

Affected Others' Concerns

people whose lives have been affected by problem gamblers

On May 18, 2007, Northstar Alliance convened a group of 11 people whose lives have been affected by problem gamblers. The insights and comments from these affected others shed light on often overlooked, yet vital issues to address when dealing with problem/compulsive gambling.

There is a need for more support for affected persons of problem and pathological gamblers – Among the most pressing issues cited by affected others are:

- financial concerns
- shortfalls in treatment services
- inadequate number of gambling treatment professionals for affected others
- the need to break down communication barriers between family members and within the core family
- changes that come with their revised role as family caretaker
- lack of public awareness of how problem gambling affects the family

It was totally devastating

This is not a victimless crime

Supporting affected persons – Focus group participants reflected on their disbelief and shock. They had no idea what to do or where to turn. Available resources provide little help or direction and seem to be geared to the problem gambler alone, not those affected by the gambler's behavior. Banks cannot provide access to problem gamblers' accounts. Affected others find it very difficult to manage and/or stabilize family finances. There appears to be a lack of financial recovery options other than bankruptcy. The group made suggestions for improving services and resources. Among their recommendations were to:

- provide more productive help concerning finances
- get the banks involved
- allow affected others to have access to the problem gamblers' accounts and make decisions regarding family finances

I wish I had more opportunities to talk to people in a crisis situation

Participants want bankers to help, but reported that banks would say, "There is nothing we can do for you."

Dealing with financial destitution and becoming the sole caretaker of the household exacerbates affected others' already strained emotions and high levels of stress. Participants described feelings of disbelief and anger at the gambler in their life. They pay the gambler's debts, prepare and pay their taxes and other bills too. The gambler, say affected others, doesn't have to do anything but go to treatment, leaving all the family responsibilities to the affected other. Making the situation even worse, say the affected others, is the lack of support and compassion they receive from treatment services and other family members.

I wanted to hear, "We can work with him...now here is something for you."

Affected others feel that treatment services do not treat them with the same amount of concern, detail or care as they provide problem gamblers. There are insufficient counseling hours allocated to the spouses and families of problem gamblers, especially those families that have children. Counseling hours of the spouse are sometimes used for the child(ren). While this is important, it's also important that **both** the children and spouse have adequate time with the counselor.

It's not just the problem gambler who is in crisis – sometimes the family is as well. Affected others have been told that crisis counselors 'do not have time for them for several days.' The focus group recommends that family members get to see counselors as quickly as possible, at the same level of urgency as problem gamblers. This is only possible, if there are enough qualified counselors and there is awareness of the problem. In addition, affected others may need counseling even after "their gambler" is out of treatment, but they are not able to receive such services currently.

The problem gambler's life just got easier, the spouse's life just got harder

Feedback regarding the Helpline

The helpline needs to consistently support affected others in addition to providing help for problem gamblers. Also, it must provide current information. The helpline and treatment centers need to be notified of updates and changes and to pass along the best information available.

Importance of Gam-Anon – Group members expressed the need for meetings to be offered more than once a week to be there for participants who need additional group support.

Our group is inspirational

Communication between and within families – Discussion centered on the fact that frequently, other family members are in denial – they do not see the gambler’s problems as problematic. Some family members, not fully understanding the severity of the situation, think they are helping by bailing out the gambler and not seeing the ramifications that has for the spouse. Additionally, lack of communication is emotionally straining and isolating for affected others. Focus group participants report about extended family gatherings where an unaffected family member bypasses the affected other in order to provide sympathy to the problem gambler. This is difficult for affected others to deal on top of everything else they are doing. Family members need to be better informed about the problem gambler’s behavior, the disease, and the effect both have on others.

How can I hold my family together when I can’t even hold myself together?

Social implications – affected others often feel like they cannot tell friends, and in some cases family, about the situation. Keeping the secret is yet another stress. One way to alleviate some of the stress of keeping secrets as well as the shame and isolation may be to involve faith communities. They could get involved in supporting, affected others. This would involve educating compassionate clergy and lay people about the facts and understanding that overcoming problem gambling is not a matter of willpower. Not all the participants agreed with this approach, however. “Some churches’ doctrines would consider gambling a weakness of will.”

Just because the gambler gets fixed, doesn’t mean that you get fixed too.

Honesty – there were indications from the group that they, affected persons put in a lot of time and effort to manage everything, but that their problem gambler didn’t seem to be putting in the same amount of effort. A big part of recovery for both the gambler and affected other is honesty and trust. The lies of the problem gambler being revealed slowly over time were harder to recover from than quick intense sessions where everything comes out. One participant expressed how Vanguard did a very good job with this “band-aid removal” type of communication, saying that this type of completely honest communication helps rebuild the trust in the relationship.

Personal Struggle of the Affected Other – With everything and everyone else that affected others deal with, it's important that their own struggle not get pushed aside. Affected others need support and someone to talk to. Someone who could understand what the gambler doesn't – what it's like being the spouse. To some, it feels like being a single parent – the spouse is "missing" and you feel like you've taken on another child.

Disease model – Not everyone is able to initially comprehend problem gambling as a disease, but it can be helpful when explaining the situation to a child.

Suggestions for DHS re: affected others:

1. Treat the whole family, not just the gambler.
2. Increase statewide distribution of resources – posters billboards, and brochures specifically for affected persons.
3. Distribute resources anywhere and everywhere, not just in the "obvious" places like casinos.
4. Establish an affected persons helpline.
5. Start educating people about problem gambling early – in school.
6. DHS staff needs to be knowledgeable about what it is like to be affected by problem gambling.
7. More lottery proceeds should go problem gambling resources since they directly benefit from the problem.
8. Increase understanding among stakeholders – have the gaming commissioner hear firsthand accounts from affected others.

If there was funding available specifically for affected persons, how should it be used?

1. Start an emergency fund for spouses of problem gamblers so they can buy groceries, diapers and necessary items while in crisis. This fund could be in the form of a check, vouchers, or even in services like providing childcare while parents are at Gam-Anon meetings.
2. Create a video for affected others about their issues – showing them they are not alone and what resources are available to them.
3. Establish halfway houses for affected persons to go (where the gambler cannot go) to take care of themselves and their children while in crisis.

Conclusion – Affected others need to understand that they cannot fix the problem gambler. That only hurts you more. Even if the problem gambler tries to blame you, their problem gambling is not your fault. They need to take responsibility for themselves and their own wellbeing.

What affected others want most of all is to relate to people who understand what they are going through. They are weary of feeling alone while trying to keep it all together. Focus group participants expressed frustration that while gamblers get support, affected others are too often left out of treatment and recovery.

Affected others **are** the long-term support of the problem gambler. If they don't feel supported, how are they to support the family and household?