Women Addicted To Gambling

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With the rise of on-line poker, compulsive gambling is becoming an issue of national concern. And it's not just men who become addictions. The Early Show national correspondent Hattie Kauffman found a growing number of women are developing a gambling habit, as well.

In the 1980s, Melanie Morgan was a successful TV anchor. But her gambling addiction cost her her job and nearly destroyed her marriage.

"The reality is, the longer that you gamble compulsively, which is what I was doing, the more you become a compulsive liar," she said. "I would lie about where I was going, what I was doing, who I was with, how much money I was spending."

Even when she became pregnant, Morgan could not break the habit in order to focus on her growing family.

"I was in a terrible environment, a smoke filled room, hardly taking care of myself. I was gambling right up until an hour before I gave birth," she said.

After her son was born, she would leave the infant with an assortment of baby sitters, so she could go back to the tables.

"I remember packing up the baby one day," said her husband, Jack, "driving around to each of the card rooms where I thought she might be … finally locating her, and taking the baby in its carrier and putting the baby in the middle of the poker table." At that point, he would confront his wife, "saying, 'You got a choice, you know, play cards, or do you want to be a mom?'"

"I knew at that point, I was in desperate trouble, and I knew I was sick and..."
Lesley Stahl Reports On Online Gaming, Illegal Yet Thriving

needed help. And I still didn't want to stop," Melanie recalled.

Kauffman says that people used to have to make a trip to Las Vegas or Atlantic City to gamble non-stop, but now the lure is everywhere. For example, even in Phoenix, visitors are greeted with the Arizona Gambler's Guide, listing 22 casinos, horse racing, dog racing, bingo and more.

Kauffman met with three women, all in recovery from compulsive gambling, to hear their stories. "I lost $300,000," she was told by Vicki. "It was all of my retirement money."

Shannon lost count of her losses, but knows they were serious. "I had thought it was around $35,000, but my husband stated it was closer to $50,000," she said.

For Fredia, the financial loss was enormous, but it was just the beginning. Not only did she gamble away between $150,000 and $200,000, she lost a year of her life when she went to prison for stealing cash to gamble.

"The sick, compulsive gambler will do whatever they have to do to gamble," she told Kauffman. "It is an addiction."

Psychologist Paul Good says it used to be that most women gambled to escape their everyday lives. But, now, more are simply lured by the action.

"A sense of excitement, of being on the edge, that you are literally holding your fate in your own hands at a poker table," said Good. "For a woman, that can be a very powerfully riveting experience."

According to the National Council on Problem Gambling, twenty years ago, only a handful of those seeking help for a gambling addiction were women. Now, almost half are female.

"You are going to see gambling take its place alongside alcoholism and drug abuse as being one of the most significant addictions of our time," predicted Good.

The women who seek treatment and attend a 12-step program often manage to get their lives back. Melanie Morgan has a broadcast career again and hasn't gambled in 14 years, but she knows it's just one day at a time.

"One bet, that's all it takes and I could instantly be back in that place that I was before," she said.

All of the women who shared their stories with Kauffman said they were doing it to help others, remembering a time when they thought they were alone with their addictions. There is a number to call for help with gambling problems: 1-800-GAMBLER.

Only On The Web: Hear more from Melanie and Jack Morgan on the gambling habit that nearly destroyed their lives, and a psychologist assesses what the gambling culture means in today's society, click here.

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