

One New Yorker's Account of Her Years of Compulsive Gambling

I never realized that I would one day become a victim of a horrible, progressive illness called compulsive gambling. I have always prided myself on the fact that I was able to take care of myself and my daughter. I had provided a home and taken my career to a point that we were very comfortable. My daughter has asked me, "How did you afford my every whim?"

It all started innocently enough. When I sent my daughter to summer camp, I would plan trips to Atlantic City with friends two or three times a year. I could drive or take a bus and stay at a friend's house or a cheap hotel. (I can remember one time that a friend and I shared a cup of coffee and stale donut because that was all the change we had left!) Then my daughter graduated, and the empty-nest syndrome hit me. My mom and I would go to local church bingos. We would go two or three times a week, and it gave us something to look forward to. Next, we were invited to go to a high stakes bingo hall at Oneida Indian Bingo. There were six of us who went including my daughter and mom on the first night. My daughter, who was 21 by this time, won \$1,000 on one of the first games. That was a lot of \$20 bills to her! We look back now, and she has often said that she wishes she had never won it.

There were machines in a room next to the bingo hall, and we walked by them for maybe six months before someone showed us how to use them. The first week I won three jackpots--\$7,500—and a jackpot every other week for months. Then Turning Stone opened up. I went three or four times a week, and I did not win at the machines or bingo for two years. During this time, I was asked to join a card game—Pitch. (Our local taverns have card leagues.) I mention this because I would play cards and be all hyped up and then leave for Turning Stone at 11:30 at night—didn't matter what the weather was—and many times there was a snow storm going on. The switch for my compulsion had been flipped, and there was no turning back.

At the end, I had not won at bingo for four years even though I continued going and would play the machines in between bingo games. By then, I had sold my part of our family cottage to my sister, had taken out a Home Equity Loan, and had started using my two life insurance policies.

In the twenty years of my gambling, my home was foreclosed, I went through three bankruptcies (both personal and business), I lost my business leaving five employees without employment, I had a heart attack at the casino, and I was convicted for taking out fraudulent loans. I would like to tell you about the heart attack at the casino, because I found out that my case is not uncommon. As I entered the casino on that particular day, I remember sitting down for a few minutes and later waking up next to a pillar in front of Turning Stone. I walked inside and the same thing happened. A cleaning man found me and asked if I needed help. Fortunately, he called security, who assured me that they would bring my car to me after an ambulance would take me to the hospital.

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I was in intensive care for two days and then transferred to another hospital that specializes in heart care. I was in cardiac care for about a week. I then stayed with my mom for two weeks before going home. I was home two days before I was back at Turning Stone. By the way, while I was at the first hospital, two other women were brought in from the casino with heart symptoms. It appeared that this is a regular event at that hospital.

Throughout all of these events, nothing made a difference to me, and none of these things made me want to stop gambling. I worked three jobs and yet had to ask my mother for help to cover my expenses. My daughter had a very serious illness and operation, and I was able to quit for the 4 ½ months she was in intensive care, hospital, and rehab. But when the psychiatrist said that she would never be any better than she was that day when she did not know me, I called into work and drove right to the casino. I needed to be around the mindlessness of pushing that button and return to my old friend—and enemy!—gambling. (Thank God my daughter is doing wonderful now, and the doctor was wrong!) After that, I myself injured my arm at work. After physical therapy and operations, I was never able to return to work.

I don't know how something that seems so harmless—and is passed off as entertainment—could affect negatively so many parts of my life.....and the lives of countless others. I have been given a gift. I no longer gamble. (I wasn't even tempted when after a month of not gambling I received a phone call from—of all places Turning Stone—the casino I had done most of my gambling in! They wanted me to know that they noticed I had not been there in over a month, and they asked if they had offended me in any way.) I now have all the friends that I had turned my back on, and I have become responsible for my actions. I now live in a rent-controlled apartment and take care of my 91-year-old mother 24/7. I look forward to the day each month when the food stamp money goes on my card. My bills are all paid except for the fraudulent loans that I will be making regular payments on for the rest of my life. I am a hard-working woman who has worked all her life, and because of my compulsion, I am reduced to living humbly for the rest of my life. I now try to "pay it forward" to others who have the same affliction.

I listen to the news, and I know they want to place nine more casinos in New York State. As a compulsive gambler, all I can say is, "Just shoot me!" Every day, I am farther away from pushing that button; and now it is possible that a casino would be even closer to where I live. I know what it takes to resist temptation. There has got to be other, better ways for our State to survive, and I don't feel it should be at the expense of the residents that live here. It may not affect the millionaires in our State, but it will affect the people who are just getting by. We have to take a stand somewhere, and I think now is the time to do that.

**-- Anonymous, Central New York Area
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