Gambling: The Hidden Addiction

By Judy Herriff

For those of you who remember the days of the Turning Point (the Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program’s former quarterly newsletter), you may recall that we began to explore the problems associated with gambling nearly a decade ago, at a time when casino gambling within Michigan’s borders—and particularly in the greater Detroit area—was still a relatively recent development. Previous studies of gambling addiction patterns indicate that a growth in gambling addiction will follow the accessibility to gambling that newly established casinos afford local residents. As predicted, we have observed over the past 10 years the insidiousness of this particular form of “process addiction” and the growth of its impact on individuals, families, and communities at large.

The following article by Judy Herriff, executive director of the Michigan Association on Problem Gambling, provides information for identifying a client who is engaged in destructive gambling and ways to assist the client and his or her family. We hope that this information will be helpful to you in your practice. We also hope that, if you have a colleague, family member, or friend who is struggling, this information will help you gain momentum toward addressing the problem.

It intrigues me that the number of calls to LJAP about attorneys who are in the throes of gambling addiction have not spiked proportionately to the number of discipline cases involving fiscal issues in recent years. I fear that this lack of correlation is not because lawyers are invulnerable to the siren’s call of gambling in its many forms, but because more often they don’t get identified and “flushed out” until their compulsion drives them out of the shadows and into the discipline system by virtue of ethical and legal violations involving client funds. By this time, it is often too late for LJAP to help these individuals get treatment at a time when doing so could enable them to keep their law licenses. Many of those who end up in the discipline system as a result of using client funds to support a gambling addiction have fallen so far that they are criminally prosecuted or at the very least owe so much money in restitution and costs as a result of the disciplinary proceeding that the possibility of reinstatement is remote. Because they are no longer able to earn the income that they had previously enjoyed, there is no way for them to repay the money owed. Sadly, their shadows never cross the LJAP door. Early identification and intervention, however difficult, is critical for healing and recovery to begin. We can offer support and referrals for treatment at any juncture, including when a former lawyer seeks reinstatement and may be recognizing for the first time the need for help.

At LJAP, our goal is to enlighten and inspire: to express our confidence that with proper identification, attention, support, and care, you, your loved one, or your clients who are caught in any aspect of the isolation and desperation of destructive gambling behavior can experience the serenity, hope, and joy that you deserve. Please let us know if we can help.

—Martha D. Burkett, Program Administrator, LJAP

How could this happen? This is the cry of disbelief when a family member receives notification that his or her home is in foreclosure, a result of falling three months behind in mortgage payments. He or she may rush to the bank and discover that the family’s savings account is drained or the children’s college funds are missing. This family has joined the thousands of individuals and families adversely affected by someone who is a problem or pathological gambler. In addition to the financial issues, repercussions include loss of trust, loss of respect, weakened or destroyed relationships, financial insecurity, and public embarrassment. Moreover, the children of problem gamblers tend to have a higher probability of developing a gambling problem than those whose parents do not gamble.

Not every spouse or partner discovers out-of-control gambling behavior through a financial crisis. If you wonder about your partner’s involvement in gambling activities, it is prudent to follow your hunch and check for the following indicators:

• Has there been a personality change?
• Is he missing work, or becoming more anxious or moody?
• Has she asked to borrow money from you or relatives and friends?
• Does he fail to show up for his children’s programs or sporting events?
• Does she brag about gambling winnings, but avoid talking about losses?
• Does he respond angrily when questioned about time and money spent on gambling activities?

Whether gamblers seek help or not, you can help yourself by attending a GAM-ANON meeting.1

1. I was a provider of mental health services to problem and pathological gamblers and their families in the Lansing area from 1998 to 2006. Problem gambling is gambling behavior that causes disruptions in any major area of life: psychological, physical, social, or vocational.2 The term “problem gambling” includes, but is not limited to, the condition known as “pathological” or “compulsive” gambling, a progressive addiction characterized by increasing preoccupation with gambling, a need to bet more
Typical responses are anger, denial, and guilt-producing blaming. Be alert to a gambler’s emotional state and whereabouts, as he or she is also at high risk for suicide.
fights with family members, lying, and not attending GA or therapy. When any of these signs become evident, family members and friends can be supportive and offer to participate in the gambler’s recovery plan. Gambling is a secret and hidden activity. Recovery is openness and honesty with self and others.

Incidences of problem and pathological gambling have risen as gambling becomes more accessible to greater numbers of Michigan residents. People gamble at casinos, participate in the various opportunities sponsored by the Michigan Lottery, play bingo or card games at charitable gaming events, bet at a horse track, or participate in illegal forms of gambling such as Internet or remote gambling, sports betting, office pools, or animal fights.

The following are warning signs of a possible gambling problem that you might hear a client mention when describing what brought him or her to your office:

- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Missing personal or household items
- Hiding gambling losses from family members
- Being secretive or deceptive when asked about gambling or finances
- Receiving late notices or telephone calls from creditors
- Talking only about wins, not losses
- Liquidating assets
- Failing at attempts to cut back or stop gambling
- Showing an intense interest in gambling-related matters
- Neglecting personal needs or health
- Using retirement funds to gamble or cashing in an insurance policy
- Suddenly needing money or loans
- Exhibiting mood swings based on winnings and losses

Gambling is the most powerful addiction I have seen in my practice. Gambling addicts cannot stop without intervention. That intervention may come through you and the courts. It may come from participating in GA meetings. Gamblers or family members may call the Michigan 24-hour Gambling Helpline at (800) 270-7117. Recovery work is very difficult, and those who are most successful attend GA meetings and engage in therapy.

We are very fortunate in Michigan that sixteen therapy sessions for gamblers and three sessions for family members are financially supported by the three state casinos, the Michigan Lottery, and horse tracks. There is hope for your client. I urge you to be alert to the possibility that problem gambling may be a factor in your client’s life.

Judy Herriff, MA, LLP, NCGC, counseled people with gambling addictions from 1998 until her retirement in 2006. In 2000, Judy helped establish the Michigan Association on Problem Gambling. She is the executive director of MAPG, representative to the National Council on Problem Gambling, a member of the NCPG Board of Directors, and chairperson of the NCPG Nominations and Elections Committee. She graduated from MSU with a master’s degree in counseling.

FOOTNOTES
1. A resource for GAM-ANON meetings is <http://www.gam-anon.org>. All websites cited in this article were accessed April 15, 2009.
3. Id.
7. For a list of GA meetings, visit <http://www.gamblersanonymous.org/mtgdirMI.html>.