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The Effects of Compulsive Gambling on the Marriage

Running time: 43 minutes

Price: \$295 (US)

Format: VHS format

and

Can this Marriage Recover (from the Effects of Compulsive Gambling)?

Running time: 23 minutes

Price: \$295 (US)

Format: VHS format

Set of both videos: \$495 (US)

Distributor: Arnie and Sheila Wexler Associates

213 Third Avenue, Bradley Beach, New Jersey 07720 USA

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E-mail: aswexler@aol.com

Web site: <http://www.aswexler.com/html/videos.html>

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The Effects of Compulsive Gambling on the Marriage and Can this Marriage Recover (from the Effects of Compulsive Gambling)? provide parts One and Two of a videorecorded conference presentation by Arnie and Sheila Wexler, a married couple who survived the effects of a gambling addiction. The presentation was part of the New Jersey Council on Problem Gambling Conference in 1993. It chronicles the destructive effects of Arnie's gambling problem on him and on his wife as well as their journey through recovery.

The Effects of Compulsive Gambling on the Marriage traces the development of Arnie's gambling problem and its effect on his relationship with Sheila. In 1993, Arnie and Sheila Wexler had been married for 32 years, and of those, 25 years had been spent in the process of recovery from Arnie's gambling problem. They are both 12-step program members.

Arnie's interest in gambling, mostly horseracing, began at age 14. His first big win was \$54 at the racetrack; a lot of money to Arnie, who was then earning only \$.50 per hour. Gambling always played a central role in his relationship with Sheila. In fact, their second date involved sneaking the underage Sheila into the races to gamble. Arnie and Sheila take turns describing their experiences in a direct and frank fashion. We hear vivid, personal details about their decisions and actions, regardless of how painful they were.

The structure of the talk follows Custer's (1984) well-known diagram of the progression of gambling problems from the winning, losing and desperation phases (Part One) to the critical phase and re-building and growth phases. (To see the diagram, go to <http://www.state.in.us/fssa/servicemental/gambling/problems.html> and search with Ctrl+F for Perception of Gambling as an Addiction). A similar phase diagram is used to outline the effects of gambling on the spouse. The parallel phases are referred to as denial, stress, exhaustion, critical, re-building and growth.

Review process

A group got together one hot summer afternoon to view the tapes; the eight people were graduate and undergraduate students, psychologists, gambling clinicians and gambling researchers. We viewed each tape (Part Two first, unfortunately, because of poor labelling) and discussed each briefly. The following review presents our consensus views.

Critique

Arnie and Sheila are both articulate and effective speakers. The recording quality is good, although the videos follow a low-tech approach. The talks are presented as given to the audience, with the phases of compulsive gambling and recovery marked with simple camera shots of the diagrams. There are few graphics, little bridging narration and no supporting materials other than the Custer diagram. We considered this simplicity both a strength and a weakness of the videos, a strength in that the rawness of the stories is underscored. At the end of Part One, which ends with the desperation phase, we all felt subdued and saddened by the Wexlers' experiences. Part Two provided a greater sense of hope as they described the recovery phases. Throughout both videotapes, no detail is spared in illustrating the process.

The difficulty with the low-tech approach is that the structure of the videotapes was not immediately apparent. It would have helped to have some narration indicating the structure of the two-part video presentation and a graphic presenting the complete diagram. Certainly an information guide could easily be prepared. The graphics that distinguish each phase are camera shots of the classic Custer diagram of addiction and recovery. The information was difficult to read, and again, narration could guide the viewer through each phase with a brief explanation.

Our group had an extensive discussion of the intended audience for the videos. They provide a useful introduction to the Gamblers Anonymous philosophy and associated terminology. The videos emphasize the long-term nature of recovery and the importance of the spouse working on him- or herself, both of which may be useful to stimulate discussion in a treatment program with a therapist's guidance.

From a stages of change perspective (for an introduction to this concept, select http://www.med.usf.edu/~kmbrown/Stages_of_Change_Overview.htm) we wondered if the extremeness of the Wexlers' experiences as presented on the videos might discourage contemplators, whose own stories might be less dramatic and lives less disrupted, from seeking recovery. A therapist could

guide the discussion appropriately to avoid this effect and, instead, instill hope for recovery and emphasize the importance of current action to prevent the development of such devastating consequences. The videos may also be useful in a teaching context. Although a guest speaker from Gamblers Anonymous or Gam-Anon would be most effective, these videos offer a good alternative.

A limitation of the stories is that Arnie is an "old style" gambler, having a problem primarily with horseracing. No mention is made of the electronic gambling machines or older-age onset of gambling that currently are issues for the majority of people seeking treatment. Families will often report that the relationship with the gambler was good prior to the development of the gambling problem. The Wexlers, in contrast, describe their relationship as starting out on a poor foundation that needed to be completely rebuilt in recovery.

The videos do not provide much information of the process of recovery for the couple. For instance, we wanted to know more on how Arnie quit gambling, reconnected with his wife and worked through the hurt they had caused one other. It seemed that they worked in isolation versus coming together and working jointly. We were also interested in the recovery process for their children and how they fared, and we assume there were many ups and downs for all of them that are not described. Generally, the recovery is presented as a linear process once initiated (as in the Custer diagram).

The Wexlers subscribe to the disease and codependency models of pathological gambling. However, although they use this language (Sheila speaks of her codependency "illness"), their rich descriptions also illustrate characteristics of other models of gambling problems. Arnie describes the behavioural changes that were important in his recovery —taking on new activities, limiting access to money, and so forth. He also speaks of the cognitive distortions that guided his wagering —superstitions, discounting losses, symbolism and luck. Sheila describes her hope that "love will conquer all" and her lack of assertiveness in confronting Arnie's behaviour. She also describes symptoms of depression, agoraphobia and panic attacks.

In summary, the two videos provide a powerfully presented recovery story that describes the experiences of the gambler and the affected family member. Their potential usefulness is in specific contexts when employed by experienced clinicians.

Reference

Custer, R.L. (1984).

Profile of the pathological gambler. *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 45 (12,2), 35–38.

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