

Journal Information

Journal ID (publisher-id): jgi

ISSN: 1910-7595

Publisher: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Article Information

Product Information: By BillLee (2005). Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2005. ISBN 1-59285-153-3 (softcover).

Price (approx.) \$12.00 CND or \$10.00 USD.

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Received Day: 02 Month: 06 Year: 2005

Publication date: April 2006

Publisher Id: jgi.2006.16.12

DOI: 10.4309/jgi.2006.16.12

Born to Lose: Memoirs of a Compulsive Gambler

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This article was not peer-reviewed.

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Born of a schizophrenic mother and compulsive gambling father, Bill Lee tells a fascinating tale of action and abstinence. His mother made suicide attempts, while his father was alcoholic and a sexual predator. His father created an herbal concoction, intending to abort him, which resulted in congenital defects instead. If this were not enough, his parents tried to sell him to an elderly couple when he was three years old. His mother continually told him he was good for nothing while his father ignored him, except to take him to gambling parlors starting from toddlerhood. Gambling was the main thing he had in common with his father, a “connected” member of a Chinese gang.

To avoid being beaten by his older brother, who took care of him, Lee gravitated towards the streets where he hustled and became a member of a Chinese gang in San Francisco. His gang experiences were described in another memoir: *Chinese Playground* (Lee, 1999). He experienced violence and gang wars in which some of his friends were killed. In addition to gang activity, he engaged in legitimate employment in a pharmacy, went on to college (he was placed on the Dean's List), and learned about the stock market. This learning produced an addiction to the stock market in addition to other forms of gambling.

This is a fascinating tale of problem gambling episodes, attempts at recovery, and numerous relapses. Lee realized that he had a problem with his gambling when he

decided to work as a blackjack dealer in Lake Tahoe but couldn't wait long enough to fill out a job application before he went to the tables and proceeded to lose his stake.

Lee is psychologically minded. He has a BA in psychology, volunteered at the San Francisco Hospital's Psychiatric Emergency Services, and has had years of psychotherapy. As a result, he is familiar with its language. For example, of the gang activity he comments: "...the lifestyle compensated for my insecurities and provided relief from emotional pain that had been festering deep inside me" (p. 39). His marriage lasted two years; he states he was not mature enough. This rejection was an echo of the rejection by his parents and he became quite angry and depressed. He states, "My reaction was to mask my pain by expressing tremendous anger at Kathy [his wife] and just about everyone else I came in contact with" (p. 53).

Lee fulfilled all of the DSM-IV criteria for pathological gambling with one possible exception: "needs to gamble with increasing amounts of money in order to achieve the desired excitement." Lee makes a common comment among gamblers: His increase in wagering size was not to increase excitement but to chase losses. He states, "Out of desperation to recoup my earlier blackjack and stock market losses, I increased the size of my bets..." (p. 70). His gambling preoccupation was obvious throughout the book. His failed efforts to control his gambling were recurrent. He was restless when trying to quit gambling. While his irritability could have been a product of bipolar II disorder, he also experienced strong cravings. He writes about his cravings: "At around 3:30 am, I woke up drenched in sweat and shaking. My urge to gamble left my entire body feeling like one giant mosquito bite, and no amount of will power would have been able to stop me from scratching myself ... After throwing on some clothes, I drove to a card club about forty miles away" (p. 121). He talks about escaping from his insecurities and emotional pain. He chased his losses. He lied to family and others about his gambling. He lost a marriage as a result of the gambling, but possibly also a result of his antisocial personality disorder. He engaged in illegal activity to finance his gambling, and he relied on many others for money to get out of desperate financial situations produced by his gambling.

Knowing that Bill Lee was a pathological gambler does not tell you as much as you need to know about him. The list of diagnosable psychiatric disorders Lee experienced was long. As a youngster he washed his hands until they bled and obsessively tidied things both at home and at work. This obsessive-compulsive disorder continued well into adulthood. As a teen he experienced conduct disorder, funding his gambling not just by stealing but also by extorting money from other kids and using violence to get money. He was truant, disruptive in class, and hostile towards teachers. While some of these behaviors could be explained by his

gambling, their extent appears to have been caused by more than just gambling. In all probability, the conduct disorder was a response to his unsettling home life.

After entering adulthood it appears that he fulfilled the criteria for antisocial personality disorder, at least while he was a gang member and possibly later. His experiences as a youth in the streets and as a gang member where he witnessed shootings, as well as a shooting incident at work contributed to a diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder by one of his therapists. Finally, his last therapist, possibly explaining his emotional ups and downs, diagnosed him as having bipolar II disorder. It is no wonder then, that Mr. Lee is an advocate of psychiatric evaluations for Gamblers Anonymous (GA) members in order to rule out other problems.

It is also not a wonder that Lee talks about “self-medication” by gambling. He primarily referred to this in response to depression. In one instance, he reached out to the therapist he went to for years, but found she had died. This drove him deeper into depression and a desire to self-medicate. He again sought to escape emotional pain. He relapsed and seven months later was guilt-ridden and suicidal.

Bill is enamored of GA, especially of page 17 in the *GA Combo Book*. Basil Browne calls this “page 17 consciousness” as he notes GA's selective adaptation of the Alcoholics Anonymous program ([Browne, 1991](#)). Lee focuses on page 17 for much of the book and even reproduces it in an appendix. Only later in his recovery did he recognize that the 12 steps were important for his recovery. He discusses these steps and how they acted as a guide to his life. For example, in many of his activities he was a “hustler,” cutting corners and dealing in inside information to improve his ability to hire employees from the competition or obtain information that could be used to outsell the competition. He states, “The lying, cheating, and win-at-any-costs attitude I was notorious for contradicts everything Twelve Step Fellowships advocate” (p. 162). In addition to this acknowledgement, he states that his book *Chinese Playground* began as a fourth step inventory. The appendix at the end of the book provides a good example of step work notes that clients will find useful.

Lee is an advocate for service work in GA. He states that making coffee, setting out the literature, chairing a meeting, being a secretary, and other tasks are good indicators of recovery. He also notes the essentials of using the telephone list (a list of GA members—first name and last initial—from a group along with their phone number) and obtaining a sponsor. In fact, he had many sponsors.

While there are some statistical errors in the beginning of the book, most are not exceedingly problematic. They would be annoying to an academic but are understandable in light of Lee's desire to put some “facts” into his presentation. Students should be advised to ignore them and corrected by instructors.

I highly recommend this book. It is an ideal read for compulsive gamblers and their significant others. In college settings, students in courses in abnormal psychology, sociology of deviance, addictions, and addictions treatment will find it enjoyable and informative. It has much to say about addictions and self-help groups, as well as about pathological gambling.

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