

UNRESOLVED GAMBLING TREATMENT ISSUES

PART V: THE MAGICAL THINKING OF THE COMPULSIVE GAMBLER

It was a Friday night and Marty and George were on their way to Atlantic City for a get-away weekend of entertainment, some good food and to do some gambling. As they were getting close to AC, Marty turned to George and asked him if he was superstitious. George thought for a second and then replied: "You know, I used to be, but then I heard that it was bad luck to be superstitious, so I stopped."

Magical thinking refers to a mistaken belief that one thing has an influence on something else, when actually the two things are not connected. For example, a person forgets his lunch and after he gets to work, it starts to rain so hard that he can't go out at lunch time. A week later, he forgets his lunch again and around lunch time it begins to rain hard, and he has to go without eating again. Now he believes that every time he forgets to take his lunch to work, it's going to rain too hard for him to go out at lunch time.

Magical thinking for the gambler works in a similar way. If a compulsive gambler doesn't shave one day, goes to the track and wins big, he might start to believe that if he doesn't shave on a day that he plans to go to the track, he is going to win. The gambler has made a connection between two events that are not related.

Gamblers are probably the most superstitious people on the planet and they will do anything to improve their chances of winning. It might be carrying a lucky charm or performing some sort of ritual before or during their gambling session. They will do just about anything to try to influence Lady Luck to help them out.

POPULAR GAMBLING SUPERSTITIONS

Many gamblers feel that it is unlucky to enter a casino through the main entrance. Years ago, the MGM casino in Las Vegas had a main entrance that led through the mouth of a large MGM statue of a lion. Many gamblers would not enter the casino by going into the mouth of the lion. They considered it to be a

double curse to walk into the mouth of a beast and on top of that, it was the main entrance into the casino. It turned out that so many gamblers weren't returning to the casino, that MGM remodeled their entrance, costing them millions of dollars.

Many gamblers believe that fifty dollar bills are unlucky and they will not accept being paid by them. In fact, there are several casinos that do not give out fifty dollar bills from the cage when players cash in their chips. Some gamblers regard two dollar bills as unlucky.

Some feel that it is unlucky to count your money while sitting at the table gambling.

It is also unlucky to sing or whistle while playing and you never cross your arms or legs while playing or you will cross out your good luck.

One couple had a ranch style casserole for dinner on a night before they went to a casino and they won pretty big the next day. From then on, the husband insisted that they have a ranch style casserole dinner on the night before they planned to gamble.

Some like to check their horoscope before they gamble. The trouble with that is that I have never read a horoscope that said: "Today is your unlucky day—Stay away from casinos."

Some players have lucky clothing or jewelry that they always wear when gambling. There was one gambler that wore the same sport jacket for 5 years every time he gambled. Another had a set of cuff links that he always wore.

Carrying a lucky charm is a popular ritual that players use to bring about good fortune. If you were to walk through a bingo hall, you will see more different hair colors than you will find in a box of crayons, and some of these colors match the lucky dolls that are sitting on the tables.

Gamblers will even try to manipulate the slot machines. One couple always brought a large teddy bear with them to the casinos. The teddy bear was always dressed in a Chicago Cubs uniform. I don't understand why they thought

this would bring them luck, because at the time, the Cubs hadn't won the World Series since 1908.

One gambler brought a very large teddy bear with him. It was the size of a four year old. He would sit the bear on his lap and before each pull of the slot machine handle, he would whisper in the bear's ear and then have the bear pull the handle.

On gambler tried to fool the slot machine. He would cash in all his chips about every hour and then go back to the same machine and play with different money. He thought the slot machine would think he was a new player.

The Chinese are considered some of the most superstitious people in the world. Running through the entire list would take another couple of hours, so I will just mention a few that I thought were the most interesting.

The Chinese are very serious about this particular superstition because in their culture, red represents joy and good fortune and that extends to gambling as well. They believe that wearing red will bring them good luck. Any garment will do as long as it is red. It can be ties, socks, briefs, bras or thongs, just as long as it is red.

Never mention anything about books when a Chinese gambler is about to sit down at a table to gamble, because the Chinese translation for book sounds very similar to the word *lose*. Never touch the gambler on the shoulder when he/she is gambling. It's not only bad luck, but also considered very rude.

The Chinese never have sex before they are about to gamble. Very bad luck.

The reason that I have written about superstitions and magical thinking is I thought it would be kind of interesting, but more importantly, it points out some triggers to gamble.

For example, suppose your male client had a long discussion about money with his wife. She told him that they didn't have enough to pay the bills. The next day, he gets up and starts to get dressed. He goes into his closet and right in front of him is his lucky jacket that he always wore when he gambled. Is it

possible that might trigger something and give him the urge to gamble and win enough to pay the bills, get his wife off his back and eliminate the need to get a second job?

The more you know about your clients, the better chance he/she has for a full recovery. Keep it simple, such as asking if he/she is superstitious or has any rituals that he/she performs before gambling. Explain to the gambler what triggers are and ask him/her to get rid of that lucky jacket, lucky cuff links or all his/her lucky socks. A simple thing like that could prevent a major setback for you client.

For the compulsive gambler, gambling is a key coping mechanism and it brings on a major loss when he/she decides to give it up and enter treatment. When the gambler does make that commitment, it also opens the door for other major losses. These losses must be addressed in treatment. At a minimum, the therapist should let the client know what to expect and what the losses might be. Indicate and explain that the resulting concerns are normal for anyone dealing with major losses, and with a little work, he/she will be able to handle them.