

I write today to speak of my experiences with the help services for problem gamblers in South Australia.

My experiences with the helping professions for the most part have been anything BUT helpful...the counselling service provided by Breakeven caused my family and myself a great deal of harm that I now know need never have been. This may have been the result of the unethical practices of just one counsellor, but I know of at least three other people like me whose lives have turned upside down after they sought help as a direct result of the tendency of counselling to focus on the problems in a gamblers life and ascribe to those problems causation for the individuals gambling.

I approached Breakeven just eight weeks prior to an interstate move. I told the counsellor I saw on my first visit that I had just eight weeks to

1. understand to some degree why I did what I did
and
2. to find out what I needed to do to quit.

The counsellor I saw assured me that this could be achieved in the allotted time. But it was not to be.

After just three one-hour sessions of counselling, I worked out that I was not going to get straight answers to either of the two questions I had. I was going to have to work out the answers to the why of my gambling myself AND after that, I was going to have to work out what I needed to do to quit successfully through a trial and error process. The difficulty I had with that was that I had already spent over three years trying to work out answers to those two questions on my own and had failed miserably to work it out.

At the time I made my first appointment to see a problem gambling counsellor I had come to the conclusion that I was missing some obviously vital piece of information about what caused me to keep going back to the machines despite having an ardent daily desire to not do so. I knew that most of the financial and relationship difficulties I was experiencing in my life were caused by my daily visits to the pokies and I knew that any road blocks I put in place

to stop myself from going to the machines seemed to become just one more challenge to overcome. I sought help, wanting to know what other people had tried that had proven successful...I wanted to know what the “experts” knew worked.

But that is not the way counselling is supposed to work...the client is supposed to work out his or her own solutions. Clients, counsellors will tell, you don't like to be told what to do. This may be true enough, but clients suffering from the harm gambling has caused in their life need to be educated and guided and told what has been tried and found workable by other people who have been through the same experience. They need an active and practical, step-by-step approach to quitting – especially in the early days when stress levels are high and their ability to learn new tasks limited because of their high anxiety levels. They need constant reassurance that taking one day at a time, planning their days and following a written plan of action will result in success. They need to know that the manufacturers of the pokies spend millions of dollars researching ways to get people to change their behaviour and not realize that what they are doing is risking some of their hard earned money to get more.

And finally, they need to hear other gamblers stories – to realize that they aren't alone. They need to be told that many thousands of people have done what they have done – and that most of those who did once lived very healthy, functional lives before they began playing the machines.

Sadly, all I got that I needed in the eight weeks of counselling I received at Breakeven was one bit of vital information that enabled me to quit gambling. Without money I was told, I could not gamble. Handling money (or having access to it) both enabled me to go to the machines and triggered the urge to do so. This made so much sense that I wondered that I had not thought of it before. If I wanted to quit gambling, I had to relinquish all access to money. I handed my then husband all credit and ATM cards right after my first session of counselling.

What I didn't get was information about other stimuli in my environment, how they evoke the urge to gamble and how to counter them. I was not told that I was going to need to find 'other than gambling' things to do to fill the six to eight hours per day, five days a week that I had been spending in various gaming rooms, or that my motivation to take up previously fulfilling activities was going to be lacking for a time.

I was not told that I was likely to go through a difficult and anxiety provoking time, where the desire to go to the machines would seem almost overwhelming. I was not told who to contact should I need support between counselling sessions, and I was not told that my husband needed to fully understand the importance of his role in helping me through the hardships ahead if I was to reach my goal of quitting the bet.

What I got was a constant focus on how I felt about my husbands "lack of interest in fulfilling my needs" and questions about whether or not his actions seemed "normal" to me. All the positive strengths of my husbands and my relationship were ignored, all the negatives picked up on, questioned and discussed ad infinitum.

Despite the constant focus on the negatives traits of my husband's personality and how this affected me, I was pleased that I had quit gambling and that the family finances were rapidly improving. I had worked out what other than nursing I wanted to do and had plans to begin retraining for my new career once we had moved.

I had what I now know to be a high bottom. I still had financial resources, had not taken out an unmanageable number of loans and had somehow managed to pay our general household bills while I was gambling without having power, gas or phone disconnected. I was as a result of not gambling, sleeping and eating better than I had for years. My husband and I had begun working together to reestablish open and honest communications and after 19 years of marriage we had begun taking time out from parenting and work to simply be in each other's company – to reconnect and rediscover what it was that kept

us together all those years. For the first time in almost four years, I felt healthy, happy and had a positive outlook on life. After eight weeks, I was ready to walk away from gambling and counselling and pick up the threads of my life in a new location.

But it was not to be.

During what was to be the last session of counselling before my family and I left for our new life interstate, after yet another session focused my husbands faults and lack of consideration for me and our children, I received, from the counsellor a phone number – his! I was told that he had done this many times before for what he called his “special clients”...I was told that he counselled people privately and that in his opinion, the counsellors where I was going were not “particularly good nor suitable” for someone with the “kind of problems” I had...I was told that when I got settled at my destination, I was to give him a call – to keep in touch.

I took the number and spent the next three weeks trying to resolve what it was about my gambling that needed further resolution that might have motivated the counsellor to offer to continue our association....I wondered if I had once again missed something important to know that would ensure I stayed away from the pokies...I wondered if “the expert” knew something I did not about women and their gambling....and I wondered at the purpose of further counselling if I had not had any desire to go to the machines during the previous eight weeks. I wondered also if he wanted a friend (we got on well – had mutual intellect and interests) or a client who still had money to pay for his services.

I wondered if there was more I needed a problem gambling counsellor to help me work through, but couldn't understand why did I not know it if this was so. If he wanted me as a friend, then why mention that he counselled “special clients” privately over the phone? If not a friend, then what I wondered was my role in the ongoing relationship? What made me “a special” client?

When giving me his phone number, the counsellor made no mention of the purpose or direction of our ongoing relationship...I was left to work it out for myself – worse, how I approached him during any phone call came with risk of loss. I risked losing a counsellor if I spoke to him as a friend and I risked insulting his friendship if I treated him as a counsellor. After two or three phone calls had failed to resolve the dilemma, I phoned him at work and asked him if he thought my relationship with my husband was the cause of my gambling. He answered, “yes”.

That answer left me with a clear message – in this “experts” view if I was to stay away from the pokies, I was going to have to get out of denial about my “abusive husband” and do something to stop the abuse, or I was going to have to leave him. Only how was I to give a reason for leaving - I couldn’t see where his behaviour was abusive. Also I realized if I left him, I was going to have to continue working as a nurse to support our three children - a notion that filled me with such despair that I contemplated suicide. But even suicide I eventually realized was not an option – I couldn’t leave my children to be raised by a man who may be abusive. I couldn’t stay in the marriage without risking using the pokies to “escape” from my spouse’s abuse....I couldn’t leave without risking returning to the pokies to “escape” from a job I had come to hate doing. Returning to the pokies was what I very much did not want to do – I hated the person I had become while gambling.

Unable to resolve the unresolvable dilemma...left with more questions than answers and a morbid fear that no matter what I did, I risked returning to the hell of gambling, I fell apart physically, mentally and emotionally. After just three weeks in the new location I returned to Adelaide and attempted to resolve the dilemma with the only counsellor who knew my story – he, I suspect realizing that he had projected his beliefs about the cause of women’s gambling into the therapeutic space, attempted to convince me that my partner of 19 years was not abusive - that I had misinterpreted and over-reacted to his behaviour when frustrated. This only served to confuse me further - by then, my husband was exceedingly distressed and angry over my leaving. His behaviour towards me see-sawed between being verbally

abusive, desperately needy and suicidal and angrily threatening of the counsellor.

Realizing that the counsellor couldn't help me, I left, but continued to call him on occasion when my husbands tirades distressed me. Eventually I was referred on by the counsellor - to "a close personal friend" of his - for further counselling. I now suspect he did this to cover his butt and to keep an eye on me – to see if I might report him to his professional association over his unethical, incompetent counselling.

Unfortunately by then I was in such a mess psychologically – so unable to make a decision about even the simplest of tasks or to speak coherently for longer than ten minutes, that reporting him to the relevant licensing body was the last thing I was capable of. I didn't stay long in the second counselling relationship. It soon became obvious to me that my new counsellor was doing what I had feared what would happen – she minimized the effect her friends unethical actions had on me and changed the topic of conversation whenever his name was mentioned.

It was six months after ending the relationship with the second counsellor before I finally found my way to a psychotherapist and another 18 months after that before I was stable enough – and trusting enough of her - to begin to sort out what went wrong in the initial counselling. By the time I began psychotherapy, I exhibited all the signs of schizoaffective disorder....my mind a racing jumble of words and thoughts, my emotions changeable from moment to moment and my behaviour unpredictable – and even to me - bizarre. Never before in my 40 plus years of life had I had any psychological disturbance. Never before had I been unable to function or make myself understood. Needless to say, it has been a very long, traumatic and expensive journey back to psychological health for me.

Late in 2003, I approached the problem gambling treatment service at Flinders Medical Center. Despite it being over four years since quitting the pokies, I was at that time still dealing with the urge to gamble almost daily. I

found the staff at the center helpful in the extreme. They told me from the outset what the behavioural management program they ran involved...both what my role was and theirs. I was told what would be focused on when and constantly reassured that if I followed the program faithfully that the urges would disappear.

I have since then completed their "stimulus exposure, response prevention" program. After completing it, for the first time since I began playing the pokies regularly in 1995, I no longer heard the sound of a pokies winning jingle when I closed my eyes to sleep. I no longer dreamt of playing the pokies and I no longer worried about slipping back into old habits or that I might return to playing the pokies when my stress levels were high. I now have enjoyable things to do that fill my days and I have money in the bank! I have now developed what can only be called a non-gambling habit.

How I wish I had found my way to the Flinders program back in 1999. How I wish I had not trusted that problem gambling counsellors knew best what needed to be dealt with to quit the pokies.

The basic treatment paradigm of counselling in South Australia is one that is based on the medical model - the self-medicating theory in particular holds sway amongst many counsellors. The self-medication theory of addiction holds that the addict seeks, through their addiction, a way to anaesthetize their psychological pain or to avoid dealing with problems and stresses in their life.

With this model of counselling, the focus of each session is less about what information and advice the counsellor imparts to an unknowing and uninformed client and more about the clients relationship issues, their poor stress coping skills and inability to face up to the problems life throws at them. This model shifts the focus of the counsellor from "how can I be of service" or "what can I help you to learn", to "you don't have a gambling problem....you have a relationship issue. Let's look at your relationships - if you deal with your relationship issues, you won't be driven to go to the machines any more".

I have forgotten how many former problem gamblers have in telling me of their gambling said, “I didn’t really have a gambling problem – I had a problem with my husband” or “I didn’t really have a gambling problem as such – my counsellor said I had a problem coping with my husbands failing business”. I liken this to telling a five year old child that if they deal with their relationship issue with their mother, they won’t feel the need to go to the toilet every time their bladder is full. No where is mention made of the way the pokies are designed to get the player to continue playing....nowhere is mention made of the effect the conditioning process has on each and every human made in counselling – except perhaps by the people at Flinders.

The “gamble to escape or medicate” paradigm causes the counsellor to focus the client almost entirely on their dysfunction and problems and ignores their lack of knowledge of the social and psychological conditioning process inherent in the gambling activity. How is the client able to alter their behaviour if they are kept in the dark about all the influences in and around them that contrive to influence it and get them to act a certain way?

I have yet to speak with anyone who has been on initial contact with the help services fully informed of what to expect of counselling or during counselling. Counselling, I’ve discovered since is a journey – the steps taken follow a reasonably predictable course of progression, beginning initially with establishing that the clients immediate physical needs for food, shelter and safety are being met, and ending with discussion and clarification of their spiritual needs. For some reason, problem gamblers entering the straight counselling services are not given a run down of what to expect each week. Only on entering the program offered by the Flinders Medical Center’s Center for Anxiety Related Disorders, Problem Gambling Treatment unit was I ever given any kind of plan of action.

I believe it is vital that clients be fully informed about what they can expect during the course of the treatment program they are about to enter. The counsellor through their superior knowledge of human behaviour and the counselling process, is the holder of the power in the counsellor / client

relationship. The client is vulnerable in their lack of knowledge. Because of it, the client needs first and foremost to be able to trust that the “expert” will give to them the information and help they need to achieve what they want to achieve. If that information and advice is not forthcoming, clients are left to either work out for themselves what their role is in their recovery process at a time when they are most unknowing and stressed or leave counselling and find their answers elsewhere. For those who stay, there is a need to shift their focus from what is going on in their world to watching the counsellor’s reactions in order to get from them the pieces of vital information they need to solve their problem.

The medical model – and the theory that gamblers gamble as a way of medicating their pain in particular – is a paradigm that underpins most counselling of problem gamblers in South Australia today. Little if any attention is paid to the other two factors known to contribute to the development of any addiction – namely the social and environmental conditioning and the genetic component.

I have spent many years discussing and researching the issue of gambling addiction as it relates to the pokies – counselling that focuses almost entirely on the gamblers “dysfunctional personality”, poor coping skills, undiagnosed depression or their abusive relationships does not help the person who seeks to understand why they keep doing what they know to be causing them harm despite wanting to stop doing it...it does not help the person who seeks the advice of the “problem gambling experts” about the steps they need to take to quit successfully. It harms those people whose self esteem and self worth is at an all time low because they have kept doing what they want to stop doing.

The Quit smoking program provides ample suggestions and advice for people who want to quit successfully. People who quit smoking stand straight and tall for many years afterwards and declare, “I used to smoke – I quit back in XYZ – best thing I ever did”. Problem gamblers on the other hand, look around themselves furtively to check if anyone else is about who might over hear them, then they whisper conspiratorially, “Just between you and me, I once

had a problem with the pokies....I quit about X number of years ago....But I didn't really have a gambling problem you understand - my psychiatrist said I had a marriage problem...." As one woman said to me, "I attempted suicide because I had gone through \$15,000 of our savings gambling – my husband found out about it the day I tried to kill myself"...."While I was in hospital, my husband and my best friend began having an affair. My psychiatrist said that I didn't have a gambling problem".... "On some level he said, I knew my husband was going to have an affair, and because I was so dependent on him, I couldn't deal with the thought of losing him, so I played the pokies".

Is counselling of this kind helpful for problem gamblers? No – it is the clinicians beliefs that are projected onto the therapeutic space – the client unable to trust their own beliefs and perceptions after years of trying and failing to control their own behaviour, credits the problem gambling expert with a wisdom that they don't have.

My experience wasn't quite as obviously irrational as the woman whose husband had an affair was blamed for her gambling, but it was based on the same underlying belief – that the gambler gambles to escape the problems in their life that they don't want to face....This helps the counsellors whose stock and trade is helping people with their relationships to feel good about what they do, but it doesn't help problem gamblers with the questions they most want answered....why do I continue playing the pokies when I desperately want to quit?...and what do I need to do to quit?

I am submitting this paper anonymously – I still fear repercussions from what is in effect a small community of counsellors protective of themselves, each other and their treatment paradigms. I will not be speaking to my submission at the public hearing, though I am willing to speak to members of the board at another time 'in camera' if further information on the matters I have raised in my submission are required.