



ADDICTIONS FOUNDATION OF MANITOBA

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Problem Gambling Residential Rehabilitation Program Gives Clients Hope

John Smith (not his real name) has struggled with a gambling addiction for many years. It started with a few bucks lost at weekly poker games, but escalated to hundreds of dollars a month spent chasing his loses at the casino. His wife caught on and insisted he go for counselling, but after numerous failed attempts to quit gambling, she finally left him. With his house repossessed, his family gone and nothing but a mound of debt facing him, John had pretty much given up hope that he could ever be helped.

John is a prime candidate for the new Problem Gambling Residential Rehabilitation Pilot Program offered by the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba. Located in Brandon, this 14-day-long co-educational program started in October 2002. Clients live in a comfortable facility for the duration of the program, during which time they are supported and challenged in a journey of self-discovery and change. The program is delivered by a team of professional rehabilitation counsellors, gambling counsellors and specially trained residential care workers.

“There are residential programs out there for other addictions, but until now, there has been nothing like this for problem gamblers in Manitoba,” says Dawna Caithness, supervisor of the program.

Caithness explains that the new program specifically targets individuals who need a higher level of intervention than those who do well in non-residential programs, such as community-based counselling sessions. “Our clients have had difficulty succeeding in other programs – they come to us with very little hope, and some are even suicidal,” says Caithness. “But by the end, they have hope because they develop the skills and knowledge needed to change.”

**For more information
about the Problem
Gambling Residential
Rehabilitation
Program or to find out
about session start
dates, call:
Jamie Berry
(204) 729-3841**

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

The program offers a number of unique features, including the involvement of family members or significant others on the first and last days. Employers, or other people affected by the gambling, are also encouraged to attend. The sessions provide information about gambling and give tips on how the people closest to the gambler can help in the rehabilitation.

As well, couple counselling is a key component of the program. Couples affected by problem gambling have special issues to deal with, such as intimacy or money problems. “If couples receive some intervention around

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these issues, it frees the client to focus on the other work he or she needs to do,” says Jamie Berry, a counsellor in the program.

CONTROL OVER MONEY

Another unique feature of the program is helping clients to develop a money control plan or, more accurately, a “limiting access to money” plan. Clients in the program need such a plan because without money, they can’t gamble. However, it’s not as easy as it sounds. Everyone needs money in today’s society, and adults are accustomed to earning and spending their own money as they see fit.

“When clients are asked to give up control of their money, there is a whole emotional process they must go through,” says Caithness. “So, we ask them to practice limiting their access to money while they are participating in the program.”

Therefore, clients don’t bring credit cards, and the money they do bring is put away for them. If they need money for anything, they have to ask for it, then produce receipts to account for it. By practicing this procedure, clients will hopefully be ready to hand over control of their money to a spouse or a significant other once the program is over.

As well as the limiting access to money plan, clients attend a group session with Darrin Surminsky, a trustee in bankruptcy with Meyers Norris Penny. They can also take advantage of free individual sessions with Mr. Surminsky, who will provide financial advice on such things as debt management and bankruptcy procedures. Says Karen Fisher, an AFM gambling counsellor: “Darrin gives the clients a lot of hope that their desperate financial situations can be dealt with.”

HOW GAMBLING WORKS

One of the factors that keeps gamblers gambling is a lack of understanding of how the games really work. With other addictions – nicotine for example – big warnings

on the packages describe how the body will be negatively affected by this drug. There are no such warnings with gambling, and many clients believe that they will actually come out a winner if they keep trying.

To demystify gambling, counsellors present accurate information on gambling, describing, for example, the built in house advantage, the inability to accurately predict winning numbers and the effects of occasional wins. As well, some of the internal factors, such as believing that a machine is “lucky” or thinking they have a “system” to beat the odds, are challenged.

“We use interactive activities to show how gambling works,” says Caithness. “The activities challenge the clients’ thinking and open their eyes – it’s really powerful for people.”

CONTINUING CARE

Once the program is completed, clients have access to AFM continuing care counsellors in their communities. Program counsellors also attempt to facilitate support, such as telephone counselling, for clients from areas with limited social services. Gamblers Anonymous is also a helpful resource; clients are introduced to this self-help group by attending two sessions a week during the program.

Is the program successful? While research results are not yet available, comments from client feedback forms are promising: 70% of the participants said the program helped them, and all would recommend it to others. Anecdotal evidence is also positive. Mike S., a client in the first session last October, says he is now able to control his own money. “It’s a matter of stopping and thinking – once, twice or three times. I stop and remove myself from the situation. I don’t need gambling in my life anymore.”



The lounge at the residential facility.