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HIGH STAKES OF GAMBLING / GAMING ISSUE

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WHAT'S INSIDE

Calendar / 2

Cultural Myths That Undermine Our Happiness and Well-being/ 3

Support Groups / 4

Video Gaming: The Next 12-Step Frontier / 5

Gardening Lessons / 12

IT'S ONLY A GAME

OR IS IT

by Pat Samples

Gaming disorder, recently recognized by the World Health Organization as a disease, affects only a small proportion of people who engage in digital- or video-gaming activities. But for those affected, the addiction can be all-consuming, controlling the mind. Gaming addict Julian Struksheats tells his story in this interview with *The Phoenix Spirit*. The interview has been edited for length.

HOW DID YOUR INTEREST IN VIDEO GAMES BEGIN?

We got our first video game console – an Atari system – when I was five or six. Then we got Nintendo. I remember playing that a lot without any real problem.

Around the age of 17, in 1997, we got our first computer and this one game called the Age of Empires. I remember walking to the library one day, thinking I've got to crack that CD in half. I remember thinking, this is taking time away from school and other things I want to do. So I stopped playing it.

In college, I got a computer game called EverQuest. It was so addictive that people called it EverCrack. My grades dropped, and I barely made it into grad school.

DID YOU PLAY THIS GAME WITH FRIENDS?

You play with people online from all over the world. Nobody I knew in person played it.

HOW WAS THE GAME AFFECTING YOU?

It was on my mind all through the week. I spent many, many, many hours playing it. I ended up selling my online avatar for money and bought other online avatars that are part of this game. It became a source of income.

DID YOU HAVE OTHER THINGS YOU WERE INVOLVED IN?

I did play basketball with a few friends. I went to movies with my family. I lived at home during college so I helped take care of my younger siblings. Nonetheless, I look back and remember how much time I lost playing games. I would rather that I had spent those thousands of hours learning to play the piano or making works of art. I'm a painter, a sculptor. This game just sucked up so much of my time.

In grad school, I stopped playing it. But this other game came out, World of Warcraft. I played that for 14 years. I bet I quit it seven times.

WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO TRY TO QUIT?

I wasn't performing at the level I wanted to in grad school. It was affecting my love life. I would play games instead of going out on dates or doing things with friends and family. Every night I would get home to play the game for four to five hours. On the weekends, sometimes for 14 hours straight.

I dawdled around in grad school, taking longer than I should have, in very large part due to the game. I quit the game several times in grad school for that reason. OK, this is taking up too much of time. I'm sick of it.

The whole time I pretty much felt guilty about it. I felt it was something I had to hide because I was embarrassed that I did this as an adult. A lot of what addicts do is done in secret. It's one of the things that creates internal shame and prevents them from seeking help. It affects your self-worth a lot. It's very insidious.

IT'S ONLY A GAME to pg 9

How Gambling Disorder Distorts the Brain

by Bill Stein

for Northstar Problem Gambling

Addiction — of any kind — is often difficult for many people to understand. But gambling disorder, a compulsion in which no chemicals are actually ingested into the body, can be particularly confounding.

Gambling disorder refers to the uncontrollable urge to gamble, despite serious personal consequences. In 2013, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5 grouped gambling disorder into a category of disorders that also includes substance abuse. This change was made in light of new neuroscience research and brain imaging studies that show that people with gambling disorder have a lot in common with drug and alcohol addicts, including the changes in behavior and brain activity.

This article examines the physiology of gambling disorder, including why it's hard for some people to resist the urge to gamble and why some people continue to

gamble even after the activity ceases to be enjoyable.

THE BRAIN'S REWARD NETWORK

The genesis of gambling disorder begins in the reward network of the brain, which consists of the ventral striatum (also known as the "reward hub") and the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC). The role of the reward hub is to recognize the cues that suggest when a reward may be coming. This part of the brain is activated when a reward is anticipated, such as when your dog is coming to the door to greet you or when you smell a tasty dinner cooking in the oven.

Images of brain activity in people with gambling disorder and substance addictions show that they have less activity in the reward hub when anticipat-

ing rewards. This suggests that people with addictions may process rewards differently than others. It may also explain why they seek out unnatural rewards, such as gambling, alcohol or drugs, to experience pleasure.

The role of the mPFC is to stop, or inhibit, a response. This braking action is important when the "go" signal encourages one to charge ahead toward something the brain associates with pleasure.

Research shows that the impulse control action or the "brake" does not work well in people with gambling disorder. Compared to those without addiction, there is less activity in this area of the brain. These individuals pay less attention to the "stop" signal and are less able to stop the pursuit of pleasure. When it comes to gambling, this means those individuals will have difficulty stopping.

GAMBLING DISORDER to pg 8

CALENDAR

UPCOMING

Hazelfest 2019: Saturday, August 3, 11:00 am to 8:00 pm in Center City, MN. Artists include, Jeremy Messersmith, Nicholas David, Chris Kroeze, Kat Perkins, Jesse Larson, Annie Mack, Dusty Heart, Lydia Liza. \$20 in advance, \$30 at the door. Children under 12 are free.

Spirituality Breakfast 2019: Friday, September 6, at 7:30 am, Hoversten Chapel, Foss Center, Augsburg University, Minneapolis. Keynote speaker is Carl Eller. Purchase tickets at engage.minnesotarecovery.org/breakfast.

NUWAY Annual Picnic: Saturday, September 7, 1:00 to 4:00 pm, 2118 Blaisdell Avenue S., Minneapolis. Live DJ, food from local restaurants. More information visit nuway.org.

ONGOING

Dissonance: Wednesday Music Series at Capella Tower: Every Wednesday, from May 8 to the 22nd, from 12 - 1 pm. A free lunch-hour concert will be held in the atrium of the Capella Tower in downtown Minneapolis to celebrate Mental Health Awareness Month. For more info: www.dissonance.website/events.

All Recovery Meetings: Minnesota Recovery Connection is hosting All Recovery meetings throughout the Twin Cities. These meetings honor all pathways to recovery, acknowledging that each person's path is unique. Call 612-584-4158 for more info or go to www.minnesotarecovery.org.

Hazelden's Second Sunday Retreats:

The second Sunday of each month everyone in recovery is invited to Hazelden in Center City, MN (Cork Center) for an inspirational day of workshops, fellowship, sharing and fun. Open to anyone 18 or older involved in a 12-Step program. \$15 if you register online, \$20 (in-person) includes a buffet lunch and information packet. 9 am to 2:30 pm.

9 am - Register at the Cork Center
9 am - Introductions and orientation
10-11 am - Lecture
10:30 -12:45 - Small group discussions
12:45 - 1:30 pm - Sunday buffet
1:45 pm - Small group discussions or Meditation group
2:30 pm - Relaxation group

July 14

God-Consciousness in Twelve Step Recovery

August 11

Transformation Through Love

The Recovery Church: 253 State St., St. Paul, 55107, offers worship services on Sunday at 9:30 am with fellowship, coffee and snacks following service. The mission is to provide a spiritual community for people in search of growth, healing, and recovery. For a list of recovery meetings, visit therecoverychurch.org or like [therecoverychurchstpaul](https://www.facebook.com/therecoverychurchstpaul) on Facebook.

To place a listing, email us at phoenix@thephoenixspirit.com or call 612-615-9740.



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THE PHOENIX NEWSPAPER is a bi-monthly publication for people actively working on their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being. We are committed to providing articles, advertising, and information about recovery, renewal, and personal growth to help people experience life in a balanced, meaningful way.

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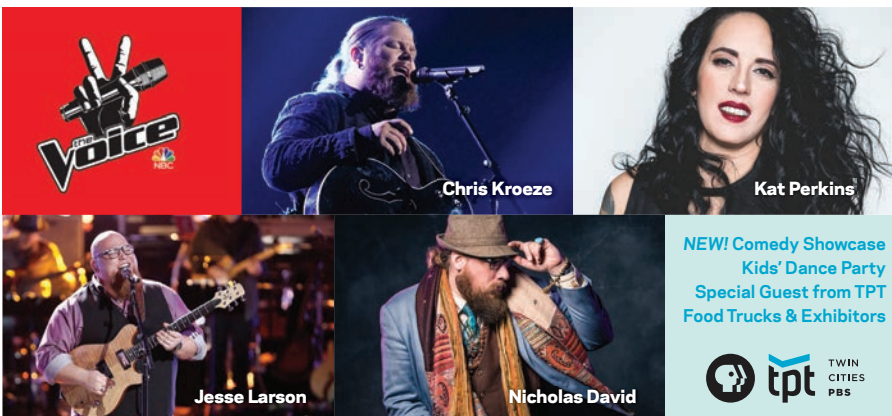
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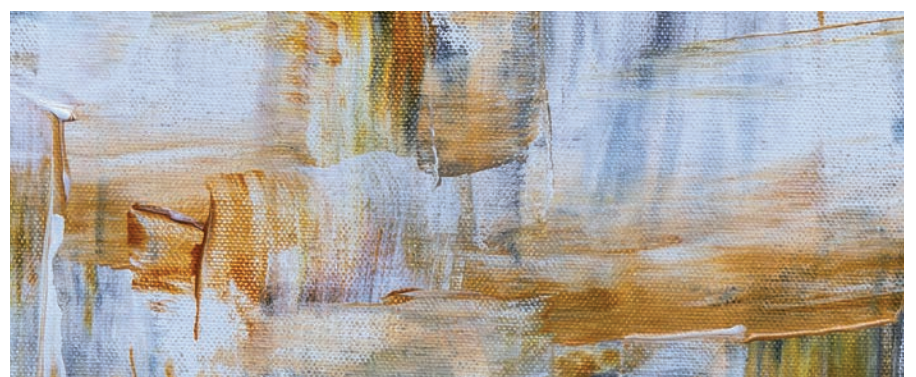
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Cultural Myths That Undermine Our Happiness and Well-being

by **John Driggs, LICSW**

Myths are metaphoric stories that can inspire or demean us. Believing in magical elves in forests may make our imaginations soar; thinking that people with dark skin are inferior to us only devalues us. The most destructive myths are those that operate in our lives while remaining unexamined. They do bad things to us without our being aware of them, and surreptitiously undermine our well-being. This is especially true when other people also believe the same myths as part of a cultural ethos and we just go along with the crowd.

In fact the longer I've lived the more I believe many of us today still are very good people, but are not critical thinkers. We lack self-reflection and easily fall under the spell of cultural misguidance. Getting duped into foolishness turns us into lesser versions of ourselves. If you've ever watched the news or read the newspaper and said, "What in the world could they be thinking!?" you know exactly what I mean.

WHY DO HARMFUL MYTHS STAY UNDER OUR RADAR?

Most of us are so challenged by the stresses of modern living, the last thing we want to think about is how misguided or unrealistic our thinking really is. Some of us have an exaggerated view of how much we know about life. We think we are wise when the reality may be otherwise. As a culture we are technologically smart but we are less than adequate when it comes to self-awareness and personal relationships. We prefer staring at screens than reading a good book or getting into a live discussion group. Many of us live up in our heads. Some of us may even prefer being misguided in order to fit in with other people who also hold the same beliefs. As Sheldon Kopp, the famous psychoanalyst said, "We prefer the security of known misery to the misery of unfamiliar insecurity." Because we feel too stressed to reflect on our own beliefs and would rather tune out the emotional limitations of our beliefs, we opt to let our doubts stay under the radar. Most of us feel a need to conform to the general opinion. To not do so makes us feel disloyal. Who wants to be seen as the odd person out?

The pressure to conform has never been more urgent since the obsession with social media has enveloped our lives. The rise in social media in the last 10 years leaves many of us more worried about what other people think than what we think. We worry more about conforming to others than examining and living up to our own standards. Rare is the person these days who thinks for himself and has real integrity. This "safety in numbers" mentality prompts us to put our heads

in the sand and allows destructive cultural myths to stay unrecognized. Unfortunately what lies hidden is still very much alive within us, and likely diminishes our well-being and makes us less likable, and less compassionate.

COMMON HARMFUL MYTHS IN TODAY'S CULTURE

"The only happiness that matters is my own and my family's. I have no responsibility to care for others."

We live in a culture where pursuing well-being and happiness is a private matter and appears to have little to do with other people's needs, even to the extent of being oblivious to people outside of our own little world. If we can't see the suffering in the world, then there is a lot less to worry about. Caring for unfortunate people may feel burdensome to us, especially when there seems no end to the suffering around us. While it is true that we are each responsible for our own happiness we also need others to be happy because we are social creatures. Thus we are also responsible to help others, as their happiness is our own. We are our brother's keeper whether we like it or not. No man is an island and we are all affected greatly by the suffering around us, even if we are oblivious to it. We may go on for an extended period of time embracing our individualism and turning a cold shoulder to others, but eventually it becomes clear just how much we need others and how much we have already relied on others in our lives to be as successful as we are. We all live in an invisible web of other people's lives.

In fact the greatest happiness in our life will not be our wealth and success but the feeling that our life has had a purpose in service to others. It is a privilege to be responsible for others who truly need our care. It gives our lives meaning, which is often more important than food and money.

"Things and money makes us happy. The more we have, the happier and more successful we are".

The research on money and happiness is mixed. Actually a certain level of sustainable income is essential for happiness. Families that have access to good health care, have enough food on the table, can clothe themselves and have a safe place to live have sufficient happiness. For a mid-western family of three about \$60-80,000 per year will do the trick. Families above that

level are often no more happier no matter how much their income increases. In fact some families who have big incomes develop a negative syndrome called materialism where nothing is ever enough. These families lose the ability to be happy, and can have mental health problems like depression, anxiety and drug use. When money and status are the most important thing in life, family members develop ennui, feel they can't trust each other, feel empty and are never good enough, no matter how much they succeed. These are often families with high drug use and suicides. To be happy, it is far better to be a poor or moderately wealthy family with good relationships or a wealthy family that deemphasizes wealth and cares for others. Money in itself does not make us happy.

"Getting out kids into the best college and paying for it proves we are good parents. Kids come first."

Nothing ruins a family's well-being than its obsession with getting the kids into the best college and always putting kids first. Gone are the days when kids were as responsible as adults for putting themselves through college or heaven forbid, expected to contribute to the financial well-being of their families. Kids who always come first never learn to care for others and are often entitled in adult relationships. Ideally in families, everybody's needs ought to be balanced and seen as a way to learn how to love. Before throwing away intimate family time together for excessive outside-the-family involvements or scholarship possibilities, it would be wise to know that research shows that kids who go to less prestigious or costly schools have much less debt, and over the course of their lives earn just about as much as kids who go to prestigious schools. Not all kids should be expected to go to a four-year college and many would be better served by a trade school or community college. Kids who partially earn their way through college by summer jobs and go to affordable schools often are more motivated to learn and get more bang for the buck in selecting higher education.

Probably most kids who go to a prestigious college would be way better off taking time away from school to mature and save for their own education. Too many college kids these days struggle with social anxiety and low self-esteem for two reasons: they are more glued to pseudo-intimate relationships on electronic media than real live people and they have long ago lost the emotional connections to family who are more invested in their succeeding than

in their having good character. The parents and siblings in our lives who love us give us way more wealth than any prestigious college or career could. Parents who sacrifice for years have nothing to prove about being good parents.

"Technology is the future. We cannot live without it."

If you've read my columns before you know I am not a big fan of technology. Although I have an advanced degree in science and math and believe in science as a necessary approach to life I do not worship at its altar. Science has its place in my mind. The major problem I have with technology is that we don't know how to keep it in its place and develop other aspects of our lives in a healthy balance. The advances in science go well beyond our wisdom on how to use it. Cell phones, computers, social media, robots and the latest gadgets all have major downsides and make our lives much less convenient, unsafe and complicated, they too often rob us of emotional closeness and a confident view of ourselves and they frequently take us away from what gives our lives its greatest meaning—the mystery and humility of our not knowing, the splendor and majesty of nature in all its glory and the blissful blessings of safe touch by others who love us.

Evolution has not trained our brains to sit in a cubicle and stare blankly at a screen; it has trained us to be monkeys who hang out with others, pick fleas off each other in a grooming ritual and cuddle one another in a social group. Our brains have nearly the same DNA as chimpanzees and are wired from evolution for real relationships. When the Beatles said, "All we need is love" they got it completely right.

Embracing science is wise but it is even wiser and we would all be a lot happier if we could use the limbic mammalian brain we inherited from evolution. This means learning how to play a musical instrument, reading a hard-covered book, schmoozing with our neighbors in non-judgmental ways, and having real face-to-face time with loved ones. It also means doing regular community service with others in a group of helpers, reciting poetry to our children and having them tell us stories, taking long walks in the woods with family, forgiving our relatives their transgressions and focusing on our own miscues and above all being skeptical and wisely resisting the social manias that promise us happiness where there is none. If we could only turn back to being fuzzy

CULTURAL MYTHS to pg 6



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SUPPORT GROUPS

MONDAYS

1900 Mens Alanon, Monday 5:45-7:15pm, 12-Step meeting, step presentation and small groups, fellowship. 1900 Nicollet Ave., Plymouth Congregational Church. Tom W., 612-281-5230. Enter at parking lot.

Overeaters Anonymous: Monday mornings, 10-11am. 3rd floor, handicapped accessible. Minnehaha United Methodist Church, 3701 50th St Mpls 55407. For more info call Ana 651-592-7510

Understanding Eating Disorders, Treatment, and Recovery: First Thursday, every other month, 6-7:30pm. The Emily Program staff provides answers to common questions and concerns of families and friends "new" to eating disorders, treatment and recovery. 2265 Como Ave, St. Paul, 55108. Free, drop in. Visit www.emilyprogram.com or call 651-645-5323.

Friends and Families of Suicide: a place of support and comfort where those that have lost a loved one to suicide will be comfortable talking about their own loss as well as hearing about the losses of others. Meets the 3rd Monday of every month 7-9pm, Twin Cities Friends Meeting, 1725 Grand Ave., St Paul, 55105. For info email ffosmn@yahoo.com or call Tracy at 651-587-8006.

Debtors Anonymous: a group of men and women who use the 12-Step program to solve problems with debt and other money issues.; www.daminnesota.org 952-953-8438. Check website for locations and different dates and times.

Richfield Codependents Anonymous: 7pm, men & women Richfield Lutheran Church, 60th and Nicollet or call 952-649-9514.

TUESDAYS

Recovering Couples Anonymous, 7pm. We are a 12 Step Group for couples wanting to find new ways to communicate. We provide strong couple support and model healthy couple-ship. Unity Church, 733 Portland Ave, St Paul, 55104. Enter the building through the parking lot door and take the elevator to the basement. Please check us out! Contact Dave at 651-214-5747 or Connie at 651-307-7964 for more information.

Families Anonymous (FA): First and third Tuesday evening of each month, 7pm. Support group for families and friends of those dealing with drug, alcohol or other behavioral issues. Is someone you love destroying family harmony by using drugs or alcohol? Free help exists! Join us at St. Timothy Lutheran Church: 1465 N. Victoria Street, St. Paul, MN 55117, or contact Dave E: 612-701-5575.

Debtors Anonymous: a group of men and women who use the 12-Step program to solve problems with debt and other money issues.; www.daminnesota.org 952-953-8438. Tues, 7-8 pm, Dayton Ave. Presbyterian Church, 217 Mackubin St., St. Paul, 55102. (1 block n. of Selby and 2 blocks e. of Dale. Meets in the parlor.

Recovery International Meeting at Mary Mother of the Church, 3333 Cliff Road, Burnsville, rm 9 at 3pm. It is a proven self help method to deal with mental illness including depression, anxiety, anger, mood disorders and fears using cognitive behavior therapy. Contact Rita at 952-890-7623.

Emotions Anonymous: For those dealing with emotional stress, depression, etc. 7:30pm at Christ the King Lutheran Church, Room 106, 8600 Fremont Ave., Bloomington. Take Penn Ave. south to 86th. Turn left and go to Fremont, just east of 35W. Brian at 952-888-6029.

Nicotine Anonymous: 7-8pm at St. Columbia Church/School, 1330 Blair Ave., St. Paul, 55104. For more info call 952-404-1488. More locations.

Overeaters Anonymous Roseville: Meetings are held from 10-11am (and Saturday's from 8-9) at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, 2300 N. Hamline Ave., Roseville, Room 218 Call Janie 651-639-4246 for more info.

A.C.A., 5:30-7 pm, Dakota Alano House, 3920 Rahn Rd, Eagan (Hwy 13 & Cedarvale Shop Ctr). 651-452-2921.www.dasinc.org/

A.C.A. 7pm, Saint Michael's Lutheran Church 1660 W City Rd B (at Fry). Roseville. Open to all. Step and Traditions meeting.

Get a Fresh Start! 12-Step AA group, open meeting Tues., 7pm, at Kingswill Church, 1264 109th Ave NE, Blaine. Denny, 763-757-6512.

WEDNESDAYS

AA Meeting, 6:30 – 8:30pm St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, 2300 N. Hamline Ave., Roseville. Call 651-639-4246 for more info.

Women's 12-Step Program: 7pm, Peace Presbyterian Church, 7624 Cedar Lake Road, St Louis Park. For women of all ages who find any part of life chaotic or out of control. Through reading *A Woman's Way through the Twelve Steps* by Stephanie S. Covington, members explore how the Steps help us overcome addictions and work to heal ourselves. Peace Presbyterian Church has a community dinner at 6pm on Wednesdays and provides free supervised childcare for 12-Step participants. Reclamation-Ministries.org, 952-545-2586.

Overeaters Anonymous: St. Paul Midway: Wednesdays 7-8 PM, Hamline United Methodist Church. Two blocks east of Snelling & Minnehaha. Park in south parking lot, use south entrance to education building. Press buzzer. For more info contact Susan at 651-295-7854.

Adult Children of Alcoholics: Wednesdays @ 7-8:30pm. St. Mary's Episcopal Church, 1895 Laurel Ave, St. Paul. Meets downstairs, sign in the lobby. For more information call Mary at 612-747-0709.

Transitions: 7:30:9:30pm Support to men and women who are transitioning from incarceration to living in the community. Trained facilitators and peers provide emotional support in a safe, openly honest environment to discuss discouragements, frustrations, temptations. One of the trained facilitators is a woman. The Men's Center, 3249 Hennepin Ave. S. Minneapolis, 612-822-5892. TCM.org

Women's CoDA Group: Women's Only Codependents Anonymous Group. Meets every Wednesday at noon at Colonial Church of Edina, 6200 Colonial Way (Fireside room, S. end of bldg). For more information, call Valerie at 612.741.5281

Workaholics Anonymous: A 12-Step program of recovery for people addicted to non-stop work or continuous activity. Meetings every Wednesday, 12:30 p.m., Brooklyn United Methodist Church, Brooklyn Center. Call Pat with questions: 763-560-5199, or visit www.workaholics-anonymous.org.

Marijuana Anonymous, Bloomington, 6-7pm, Minnesota Valley Unitarian Universalist Church 10715 Zenith Ave S. (2 Blocks south of Old Shakopee Rd, on the East side of Zenith) Contact: bloomingtonma@hotmail.com

Atheist/Agnostic Alcoholics Anonymous, 3249 Hennepin Ave S., #55 (Men's Center, in the basement) Mpls, 7-8 pm., Open to Men and Women. For more info write tcAgnostic@gmail.com

THURSDAYS

Workaholics Anonymous: 12 step group for finding balance between work, activity and fun. Meets every Thurs. 6-7:15 p.m. Christ Presbyterian Church, 6901 Normandale Rd. Room 210 North entrance, enter door on left. Call before attending for any schedule or location updates. Liz 612-229-8930, Gretchen 615-423-9444 email: wafindingbalance@gmail.com

New CoDa East Metro Group: Rasmussen College, 8565 Eagle Point Circle N, Lake Elmo (exit north to Radio Dr. on I-94 E). 6:30-7:30pm. Joseph H. at 715-497-6227 or LaTosia 651-319-2554.

Red Book ACA/ACOA: Recovery Church, 253 State, St. Paul, 7-8:30pm. For more info call Jacob at 612.819.9370 or Bruce at 651-407-6336.

Recovery International Meeting, St Phillip Lutheran Church, 6180 Highway 65 N, Fridley at 7pm. It is a proven self help method to deal with mental illness including depression, anxiety, anger, mood disorders and fears using cognitive behavior therapy. Ken, 763-571-5199.

Adults with ADHD Support Groups: (first time free) Every Thursday morning 10am-noon and every Thursday evening (except last Thurs of the month) 7pm 8:30pm. LDA Minnesota, 6100 Golden Valley Road, Golden Valley, MN 55422. Tel. 952-582-6000 or www.ldaminnesota.org.

FRIDAYS

Food Addicts Anonymous: a 12-step program dedicated to food addiction. Fridays 8-9pm, Living Table United Church of Christ, 3805 E 40th St., Mpls, 55406. LGBT friendly. For more info call Shea at 612-722-5064 or sheahnsn@gmail.com or www.foodaddictsanonymous.org.

Recovering Couples Anonymous: Friday Night @ Minnehaha United Methodist Church, 3701 E 50th St, Mpls, 55417, 6:30 - 8pm. 12-Step couples group meets as couples in recovery from any addiction. The only requirement is the desire to remain committed to each other, and find better ways to communicate and develop intimacy. Call Kathy 612-545-6200 or Allan 612-309-5632.

Recovery International Meeting at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, 4100 Lyndale Ave S., Mpls at 7pm. It is a proven self help method to deal with mental illness including depression, anxiety, anger, mood disorders and fears using cognitive behavior therapy. Ruth 612-825-4779.

SATURDAYS

Overeaters Anonymous Meeting: 9am at Macalester-Plymouth United Church, St. Paul. For those still suffering from compulsive overeating, bulimia and anorexia.

Nicotine Anonymous: Sat. 10am at Linden Hills Congregational Church, 4200 Upton Ave South, Mpls. Enter at the back door. 952-404-1488. Call for locations.

Spenders Anonymous: Our purpose is to stop spending compulsively and work toward serenity in our relationship with money. 1-2 pm at Bethany Lutheran Church, 2511 East Franklin Avenue, Minneapolis, MN 55406; street parking or in the church lot; enter through the gate on Franklin and ring the bell; www.spenders.org

Northeast Minneapolis CoDependents Anonymous (CoDA) Group: East Side Neighborhood Services, 1700 2nd Street NE, Mpls, 55413 (corner of 2nd Street NE & 17th Ave NE). Park in lot behind building, use rear entry door. Saturdays: 1-2pm. Contact Ralph W. at rwwink@aol.com or 612-382-0674.

CoDA Group: Shoreview, Shepherd of the Hills, 3920 North Victoria Street, 1 blk north of 694. Please enter from the back/north side of building off of Gramsie. Door "G". Follow signs to room #265. 9-10am. Dana, Shoreviewcoda@gmail.com

Overeaters Anonymous Newcomer Meeting: Third Saturday of the month, 1pm.2pm. Sumner Library, 611 Van White Memorial Blvd., Mpls, 55411. For more info contact Allison @ 612-499-0280, Gene @ 952-835-0789 or visit www.overeaters.org.

Overeaters Anonymous Courage to Change Meeting: Saturday mornings 8-9am at St Christopher's Episcopal Church, 2300 Hamline Ave N. Roseville. Contact Donna with questions at 651-633-3144.

Clutterers Anonymous: St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, 2300 N. Hamline Ave., (Hwy 36) room 220, Roseville. 12 step support group meets the first, third and fifth Sat. of the month, 10-11:15am. www.clutterersanonymous.org

Debtors Anonymous: men and women using the 12-Steps to solve problems with debt and other money issues.; www.daminnesota.org 952-953-8438. 9-10am, Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, 4120 17th Ave. S., Mpls, 55407 (rooms 7 & 8, enter sliding glass door facing parking lot.)

Overeaters Anonymous: 8-9 am, Falcon Heights Community Church, 1795 Holton Street, Falcon Heights. Lisa 651-428-3484.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder Support Group: 1st and 3rd Sat. of the month, 11am -1pm at Faith Mennonite Church, 2720 E. 22nd St, Minneapolis. Website: tinyurl.com/tcocdsg. Call before coming for direction. Burt at 612-547-6388.

Adult Children of Alcoholics & Dysfunctional Families: Saturday, 10am, ACA Club Fridley, Moon Plaza, Boardroom in the lower level of Unity Hospital, 550 Osborne Road, Fridley. Please see www.acafridley.com for info.

Men's & Women's Support Group: Meetings every Saturday (including holidays) at 9am. Prince of Peace Church, 7217 W. Broadway, Brooklyn Park. (north entrance.) Informal, safe place to share experiences of joy and concerns. We promote growth & positive change to meet the challenges of our lives. Call 763-443-4290.

South Side Men's Group: Saturdays, 8:20 to 10am Support for men working toward positive personal change. Creekside Community Center, 9801 Penn Ave. S. Bloomington. Visit www.southsidemensgroup.org.

SUNDAYS

Big Red Book ACA, 11:15am at the Cavalier Club, 6123 Wooddale Ave., Edina, MN 55424. Call Therese S. at 952-927-6761 for more info.

Calix Society: A group of Catholic Recovering Alcoholics and their family/significant others who desire to strengthen their spiritual growth, meets the 3rd Sun. of the month at Cathedral of St. Paul. Mass at 8am., breakfast/speaker meeting at 9am. 651-773-3117.

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Video Gaming: The Next 12-Step Frontier

by *Sheila Hayes*

She's anxious at work because she worries that her boss will catch her playing solitaire again.

He's up at 2 a.m. completing a task in the epic multiplayer game while his wife sleeps.

She's distracted watching her kids at the pool because it's hard to put down the phone.

He's obsessed with rank and makes appointments for "raids" at family dinner time, causing constant stress.

These are just a few ways in which compulsive multi-player and other computer and cell phone gaming are making people's lives unmanageable. Is it possible to be powerless over technology in the way that many people find themselves powerless over drugs and alcohol? Our family would answer with a resounding, "yes."

My spouse and I were a case of "boy meets girl on AA campus." Like a lot of people in recovery in our generation, we met in the rooms, fell in love, and I'm happy to report that 30 years later we're still going strong. With 37 and 35 years of recovery respectively, our journey as partners and parents has been grounded in the principles of the program.

I admit that I always worried that the genetic odds might be stacked against our kids. While they didn't face the violence and dysfunction of my childhood, there is no battling whatever physiological odds they face, and some part of me was, and is, prepared that they may encounter substance abuse problems. But I never thought it would come in the form of technology.

I was really interested in enrichment for my children. Toddler music class, play dates, and many other activities were part of our routine. As a young mom, I was excited by the computer. I had started my career in what was then called the "information industry," and software and hardware were in a constant state of innovation and change. I remember when I first encountered "Living Books," a Broderbund software product that turned childhood classics by authors like Marc Brown, Kevin Henke, and the Berenstains into fun, interactive learning experiences for preschoolers and kindergarteners. I was amazed how quickly the kids learned how to use a mouse, and for the limited times they played these wonderful classic book-based games.

As the kids got older, and I think of their generation as the tech guinea pig generation, more complex, and more violent, games emerged. We would not allow a gaming system in the house; we had incredible limits on computer use and no screens in the bedroom. Handhelds were restricted to trips. My husband and I listened to what experts said about the downside of too much screen time, and there was no TV on school nights — Sunday through Thursday. What at first seemed like such a great thing needed a great deal of management.

You would think with all these rules and controls, we would have triumphed. However, one of our children was particularly tech savvy and also became tech obsessed. From the time he was an adolescent, our son found solace in the computer. Caught in a world made of pixels in



which he could become a master, he dove deeper into the unreality of the games, a place where people didn't pick on him and where he was in total control of his narrative. When he was playing games like Age of Empires, which were solo, things seemed controllable. But when the massively multi-player online role playing games (MMORPGs) emerged, things got much worse.

Friendships fell by the wayside. Other interests, like music, scouting, and more, were far less desirable. The solitude of the gaming world, and the status he was able to achieve gave him a sense of belonging and triumph. But in fact, the more he excelled at the games, the smaller his life got.

The more he obsessed with gaming, the more we tried to control everything. Every imaginable restriction was used, including confiscating power cords. The conflict escalated, as did the lying and belligerence. With trepidation, we sent him off to college. We were already hearing through the grapevine about youth who went down the rabbit hole of obsessive gaming once parental restrictions were gone.

And that's what happened to our son. He was out of college by sophomore year. He moved home, and seemed paralyzed in moving forward in his life. His hygiene and self-care deteriorated. He misused his ADD meds to become more acute when he gamed. As my worry escalated and I felt more out of control, I became more shrewish and pleading.

Thank God for Al-Anon. During the worst of the gaming, friends would comment about how wonderful and smart our son was; how come he didn't just stop? As he lied to family, his aunt and grandmother expressed their frustration; what's wrong with him?

My husband and I had no question about what was wrong. Our son was as obsessed and powerless as any other addict. His substance was different, but it was clear that he was completely addicted to these games, that he was powerless, and his life was totally unmanageable. I know, we aren't supposed to take another person's inventory; just consider that observation my humble but deadly accurate opinion.

It was awful. There were no resources. There was no program, except for online meetings of a small group of folks around the country. The one treatment facility I could find, reStart, had a waiting list and was way beyond our reach financially. People would say, "at least he's not a drug addict," and I would secretly think, "But if he were, at least I would know what to do to help him."

I joined the parent's boards on Olganon.com (Online Gamer's Anonymous). I told a therapist in our area who was trying to work on this issue that I was available to support parents, and I kept going to Al-Anon. We took our son to a therapist, but he was not willing to talk, and not much ground was gained. He was hospitalized for depression. It seemed like nothing would move him forward.

Someone once said to me that coincidence is God's way of staying anonymous. Just as our son was on the brink of homelessness, I got a call from a guy who wanted to start a face-to-face OLGA meeting. Would I be willing to start the Olganon meeting? My husband and I were an instant yes. We hoped our son would be too, but we knew that we were willing to do our part.

Just as our son was hitting a bottom, I was able to find a group focused on anxiety and depression that was intensive outpatient. Both are by-products of the brain syndrome that the rush of gaming produced. We started meeting, and because there is no 12-Step literature as yet, we used the modified literature available from the olganon.com website.

There are two books we have read and reflected on at our meeting that have helped us over the past months to better understand gaming. One is *Hooked on Games* by Andrew Doan, and the other is *Cyber Junkie* by Kevin Roberts. Both explain the complexities of the brain chemistry that gaming, particularly MMPORGs, generate. The gamers in our group have found an opening to identifying with each other as they've read about the dopamine surges, the irritability, isolation and more

that make this addiction so difficult. The loved ones of the gamers have grown in compassion. While the DSM-V does not include "Internet Gaming Disorder" as yet, we believe it will, and once that happens, perhaps there will be more treatment and safe places to go through withdrawal (yes, I saw it) and learn how to remain abstinent in a technology soaked world.

A few more people have found us. Some stayed, some popped in once. Some parents have come by, hugely relieved that they are not the only ones dealing with the devastation of excessive gaming. We're all doing it one-day-at a time, facing the challenge of recovery together, finally, no longer alone.

**There is currently one OLGA and one OLGAAnon meeting in MN. It is on Monday at 6:30 at the Cavalier Club in Edina. The groups start together and then split for their individual discussions. More on gaming disorder can be found at olganon.com. Sheila Hayes is the author's pen name.*

Please send your 1st Person story to phoenix@thephoenixspirit.com. We'll connect with you if we choose to publish your piece in a future issue. Thank you.

Resource Directory

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Lehmann Counseling

Help for individuals and families dealing with addiction. Kate Lehmann is an experienced professional offering client-centered substance use counseling. Discrete, flexible, private pay. www.katelehmann.com for more information.

Eating Disorders

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Living Proof MN

A mentoring program for those who've been impacted by eating disorders. We know healing comes from within; we are here to guide you, from the heart, with real world experience and love, through the darkness to take back control and to live life as you deserve. Visit www.LivingProofMN.com, email shira@livingproofmn.com or call 612-207-8720

Drugs and Alcohol Treatment

Minnesota Teen Challenge

If you or a loved one is struggling with drugs or alcohol, we're here to help. In addition to our effective and affordable residential Licensed Treatment, faith-based Long-Term Recovery and convenient Outpatient program, we have extensive prevention and transitional/aftercare services. Freedom from addiction starts here. 612-FREEDOM or mmtc.org

Narcotics Anonymous Helpline

Drug Problem? We Can Help! Call Now 24-hour 877-767-7676. Also, check out www.namimnnesota.org For a complete listing of meetings, upcoming events, camp-outs, and service opportunities.

Workaholics Anonymous Meeting

Burning out? Workaholics Anonymous provides steps and tools to break free from non-stop work and activity — or work avoidance. Meetings are every Wednesday, 12:30 p.m., Brooklyn United Methodist Church, Brooklyn Center. Newcomers welcome. Learn more: 763-560-5199 or www.workaholics-anonymous.org.

To place a Resource Directory listing call David at 612-298-5405 or email at david@thephoenixspirit.com

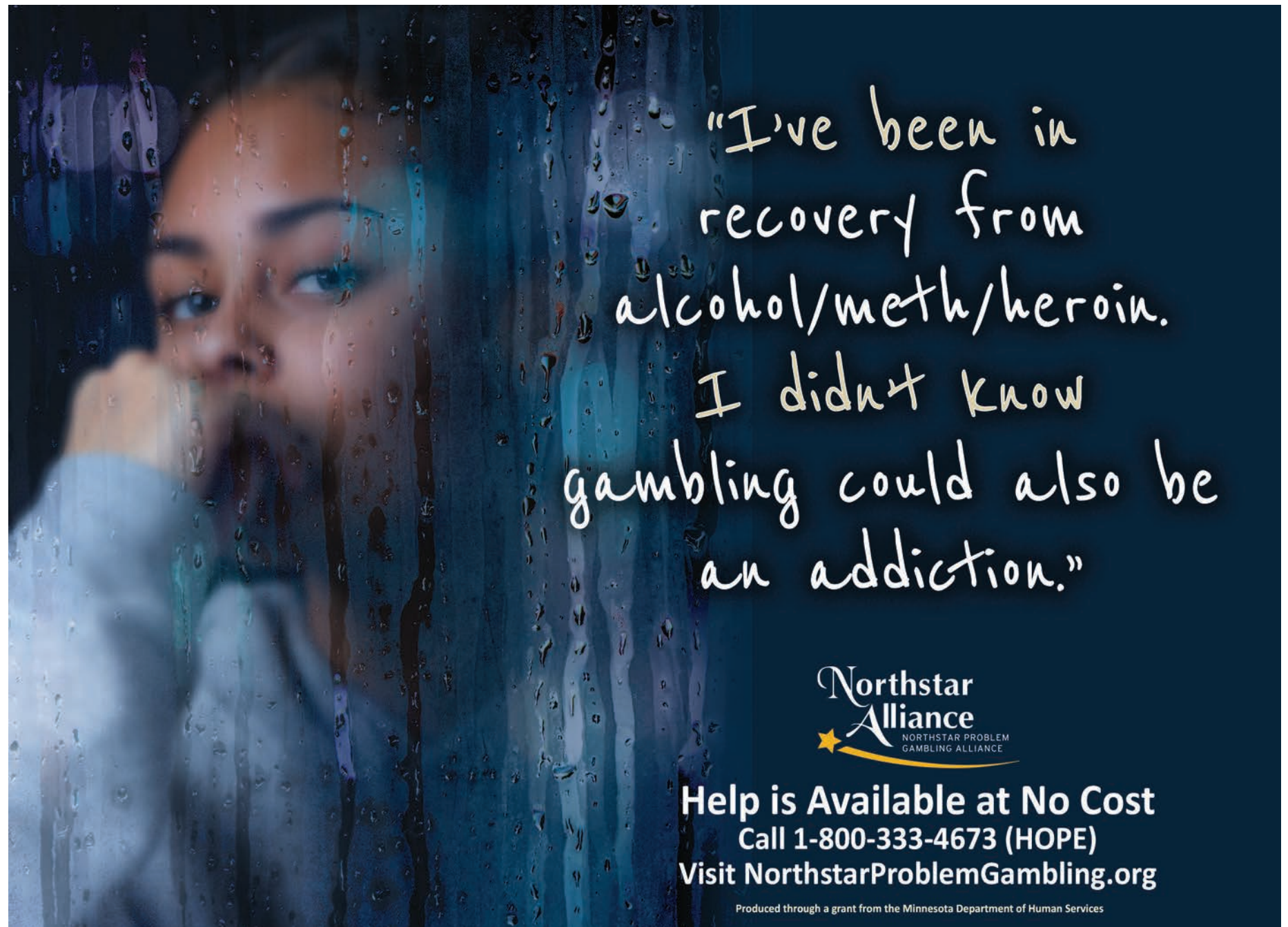
from page 3

chimpanzees we could have a bright future and be happier than ever. If you have any doubts just observe your family pets and see what they have to teach you about being happy. Life is so simple for them. We should all be as smart as a pet monkey or family pet! Our future is actually in our past and in each other.

Now, I could go on and on about other social myths that undermine our happiness. The list appears endless. I urge you to identify faulty beliefs you've learned from this culture and bring them into the light of day. You absolutely have my support to march to the beat of your own drummer and be responsible. I've been doing it for years! Have no fear and enjoy.

Regarding this article you may want to read *A General Theory of Love* by Lewis, Amine, and Lennon (New York: Vintage Books, 2000) and *The Social Causes of Illness* by Dr. Richard Totman (Pantheon Books, 1979). These books provide the science underlying this discussion. Godspeed.

John H. Driggs, LICSW, is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in private practice in St. Paul and co-author of *Intimacy Between Men* (Penguin Books, 1990). He can be reached at 651-699-4573.



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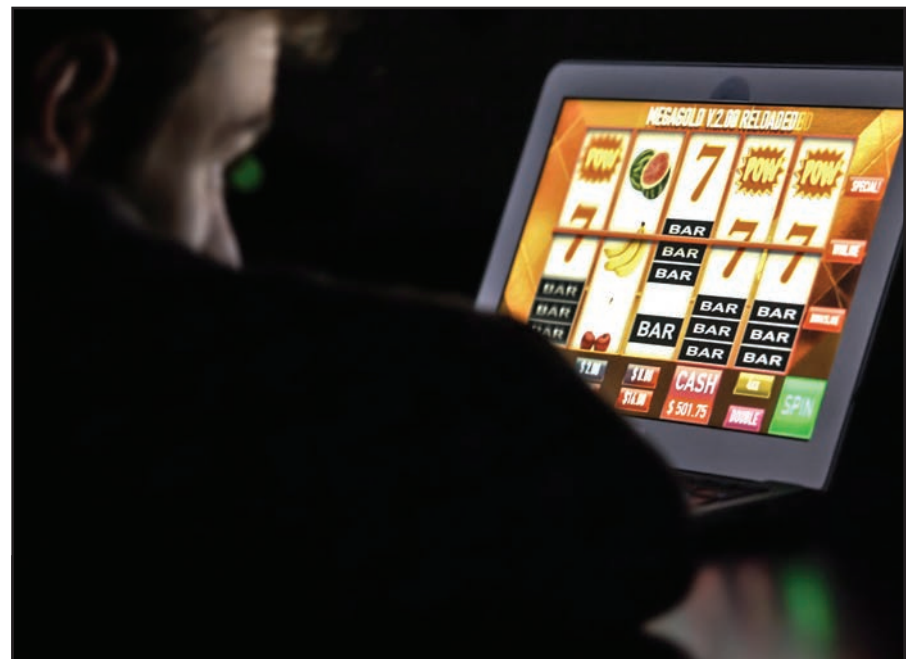
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Gambler Healing Offers Online Hope for Gamblers

Zack is worried about his gambling.

He's been losing a lot lately – so much that he had to dip into the family savings account to cover this month's mortgage. In the no-win cycle familiar to problem gamblers, he feels compelled to place larger bets, in the hopes of making up for losses.

He has tried to cut back or quit on his own, with no luck. He can't admit how much he's been gambling to anyone – not even to his wife. He wonders if he needs help, but he has no idea what to do or where to start.

It's estimated that 1 to 2 percent of the general population has a gambling problem, and as many as 3 to 4 percent have engaged in problem gambling at some point. Yet only a tiny percentage of those seek help, often because they are so embarrassed by the financial fallout from this process addiction.

"Gambler Healing," a new program developed by the counselors of Lutheran Social Services of North Dakota's Gamblers Choice program aims to circumvent the shame and stigma by bringing help right into the privacy of a concerned gambler's home.

The online e-curriculum is based on the 12 steps of Gamblers Anonymous. After enrolling in the course, the user can go through the program at their own pace or, if they'd prefer, work through it with the guidance of a licensed therapist.

Exercises help users evaluate whether their gambling has become a problem, while worksheets, readings and journaling exercises take them on a self-guided tour through the core principles of 12-Step based recovery. Users are invited to honestly answer questions such as, "Which areas of your life became increasingly more unmanageable because of gambling?" Or, "Make a list of ways in which you tried to control your gambling."

Although a user can complete the course in the privacy of one's living room, the curriculum also offers elements of the group perspective via taped segments of group discussion, in which graduates of the local Gamblers Choice program share their own experiences and discuss relevant recovery themes.

Other features of the e-curriculum include access to the daily reflections/readings of Gamblers Anonymous, concrete tips on how to stabilize one's financial situations and insights on addiction from Dr. Stephen Timm, a consulting psychologist on the project.

Portions of the online course can be previewed at www.gamblerhealing.com. The complete course is \$99 and is accessible to anyone who speaks English and has an internet connection.



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Gambling Disorder Distorts Brain from page 1

THE HABIT GROWS-EVEN WHEN GAMBLING CEASES TO BE FUN

People with gambling disorder continue to gamble even when it no longer brings them pleasure. This behavior stems from parts of the brain that establish habits.

Habit formation occurs in the dorsal striatum, also known as the “habit hub.” Over-indulgence in pleasurable behaviors causes brain activity to shift from the reward hub to the habit hub. Typically, these two parts of the brain work in tandem, so that habits can be developed out of pleasurable experiences.

However, for individuals with gambling disorder, it seems that these two areas of the brain stop working in harmony. When the pursuit of pleasurable experiences becomes too strong, a habit begins.

For those with gambling disorder, these brain changes create several impacts. The first is that people with gambling disorder become overly aware of environmental gambling cues. For example, when a person gambles, they begin to associate related cues, such as the sounds of a slot machine, the sight of favorite numbers, or the feel of the felt on a poker table, with feelings of pleasure that gambling brings. The more one gambles, the more the reward hub lights up.

However, the pleasure gradually decreases as the brain learns what it needs to do to derive a reward. The better these behaviors are learned, the less they light up the reward hub. Over time, the behavior becomes a habit, meaning less thought goes into the behavior and less accompanying pleasure.

In addition to the decrease in pleasure derived from gambling, research shows that people with gambling disorder are also more likely to shift their attention to gambling cues than people who have more neutral feelings about gambling. This is why those with gambling disorder will be quick to notice a gambling-related ad.

WHY GAMBLING CUES PRODUCE URGES

As the habit hub overrides the reward hub, gambling cues are processed ever more quickly, ultimately producing powerful urges to gamble. For example, the mere sight of money or hearing about the latest high-paying lottery game can be gambling triggers.

From the time of a first pleasurable gambling experience to the time a gambler becomes “addicted,” the feeling of “liking” decreases while a feeling of “wanting” increases. This explains why disordered gamblers feel a strong desire to gamble even while it’s no longer fun or entertaining. At this point, the activity of gambling functions to ease the discomfort of urges.

WHY THE BRAIN STRUGGLES WITH GAMBLING URGES

The urge to gamble haunts many as they attempt to stop or modify their gambling habit. Because of the complicated processes at work in the brain, it can be difficult to ignore these urges.

In addition to the takeover by the habit hub and the inability of the reward hub and habit hub to work together appropriately, a third part of the brain plays a role in urges. The insula is involved in subjective emotional experience that allows

one to process physical sensations, such as pain, temperature, hunger and thirst, so they may be used to influence decision making. The insula is also responsible for driving someone to do something about urges.

Studies have shown that compared to people without an addiction, individuals with gambling disorder can cycle into an increased response to gambling cues while unsuccessfully trying to regulate the negative emotions stirred up by these cues, which then leads to prolonged gambling activity.

THE CHALLENGES IN REDISCOVERING PLEASURE

Strong gambling urges can hamper those in the early stages of recovery from disordered gambling. These urges are so strong that many people find that activities that used to bring them pleasure or excitement, such as socializing with friends, participating in hobbies or eating food, no longer do so.

This condition of not being able to feel pleasure is called anhedonia. Disordered gambling can lower natural mood states such that rewards that used to provide pleasure don’t anymore. This is consistent with brain imaging studies of people in early recovery from substance abuse. When presented with pictures of mouth-watering food or positive social situations such as family gatherings, brain scans of individuals with anhedonia showed less activity in the reward hub of the brain than those with lower levels of anhedonia.

THE RISK OF ADDICTION SWITCHING

Reports of people switching from one type of addiction to another (also known as substitution or cross-addiction) are not uncommon. For example, when a person stops drinking, he may find himself smoking more cigarettes, binging on certain foods or gambling excessively. This unfortunate occurrence can occur because of reduced activity in the reward hub and their ability to “brake,” making a person vulnerable to other unhealthy rewards to satisfy urges. The result could be a new pattern of repeated rewarding behavior that steals one’s attention, opening the door to a new addiction.

THE GOOD NEWS: ABSTINENCE CAN REDUCE GAMBLING URGES

The good news is that brains are continually changing. Therefore, the processes that create addiction can be reversed to a varying degree over time. A study published in *Neuropsychopharmacology* showed that the brains of individuals with substance-based addictions changed in response to non-addiction cues. This means that individuals recovering from an addiction can start to enjoy natural rewards again. However, because these changes can take time to occur, it emphasizes the importance of continuing to practice previously enjoyable hobbies, to try out new activities in new settings, and to be around those who engage in positive behaviors.

Given the time it takes to build new brain processes — and a lasting recovery — individuals should consider the importance of cultivating healthy responses to non-gambling rewards. This can help protect them from the dangers of cross addiction and relapse, and create a rich, meaningful and rewarding life over the long term.

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from page 1

IT'S ONLY A GAME. OR IS IT?

I had given it up probably for the second or third time before I met my girlfriend, now my ex-wife. We got together and started a relationship. Then I started playing the game again. Three years into our relationship, I remember punching a hole in the wall because of how angry I was at the game. At that point, I again quit because I was concerned that the game had made me do that.

HOW DID GAMING AFFECT YOUR MARRIAGE?

After I got my Ph.D., I was doing post-doc work, working for a professor. That was very stressful. I'd come home at 8 p.m. and head straight for the computer. She'd say, you're basically ignoring me. We fought about that a lot. Eventually she gave me an ultimatum, and I stopped. I chose her over the game. Then I started playing other games that weren't nearly as addictive. That was "manageable" for about four years. Then I went back to my original game and did it in secret so it wouldn't affect my wife.

Our marriage ended over other issues. But that was a big moment in my life that caused a lot of grief. I was still

playing the one game in secret. The bubble kind of popped and I became disgusted with myself.

WHEN DID YOU FIRST SEEK HELP FOR YOUR ADDICTION?

Right before I got married, I found there was a group called Online Gamers Anonymous [OLGA]. I started reading the forums and I was, like, whoa, these are very similar to my story. But at that point I was getting married, and I got distracted and thought I could manage it.

When my marriage ended, I decided now's the time to join. I emailed them, saying that I didn't notice any face-to-face meetings in Minnesota. I had been in other 12 Step groups and had led meetings, so I said that I would like to start a group in Minnesota. They were all for it.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE RESULT FOR YOU?

I haven't played any video games in 10 months. Instead of having a dual-monitor gaming system and gaming chair in my office, I now have a painting easel, a sewing machine, and a block of wood that I'm carving. I'm going out on dates. I'm having more friend time. I'm going to a

lake on Saturdays to enjoy time with a recovery buddy. I'm going to movies. My life has been enriched so much, now that I don't have this one thing holding me in its grip – staring at the screen for hours and hours, with nothing really gained from it.

WHAT ARE THE DAILY ANCHORS FOR YOUR RECOVERY?

One is affirmations. It has a lot to do with what, in my therapy, is called developmental immaturity. The idea is that addiction is a secondary symptom, and the primary symptom is developmental immaturity. The addiction is there to fill a void. So the affirmations I say to myself every day help me remember that I don't need this other thing because I am whole the way I am. Then I add a Third Step prayer every day that keeps me in a spiritual way with other people in the world that have this same disease, so we're all linked together.

GIVE ME AN EXAMPLE OF AN AFFIRMATION YOU SAY.

The one's that really good is, "I'm enough and I matter."



DID THE GAMING TAKE YOU TO A PLACE WHERE YOU WEREN'T ENOUGH?

In the gaming, you're always trying to achieve perfection, a high status, become the number one. I had come from growing up poor, feeling I needed to "ascend" to matter in the world. I felt I was not good enough the way I was. I had to do something great to matter in the world.

WHEN YOU FIRST JOINED OLGA, DID YOU EXPERIENCE ANY KIND OF WITHDRAWAL?

When I gave up video gaming, sometimes I'd get triggered when I'd see something about the game. I'd use affirmations or make a recovery phone call and say, I just need to talk to you, I really want to play the game right now. Can you help process this with me? Having those people on your phone list to call in time of need is what really helps people stay sober.

If I do pick up the game again, I can always come back to the community without being judged. They'll say, We understand. It's part of the disease to go back, so now let's work on it together. We're going to help you. The longer you're in sobriety, the better your life is.

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU WANT TO MENTION ABOUT RECOVERY?

It would be good if everyone could look at this as a disease like any other disease, with a certain set of diagnosable symptoms. I think that will help reduce any stigma, any shame. It would take away the idea that these are just kids who can't control themselves – don't have the will power. It's not something easy to give up. It's like the game has its tentacles in your brain.

Pat Samples writes on personal growth and is a writing coach. Contact her through patsamples.com.



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Social Integration Will Add Years to Your Life

by *Terrilyn Renella*

Smile and say hello to a random stranger today — social integration and personal relationships lead to longevity. Face-to-face connection releases a whole cascade of neurotransmitters that reduces stress, including dopamine, a neurotransmitter that helps give you a natural high and may relieve pain.

It's been found through various long-term studies that the top two predictors of living a long life are social integration and close relationships. Social Integration means interacting with everyone you come into contact with such as the barista, grocery clerk, a stranger, and people in your neighborhood. Close relationships

may be the people that you can call if you need a ride or a shoulder to cry on. And your family.

Online interaction does not produce the same results in your body. I was isolated for a long time during my cancer journey, as I wasn't open to receiving help. This isolation lasted for nearly a year. I am now discovering how detrimental it was to my health to not ask for help — but also to not be open and receptive to love.

The following came out of my loneliness: We all need someone in our life. I believe people who say you should want someone but never “need” them have it all wrong. This attitude is keeping us, especial-

ly single people, isolated and disconnected.

We all need someone, a partner or teammate, someone who is in our corner. Someone who will always have our back no matter what life throws at us.

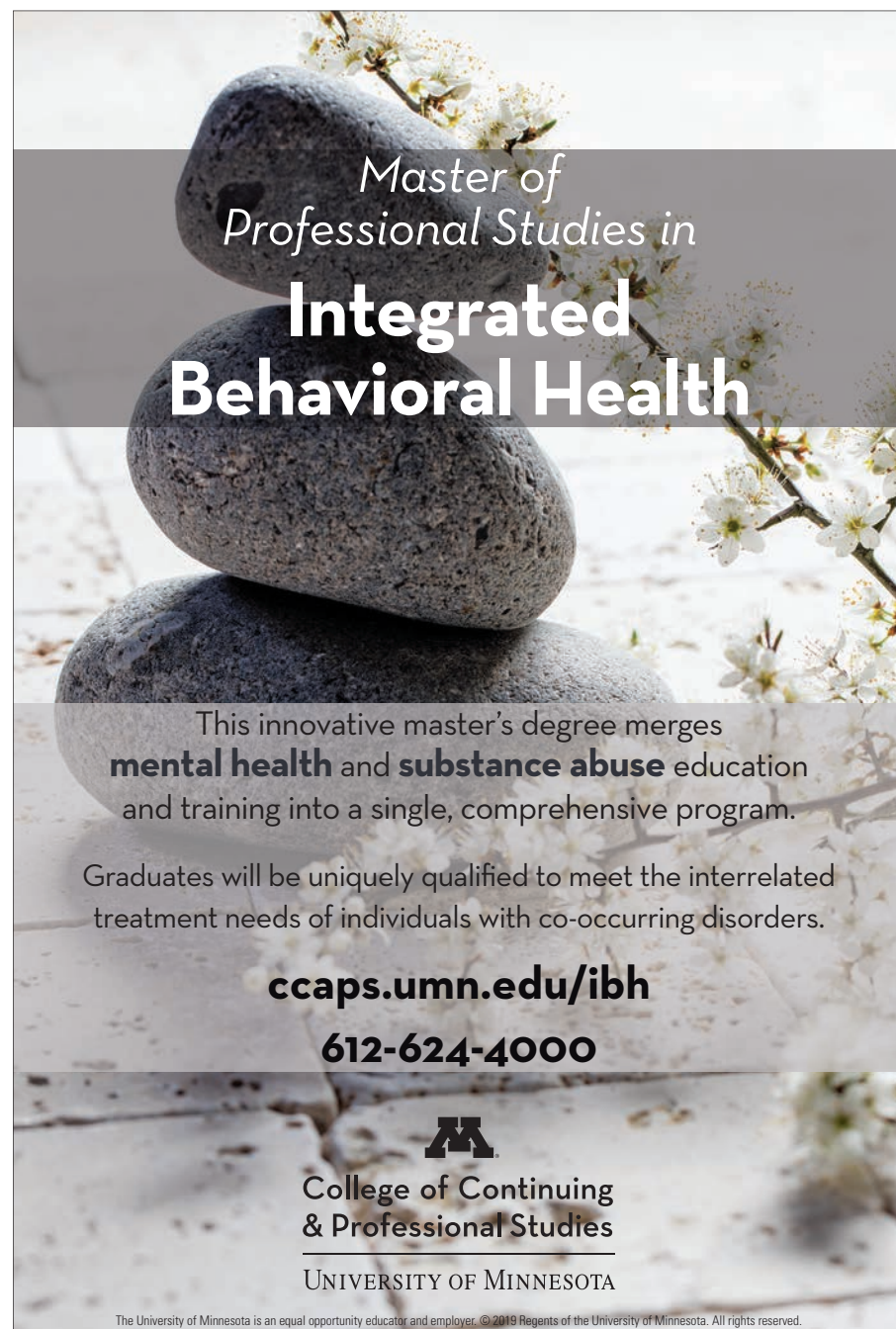
We all need people who will wholeheartedly accept us exactly as we are, warts and all. And that means every inch of us, the good, the bad, the crazy at times, the silly, and the whole unique person we are.

We all need people who will love us unconditionally and not feel the need to change us. People who will give their all to us, allowing us to give our all and best to them.

We all need epic, messy, crazy, laugh until your belly hurts, cry through the beautiful and rough moments...love. We all need people with whom to hold hands, love and pray, and stand united through thick and thin.

We all need to feel a sense of belonging, even if it's just with one person. We all need people who make us feel authentic, safe, vulnerable, loved, passionate, free, cherished, respected and alive.

We all need people, because love conquers all.




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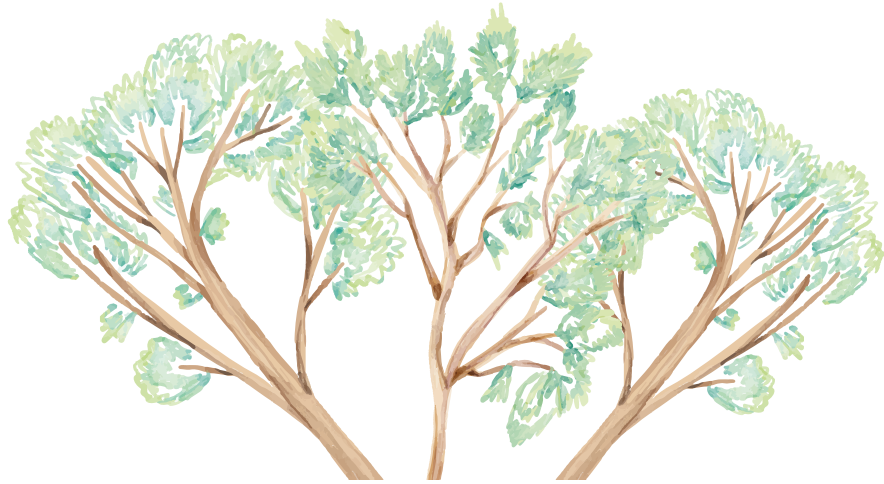
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Silence

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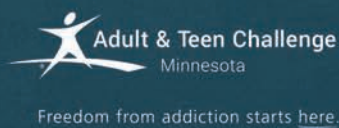
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Sounds of Silence

by Mary Lou Logsdon



"I've begun to realize that you can listen to silence and learn from it. It has a quality and a dimension all its own." CHAIM POTOK, *The Chosen*

I retreated to Tucson in January for my annual days of silence. It was luxurious to leave Minnesota in the depths of winter. The low desert sun warmed my stay. I had another engagement in Arizona, leading me to wander the web to see what might be available for retreat. There were several. I chose the Desert House of Prayer, which borders Saguaro National Park, providing access to acres of open land and miles of trails for exploration. Most importantly, it gave me several days of silence.

How quiet is a silent retreat? Not that quiet as it turns out! There is much to listen to.

The first morning I awaken in a dark room with no familiar cues as to what time it might be. I listen. Little by little I hear cars traveling down the highway that passes the retreat house. As their frequency increases I assume morning is near. The clock confirms it. I ready myself for 6:30 a.m. meditation.

Once in the chapel, I settle in and close my eyes. I hear a gentle rustling as fellow retreatants remove jackets and shoes. A large brass bowl is tapped by a wooden mallet and the chapel reverberates with its deep lingering gong. Particularly the first days, my mind gathers all the tidbits of tasks and reminders lurking in its recesses. One by one I let go of the intruding thoughts until my mind quiets to the rhythm of my breath. Twenty minutes later the closing gong jolts me back to the chapel. By now dawn's light has broken through the darkness.

I stay for morning prayer. We recite today's psalms aloud using a slow, steady cadence in an antiphonal back and forth, passing voice from one side of the chapel to the other. At the close of prayer we leave in silence. I walk the short distance to breakfast, gravel crunching under my feet. I turn my head at the whir of a hummingbird hovering midair six inches from my face. I realize I am between her and the feeder. She ignores me as I move out of her path.

About a dozen of us are at various stages of our morning meal, sharing a long table in the kitchen. I hear sounds I rarely notice at home — the click of the toaster lever as the bread descends and minutes later pops back up. The ping of my spoon against the cereal bowl, the gurgle of fresh coffee dripping into the carafe. We sit without speaking.

Not yet ready for full silence, I walk to the library in search of voices of wisdom. I find well stocked shelves with familiar authors and new writers to explore. I carry a hefty stack of spiritual books to my simple, cement-floored room. Clearly I have not yet left my productive self behind. I wander through a few of the books as the cool morning gives way to a pleasant warmth.

Lunch is similar to breakfast as we once more gather around the long kitchen table in silence with a simple meal. Instrumental music plays in the background. Eyes are mostly averted, looking just beyond the face. Occasionally we make eye contact and smile before returning to the distant gaze.

After lunch I venture on a longer walk into the desert. A Gila woodpecker

screeches overhead, moving to the top of a Saguaro Cactus. Tap, tap, tap. I catch a glimpse of a stealth coyote, quiet as a retreatant. Cacti grow hither and thither, appearing in maze-like patterns, implying trails that are not there. I focus on where I have been in order to return.

Tucson is home to Air Force, Army and Marine bases. Sleek military jets roar in the distance. Hovering helicopters hang and hum in the open blue sky. This retreat center is but a small island of tranquility in an otherwise active, noisy world.

Not all the sounds of silence are external. Memories come to visit. Unresolved issues surface for deeper examination. My usual escape route through busyness and activity doesn't work here. Pieces of my history emerge from what I thought were dormant roots, now watered by spacious stillness. I replay old conversations. Dreams interrupt dark nights. Here, too, trails lead back to where I have been.

I return to the chapel for late afternoon's double meditation, two 20-minute sits connected by a 10-minute walking meditation circling the perimeter of the chapel. The second sit is quieter. I am surprised by how soon the gong sounds.

Each retreat house has its own rules around silence. At The Desert House of Prayer the evening meal is accompanied by conversation. We gather at round tables of six. I meet people who live as close as an hour away, and as far as Vermont and British Columbia. Some come for a few days, others for months. We share stories of our ramblings here and elsewhere.

Back in my room and silence, I open my journal to converse with the many spirits who visited during the day. Who are these spirit visitors? Among the most persistent is my intrusive inner critic. She loves to fill the silences with her own repetitive commentary. I banish her — again and again.

There is the recently deceased one who came in a dream to say good-bye. I thank him. There is a visit from my inner child who feels shamed by a long ago interaction. We chat about it. I offer self compassion and a willing ear. The ghost of mistakes made long ago knocks at my door but I decide it is time to claim my space and refuse him entry. Tonight's listening session is ended.

My Higher Power is present for all of this, quietly awaiting my attention. Eventually I get there. I gather in a litany of my blessings, like a long chain of prayer beads, giving thanks for each one. I acknowledge my missteps and consider my amends. I ask for help for myself, and all those for whom I have promised to pray.

I fall asleep in the rich and deep, dark silence of the night, grateful for this sacred time away.

Mary Lou Logsdon, provides spiritual direction and leads retreats in the Twin Cities. She can be reached at logson.marylou@gmail.com.