxious when trying to stop/cut down on gambling? ____ Yes _____ No
2.) During the past 12 months, have you tried to keep your family or friends from knowing how much you gambled? ____ Yes _____ No
3.) During the past 12 months, did you have financial trouble as a result of your gambling that you had to get help with living expenses from family, friends or welfare? ____ Yes _____ No

Answering “yes” to any one of the previous questions indicates that, currently, you are at increased risk for developing or experiencing gambling-related problems. You are not alone. About one percent of adults and five percent of college students report that they have experienced a severe gambling-related problem during their lifetime. Gambling-related problems can take a variety of forms, including money problems, relationship problems, health problems, school problems, and more.

**Treatment is Effective for Problem Gambling**

There is treatment for gambling addiction, and recovery is possible. There is help and there is hope. Treatment may range from one-to-one counseling, to group outpatient therapy, to residential gambling treatment. People can, and
do, recover from problem gambling to live the life they truly deserve.

*Project Turnabout’s Vanguard Center for Gambling Recovery* is a nationally recognized inpatient/residential treatment program. It is located in Granite Falls, Minnesota, and serves men and women 18 years and older who are experiencing problems related to gambling. Vanguard is the only inpatient/residential treatment program for problem gambling in Minnesota, and one of only a few in the nation. In addition to addressing the needs of problem gamblers, Vanguard offers a family program for those that have loved on participating in the treatment program. Please feel free to call Vanguard for assistance in locating resources in Minnesota and around the nation.

800.862.1453  
www.projectturnabout.org

Minnesota has funding for problem gambling treatment. Individuals and families in Minnesota can access these services at no charge based on need. This provision recognizes that problem gamblers have often depleted many of their financial resources. Therefore, lack of money for treatment should not be an obstacle if a resident of Minnesota needs help.

If you are outside Minnesota, most states offer professional resources, and there is a listing by state on the website of the National Council on Problem Gambling.

*National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG)* is the national advocate for programs and services to assist problem gamblers and their families. NCPG’s mission is to increase public awareness of problem gambling and ensure the widespread availability of treatment for problem gamblers and their families, and to encourage research and programs for prevention and education.

800.522.4700  
www.ncpgambling.org.

*Northstar Problem Gambling Alliance (NPGA)* is Minnesota’s affiliate to the NCPG. NPGA is a nonprofit (501c3) agency whose mission is to help Minnesotans deal with the negative effects of gambling through awareness and education activities, and advocacy for treatment. Northstar provides education resources through its website and is available on Facebook and Twitter.

612.424.8595  
www.northstarproblemgambling.org

*Gamblers Anonymous (G.A.)* is a twelve-step support program for problem gamblers who share their experience, strength, and hope with one another to help solve their common problem and recover from a gambling problem. The only requirement for membership is the desire to stop gambling. GA meetings are available throughout the U.S. and internationally. Their website offers a meeting locator and a hotline number by state. These hotlines provide a person in crisis the opportunity to speak with someone immediately.

www.gamblersanonymous.org

*Gam-Anon* is an international self-help program for families and friends of problem gamblers. Meetings take place throughout the U.S. and offer a meeting locator by state, as well as a list of international meetings.

www.gam-anon.org
The Vanguard Center for Gambling Recovery is located on Project Turnabout’s main campus in Granite Falls, Minnesota.

For more information or additional copies call

1-800-862-1453

or visit our website

www.projectturnabout.org