

UNRESOLVED GAMBLING TREATMENT ISSUES:

PART IV: GRIEVING THE LOSS

As a treatment provider, It's crucial that you understand the grieving process that the gambler will go through when he/she decides to stop gambling. It is just as important for your client to be aware of the grieving process and what to expect. Let him/her know exactly what will be lost and that it is all right to grieve those losses.

When gambling becomes the overriding factor of a person's life, it dominates many features of daily existence. The loss of gambling alone has a serious psychological impact and when the gambler realizes all the other losses he/she is going to face, it can be overwhelming.

Gamblers who attempt to remain abstinent experience the same feelings of loss as all of us would feel when we have a significant loss in our lives. However, it is important to note that the loss of gambling is different in two ways. It is self-initiated and self-sustained. Other people dealing with a loss will, at some point, accept the loss as fact. A recovering gambler must not only struggle to accept the loss, but at the same time resist the temptation to restore what has been lost.

Denial is the first reaction to loss. There are various levels of denial. One gambler might say, "I'm not giving up gambling. "It's not a problem". Another might say, "I'll stop going to the casinos but I want to still bet football." Still another might say "I'll stop for now, but when I get off probation, I plan to gamble again." Gamblers deny or minimize the connection between gambling and their problems, and deny or minimize their lack of control over gambling. Even gamblers who are more committed to abstinence will deny or

minimize the pain of the loss. It might take several months before they begin to feel the full impact.

Some patients who are dying of lung cancer will attempt to strike bargains which they hope will keep them alive. Promising not to smoke again ever if only they don't die. Some gamblers may resort to similar bargaining to keep from having to give up gambling entirely. They may promise themselves and others that they will only play poker on Fridays, or only bet on sports, but won't go to the track anymore. They might even promise that if their spouse and children will come home, they will never gamble again. However, we know that these attempts will invariably fail. Bargaining does have some advantages over gross denial, since the gambler is at least admitting that something has to be done about the gambling.

Hope is an interesting reaction for recovering gamblers. Sometimes it can be very constructive. As the gambler sees some of the benefits of recovery, he/she starts to hope that things will get better, and this can provide the incentive to work through more difficult times. However, there is another type of hope that may jeopardize therapy. Many newly recovering gamblers hope that now that they have stopped gambling, everything will be just fine and all their problems will disappear. But, this is one of the most difficult times for them, and once they come off of their cloud, they can become depressed and very vulnerable to relapse.

Sadness arrives when they realize the extent of all the losses caused by gambling. But, as long as it doesn't develop into depression, this sadness is a good sign. It means that the recovering gambler is developing a strong commitment to abstinence and has reduced the use of denial.

The gambler will have feelings of guilt and shame over all that has been done or not done as a result of the gambling. Many have a very strong sense of guilt over having lost control over their gambling. “How could I have been so stupid that I lost control like that?” This guilt must be worked through to prepare for full acceptance of the loss of the gambling.

Anger is one of the most common responses to loss and it is often misplaced. It is sometime directed at social gamblers or it may be directed at spouses or other people who the gambler feels don't have to struggle and make any sacrifices. Some anger can even be directed towards the therapist. Acting out should be controlled, both to avoid its consequences as well as the potential it has for setting up conditions for returning to gambling. This anger will pass as the gambler comes to accept the loss of gambling.

Acceptance is frequently talked about in Gamblers Anonymous, and other self-help groups, and is the basis of the first step of the Recovery Program. The gambler must accept that he/she lacks control over gambling and that it has made life unmanageable. The first step is not fully met until the gambler has fully and honestly accepted the loss of gambling and has made a full commitment to abstinence. At this point, the recovering gambler must still continue to guard against a return to gambling and must devote more effort to getting more out of life, relationships and work. The gambler now has the opportunity to reorganize his/her life where gambling won't be a priority anymore.

Summary: As you build up trust with your client, you might be the only person that he/she can feel comfortable speaking with. The only one that he/she feels understands what he/she is going through. To get a full picture of your client, you really should talk about these issues in treatment. What does money mean to the gambler? How

important is it to him/her? What did the gambling do for him/her and is there awareness of all the losses that come with abstinence and how he/she is going to handle them? Most importantly, understanding the grief and consequence that accompany loss of gambling is another tool that we can use to help prevent relapse.

In Part V, we will look at the “Magical Thinking of the Compulsive Gambler.”