



Author shares his journey of recovery from compulsive gambling

Looking back on it, Bill Lee, author of *Born to Lose: Memoirs of a Compulsive Gambler* (Hazelden, 2005), realizes that his gambling addiction began in the third grade when he would wager his cherished baseball card collection in "pitch the card" contests during recess. Soon he was pitching pennies and nickels against other kids on the playground. By age 10, he was playing blackjack and poker and finding other creative ways to gamble.

He recalls: "When it was raining outside, the window in my classroom served as a game of chance, as my classmates and I picked individual droplets and wagered on their race to the bottom of the pane."

After decades of accumulating and losing small fortunes, Lee forfeited everything he owned at a blackjack table when his winning streak spiraled into a devastating loss. By that time his marriage had failed, his teenage son had run away from home, and his thoughts were suicidal. Lee's journey of recovery has been a fragile but hopeful one, with Gamblers Anonymous (GA) at its core.

Lee's experience underscores the progressive nature of compulsive gambling--a treatable addiction characterized by increasing preoccupation with gambling, a need to bet more money more frequently, restlessness or irritability when attempting to stop, and loss of control manifested by continuation of the gambling behavior in spite of mounting, serious, negative consequences.

According to the National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG), 2 million (1 percent) U.S. adults are estimated to meet the criteria for pathological, or compulsive, gambling in a given year.

Another 4-8 million (2-3 percent) are considered "problem gamblers," meaning they do not meet the full diagnostic criteria for pathological gambling, but they are experiencing problems due to their gambling behavior. Only two states (Hawaii and Utah) do not have legalized gambling.

Gaming is the fastest growing industry in the United States, and gambling is the fastest growing addiction. No longer just a problem for male adults, now youth, the elderly, and women are being affected in record numbers. For every compulsive gambler, it is estimated that five others are affected by the addiction. In his book, Lee stresses the importance of Gam-Anon, a mutual-support group for the loved ones of addicted gamblers.

"Gam-Anon members sometimes envy spouses of addicts in other fellowships whose drug of choice is alcohol, food, or sex," writes Lee. "At least with those addictions, the healing can begin as soon as the addiction is in remission; whereas in gambling, the financial damage can last a lifetime and beyond."

According to GA, once a gambling addict, always a gambling addict. "The first bet to a problem gambler is like the first small drink to an alcoholic. Sooner or later he or she falls back into the same old destructive pattern," their Web site states. In GA, members work the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) that have been revised to reflect an addiction to gambling. Like AA, GA is a microcosm of our society. Young and old, rich and poor, professionals and blue-collar, men and women of a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds gather to listen to and support their fellow members. In describing his own GA group, Lee writes: "Everyone present has bounced a check, faced bankruptcy, and at least contemplated suicide. More than half are recovering from multiple addictions. A few proclaim that gambling is harder to kick than heroin and crack."

Like alcoholism, compulsive gambling can be thought of as a "family disease." Lee traces the addiction back at least three generations in his own family, and he writes poignantly about the effects his obsessive gambling had on his own son. But, like alcoholism, the disease cycle can be interrupted when compulsive gamblers take an honest look at their destructive behaviors and get the help they so

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desperately need.

To learn more about compulsive gambling and recovery for individuals and families, contact GA at <http://www.gamblersanonymous.org/> (213-386-8789). For information on NCPG, visit <http://www.ncpgambling.org/> or for Gam-Anon, go to <http://www.gam-anon.org/>.

--Published May 30, 2005

Alive & Free is a health column that provides information to help prevent substance abuse problems and address such problems. It is created by Hazelden, a nonprofit agency based in Center City, Minn., that offers a wide range of information and services on addiction. For more resources, [email](#) or call Hazelden at 800-257-7810 (outside the US 651-213-4200).