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Romancing the Odds (1997)

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Length: 40 minutes

Subject: Problem gamblers

Distributor: Nova Scotia Government Bookstore

(902) 424-7580, in Nova Scotia call toll-free 1-800-526-6575

URL: <http://www.gov.ns.ca/bacs/books/gambling.htm>

Fax: (902) 424-5599, E-mail: lynchcd@gov.ns.ca

Cost: \$125.00

Comedian Bette MacDonald hams it up, sings and acts her harried way through this dramatization of the lives of several problem gamblers. These gamblers deal with the economic, social and family consequences of devoting too much time and money chasing their losses. One gambler is locked into a desperate cycle and constantly rationalizes his behaviour, convincing himself he must “win big” so he can pay his debts. Yet he postpones bill payments and other important commitments. He pockets his employer's money hoping the bookkeeper won't notice before he “pays it back” and attempts to borrow from anyone against his future hopes to win. The video illustrates the struggle with relapse for gamblers in recovery and recognizes triggers in relapsing. The video conveys the difficulty some gamblers may face with ever-present advertising for lotteries and other gambling venues. Occasional brief interludes offer information on the antiquity of gambling.

Much of the gambling action takes place in a bar with video lottery terminals (VLTs). Brian, the friendly bartender, offers advice to the audience, comments about gamblers, makes change for the VLTs, polishes glassware, reads aloud from

Dostoyevsky's *The Gambler* and doesn't seem to sell much alcohol. He laments that the usual social conviviality of the beverage room seems to have been reduced by the presence of the gambling machines. Interestingly, the video gives the impression that there is a sexualised component to gambling as the bettors use suggestive talk with the electronic host on the VLT screen, seemingly trying to “romance the odds.” This concept is not pursued very far, and it would be interesting to know if this is a common component in problem gamblers' experiences, or just cleverness on the part of the video producer.

The video presents some basic aspects of recovery from gambling problems. A receptionist on the Problem Gambling Helpline outlines how this service works. A counsellor with the Drug Dependency Services briefly comments on his attitude to gambling therapy. He sees problem gambling as a kind of “self therapy” that not only interferes with the process of dealing with life problems, but may mask other issues. He offers four basic steps for someone seeking help: stop yourself from accessing money, begin an exercise program as a start to a lifestyle change, participate in Gamblers' Anonymous support groups and attend counselling sessions. The Helpline number is shown during the introduction and at the conclusion of the program.

One of the more compelling segments of the video involves a secondary school class doing a project on gambling. They explore questions of gambling, the role of chance and the odds of winning a lottery, for example, compared to other kinds of random events. One of the students in the class plays the part of the son of a problem gambler. He approaches the teacher at the end of the class and presents his dilemma about “a person he knows” with a gambling problem.

I believe this video would be a useful adjunct to an information session about problem gambling. The program is not without faults and some segments last rather long –“Why I gamble”– for example. Though intended to puncture the bubble of excuse making, it comes perilously close to condescending mockery. Looking at demographic characteristics, the gamblers portrayed appear to be remarkably consistent; they are all white, 30 to 40 years old and low to middle income workers. Is this the group most often experiencing gambling problems? The video covers a lot of issues though, has an offbeat sense of humour and would be appropriate for an adult audience. As an added bonus, viewers can try their hand at the recipe for “turnover chips.”

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- Review