

CONNECTICUT CONNECTIONS

October 1999

Executive Director's Report

The link between compulsive gambling and suicide has been in the forefront of my attention since participating last June in NBC's DATELINE program, *Out of the Money*, which focused on the impact on one family of a father's compulsive gambling and his death by suicide in the presence of one of his sons. Our 1998 Helpline statistics (below) focuses awareness on the potential for suicide as a consequence of compulsive gambling as more than three out of four callers attributed depression and almost one out of four callers attributed thoughts of suicide to problem gambling. All this brought my thoughts back to four years ago when I received a personal note from Jim (pseudonym) written to me just before or during the process of his death by suicide. Jim had been a board member of our council in its earlier days. In more recent years, I only had occasional contact with him. The last time I saw Jim was when I invited him to share his compulsive gambling history and recovery process at a professional training. Naturally, receiving Jim's note was a personally moving experience and cause for much reflection about Jim's life and the process of recovery in general.

In the Spring, 1985 issue of the CCPG Newsletter, we featured Jim's story of a recovering compulsive gambler. In Jim's final note to me, he encouraged me to again use his story in an educational way: "If you still have a Newsletter, I have a final contribution to society." We are devoting this newsletter in large part to reprinting Jim's 1985 offering (pages 2-3) and an excerpt from his farewell message. Losing Jim at age 49 was tragic. Recovering compulsive gamblers and their families as well as those of us who treat compulsive gamblers know well the very serious risk of suicide attempts and completed suicides for compulsive gamblers. Clinical studies of compulsive gamblers in treatment and in Gamblers Anonymous as well as Helpline statistics support this concern. As recovering gamblers know all too well, they are one bet away from returning to all of the problems that out of control gambling brought in the past and the possibility of greater devastation . . . as in the case of Jim. It was Jim's hope his story could somehow help other struggling compulsive gamblers to share their pain and feelings of helplessness and to reach out for support.

The Story of a Compulsive Gambler

To most people, gambling is a harmless pastime—an occasional lottery ticket or a friendly wager on a Sunday football game. But, for me, gambling is a disease that nearly crippled my career, destroyed my marriage and drove me to the brink of suicide. I have found that I must avoid my next wager as surely as an alcoholic must avoid his next drink. My name is Jim and I am a compulsive gambler.

Born and raised in the Hartford area, I was the younger of two boys in a somewhat troubled middle class family. My brother seemed to be able to cope with my parents' quarreling, but I spent a great deal of my early childhood feeling frightened, confused and neglected.

At six or seven, my father gave me my first allowance. One day, at the local candy store, a gumball machine caught my eye. For a penny, I got to shoot at the ducks, and if I knocked one down, I was rewarded with a few extra gumballs. As the ducks fell, a rare feeling of accomplishment swept over me. My problems and fears seemed to diminish as my entire allowance was promptly deposited. The gum was not important, but the game was so exciting that I felt drawn to it like a moth to a flame. Discarded deposit bottles brought a two-cent return, and I found many along the roadsides, but never enough to feed the machine. I resorted to stealing bottles from neighbors and was caught. Depression set in as my parents grounded me from the candy store. The next few agonizing days were spent vomiting and shaking.

At nine, I spent my free time at the local golf course finding and selling golf balls. I earned enough to buy a golf club and learned how to play by sneaking on to the course and practicing. I met another kid and soon we practiced together. It seemed more interesting if we played for a nickel a hole, which soon increased to higher stakes. By the end of that summer, I had won enough to buy my first set of clubs. I made it through the winter by learning how to play cards and my winnings strengthened my belief that gambling was a way to get what I wanted.

School was always boring and when I entered high school, competition with other students was terrifying. I escaped to the golf course, where my bankroll grew; reasoning that I would become a millionaire by the time my friends finished college. I gambled with older people and rarely socialized with those who were my own age. At sixteen, I was introduced to the racetrack and, as luck would have it, I picked some winners. With my newly found skill, I calculated that I could easily win a week's pay simply by increasing my bets. I felt secure and comfortable having finally found a way to deal with life's pressures.

After struggling through high school, I enrolled in a local college. My classes were planned so they did not conflict with gambling time, and my life revolved around weekly trips to the track. In my sophomore year, I made a big win at the dog races and reevaluated my situation. It seemed silly to let my education interfere with success through gambling; I dropped out of school and spent the rest of the year making daily trips to the track. My luck betrayed me, and I ran up against a "bad streak." Figuring that it couldn't last, I doubled my bets! Panic took over when the overdue winners eluded me and the cash supply dwindled. When the money ran out, I experienced a mysterious feeling of relief.

Broke and unemployed, a sales job seemed inviting as it offered free time for gambling. Work would be a temporary solution until I could get back on my feet. The job included some evening work, but I avoided it by being skillful enough to exceed my sales quota during the day. Every evening I rewarded myself with trips to the Massachusetts or Rhode Island tracks. Each night I picked up my betting crew for the long ride and sped off to the races. The passengers joked that they used up all their luck just reaching the track alive. To finance my constant losses, I worked harder on my job to earn larger commissions.

Sensing that something was wrong with my life, I reasoned that my problem was caused by being single. At twenty-five, I married my secretary and soon had a son. My gambling was out of control and I fantasized that my wife would slow me down. She tried, but became increasingly resentful when my wagers escalated and I accused her of nagging, while insisting to her (and myself) that I could stop

gambling any time I wanted to. Since I needed more money, I accepted a management position with my company. To most people, my life appeared to be going smoothly. I took pride in the way things "looked" but I felt empty and alone. Feeling burdened with responsibility, I left my management position because it took too much time. I avoided my family whenever possible, but felt guilty that I was missing my son grow up and frightened that my marriage was falling apart.

Legalized gambling came to Connecticut and the dog track, off-track betting and Jai Alai allowed me to be "in action" much more often. I felt trapped and hopeless, but denied these feelings and continued dreaming of the big hit. When the hits came, they weren't big enough and were always followed by periods of greater losses. I could not get off the merry-go-round and contemplated suicide.

One day, the phone number of Gamblers Anonymous seemed to miraculously appear on an O.T.B. Program. I made a note of it in case any of my sick friends might need it. Several weeks later, an old gambling buddy showed up. He begged for money and spoke of bookmakers threatening his life. Quickly I offered to take him to a Gamblers Anonymous meeting. After entering the GA room I relaxed with an immediate feeling of acceptance. I no longer felt alone. Member after member spoke of losing families, bad checks, and even imprisonment. It was clear where gambling was leading me. Several meetings later my friend borrowed money from a relative and stopped coming. I admitted I was there for myself and decided to try what seemed to be working so well for the others. During the next few years, I assumed responsibilities within GA and slowly began to feel better about myself.

My deteriorated marriage proved to be beyond salvation, and came to an end. Feeling guilty and shattered, I became too frightened to make most decisions. While the support I received in GA helped me to not return to gambling, I felt I needed professional help and turned to the Bridgeport Compulsive Gambling Treatment Program. I received the help I needed from caring professionals who understood my gambling background and the way I thought and felt.

Today, I am in the process of rebuilding my life. I have become involved in community affairs, established a business and just recently remarried. My son grew up quite resentful, and unfortunately chooses not to see me, but I have found some comfort doing volunteer work with a local youth group. Gamblers Anonymous remains a large part of my life, and attending meetings, and sharing my experiences with others helps me to abstain from gambling. Although I see myself as being one bet away from being back on the merry-go-round, I now face each day with renewed hope and interest and am continuing to discover how to live a happy and purposeful life.

Spring, 1985

A Letter From a Dying Compulsive Gambler

"... I needed more help than I was willing to admit. Now the need to gamble has possessed me and I have run out of resources. I am about to end my life, the only remaining dignity I have left. . . I was one of the unfortunate ones who didn't reach bottom YET! It gets worse, even after clean time when you go back out. The part of me that understands what I do gets weaker. . . Many hands have reached out to me and I have refused them all. That is the worst part of this disease, the loneliness. I

never thought it could be this bad. I feel totally alone and worthless. . .I apologize for having no positive message to share with my fellow compulsive gambler. The only experience I can share now is the negative. . .I never knew how to get honest with myself. I told myself lies so I could continue on. I gained many people's confidence, but never my own. If I could do it again, I would look for the humility I needed to come clean and open up to others with my pain. That pain is too much now, I can no longer bear it. Try the other road."

August 6, 1995

Footnote: Jim's gambling led him to gamble away money entrusted to him by his clients. He willed his life insurance benefits to those whose money he had taken.

SUMMARY HIGHLIGHTS OF HELPLINE CALLS 1998

The Helpline is a 24-hour service for callers seeking help with a gambling problem for themselves or someone they care about. Callers seeking general information about problem gambling are referred to the CCPG's office. Included here are highlights from the recently released 1998 Helpline Summary. For more information, contact the CCPG at 203-453-0138.

Demographics

- There were 1061 calls for assistance with a gambling problem.
- Approximately two out of three callers (64.4%) called about their own problem. Almost one out of four callers (23.4%) were spouses/relatives of the problem gambler. 7.3% of the callers were friends of the problem gambler.
- Callers were almost equally of both genders (50.6% males and 49.4% females). Approximately 2/3 of the problem gamblers they were calling about were male (65.2%) and 1/3 were female (34.8%).
- The problem gamblers tended to be between 31-40 years old; married (44.8%); with children at home (42.4%); Caucasian (82.2%) and Catholic (47.3%).
- The four types of gambling most frequently causing a problem were casino slot machines (40.6%), casino blackjack (26.6%), lottery--scratch off tickets (23.1%) and lottery--daily (21%).

Substantial Negative Personal, Family and Societal Impact

- *Effects on the individual and family:* High reported rates of depression; concurrent substance abuse; suicidal ideation; Connecticut problem gamblers had enormous lifetime losses (43,079,400) and current gambling debt (\$10,723,167).
- *Effects on society:* Losses and debts place a significant burden on families, friends and creditors. The additional consequences of divorce, bankruptcy, suicide and incarceration also exact a serious toll.

Vulnerable Populations Need Special Attention

- *Women:* Special prevention programs targeting women are warranted as women developed a gambling problem in fewer years than men (5.6 years versus 8.2 years).
- *Families:* Almost one out of four calls (23.4%) were made by those close to the gambler, indicating that families are deeply affected by problem gambling. Family members are more likely to be receptive to information and resources than the gamblers themselves.
- *Other addictions:* A relatively high percentage of problem gamblers also reported addictions to alcohol (15.9%), tobacco (54.3%) and/or food (17.5%). Addiction clinicians should routinely screen for problem gambling.
- *People with low income:* 22.5% of the problem