



GAMES
COMPULSIVE
GAMBLERS
and
WE PLAY
SECOND EDITION

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PREFACE

Compulsive gambling is an emotional illness. This is, perhaps, the most difficult premise for someone close to a compulsive gambler to believe and understand. It can affect anyone: women as well as men, young as well as old. Cultural background also does not determine the likelihood of falling prey to the disease.

Because of the games that gamblers play, those close to them often come to believe that the issues and problems they must deal with are actually their fault. This is the ultimate goal of the gamblers' games--- to shift the blame and avoid the consequences. It is essential for anyone dealing with gamblers to understand this first very basic fact--- that compulsive gamblers are master manipulators. They are the ultimate "gamers."

Life for active compulsive gamblers and their loved ones may be seen as such a game. The gamblers must manipulate situations and people in order to maintain their gambling activities. Those who love the gamblers can be easily manipulated and can never win playing the gamblers' games. The gamblers know each person's weaknesses and the moves that will be made before they do.

THE COMPULSIVE GAMBLER

In their struggle to relate to others the gamblers often create the image of philanthropists and all around “good sports.” While many consider gamblers to be wonderful and loving people, the gamblers’ families may feel quite differently. They see their gamblers as being unconcerned about them. There never seems to be enough money for their basic needs or enough time spent as a family.

Frustration is a constant companion for the gamblers since they tend to set unreasonable and unrealistic goals that they never seem able to reach. Compulsive gamblers escape the frustrations of day to day living by building a fantasy life filled with dreams of what they will buy or possess when there are enough winnings. Pathetically, there never seems to be enough of these winnings to make even the smallest dream come true and gambling compounds the frustrations rather than minimizing them. In the gamblers’ world monies won are sacred and to be used only to gamble more in hopes of winning even more.

Ultimately they gamble in reckless desperation and the dream world brings no relief. It brings only increased debt and extreme anxiety, driving family and friends further away. But the obsession to gamble is accelerated nonetheless. The gamblers’ self destruction becomes a terrifying experience for families and loved ones and may involve their destruction as well.

Since denial is the gamblers’ primary defense mechanism, most compulsive gamblers cannot admit a need for help until their lives have become intolerable. Each must find his or her own “bottom.” This could be precipitated by any number of experiences such as the loss of family and/or loved ones, the impending loss of freedom due to incarceration, or the final realization of complete and utter loss of self respect. When the gamblers reach the point where they are willing to admit the loss of control over gambling and the complete

unmanageability of their lives, they may finally be ready to accept help. This can be found in Gamblers Anonymous.

Experience has shown that regular attendance in this self-help group is necessary in order to abstain from gambling indefinitely. GA will provide the gamblers with the necessary guidance for stopping gambling and attaining a normal way of life.

THE SPOUSE/LOVED ONE

Spouses/loved ones of compulsive gamblers may have varying degrees of awareness of this situation. Some were unaware of the gambling problem at the beginning of the relationship while others were together several years before the problem became apparent. Still others knew the problem existed, but felt that the gamblers would “mature” or “grow out of it,” and eventually accept the responsibilities of a stable relationship and family; the “bad habit” would then cease.

It may be difficult for the loved ones to accept and examine their own issues when they are in relationships with compulsive gamblers. Their lives are frequently filled with fear, disappointment, frustration, anger and a general feeling of unmanageability, making even the simplest tasks of daily life a challenge. They know that something has to change in the way they are relating to the gamblers, but can't think of what to do and how to do it, so they take no action other than repeating past behaviors. They have no way of knowing what may happen if they were to act and react differently. Fear of this unknown is a great deterrent for taking action. Feeling like a victim is a natural result.

And yet loved ones desperately try to rationalize and defend why they put up with the outrageous behavior of their compulsive gamblers. They use statements such as “I love him,” “I know she loves me,” “He needs me and would be lost without me,” “The children need their

mother/father,” or “My culture, religion, family do not approve of divorce.” These are frequently some of the reasons offered as excuses for doing nothing about the situation.

Even if the gamblers reach the point of seeking help through Gamblers Anonymous, the non-gamblers will often refuse to recognize their own need for help. This will not come until they have reached their own emotional “bottom” and they grow “sick and tired” of being “sick and tired.” When this point is reached, the self-help group called Gam-Anon will be there to guide and assist with healing and recovery.

At first new Gam-Anon members might attend with their primary focus on getting the compulsive gamblers to attend Gamblers Anonymous and stop gambling. The non-gamblers often continue to say what they have said countless times before: “He is really such a good person. If he would only stop gambling, our lives would be perfect.”

Over time, with the help and guidance of the Gam-Anon members and a great deal of personal perseverance, the spouses and loved ones begin to understand that the work of their recovery must begin from within and that they are responsible only for themselves. They will learn that it is possible to love their gamblers without enabling and they can begin the journey to a healthy and honest way of thinking and living. The recovery of the compulsive gamblers must be left to Gamblers Anonymous.

With continued determination and guidance from the Gam-Anon program a new and enriching life will emerge whether or not the compulsive gamblers are attending Gamblers Anonymous. This new beginning for the loved ones will bring about new feelings of self worth, greater fulfillment, and the ability to set healthy personal goals.

THE GAMBLER'S PARENTS

The issues facing the parents of compulsive gamblers are somewhat similar to those facing a spouse or companion and yet different. The problems may also differ with the age of the gambling child. For example, dealing with a child who lives at home, one who is away at school, or one who began gambling while living at home and then went to school require different coping strategies at different times. Other parents may be forced to face the issues presented by an adult child who gambles, and, by extension, their adult child's spouse and perhaps even their grandchildren.

Parents may feel tremendous anger and a sense of betrayal just as spouses and companions do. But there is also a great deal of confusion surrounding the origin of the problem since parents generally feel responsible for their child's upbringing. This is one of the primary points at which the path of the parents diverges from the path of other non-gamblers. Gamblers might be able to make the other non-gamblers in their lives feel as though they have contributed to the problem in the family, but a parent may actually feel that they have caused it.

Parents also feel tremendous disappointment and disillusionment when confronted with the reality of the situation. When a child is born, a parent often has dreams and plans for that child. With the realization that this child is a compulsive gambler, those dreams are likely shattered.

Parents will often attempt to "fix" their children by giving in to their demands. The gamblers, of course, will exploit this by insisting that the parents can indeed fix everything by just giving them more money.

The situation is usually compounded by the actions of the gambling children. Since compulsive gamblers are master manipulators, the gambling children will attempt to capitalize on their parents' feelings of guilt and despair. They will beg, plead, blame, set one parent against the other and play all manner of other games designed to get the parents to bail them out of each worsening situation.

The compulsive gamblers will often not stop with the parents. They will also go to other members of the family and attempt the same type of manipulation. Grandparents are often a favored target as are siblings. Siblings are often coerced into keeping the gamblers' secrets as well as giving the gamblers money. This can cause even more rifts in the family as the other children begin to lie to the parents to cover for their siblings. The gamblers, in the meantime, will continue to manipulate all these family members in order to achieve their goals of obtaining more money and time to gamble.

It is vital to their survival that parents of compulsive gamblers attend Gam-Anon, just as spouses, companions and other loved ones do. Through this program they can begin to understand the gambling illness and gain the strength to say "no" to their children.

THE CHILDREN

As the gamblers and their loved ones struggle with the gambling problem, they carry with them their children, the true innocent victims. The children feel the insecurity and instability of the parental relationship and may often become involved in behaviors that are motivated by fear and anger.

The children may witness situations such as the constant turmoil and game playing between parents and experience the gamblers' physical and emotional withdrawal from the family. As a result of the frustration generated by living with the disease, the non-gambling parents may vacillate between overindulgence, over-protectiveness and outbursts of misplaced anger toward all family members. Older children may begin to believe that the gambling parent is the world's greatest "con artist" and is not to be trusted. As a result, they experience insecurity, fear and anger themselves. They cannot help but be affected emotionally. Since young children may lack effective coping mechanisms, they may become increasingly distracted in school, not be able to concentrate, pull away from friends and activities, and even feel responsible for the unhappiness in the home. The most important thing that can be done for children in this situation is to appropriately explain the problem. The children may not find the truth as threatening as the fear of the unknown.

Only time will tell how their childhood will affect their adulthood. Some adult children of compulsive gamblers may identify with the gamblers, mimicking their behavior. Others may become the protectors of the non-gambling parent. Even though these children abhor gambling and may have grown up to dislike and distrust the gambling parent, they may actually help the gambler keep secrets so the non-gambling parent does not become upset. They might give the gambler

money so the other parent does not suffer the financial and emotional consequences of the gambling. Some children will strive throughout their adulthood to secure the love and attention of the gambling parent, continuing to give money to the gambler, even to the detriment of their own relationships and financial security. For some children, their only choice is to physically and emotionally abandon their parents in order to strive, unencumbered by their parents' problems, to live a normal life.

If and when the parents accept their need for help and find it in Gamblers Anonymous and/or Gam-Anon, this too should be explained to the children. The children need to understand that their parents' attendance at meetings is vital to the stability of the family, even though it means leaving the children at home. As the children grow older, there may be a need for their own self-help group, Gam-A-Teen, where it is available or in Gam-Anon when it is age appropriate.

THE GAMBLING PROGRESSION

In the beginning one may fail to recognize compulsive gambling as a serious problem. The loved ones may participate as part of their social entertainment, enjoying the excitement and glamour of vacations in places such as Las Vegas and similar destinations. Although at first they may be disquieted by the early intensity and complete absorption of the gamblers in the game, fears are set aside. Some enjoy the image of their gamblers as glamorous "high rollers." Some have dreams of luxury. Some are proud of the winnings and seldom aware of the losses.

In the second stage of the compulsive gambling progression, the disenchantment begins, and the non-gamblers' anxiety increases. Even then there is seldom the recognition of gambling as an illness. The

gamblers lose and are remorseful. The non-gamblers are consoled in the mistaken belief that the gambling is only intermittent and thus accept any promise made to never gamble again. Months may pass between gambling episodes. Most of the time, however, there is ongoing gambling which remains hidden from view.

In the third stage of gambling, the illness escalates and exerts an even stronger pull on the gambler. Family relationships deteriorate, friends are gone, emotions are strained, and finances are ruined. Life becomes meaningless and the players proceed down the pathway to the complete destruction of one another.

THE GAMES GAMBLERS AND WE PLAY

When we examine our relationships with the gamblers we must confront some universal behaviors which we explore in Gam-Anon. When we act on these behaviors, we are often motivated first by love and then by a combination of love and fear. These emotions then become integral parts of all the games we play. We must ask ourselves:

- Are we doing for the gamblers what they must do for themselves?
- Are we accepting behavior that is unacceptable?
- Are we taking responsibility which is not ours to take?
- Are we shirking our responsibilities to self and others?
- Are we in a state of denial about the reality of our situation?
- Are we continually reacting to the gamblers, or are we taking our own appropriate actions?

In the fellowship of Gam-Anon we gather the strength to face the game playing and change the moves we make. What we can't always see in ourselves we can see more clearly in the experiences shared by other

members. This then gives us the ability to face the game playing in our own lives, the illness of compulsive gambling and its consequences, and the possible changes we can make in our behavior. Explained below are some games we might reflect upon.

THE BLAME/ GUILT GAME

The gamblers blame anyone or everyone for the reason they gamble, or, in another variation of this game, the non-gamblers often assume the blame for the gamblers' actions. The gamblers strive to make anyone and everyone feel guilty for triggering or contributing to the urge to gamble and the subsequent problems. The non-gamblers' actions are usually based upon assumed guilt for having brought about or contributed to the gambling.

The gamblers may make statements such as:

- "If you weren't always nagging me and making life miserable I wouldn't need to gamble."
- "You know how hard I work and you begrudge me my hobby."
- "If you were a better spouse..."
- "If you didn't spend so much I wouldn't need to gamble."
- "If you hadn't made me so angry, I wouldn't have had to leave the house to calm down."
- "Sitting at the computer is the only way I can relax after one of your stupid fights."
- "If you paid more attention to me, I wouldn't gamble."

Usually, the accusations are much more subtle and more difficult to deal with. Gamblers use the loved ones' guilt and state that it is their fault that they gamble. On one level of understanding, the non-

gamblers know this is not true, but on another level they can't help but wonder if they could have stopped the gamblers from gambling if only they had done or said something differently. The fact is that whether or not the non-gamblers continue to play this game and join in the argument created by the gamblers, the gamblers get to gamble. The gamblers know this. The non-gamblers, not the gamblers, pay an emotional price.

The children, either young or adult, in this family may become trapped between the gambling parent and the non-gambling parent. They may get caught in the game of hiding their money with all the connected anxiety and guilt - one parent needs money to fund the gambling; the other needs money for food. Taking care of oneself feeds the guilt of not taking care of one or both parents.

Parents of compulsive gamblers often assume guilt for having failed in the "proper" upbringing of their children, thinking that they in some way caused the gambling. They want to "fix" their children and the gamblers rely on the parents' anxieties and guilt. The gamblers gamble, the parents try to fix and ultimately fail, and the game continues.

The loved ones of gamblers, including the children and parents of gamblers, will find the strength in Gam-Anon to change their enabling behaviors with the understanding that these behaviors are detrimental to themselves as well as the gamblers.

If my husband ever felt guilt he never showed it. I always felt guilty. My efforts to stop him from gambling or change his horrible behavior always ended up with me apologizing for making him angry, or not trusting him, or making him feel inadequate as a person and as a provider for his family.

I actually believed that my husband gambled because I had "expensive taste" in furniture! When the Gam-Anon members

reassured me that was not true, he could no longer make me feel like it was my fault that he gambled.

My gambler put blame on me for any problem that might occur. This kept me tripping over myself to prove that I was a good person and blameless. These “blame sessions” never really ended; they just moved on to the next time my gambler had the opportunity to indulge his need to take the focus off his gambling behavior.

I used to be close to my dad but as I got older I don't know what happened. Everything fell apart. I can't talk to him or even be in the same room as him. It is just awkward and so I go to my room and wait till he goes to work or goes to bed before coming out. Every time my mom confronts him about gambling he yells and gets mad. When he has nothing else to yell about he blames my mom, saying she is the reason he gambles. He blames my mom and me saying we spend every dime. Sometimes I feel so bad, I want to move out and just never come back. My mom cries a lot and I don't know what to do. I want to help, but there is so little I can do. How can I help him when he doesn't want it?

Sunday was my husband's day to do what he wanted, when he wanted to do it. All he wanted to do was watch sports while changing channels constantly, listen to the radio and make phone calls. When I asked him to go with the children and me to the park or to someone's house he yelled that he works hard all week and I am begrudging him his only hobby. He never gave that up to spend the day with us.

My gambler's harsh words never failed to produce the desired effect on me until I came to Gam-Anon and got a clearer understanding of what was really going on. Now I can choose to react only to what I know to be true.

THE SHIFTING RESPONSIBILITY GAME

In this game, the gamblers allow others to assume the responsibilities and consequences of their actions, and the non-gamblers readily relieve the gamblers of the same. The gamblers always seem to be submerged in one serious financial or emotional crisis after another. Sometimes the crisis endangers the family's lifestyle or assets and sometimes it affects only the gamblers' quality of life. Regardless, the non-gamblers often make the unhealthy choice of not allowing the gamblers to experience their own crises and instead proceed to find ways to fix the situation. The behaviors shown by the non-gamblers may include:

- Co-signing notes;
- Lying to creditors and employers;
- Asking family members for money;
- Making restitution for bad checks written by the gambler;
- Making excuses for the gambler;
- Paying the gamblers' debts;
- Compromising their own credit;
- Doing whatever is necessary to keep the gamblers out of jail;
- Making life more manageable for the gamblers.

In Gam-Anon we confront this misappropriation of responsibilities. We are asked to reflect on the phrase, "The gambler will play as long as someone will pay." We are prodded into finding the courage to stand by our values, not to be motivated by fear and to not take on the consequences for the gamblers' actions. The courage to make these changes is reflected in the images and experiences of those who have done it before us. We are not alone.

I was standing in the way of my gambler's recovery by treating his symptoms with bailouts and sympathy, taking on his responsibilities and softening his consequences. He couldn't feel how bad his illness was because I was helping him numb the pain it caused him.

I thought, "How could I NOT cover the checks?" I didn't want him to ruin his credit. I couldn't allow the lights to be turned off. It would be so embarrassing for the gift check to bounce.

My husband lied to me about why we needed money and in turn I lied to my father about why we needed money. My father took out a bank loan to give us the money and gave the payment book to my husband. When my husband missed a payment, I lied to my father, telling him that I forgot to pay it.

THE INCAPABLE OF BETTER BEHAVIOR GAME

In this game, the gamblers withdraw from participating in normal interactions and relationships and eventually are assumed to be incapable of taking on family responsibilities or exhibiting socially acceptable behaviors. Instead they are seen as withdrawing from conversation, isolating themselves, or refusing to attend family functions. They often retreat to gaming, watching sports, etc. The non-gamblers come to believe that the gamblers are not capable of better social conversation, better social interaction, or involvement in worthy pursuits. They may attribute this to reasons that have nothing to do with gambling, such as exhaustion from work, bad childhood experiences, lack of confidence, etc. The unacceptable behavior becomes the norm in this environment, and the non-gamblers settle into believing the gamblers are 'incapable' rather than 'ill.'

In Gam-Anon we look into ourselves - our values, behaviors, choices. We become honest in appraising our lifestyle. We stop making excuses to ourselves or others.

My aunt remarked to me how silent my husband always seemed to be. He never participated in dinner discussions and often retreated into the bedroom when the family was together. Once in recovery he emerged as a man with the ability to join in conversation and not run off to his private world. I had come to believe he was incapable of socializing. I came to understand that retreat was what he did as a gambler.

I had lost all respect for my husband. I came to expect nothing from him and nothing is what I got. He couldn't even take the time to change a light bulb!

I spent a lot of time being anxious over the anti-social behavior my wife might exhibit at any given opportunity. Social events and daily interactions with people became a source of embarrassment. Holidays and family functions were no longer events I looked forward to. I preferred to avoid them.

THE FANTASIZING AND RATIONALIZING GAME

The gamblers' fantasies associated with winning rationalize continued gambling behavior, and, for the loved ones, dreams of what winnings might bring blind them to the reality of the consequences of the illness. The gamblers' fantasies may range from grandiose plans for the future to desperate dreams of solving a financial or emotional crisis. Even in the face of current losses, the gamblers are convinced that the next bet will result in a win so huge that all debts will be paid, and there will be money left over to buy that house, or take the family on vacation, or buy the new car. For the gamblers who need to rationalize that

gambling is for everyone's benefit, less grandiose dreams are also satisfying. In addition to the financial benefits of gambling, in the gamblers' minds, a win buys respect, soothes a loved one's anger, salvages relationships, and makes past disappointments disappear. With the dreams in their heads, the gamblers are immune to the reality and pain of the current desperate situation. Some of the fantasies and rationales are:

- My children should have a swimming pool. I will win them the nicest swimming pool in the whole block. Our home will be the entertainment center of the area.
- My neighbors think I'm a nobody. I'll show them. I'll win a beautiful new car. I can't wait to see their eyes when I drive down our street.
- My wife is angry with me. She thinks I gamble too much. She just doesn't understand. I'll win and take her out to a nice dinner. That will fix everything!
- The bookies and loan sharks are after me. I must get them off my back. I'll borrow a little money, go to the casino or track and win enough to pay them all.
- We don't have any food in the house and our rent is two months overdue. The little money I have wouldn't begin to cover our needs. My only alternative is to win enough to get us out of this hole.
- My husband is demanding that I quit gambling. I'll win enough to pay all our debts, then I'll quit.
- Everything is going against me. I've had a terrible streak of bad luck, but I know I can win today. I must. I will just borrow this money from the company funds and win enough to get us out of debt. I can put the money back before anyone will miss it.

Sometimes the loved ones join in the dream. Misled by past wins or misplaced faith in the gamblers' expertise, they put common sense aside and wait for it to happen again. Even if they don't gamble, they enjoy going to casinos where it is possible to believe for a few days or hours that the dream can come true.

Sometimes gamblers give gifts or money accrued from winnings ... perhaps as a peace offering ... perhaps to relieve feelings of guilt. This can be a dilemma for the non-gamblers. What message is being sent to the gamblers if the winnings or gifts are accepted? Will accepting the offering be giving the stamp of approval to the gamblers? Will the interpretation be that winning makes gambling okay but losing does not? Will we actually be saying that it is not the gambling we object to but the losing?

Yet the non-gamblers might feel that the offering might just as well be accepted and put to good use because refusing it will only result in the gamblers using it for more gambling. In Gam-Anon, we share our experiences, face our enabling behaviors, understand consequences, and ultimately make choices about our actions. When considering accepting a gift we should weigh the financial benefits of alleviating the problems caused by the gambling against the messages we send to the gamblers should we accept gifts.

My husband once came home from a night at a casino, woke me up and covered the bed with money. He told me it was the best night of his life and now we could go on a vacation before the baby came. I scooped up the money and paid some bills before the baby came.

Years after my husband stopped gambling he was speaking at a combined GA/Gam-Anon meeting. He mentioned the time he phoned me after he left the racetrack to tell me that he won and I was going to

be able to buy the new winter coat I needed. I never received that call. The fantasy he created that night was so real that years later he remembered it as if it really happened.

How pathetic a figure I was...standing in the lobby of a Las Vegas hotel, waiting, waiting, waiting for him to come back from the tables, dreaming that my husband would buy me that beautiful necklace in the showcase window.

CATCH ME IF YOU CAN GAME

In this game the gamblers hide the compulsive gambling so well that the non-gamblers are unaware of it. They may be aware of recreational, affordable gambling, but have no idea that the gambling has gone beyond that. The gamblers use access to family funds, business funds, credit lines and credit cards to gamble and use the love and trust of non-gamblers to their advantage.

The gamblers calculate exactly how much time spent with family and friends, how much loving attention given to them, and how much money spent on and with them will be enough and not draw awareness to the time, attention and money that is being withheld. The gamblers may even introduce loved ones to gambling activities as a form of entertainment by taking them to casinos or a day at the races, balancing the time spent there between personal obligations and gambling.

The gamblers also rely on the absolute trust of the non-gamblers. If there is ever a question about money or time, the gamblers' loved ones readily accept the explanations. They don't check the bank accounts, the bills and the computer, speak to the gamblers' business partners about finances, or research the gamblers' explanations. When they join the gamblers at casinos or the racetrack, they don't question whatever

they are told about wins and losses. They are unaware that they are playing the game just as the gamblers wish.

When the gamblers finally run out of money and credit, or crack under the strain of maintaining a “normal life” while living the life of a compulsive gambler, the gamblers “hit bottom” and reveal the life of lies to the shock of the non-gamblers. The gamblers will promise that this will never happen again, plead for one more chance, and ask for financial help to get out from under the debt. Their loved ones then have two choices. The first and best choice is to contact GA and Gam-Anon for guidance, not pay off any debts and not go into debt themselves to help the gamblers. The other choice is to give that financial help. If they do that, they become active players in the game, trying to control and manipulate the gamblers with money and promises of love and trust. They don't realize the gamblers have just changed the rules of the game, and that they have made the moves the gamblers wanted them to make. They have now opened the box that holds all of the other games.

In Gam-Anon we learn that although we are powerless over the gamblers, we can have power over ourselves. We gain an understanding of the gamblers' expertise when they wish to hide something, we come to understand that we would be wise to not trust blindly, and we learn to verify everything in order to protect our own interests. We are warned not to become “complacent” and to remain aware of what is going on in our households. Even if the gambler attends Gamblers Anonymous meetings, the motivation might just be to appease us. We find hope in the experiences of other Gam-Anon members that the gambling will cease in direct proportion to how closely the gamblers attach themselves to those who have exhibited success in GA, and to the degree that they accept the GA program and work on their recovery, and in turn begin to help others.

When my husband and I went to the racetrack he handed me his \$5.00 ticket “for luck.” When he lost, he cursed and yelled. I told him that if he can’t lose \$5.00 like a grown-up, he shouldn’t gamble. The thought that he had bought more tickets never entered my mind. I knew we didn’t lie to each other. When he told me I couldn’t go to the supermarket the next day because he had a bad business day on Saturday, it never occurred to me that this had anything to do with the evening at the racetrack. It didn’t make sense until I came to Gam-Anon.

When my husband told me he was planning a day out for us I was thrilled. We did not spend any recreational time together. This was going to be a first and I was looking forward to our day out. He said it was a surprise so I had no idea where we were headed only to find out when we arrived that we were at a jai alai arena. I was very disappointed and hurt and did not understand why he would think that this was something I would enjoy. I am sure taking me along just made it easier for him to get out of the house on a Saturday.

What is “five?” My husband would speak on the phone to his bookie. These phone calls often took place in the bathroom. I once heard him ask the bookie to “Gimme five.” I never questioned “Why does he have a bookie? Why such secretive bathroom calls?” How could I have believed this was all normal behavior?

THE DENY AND LIE GAME

Compulsive gamblers are fantastic liars because they can be relentless and extremely convincing. If caught in a lie, they will try to convince the non-gamblers that they must be mistaken and will argue so strenuously and for so long, that sometimes the non-gamblers just give up out of exhaustion. The gamblers are so convincing, that even though the evidence at hand would convince a jury, gambling will be denied. Even

when the non-gamblers know the gamblers are lying because facts prove that the gamblers spent the money, or bought the lottery tickets, or spent the day at a casino or on a gambling website, the gamblers' denials are unshakable. Non-gamblers walk away from the gamblers knowing that what they know is the truth, knowing that the money is gone, the time is gone, and nothing they can say or do will replace it. Whether the gamblers are believed or not, the gamblers win because the money has already been spent on gambling, and nothing the non-gamblers can say or do will change that. Wearing down the resolve of the non-gamblers is the desired result of this game.

For the gamblers' family & friends, the world of compulsive gamblers is an unfamiliar and frightening place to contemplate, and the gamblers use that fear, becoming most convincing when they need money. Gamblers create lies about what could be plausible financial hardships in order to borrow money from unsuspecting concerned friends, relatives and business acquaintances. The gamblers may also plead for money to avoid jail, avoid being assaulted, not lose a job, or not lose a home or car, even when none of these things are going to happen. However, non-gamblers will take out loans, empty bank accounts, and even mortgage property for the gamblers out of fear and love. Can some of the things the gamblers claim really happen? Yes, they can. Unfortunately, the non-gamblers are so frightened for the gamblers, who are usually claiming that these things will be happening almost immediately, that they don't check the facts of the situation for themselves, so when it is not true, the gamblers get away with the lie....and the money. Sometimes the money is used to pay debts and sometimes it is used to gamble more. In the end it doesn't matter, because the gamblers continue to gamble and eventually will need money again and have to lie to get it.

There are numerous variations and twists on the lying games. For example, the lies can be so well structured that gamblers are often able to convince even themselves that the lies are the truth. Thus if the non-

gamblers express doubt, the gamblers are often genuinely shocked. When accused by the gamblers in this “How could you doubt me game?” the non-gamblers must stick with the truth and not doubt the evidence or themselves. It is essential for everyone’s well-being that it is made clear that the non-gamblers will not take any action based on lies told by the gamblers.

In our literature we say - do not interrogate the gamblers. To ask questions when the gamblers are gambling is to invite the lie or denial. We need to state the truth as we know it with declarative statements.

I reached into my gambler’s pocket to get some change and pulled out a loan book. He came up with a story. I nearly fell for it. He seemed so sincere.

Before attending Gam-Anon I found it impossible to look my gambler in the face and state the facts. Gam-Anon taught me that in order to fully live my life I had to gain self-respect. I had to not accept lies presented by my gambler and instead put my trust in myself. I know that interrogating an active compulsive gambler does not reveal the truth but invites more lies. I learned that a simple statement like “I know you are having a problem with gambling but I cannot help you with it” would be appropriate. By saying this I am refusing to take part in the game playing.

PROMISES/TRUST ME GAME

The gamblers get “caught” gambling in one of several ways. One way is to be discovered someplace where the gamblers promised never to go after the last time they were caught. Another is when money is missing and there is no lie big enough to explain how and why this much money is gone. The gamblers’ game is to convince the non-gamblers that once these debts are paid, or at least brought down to a reasonable level,

the gambling will stop. The gamblers claim that lessons have been learned. The non-gamblers believe that “love conquers all.” The gamblers may even believe it at that moment. Promises are made never to gamble again, to be a better person, to work harder, to pay back the debt, and the non-gamblers do what has been asked of them.

Loved ones want to trust the gamblers, because they believe that trust and love are inseparable. It may seem that the gamblers are keeping all the promises made, but rarely does this last long. After a while the gamblers are back, confessing a lack of self-control, asking for money, and making the same promises again. Trust is destroyed yet again. Love didn’t conquer all; it just conquered the gamblers’ families & friends who again use money to fix the gamblers’ problems. This time the amount owed may even be more than the last time, and the time before that, and the time before that. Without proper help to stop gambling, which we suggest can be found in Gamblers Anonymous, the gamblers cannot stop gambling. The gamblers’ problems are not money, and cannot be solved with empty promises.

We ask ourselves, how can we love without trust? Gamblers in recovery may ask why their loved ones have not learned to trust since the gambling has stopped. The belief that blind trust is necessary in a successful relationship is false and is a distraction to the real issues of recovery. Recovery is less about trusting the gambler and more about trusting ourselves. We have already experienced the dangers of trusting someone who has not earned our trust. Trust is something that will come over time during the recovery process. How much trust to give the gamblers, and when, is a personal decision made by every Gam-Anon member.

My intellect knew the promises would be broken, but my heart wanted to trust her so badly that I did what my wife wanted me to do.

I learned in Gam-Anon that you can love someone and still refuse to consider the phrase “trust me” as a valid argument. I do love my husband, but I will not endanger my financial security or personal serenity to prove it.

I continue to battle with doubt, even though my child seems to be in recovery in GA. I try to look at the accomplishments, interaction with others and spiritual involvement but still that nagging doubt plagues me. I want so much to trust, but I can't.

After I found out about my husband's gambling and debt, I cried and he promised he would never do it again. But...it was only a matter of time until there was another debt...and another promise.

THE I LOVE YOU/ I HATE YOU GAME

The loved ones of compulsive gamblers are very active players in this game. Their goal is to convince the gamblers to choose them over the gambling. They try to manipulate the gamblers by making them feel guilty for the hurt felt by those who love the gamblers the most. That love, however, actually gives the gamblers the freedom to gamble more since they are positive that the love is so strong, no one would ever leave. Every time the loved ones use the “I love you” game strategy, they just reinforce this fact for the gamblers.

Frustrated by the gamblers' failure to respond to the “I love you” strategy, loved ones then try the “I hate you” strategy. They try to frighten the gamblers into stopping gambling by threatening to change or leave the relationship. Sometimes they go so far as to actually leave or to make the gamblers leave. The gamblers know that this is a manipulation, and before long the relationships are usually intact again, as if nothing ever happened. Frustrated that the gamblers aren't

terrified enough to stop gambling, the non-gamblers go back to the “I love you” strategy, determined to do it better this time.

The gamblers are also active players in this game, sometimes threatening to withhold love or leave. The gamblers’ message to their loved ones is that if the gambling activities are interfered with, the gamblers will inflict emotional pain. At other times, the gamblers will do whatever they can to convince loved ones of their undying love and also their need for their love. The gamblers’ game strategy here is to keep the non-gamblers off balance, going back and forth between tactics. As long as the gamblers’ loved ones continue to go back and forth between love and hate, nothing changes for the gamblers.

In Gam-Anon we learn to see this behavior as a manipulation and not react to silence or overblown displays of affection. We learn to say what we mean and mean what we say rather than make meaningless threats.

The “I love you” and caring words and actions I aimed at my gambler only proved to strengthen his belief that I was not going anywhere and would not change anything in our relationship even as the gambling continued. My feeble attempts at manipulating him to behave by showing disdain or contempt were met with an “I don’t care” attitude, putting me into an argument that I could not possibly win.

I recently had an argument with my mother about her behavior and she attempted to deny it, then got defensive and said some pretty mean things to me. I have had a really close relationship with my mom so I’m at a loss to know how to deal with this. I find myself being really angry and frustrated and can’t bring myself to face her. I literally gave her a choice, “Me or gambling” and she said, “You, of course,” and then proceeded to lie and gamble. I want to help my mom and salvage our relationship but I can’t help feeling resentful and angry.

PICK A FIGHT GAME

In order to gamble, the gamblers need time. Family time interferes with gambling time. Dating interferes with gambling time. Work interferes with gambling time. School interferes with gambling time. If the gamblers need to feel justification in order to gamble without guilt, they pick a fight. If guilt is not an issue for the gamblers, the fight is a power play. Either way one thing is certain: the gamblers will get to gamble.

The gamblers may seek to carve out time to gamble by picking a fight and then marching out the door. The gamblers pretend to be so “upset” that they can’t be in the company of loved ones, can’t go to work, and can’t go to school. Whether the need to gamble takes the gamblers outside the home to a race track, card club, or other gambling destination or to another room to sit in front of a computer for a session of internet gambling, this game attempts to turn the home into a battleground for the purpose of escape. After a while, the loved ones aren’t fooled. They know where the gamblers are and why.

Gam-Anon teaches us how to put a stop to this game; the friends and loved ones can speak the truth of the situation and elect not to engage in the game instead of reacting emotionally. With the realization that one is powerless over another’s gambling the non-gamblers may choose to say: “I know you want to start an argument, and I know your reasoning, but I refuse to let you justify your need to gamble through me. If you choose to gamble you take the responsibility for that choice.”

My husband always picked a fight on card game nights. Either dinner was cold, or overcooked, or undercooked, or tasteless, or he didn’t like my tone of voice, or he picked on anything that came into his mind. He would stomp out the door and I would spend the night wondering what I could have done or said differently to avoid the fight. When I realized that there was nothing I could ever do or say to stop

this cycle, I told him that on card game nights he should eat dinner out and not come home first. Those became my most peaceful nights of the week.

Frustration caused me to say horrible things to my wife. No matter how much I tried not to react, she eventually found a weak spot and elicited a disgusting verbal and sometimes physical response from me. The fight usually ended in my apology for my abuse, and she left to gamble.

PROTECT THE VICTIM (BLACKMAIL) GAME

Often non-gamblers know the truth, or part of the truth about the gamblers' gambling and gambling debts. Yet, when the gamblers ask for money, or ask for financial sacrifices that will make money available for gambling, the non-gamblers feel they must comply with the gamblers' demands in order to protect others from learning the truth. They think the truth will destroy these others emotionally or financially. If the gamblers suggest that they will go to someone else for the money, the non-gamblers may do what the gamblers ask in order to avoid this.

A spouse will protect the gamblers' parents, a friend will protect the gamblers' spouse, a spouse will protect the children, a sibling will protect other family members and loved ones, an adult child will protect a parent, and a parent will protect the other parent or the gambler's spouse. The gamblers rely on the protective nature of these relationships.

What these non-gamblers often don't realize is that the people they are trying to protect may already know about the compulsive gambling, and could have given money to the gamblers recently or in the past. Perhaps one of these people has already confronted the gamblers,

refused to give money, or threatened to expose the gamblers' lies that the gamblers are no longer gambling. The gamblers create this conspiracy of silence among non-gamblers because it is to their advantage. All these personal credit lines remain open because no one talks about the gambling, no one knows how much is being borrowed from anyone else, and those who think the gambling has stopped remain ignorant of the truth. What everyone is doing is providing money for the gamblers to gamble and, by their silence, enabling the gamblers to get away with the lies and quite possibly bankrupt those they are trying to protect.

Both my parents asked for money and helped themselves to my wallet and all my hiding places without asking but for different reasons. My dad's reason, of course, was to fund his gambling addiction. My mom needed money for food. When money was missing from every hiding spot that I could think of, I just held in the anger and resentment and pretended it didn't happen. They both played on the guilt I felt for being unable to stop this vicious cycle. The hiding of the money became a ritualistic game filled with the anxiety of knowing that they would eventually find it. The only unknown was who would find it first. I was torn. I knew they needed the money, yet I needed to take care of myself.

My brother was receiving his share of quarterly distributions from our father's estate. He asked me for an additional distribution to buy a car and I gave him enough to buy the car with no financing. A month later he asked me for money to pay off the car. This didn't make sense to me. When I called my sister to discuss it with her, she told me he had been gambling at the casino for years and that she had given him money in the past. He had asked her not to tell anyone. I had no idea.

After my son got out of jail and joined GA he told me that his father, who had passed away many years before, always gave him money when he asked. His siblings knew this at the time, but I was kept

in the dark. I became so angry and hurt that my husband had believed that I was such a weak and frightened person that I needed to be protected. When I shared this in my Gam-Anon meeting, one of the comments was that perhaps my husband was not protecting me, but avoiding facing the reality of his son's gambling.

THE SILENT TREATMENT GAME

The gamblers will employ any tactic that will produce the desired result – the freedom to gamble. This might include the “deep freeze” or silent treatment used against the loved ones. This game can be very effective since it succeeds in putting the non-gamblers off balance by diverting attention away from the gambling issues and planting the seeds of self-doubt in their minds. The non-gamblers might begin to question their own motives and beliefs and begin to think:

- Am I overreacting to the gambling problem? Do I need to be more understanding?
- What have I done to cause the gambler to be so angry with me?
- How can I make this situation right? I'll do whatever it takes.
- I must learn how to make this not happen again. I cannot stand being ignored.

The silent treatment is a very personal and hurtful attack on the non-gamblers with a loud, clear message: “Don't try to interfere with my gambling, I can inflict great pain if you do.” This game puts all of the power once again in the hands of the gambler.

We have learned in Gam-Anon that, as difficult as it is, the best defense here is to see this game for the childish behavior it is and not react to it.

For no apparent reason there were times I would find myself on the receiving end of being ignored –as if I didn't exist in my own home. It was as though my husband pushed the delete button and I was no longer visible. Though I would repeatedly ask what was wrong I would never get a reply. Fear and self- doubt would grip me. Until the silent treatment was deemed over by my gambler I would spend my time trying to fix something I apparently did though I had no idea what it was. The silent treatment game succeeded in distracting me from the gambling issues and made me focus on mythical wrongs for which I was being punished. As a result my gambler was in total control during these episodes, control that I allowed him to take when I surrendered to the game. When I came into Gam-Anon I learned to put faith and trust in my own judgment and not to elevate the silent treatment to a meaningful reality by my participation.

HOW DO LOVED ONES STOP PLAYING THE GAMES?

As we can see, the games played by the gamblers are many and can morph from one into another. In addition, the gamblers often employ more than one game at a time in any given situation. It is essential that the loved ones involved with compulsive gamblers understand and believe that nothing they do or say will cause the gamblers to gamble, or make the gamblers stop gambling. They can encourage the gamblers to stop gambling with appropriate words and actions, but they cannot make the gamblers stop. Only the gamblers can do that. Those associated with the gamblers have to be determined that they will not make it easier for the gamblers to gamble. For example:

- When the gamblers lie, tell the gamblers you don't believe the lie.
- Avoid the argument by stopping the conversation. Do this by leaving the room, hanging up the phone, taking a drive, or making a phone call to a Gam-Anon friend.

- When the gamblers ask for money, say **NO**, no matter what the gamblers say will happen if they don't get the money.
- Don't pay the gamblers' debts.
- Protect your finances, family finances, and/or business finances from the gamblers so they no longer have access.
- Stop keeping the gambling a secret from those you are trying to protect.
- Separate love and trust.
- Acknowledge that the feelings of fear and guilt will not go away immediately.
- Don't show the fear. Hide the guilt. Act as if your fear and guilt do not exist. They are a source of manipulation and control for the gamblers.
- Speak the truth:
 "You are a compulsive gambler. I love you, but I will not give you any money. I will not gamble with you or listen to your gambling experiences. I will not lie for you. I will not make excuses for you. I will not argue with you to convince you to stop gambling. That is your decision. The solutions to your problems are at Gamblers Anonymous."

Of course this is far from easy. Playing these games has become a way of life and we are terrified of what will happen to us and to our gamblers if we stop. In Gam-Anon, those of us who no longer play these games share what we have learned about ourselves and the illness of compulsive gambling. We share what happened to our lives when we stopped playing the games. Those of us who are still struggling with living with active compulsive gamblers and the chaos and uncertainty of that life listen and learn that there is a way to experience peace, serenity and sanity while living with active gamblers. Those of us living with abstaining gamblers and the financial and emotional aftermath of

the gambling learn how to rebuild honest, truthful relationships when our gamblers are willing to do the same.

We understand and accept that compulsive gambling cannot be cured. In the event that our abstaining gamblers relapse, in spite of whatever excuses they give for doing so, the truth is that their return to gambling has nothing to do with us. The gamblers will try to play the games again because they want to have our financial and emotional assistance with their gambling. Having done that before, and knowing how emotionally and financially destructive these games are, we will now choose not to play. We will use what we have learned and continue to learn in our Gam-Anon program to help us be strong within ourselves and not waiver from that choice.

I no longer have the guilt and anger that I felt towards my parents. Through Gam-Anon I have worked very hard to accept the past, learn from it and move on. I have detached with love from my Mom and Dad who are in their 80's now. I do not participate in discussions of their financial situation. I let them work out their own issues and have discovered that I can have a loving relationship with them that doesn't involve gambling activity and behavior.

Money is no longer an issue because I handle all the money and pay all the bills. We discuss our finances when necessary, but day to day I have what is needed to run the house. My wife stopped gambling, but money is a trigger for her. As soon as we get a tax refund or any extra money, I can see the excitement in her eyes. It is as if she just had a "big win." She never wants to do anything practical or useful with the money.

Getting healthy in Gamblers Anonymous and Gam-Anon has brought serenity and normal living into my gambler's life and my life. Though life is good now I will never get complacent and fall back into the unhealthy lifestyle we had before program. I never want to participate in game playing again.

The Serenity Prayer

God, Grant me the

Serenity to accept the
things I cannot change,

Courage to change the
things I can,

And **Wisdom** to know the
difference.