

## Effective help is available for problem gamblers

writes GRAEME PENNEY.

Australians spend around \$19b on gambling per year. \$12B is via gaming machines where most gambling related problems occur. Figures like these give a perception that we are a nation of gamblers. Is that true?

In 2010 the Productivity Commission's Gambling Enquiry reported that only 4% of the Australian population play the pokies more than once per week. 70% don't gamble at all. Only about 1% of people gamble in a way that causes significant problems to themselves and their families.

Although 1% sounds like a small number the prevalence does not matter if you are one of the 1%. The harms caused by excessive gambling are well documented and include financial hardship, debt, disharmony in the family, a loss of self-esteem, depression and suicide. Another problem for those who have difficulty controlling their gambling is not knowing who to turn to.

Problems caused by excessive gambling can harm more than just the player. A NSW Population Health Survey in 2007 found over 10% of the population had experienced a gambling problem in the family. 7% had experienced diabetes in the family and 3% had experienced cancer. Problem gambling impacts three times more people than cancer does.

One definition of problem gambling from Gambling Research Australia cites problem gambling as "...characterised by difficulties in limiting time/money spent on gambling which leads to adverse consequences for the gambler, other, or for the community."

These "adverse consequences" are not just about the amount of money lost. For some, gambling takes them away from life choices, limits time spent with family, causes a reduction in other interests and leads to a compromised view of their self. The worry caused by mounting loss and rising debt affects a person's temperament and physical and emotional wellbeing.

Most people who face difficulties with their own gambling or are affected by the gambling of someone close to them don't seek help. Yet professional support is one thing the gambler can be certain of.

The Productivity Commission's enquiry reported that when people seek professional help for a gambling problem the majority of people benefit from the intervention. Samaritans knows this "majority" is about 80%. Significant change can, and does, occur when people admit to the problem.

Therapist Fritz Perls understood this willingness to change when he quoted, "Nothing changes 'til it becomes what it is." When the person sees the gambling as something that is no longer harmless fun or a pleasant diversion to life's ups and downs but see it as something that is destructive in their life, then change will occur.

Samaritans Gambling and Financial Counselling Service is just one of more than 40 specialised free face to face *gamblingHELP* counselling services throughout NSW. These services are funded by the Responsible Gambling Fund through the NSW Government. These effective services not only work with the gambler to implement change but offer valuable support to anyone affected by the

gambling of another person. Family and friends of the gambler can discover ways to support their loved one, maintain their own life outside of gambling or find ways to protect joint assets from being lost to gambling. In some circumstances the partner wants out of the relationship and counselling can help reduce the trauma of that transition.

For the person who is gambling excessively counselling can help make sense of a behaviour that seems out of control and unstoppable. Excessive gambling happens for a reason and counselling can help the person discover that reason, be it an escape from painful feelings to the thrill of the chase or the false expectation of making money.

For some gamblers it can be helpful to explore the factors that contribute to their urge to gamble. This urge can be powerful yet subtle and takes the person beyond their desired dollar limit. The urge can be increased by machine characteristics such as features and free spins or by factors in the person's life. When these factors are understood their role in the overall problem gambling picture can be seen.

Things like loss of a partner, loss of a job, experiencing some form of recent or past trauma or your children leaving home can lead to problem gambling for some people, especially when other issues compound the distress. Gambling counsellors are agents of change and can help people figure out their unwanted gambling behaviour.

It is very rewarding to witness someone move from the grips of problem gambling. They can see the rough road behind them more clearly and can understand what caused some of the pot holes. They know they have turned a corner and although the road ahead might be a little uncertain they sense it is much smoother and is leading to a happier place.

**Graeme Penney is a counsellor for Samaritans Gambling & Financial Counselling Service. The service covers the Cessnock, Maitland, Singleton and Muswellbrook areas and can be reach on 4993 3455.**

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### Helpful numbers

*gamblingHELP* face to face counselling in the Hunter

Samaritans	Cessnock, Maitland, Singleton, Muswellbrook	4993 3455
Wesley Mission	Newcastle	4963 9200
Mission Australia	Newcastle, Maitland, Singleton, Muswellbrook	4033 4927
Lake Macquarie Gambling & Financial Counselling.	Lake Macquarie	4950 5108
<i>gamblingHELP</i> line		1800 858 858