Compulsive gambling is an illness to which I lost nearly everything. Nearly.

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Editor's Note: We are grateful to Ms. Jodie Nealley for sharing her story with readers of The BASIS. Throughout, we have provided links to journal articles and other sources to illustrate how aspects of Jodie's story coincide with scientific findings.This Editorial is part of our month-long Special Series on Gambling Disorder.

To understand my story you need to understand my addictions. When I was 25, I quit a three pack a day cigarette habit. When I was 37, I quit a heavy drinking problem. Like my father before me, I was proud of myself for quitting. But unlike my father, I went to only three AA meetings, thought I had it licked and was in recovery. What I realize now was that I did not go to recovery -I went into abstinence.

At 50 years old I was living my dream. I loved where I lived, I loved who I was with and I loved what I did. Yet, as irrational as it sounds, as soon as I had achieved everything I had worked for somehow it wasn't enough. Somehow I felt empty. I remember telling a colleague I had 'lost my joy.'

It was at this moment when the old desires for escape surfaced. They say that while we are in recovery our addiction is doing pushups in the parking lot. Thirteen years after quitting drinking and because I had been living an unrealistic version of recovery- my addiction was Hulk strong and waiting.

In 2005 I went to a conference that was held at a casino. While I was at the conference, in between meetings and responsibilities, I gambled at the slot machines. What happened then was, as any compulsive gambler in recovery will tell you, the worst thing that could have happened for me. I won!

I had gambled before but it had never consumed me as it did in 2005. Stress, anxiety and a desire to escape all played into this moment when the obsession with gambling took over my life. The slots were my drug of choice so to speak and I loved everything about them.

When I got back to Massachusetts I obsessed over the machine I had been playing and won on. I thought if I could just get back to it – get back to incredible high I felt – a high unlike any I had experienced before – get back to that moment of possibility as the reels spun around- things would be good, money would be easy, life would be better.

Soon I was regularly going to local casinos. If on a scale of 1 to 10, I quit my drinking at a 7, my gambling did not begin at 1— it began at 7. I had a built in tolerance for gambling – quarter slots were not good enough, dollar slots were not exciting enough. Within six months of starting my gambling in earnest, I was playing $100 slots – the highest available – at $200 a pull. For me it was only about the high – the greater the risk, the greater the reward.

I could not lose money fast enough. Within six months of my intense gambling I had lost hundreds of thousands of dollars. I went through my home equity line, all of the credit I could get from my credit cards, and borrowed from anybody who would give me money – all under false pretenses. I spent any money I could get so I could keep gambling. Money was my drug, and since gambling was how I got high, I would get it anyway I could.

There are several risk factors associated with gambling. Two of them stand out in my story – illusion of control over outcome and distorted thinking. I firmly believed I would win back the money I had lost. I firmly believed that if I kept playing the same machine, even though I had put in thousands of dollars, it would hit big. And when I ran out of legitimate sources of money and began to steal from my employer to fuel an addiction that could never be sated, I truly believed I would pay it back.

Distorted thinking kept me from knowing what I, as an intelligent person, should have known: that I wasn't doing this for any reason other than the adrenaline rush. On a scale of one to 100, gambling is always 100 to me. Everything else, every other good experience, will always be less.

I began gambling heavily in 2005. By 2007, I had been fired from my job for embezzlement. By 2009, at 55 years old, I was sleeping on top bunk in prison – sentenced to two years for larceny.

How could this have happened to me – a Masters educated, intelligent woman who should have known better? To someone who had an understanding of

addiction? I realize now I understood it in others but I didn't understand it myself. I didn't realize that when I quit drinking it wasn't enough to not drink. I never examined why I drank so much or why I smoked too much. I never looked at the hole in me I was trying to fill.

As I lay on that top bunk in prison or walked around the track outside, I had time to think and I learned through the help of a 12 step program, that there wasn't enough money in the world to fill that hole. I learned I had to fill it with something else. That is when my true recovery began.

There are commonalities between substance abuse and gambling. I was totally **preoccupied** with gambling – I thought about it incessantly. I was a casino gambler so I did not gamble every day. On the days I could not get to the casino, I obsessed about when I was going to go next, how I would get there, how I could to get enough money, and what lies I was going to tell to explain my absence from home.

I had **intense cravings** to gamble. The days that I woke up knowing I was going to the casino were wonderful days. They were like Christmas morning. My palms literally itched with anticipation knowing I would soon be sitting in front of a slot machine.

Increased tolerance – my smoking began with one cigarette and grew to 3 packs a day. My drinking began with one beer and grew to a six pack. My gambling – a quarter slot grew to $200 a pull. These were among my most troubling symptoms.

But there are also significant differences between substance abuse and gambling disorders. No other addiction calls you a winner. No one comes to up you in a bar and says "Would you like this beautiful suite with two fireplaces, a balcony and room service for 'free'?" No other addiction lets you put a card in the machine and rack up points to go shopping in the mall.

The **reward** is the difference – no other addiction rewards you in such tangible ways as gambling. The implied promise of winning money is a reward not given by alcohol or drugs. No other addiction has the lure and the glamour of the casino. No other addiction feeds your desire to be a big shot as gambling does. I reveled in it. I honestly believed that I was an important person- better than others, smarter than others – above the mundane world. The illusion of control and distorted thinking warped my mind to such a point that I did not know who I was.

A friend of mine once said gambling sucks out your soul. It certainly did mine.

Another difference between substance abuse and gambling is that **you can't see it**. I didn't come home smelling like bourbon. I didn't come home with red eyes or needle marks. I didn't miss work. I didn't have my spouse call me in sick because I was hung over. My addiction – my illness – was invisible and all the more devastating because of that. The day I got fired, I came home and I told my family. My partner had no idea. My actions blindside my family. This is an addiction your loved ones don't see coming.

In 2007, I was fired. In 2009, I went to prison. By 2010 I was divorced, we had lost our home and I would have a criminal record for the next 15 years. My gambling took away nearly everything from me- my home, my marriage, my career, my reputation, and my freedom. But it took much more away from my family – for they are the true victims of this insidious disease.

I have been fortunate since I was released from prison. Because I am an optimist I knew that if I kept putting one foot in front of the other I could move towards a better life.

I would get there but it began with my recognition that true recovery was essential. Money could not fill up that hole inside of me. More things would not fill up that hole. Only the belief in myself as an honest, spiritual person could begin to heal the empty space within me.

I work every day to be in recovery. For someone who always wanted to take the easy way, it is hard work. But it is not as hard as being fired. Being divorced, losing my home, being incarcerated – those things are harder.

I think the best film – the one that most reflects at least my story – is Owning Mahowny. If you want to understand gambling disorders, look at the DSM 5 criteria and watch that film. Watch the main character, played by Philip Seymour Hoffman, go through every single one of those criteria. I am an extreme case – because of my previous addictions I experienced the devastating effects of this disease quickly. I did not just meet 4 of the DSM 5 criteria- I met all 9. In my 12 step program I don't answer "yes" to 7 of the 20 questions that are asked– I answer "yes" to all of them. But there are many who may not be that far along the path to extreme destruction. For those who may think that gambling is not as harmful as drugs or alcohol, you are wrong. It destroys families, it destroys lives,

and it can lead to prison, insanity or death as surely as any other addiction.

I am fortunate- I have survived. I did not do it alone. One-on-one counseling, peer support through a 12 Step program, friends and family who did not give up on me, and the burning desire to get better- combined with the belief that I could – got me through the most difficult times of my life. I have managed to get my life back. I have a purposeful career which I never thought was possible. I have a good relationship with my family again. I appreciate every day and give thanks that I am no longer controlled by gambling.

Jodie Nealley is currently working as the Intervention and Recovery Support Coordinator at the Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling. She speaks frequently to organizations about her experience and conducts trainings on understanding gambling disorders. She received her MS from Indiana University and a certificate in Addiction Counseling from UMass/Boston in 2012. She has been in recovery from gambling disorder for 6 years and in recovery from alcohol for 22 years.

Do you, or does someone you love, seem to have trouble with slot machines, the lottery, scratch tickets, or any other form of gambling? You can take some initial steps on your own. Here are three questions used to screen for gambling disorder, and here is a free, online toolkit for those who might be ready to make some changes. Or, call the Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling 24-hour helpline: 1-800-426-1234