

Is it Difficult for a Gambler to Quit?

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I once heard of a problem gambler who cut off his finger to prove his determination to quit the habit, but soon after returned to gambling. Recently, I met a help-seeker who did just the same to prove himself to his family. However, it took him just less than a year to return to his old lifestyle, this time with much higher debts. I was astounded. It is no wonder that family members of gambling addicts often lose confidence in their loved ones' recovery. With the high chances of relapse, it is not uncommon for many to be skeptical about a gambler's ability to quit.

- Factors Contributing to Difficult Recovery

The truth is, it is not inborn or natural for a person to be obsessed with gambling to the point of addiction and being unable to quit. However, many problem gamblers find that they cannot break free from the vicious cycle, even after having inflicted harm on themselves, their loved ones and friends. There are a number of factors behind such conflicted behaviour, which we will explore here.

- Gambling is addictive in nature

Many believe gambling to be merely a form of entertainment and a hobby that can be easily controlled. However, the reality is not that simple. Gambling inherently draws people into addiction. Some of the known symptoms include – having persistent thoughts about gambling; thinking of ways to get money to gamble; having to gamble with increasing amounts of money to achieve the desired excitement; having made repeated unsuccessful attempts to control, cut back, or stop gambling; and gambling when feeling distressed. An individual with a combination of such symptoms may be classified as having a gambling disorder, according to the diagnostic criteria from the Diagnostic & Statistical Manual V (DSM-5) published by the American Psychiatric Association. When gambling becomes a disorder and pathological issue, it becomes a challenge for the afflicted person to quit. While effective treatment could help to control the behavior, it may not prevent relapse over time.

- Wrong Motives for Seeking Help

- Seeking resolution only for the debt problem

Many gambling addicts seek help with the sole intention of obtaining a quick fix for their debt problem. Such a gambler often does not see the relationship between his debt and betting habits. With the debt problem being his immediate concern, he believes that all would be well once his debt is resolved. He would disregard his gambling lifestyle, avoid confronting the real issues and persist in irresponsible behaviours. With such a wrong motive, quitting gambling often proves to be a challenge.

- Hoping for 'bail-out' by family members

There are some gamblers who seek help in the hope that their family members would bail them out of debt in exchange. They believe that once they accede to counselling, their family members would pay off their dues. Occasionally, we would encounter an addict who would offer many empty promises without the sincere intention to quit gambling. Once his debts are settled, he would stop attending counselling and support group sessions. On the next occasion he returns for help, his debts would have ballooned and his addiction problem aggravated.

- Appeal from family members or recompense for family 'bail-out'

Some gamblers agree to undergo counselling due to appeal by their family members, or as recompense for the family's help in settling the debts. He attends counselling sessions with the expectation for his family to accept and trust him. When he fails to regain his loved ones' confidence in the immediate term, he would grow doubtful and discouraged, and eventually give up his determination to quit gambling.

- Erroneous Beliefs That Do Not Help Change

- “Gambling can help me clear my debts.”
 We often hear gamblers say, “If I stop gambling, how can I settle my debts?”; “How can I clear my debts with my current salary?”; “I only need to win once to pay off my debts.” Such erroneous thinking causes the gambler to persist in the lifestyle and exacerbates the debt problem.
- “Gambling will make me rich.”
 Some gamblers who had experienced winnings in the past believe that gambling can make them wealthy. Out of this mistaken perception, they believe that they can rely on gambling to amass a fortune and achieve financial fulfilment.
- “Gambling outcomes are predictable.”
 Some gamblers believe that they can accurately predict the chances of winning based on analysis, statistics and research. Upon winning, they would attribute it to their own skill; when they lose, they would blame it on bad luck. In reality, gambling has no predictable outcomes. The result of each game is independent, and there are no real statistics or research that can foretell winning. To put it into perspective, even a jockey is unable to predict the result of his own horse race – let alone a spectator betting on the race.
- “Gambling helps me deal with stress.”
 When encountering emotional stress or relational conflicts, some people choose gambling as a form of escape and relief. It is not uncommon to encounter gamblers who lack necessary skills in dealing with relational challenges and debt issues and as a result, rely on gambling as a coping mechanism.
- Co-dependency
 While family members are critical of the gambling habit, they are usually quick to bail the gambler out of debt due to shame and fear of public embarrassment. They also do so in the hope that their afflicted loved one would change. However, they end up depriving the gambler of the painful but necessary experience of clearing his own debt, as they had taken on the responsibility for

him. It is not unusual for a gambler to rely on his family to bail him out, which not only leads to a lack of motivation to quit, but further deepens the addiction problem.

- **Motivation to Quit Gambling Begins with Self**

For a gambling addict, the first step to recovery is often a genuine realisation of how his actions have impacted those around him, particularly the suffering his loved ones had to undergo. This leads to remorse as well as a desire for self-control and change. Thus begins the journey of recovery, as the gambler wills himself to bear responsibility and confront the real problem. It is often impossible for an addict to recover through self-help or sheer willpower of his own. Hence, it is a mistake to believe that persuading or reprimanding a gambler would bring about permanent change in his behaviour. Instead, the immediate need is to seek specialised help from a counselling centre that deals with gambling addiction. As part of the recovery journey, the gambler would undergo one-to-one counselling and attend support group meetings, in addition to developing a lifestyle change and focusing on family restoration.

For a person walking out of gambling addiction, the key is to find purpose in a new life of freedom. This includes working on reconciliation with his family, pursuing a wholesome life and refusing to return to his old lifestyle. Among the other needs are also the need to acquire a new perception on the value of money and to find new priorities for his time. These little changes will further strengthen his motivation to walk out of addiction.

- **How to Deal with the Challenges of Quitting?**

Singapore offers multiple, accessible avenues for gambling. With such availability and allure, quitting gambling is not a simple task. Hence, we advise help-seekers to keep watch over the following areas in their own lives:

- **Action**

Firstly, the gambler has to express determination to quit. This includes:

- Declaring his commitment to quit and the follow-up actions required;
 - Disconnecting himself from any gambling news or media;

- Cancelling all his gambling accounts;
 - Avoiding every form of gambling and associated places; and
 - Avoiding socialisation with other gamblers so as not to be influenced.

- Thoughts

Gambling addicts often face persistent thoughts and strong urges to gamble. Hence, the recovery road often requires the addict to remind himself of the suffering gambling would bring to his family and himself. He needs to keep his desires and thoughts in check, make every effort to run from temptation and not to lower his guard. If he realises that he is vulnerable to relapse, or had already gone back to gambling, we would urge him to seek immediate help to prevent deterioration of his situation.

- Remorse and Forgiveness

As the gambler becomes remorseful and turns from his wrongdoings, there is also a need for him to learn to forgive himself and to rise from the ashes of his former ways. This requires him to seek forgiveness from his family members and take steps towards reconciliation. In his faith, a gambler who seeks and receives forgiveness from God would find peace and strength for the recovery road.

- Managing Finances and Emotions Effectively

Ineffective management of finances and emotions tends to push the gambler back into relapse. To strengthen the recovery process, he needs to work on rebuilding family relationships, especially in dealing with negative emotions and mistrust. Furthermore, it is important that he plans and manages his debt repayments well. This would help keep him from succumbing to the thought of “trying his luck” again in order to repay his debts.

- Family Support

Recovering addicts often face many struggles along the way. We find that their loved ones’ participation in support group and counselling sessions help greatly in their recovery. In addition, by being part of the help process, family members

learn how to better understand the gambler and provide support along the journey. Nevertheless, family members are strongly advised not to provide financial help to clear the gambler's debts; neither should such 'bail-out' be the condition for the gambler to seek help.

We often say that recovery from gambling addiction is a life-long journey. Similarly, repayment of debts is a long road, and it is inevitable for stressful situations to crop up along the way. In difficult times, we encourage family members not to continually reprimand or blame the gambler, as this would be counter-productive and might drive him into relapse. Instead, the best way is for family members to remain calm and to continue expressing support for the recovering gambler, so as to boost his confidence in recovery.

CONCLUSION:

It is unfortunate to witness how problem gambling has brought about adversity for those afflicted as well as their family members. Among our help-seekers, we have encountered some who had been offered many opportunities for recovery, which they had regrettably walked away from. However, in my years as a counsellor at One Hope Centre, I have witnessed many gamblers turning over a new leaf and changing for the better. They have become peer supporters and volunteers in helping others quit gambling. It is my hope that family members and people in the community would be like the Father in the Biblical parable of the Prodigal Son, who would embrace repentant gamblers, give them another chance and accompany them in their recovery journey.