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Chasing – It's not just about the money: Clinical reflections

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Dr. Rugle has published on attention deficits and personality factors in pathological gamblers, comparisons of pathological gamblers and substance abusers and treatment approaches to pathological gambling.

Abstract

Henry Lesieur's book, *The Chase: Career of the Compulsive Gambler* (1984), focuses on the financial aspects of pathological gamblers' increasingly desperate need to win or get even. This essay suggests that the concept of “chasing” can be extended to explore how gamblers chase in their attempt to meet emotional and spiritual needs. Clinical case examples are presented and implications for treatment are discussed.

The Chase ([Lesieur, 1984](#)) is one of the seminal works in the field of problem

gambling. Its description of the gambler's need to pursue money to cover losses in an ever narrowing spiral and repeatedly returning to gamble with increasing desperation to try to win back losses, depicts one of the key dynamics of pathological gambling.

The financial aspects of chasing are certainly what many, if not most, pathological gamblers are focused on when they enter treatment. One of the most common irrational beliefs among the gamblers I have treated is that “money will solve my problems.” However, the behavior of one of my current clients contradicts this belief. After severe losses he gambled again and won enough money to pay off most of his gambling debt. But he was unable to actually carry out his plan to withdraw his winnings from his offshore sports betting account. Of course, he bet this money and lost again. Although he is able to acknowledge, at least in part, that no matter how much money he won at times, it was never enough. He also clings tenaciously to the distorted belief that his gambling is about money.

Clearly, in this client's case and many other clients I have worked with, chasing is about more than throwing good money after bad. It involves more than the material need for money; it is about emotional and spiritual need as well. Many gamblers are chasing ego losses. Richard [Rosenthal \(1995\)](#) wrote persuasively about the phenomena of the “bad beat,” the fluky loss that robs the gambler of a “sure win.” Losses like this may enrage the gambler who feels that fate has been unfair. This kind of thinking contributes to a sense of victimization and vulnerability. The gambler must therefore chase to overcome these feelings so he/she can regain a sense of power and control. The gambler focuses on having power over something external; power over the other players at the table or the fall of the dice. Gamblers may think that power and control can also mean having special knowledge, skills, abilities or luck that allow them to feel protected and invulnerable. The more the gambler loses, the more out of control, and small and vulnerable he/she feels, and the more desperate the chasing becomes.

Gamblers seeking relief and escape often care little about winning. Rather, research has suggested that their goal is to keep gambling as long as possible ([Hing & Breen, 2001](#)). What these gamblers are chasing is oblivion: repeatedly returning to gambling, even though they often don't expect to win. They use gambling as an escape from life's problems rather than as a way to cope with their problems in a more effective manner; yet, their problems mount, and they feel increasingly overwhelmed. They continually return to gambling to chase an illusory feeling of peace. Gambling also adds to their existing problems, so the chasing intensifies.

One client described a horrendous childhood of chaos and abuse. When her abusive, alcoholic father would come home, he started yelling at whomever he saw first. When this happened, she would curl up in a corner and pretend she was

invisible. She described the time that she spent playing video poker as giving her the same relief. She could be at her machine and be invisible, oblivious to any pain and stress in her life. No one could hurt her while she was gambling.

The pathological gambler is thus chasing a desire, and at the same time, running away from pain, fear, vulnerability. It is interesting that in Buddhist tradition, desire or craving is the first in a list of hindrances or “afflictions” that lead to suffering. From this perspective, craving or desire represents an attempt to hold onto what is impermanent. Craving is based on the belief that we do not have or have within ourselves what we need to be happy. Therefore, we must have something beyond ourselves and beyond what we have right now. When gamblers chase, they maintain the illusion that they're “catching” what will bring them happiness, satisfaction, peace. However, ironically, the faster the gambler chases what always seems to be just out of reach, the greater the desire becomes. The pathological gambler becomes attached to his/her desire: “I must be a winner in order to be happy.” “I must gamble to get relief.” In this way, the gambler defines him/herself as someone who must have something more, better, different than what they are right now. Gamblers who chase, are never satisfied with who they are or what they have at the present moment.

Chasing is therefore always about the past and the future. It is about evening the score for the emotional losses, inequities and mistakes of the past. It is about running away from the past and the present as much as it is about chasing a fantasy future that will bring an end to suffering. The next bet will solve the problems, alleviate the pain or right all the wrongs.

In the intensity of the chase, it is nearly impossible for gamblers to accept that they are straining to reach the unattainable. The carrot seems to be so tantalizingly within reach. In the 12-step tradition, the first step of recovery is accepting that one is powerless, in this case, powerless over gambling. For the gambler, this means truly accepting that the chase is over. While the chase has created mental, emotional as well as financial suffering, when it stops, the gambler comes face to face with the reality of the present moment. For most gamblers, the pain of facing reality far exceeds the familiar suffering of the chase. At least with the chase, they have the illusion of hope. When gamblers give up the chase, they often feel as if their lives are completely bereft of hope.

One of my clients found it very difficult to stop chasing; she was chasing the years she felt she had lost when she gambled. Chasing gave her the false hope that winning enough would make up for lost relationships, lost time, lost jobs, lost opportunities. Every time she stopped chasing, depression, self-anger and despair would set in, as she struggled to accept what she had lost.

Chasing is “mindless” activity. Clearly, the gambler who chases oblivion seeks the

perfect mindless state — not thinking and not feeling. However, even for someone who gambles to chase power and control and who seems to put much thought into gambling systems, handicapping or strategizing, the chase becomes mindless repetition. All the mental energy that goes into the scheming, conniving, lying and planning of the chase, the next bet is the “trance” of chasing, as psychologist and meditation teacher Tara [Brach \(2003\)](#) would label it.

When a pathological gambler struggles to end the chase, the escape to mindlessness and oblivion begins to collapse. In fact, it is the goal of treatment and recovery to help the gambler become increasingly “mindful” of themselves and the reality of the world around them. This mindfulness involves the willingness to recognize craving, the desire to chase, to tolerate the discomfort of not acting on that desire. By being willing to listen to desire and to deeply understand it, gamblers can learn a true sense of empowerment and can have control over their lives.

Willingness to maintain stillness rather than engaging in the chase does not come easily for most pathological gamblers. Many who gamble find that when they stop chasing, they experience nearly intolerable feelings and thoughts. Even if they refrain from gambling, they look for other ways to chase: chasing a job, a relationship, other forms of risk, competition or escape. They continue to try to chase happiness by seeking something, someone or some experience outside of themselves.

Increasingly, in my clinical practice, I have appreciated the pressure my clients experience to continue the chase. It is difficult for them to accept that happiness, serenity and satisfaction are not somewhere “out there” just beyond reach, but rather that these feelings are found within, here and now. Cravings and thoughts about gambling are about chasing the illusion. Even for the atheist or the agnostic, chasing can be viewed as a ritual in the worship of a false idol that only promises willful power or oblivion. A true spirituality (whether one believes in a higher power or not) involves the self-discipline of value-based behavior, willingness, self-acceptance and self-awareness that can lead to a mindful serenity and empowerment, rather than mindless oblivion.

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