Surviving (and Thriving) in the Era of Digital Gambling

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Editor's note: *This op-ed was prepared by Saul Malek, a professional speaker specializing in gambling addiction prevention and education. Saul developed a gambling addiction as a college sophomore, losing money, time, relationships, and nearly his life. Since entering recovery in 2019, he has become an in-demand speaker, sharing his story with schools (both high school and college), athlete mental health organizations, suicide prevention groups, parent groups, popular news outlets (including the New York Times, National Public Radio, Public Broadcasting Service, and Dallas Morning News). He has keynoted conferences including the Connecticut Council on Problem Gambling annual conference, the Wisconsin Council on Problem Gambling annual conference, and Mental Health America Greater Dallas Adolescent Symposium. He has appeared on Dr. Phil Primetime and was a TedX speaker at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. This op-ed is part of our Special Series on Addiction and Technology, which was funded by a research and consulting contract with DraftKings.*

The most popular athletes in 2017 included LeBron James, Tom Brady, and Simone Biles. It was a different star's name, however, that caught my attention that year- Tatjana Maria, a veteran on the women's professional tennis circuit.

Sometime during the fall of 2017 Maria was playing in a tournament. Who she played against? I don't know. Where the tournament was? Couldn't tell you… I don't even remember what date the match was on.

What I can tell you, with certainty, is this: I was sitting on the toilet in my college dormitory, preparing for a night out with friends, when- I logged on to my newly

created online sportsbook account and saw, to my shock, that I could bet on tennis. Before my bookie created the account for me, I'd text him the games I wanted to bet on. Eventually, he grew tired of the texts and thought of a solution: "I can make you an account online," he said "where I give you a line of credit and you can bet on whatever you want, whenever you want. At the end of the week we'll square up through Venmo." I didn't know I could text, "Hey, give me $100 on Tatjana Maria!" But now, Tatjana Maria (and the never ending world of online gambling) came to me. I was just getting started. Soon, foreign tennis matches wouldn't be just a mere bathroom pastime- they became an obsession dominating every moment of my life.

For almost two full years, my entire life revolved around gambling. Full games became live bets on halves, quarters, even individual points. Classes skipped, lies told, sleep lost, money chased.

The strangest thing of all? The progression of my addiction all seemed so normal.

Your Dream Life: One Click Away

You may be thinking, "There's nothing normal about throwing your life away on obscure tennis bets." Let me explain.

I didn't start with obscure tennis bets. My first ever sports bet, in September 2017, when I was 19 years old, was a measly $10 wager on a baseball game.

Winning that bet made me feel like a million bucks. I wanted more. Text the bookie. $20 on a football game that weekend. Hey, I'm not bad at this. I should do this more often. This is like a business, tracking my wins and losses. Bookie sets me up an account online. I can bet on tennis? And darts? Increased betting frequency. No more tracking wins and losses. Larger bets with a higher credit limit. Start losing more frequently. Chase losses with desperate long-shots. Lying. Debt. Loans. Bailouts. Live bets, betting 10 times on the same game. Each action made sense to me in response to the last one (at least, at the time). Only after suffering unbearable consequences could I see how off base I really was.

I take responsibility for my gambling. Yet, at the same time, I can't help but think that the digital nature of my gambling accelerated my problem.

Firstly, as the Tatjana Maria example illustrates, the digital gambling world exposed me to markets I never would've known about. Additionally, the digital

gambling universe desensitized me to the value of money. Typing in “500” and clicking “bet” feels a lot less real than counting out $500 in cash and carelessly risking it. Another point: ease of access. My dream world of gambling was only a click away from me at all times. Feeling down? Place a bet. Feeling a confident high? Reach into my pocket and place another bet. No waiting around, no driving to a physical betting shop.

It is easy to feel overwhelmed in the world of digital gambling. However, in my experience, there are also more opportunities than ever to be connected with help.

Getting Your Life Back: One Click Away

I first sought help for my gambling problem in August of 2018, almost a full year before I finally quit gambling. I attended in person Gamblers Anonymous meetings, by far the youngest member at only 20. GA has been a lifesaver for me, I still attend meetings to this day. But in those early, inconsistent days where I was yet to hit a “bottom” in my gambling, the internet is what kept me hanging on.

Reddit played a pivotal role in keeping me connected with others in recovery. Through this online platform, I made close connections on the “problem gambling” subreddit, often with members close in age. Reddit introduced me to Jeff, a prominent voice in gambling harm prevention, who worked to establish Skype (pre-Zoom) meetings for people struggling. Just as the digital gambling landscape was available 24/7, so was my Reddit connection.

Professional help for a gambling problem is not always easy to find. Fortunately, my parents connected me with a therapist specializing in gambling addiction who offered virtual sessions. Visits with this therapist were essential in formulating a payment plan with my creditors, easing pressure that otherwise may have led me back to gambling.

Now professionally involved in gambling harm prevention, I can’t imagine broadcasting my message without the power of the internet. LinkedIn, Instagram, YouTube… all essential. How cool is it to share ideas with prevention specialists in Africa? Very cool… and also possible!

In Closing

Technology, like many tools, can be used or abused. It is important to not only see technology's downsides, but also the opportunities for prevention, recovery, and treatment that are afforded by the digital gambling landscape. It is practically impossible to avoid digital connection these days- thus individuals should be taught to best maximize their tech use for positive outcomes.

– Saul Malek