

The Odds of Addiction

By Karel Murray

This article has been months in the making; a journey of self discovery regarding the nature of addictive behavior. Some of you who read my articles religiously each month will probably be surprised and a bit dismayed. Make sure you read the entire article. Read on if you are curious. Read on especially if you can identify with what I'm talking about when it comes to the nature of "compulsion" and hopefully my words will help you build the strength to regain control before it goes too far.

I was staying at a Hotel/Casino operation for a speaking engagement and a friend of mine agreed to meet me there. Her eyes lit up with eagerness as she relished the clanging, ringing sounds emanating from the gaming area. Her expression of pure anticipation captured my attention, enough so that I asked, "What is it exactly about gambling that delights you so much?"

Such a simple question triggered my search regarding compulsion and obsessive behavior.

Quite frankly, I don't have many indulgences other than Brahmin purses, fun prescription glasses, no foam lattes, chocolate (any kind), and southwest jewelry. Each in themselves appears to be harmless and obviously do not pertain to addictive behavior. However, I must realistically evaluate my eating habits and recognize my weight gain is a result of unrestricted enjoyment of high calorie foods which has resulted in a back that hurts from carrying around all those extra pounds. Genetically, I've recognized that many of us can have the seed that allows us to become absorbed in self destructive behavior.

Upon seeing my friend's sheer excitement for the slot machines, I asked her to take me on a tour and educate me as to why she found "pulling slots" so much fun. And boy, did I learn a lot about gambling... I became intrigued with the psychology of gaming as well as why people felt it was so much fun, even when a person considers that the odds are in the casino's favor in terms of gobbling up hard earned income.

What became an intellectual endeavor, evolved into a thrill chase. I started playing penny slots and discovered that I wasn't really only playing pennies. The minimum I could bet was fifteen or twenty cents per touch of the button. In order to get a better payback, of course you have to invest (my friend's term) more for each pull. I rationalized betting up to \$2.00 each time would increase my rate of return.

And at times it did prove profitable... winning \$500 on a fifty cent turn. Wow! No wonder people shriek with excitement. However, the more I began to win, the higher the anticipation I experienced in returning to my favorite casino haunt. I began to dream about spinning wheels, poker hands, and cashing in my tickets.

At first, I thought it was amusing that people seemed to have their favorite games. I've been approached three times (a light tap on the shoulder) by people who stand behind me waiting for me to finish with my round of play. Waiting and smoking, tapping their foot impatiently as I tried to ignore them. I was there first, right?

Curiously enough, I began to have favorite slot machines. Ancient Treasures which has a magic orb feature, the bonus double Diamond machines, or how about that Event Monopoly! I went to them faithfully and felt irritation when someone had the audacity to be sitting in my chair. I actually laughed when I realized what I was feeling!

But then, these old faithful machines started to let me down - eating up my precious pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters. They showed no remorse what-so-ever. The honeymoon was over.

And I played on ... convinced that my superior gaming sense and luck would save the day. I was never extravagant in my spending, \$50 at a time, but I knew if I didn't rationally consider what was actually happening, a decline in my "stopping power" would be imminent. After analyzing my feelings, and thoughts just before I entered a casino, I realized I was paying money to zone out.

You read that correctly. By watching the reels spin, I thought of nothing else going on with my life; busy schedules, work to finish, calls to make all seemed far away. There was only the Repeat Spin button to push. In my mind, I became one of those people with glazed eyes, wandering from machine to machine.

Something is really wrong with this picture.

That's when I woke up and observed the behavior science that has been built around human compulsion. The slot machine bells, whistles and lights are created to be hypnotic and beaconing. Often a machine that isn't being used will have a specific tone or musical cue to entice gamers. The din of noise pulsing around me is actually deafening... no wonder I couldn't think. . Cigarette and cigar smoke blown in my face by a neighboring slot player saturated my clothing. And, as a non smoker, it's something I can't tolerate, but had ignored because it was a necessary exchange for gambling.

It's the thrill of the POSSIBLE win that keeps people coming back as well as a way to be among people, yet "play" alone. Where else can someone spend money with the possibility of winning enough to pay that month's mortgage? In fact, there are actually professional slot players who make a living out of this type of gambling.

But a real harsh reality surfaced... I realized that by being isolated while I travel, and by playing the slot machines, I had entered a fraternity of fellow gamers. And I didn't know that I had signed up.

That is when I put this activity in the proper perspective.

Intellectual curiosity satisfied, I've initiated a productive course of action. Moderate play periodically is enough. Find other activities that stimulate the brain, rather than shut it down now are higher on the list. It's about recognizing personally what is good for me and reinforcing that. I don't want to shut my brain off; it's the most vibrant part of who I am.

My understanding and compassion for those who struggle daily to fight their destructive behavior has increased ten fold. I was never in danger of sinking into a death spiral of gambling. But I recognize now how easy it could be for others to do so. My belief is that we

all need something beautiful in our lives and that we should work constantly to help that beauty grow within ourselves.

Positive action is the payoff.

Accomplishment of personal goals is the thrill.

The ever expanding adventure we call life is waiting outside whatever dark door we have opened.

It's your life – why not live it nurturing your inner heart and soul. Only you can put the odds in your favor.

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