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Recovery in Gamblers Anonymous

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his committee. He has compiled an annotated bibliography on GA (and other mutual aid options for problem gamblers) with the help of an Ontario Problem Gambling Research Centre Incentive Grant.

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Abstract

This article was written to provide an overview of recovery in Gamblers Anonymous (GA). How GA's approach reflects the distinctive needs of compulsive gamblers is a central theme. GA is a mutual aid organization modeled upon Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), though differing in some ways from that organization. One notable feature of GA is its emphasis on patience in the recovery process, reflected even in its approach to the 12 Steps, which are "worked" at a slow pace for this reason. Another feature that distinguishes GA is a seemingly more rigorous approach to avoiding potential triggers, notably gambling establishments. Whereas AA leaves it up to the individual to decide whether or not it is safe to enter establishments where alcohol is served, GA's official stand on such questions is

uncompromising: members should not enter, or even go near, gambling establishments. Reasons for these differences are discussed.

Introduction

Gamblers Anonymous (GA) has earned a reputation in the literature for being a 12 Step fellowship in name only, downplaying spiritual and psycho-emotional concerns in favor of a pragmatic focus on abstinence from gambling and issues such as debts ([Browne, 1991, 1994](#); [Ferentzy & Skinner, 2003](#); [Lesieur, 1990](#)). In another article ([Ferentzy, Skinner, & Antze, 2006](#)), we report that, while this perception is still partly true, GA has more recently embraced a broader conception of recovery and has become more focused on the 12 Steps. Yet GA's approach to the 12 Steps and recovery is unique. One theme that distinguishes GA from many other 12 Step fellowships is that of patience. While substance addicts in recovery must clearly learn to resist the instant gratification offered by the substance, GA members must be doubly on guard against such impulses: beyond the immediate thrill associated with gambling, there is the very real possibility that large winnings could indeed solve many problems immediately. Compulsive gamblers are generally in difficult financial straits by the time they decide to make a change, and the temptation to solve problems quickly can jeopardize a gambler's recovery. [Browne \(1991\)](#) has said that instead of 12 Step consciousness, GA members have what could be called “page 17” consciousness—a reference to the practical recommendations on the last page of GA's most important text, the Combo Book ([GAISO, 1999](#)). While GA has changed since then, page 17 is still central, with patience possibly being its most important message. This article is a discussion of GA's approach to recovery.

Methodology and limitations

This qualitative, 16-month ethnographic study was preceded by the compilation of an annotated bibliography of GA and mutual aid as it pertains to gambling problems. The study had two main components: participant observation and individual interviews. The principal investigator attended and documented the activity and discourse at 42 GA meetings in the Toronto area and conducted 27 interviews with GA members, three of whom were also long-standing members of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). For comparative purposes, 29 Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meetings were observed and four NA members were interviewed. All interviews were audiotaped. Informal discussions during and after meetings with GA members, notably those with experience in other 12 Step fellowships, were also significant to this study.

Still, this study was regionally limited, and the advent of slot machines seems to

have changed GA's character in some regions, raising potential questions our research team has yet to answer.¹ Efforts were made to compensate for regional limitations. Notably, two of our GA interviewees were from other North American locales, and the principal investigator engaged in informal (phone and e-mail) communications with GA members from across the continent. Beyond that, much of this article addresses issues by means of explicating GA literature in conjunction with our own findings—with the effect that our observations are interpreted in relation to themes that clearly apply to GA in general. While these efforts do not negate the regional bias, we have cause to believe that the bulk of our observations apply to many, if not all, North American regions. This was a qualitative study using a relatively small interview sample, designed to generate preliminary findings that could later be verified with formal methods employing larger samples.

Observational and interview strategies were revised in response to what had been uncovered. A grounded theory approach ([Glaser, 1978](#)) was used to generate observations and hypotheses about the meanings embedded in typical GA narratives and the ways members use them to overcome their addictions and to make sense of their lives.

Discussion

This section contains two parts. The first (A) is designed to provide some background information on GA and is delivered as a list of six important themes. The second part (B) then provides an account of recovery in GA with a focus on the 12 Steps and GA's main text.

A. General information

A1. *The GA meeting*

While formats vary, a typical GA meeting starts with members taking turns reading from the Combo Book ([GAISO, 1999](#)), which is really a pamphlet (9 cm by 14 cm) and only 17 pages long. GA does have a larger text—comparable to AA's Big Book ([AAWS, 1976](#))—called *Sharing Recovery Through Gamblers Anonymous* ([GAISO, 1984](#)), but it is rarely used or even mentioned. Less textual in orientation than AA or NA, GA must put greater emphasis on its oral culture. However, the Combo Book is a masterly exercise in concision and thereby reflects GA's traditionally no-nonsense approach to recovery. As mentioned, GA has tended to take what could be called a pragmatic approach. The last and probably most important page in that text, page 17, can be viewed as a summary of the Combo Book—another exercise in concision. Normally, the readings are followed by a section called “How was your week?” wherein each member briefly answers that question and possibly elaborates on his or her state of mind. If newcomers are present, they may be

asked GA's 20 Questions (a diagnostic tool designed to determine whether someone is a compulsive gambler) or asked simply to read the questions and to think about them during and after the meeting. If several newcomers are present, and especially if many ask for feedback, such interaction may dominate the rest of the meeting. Usually, however, the chair will propose a topic—possible themes are regaining one's family's trust, abstinence, a particular step, helping newcomers (the options are countless)—and members will share on the given topic, or something else if they choose, for the duration of the meeting.

As with other 12 Step fellowships, GA members give their first names and acknowledge their addiction before speaking. Yet there is a difference. In AA or NA, a member might say, “My name is Sue and I'm an alcoholic/addict.” In GA, one is more likely to hear, “My name is George, and I fully admit and accept the fact that I'm a compulsive gambler.” So the admission is more adamant. Further, in GA the identification will usually be followed by an account of one's time abstinent (which is much rarer in AA and NA). Despite recent changes, GA still puts comparatively more emphasis on pure abstinence. Reasons for this are discussed below.

A2. Reasons for not succeeding in GA

[Brown \(1986, 1987a, b, c\)](#) has explored the reasons many new members leave GA. Perhaps his most notable observation is that members who seem very elated at their first meeting are more likely to leave than those with a balanced first impression.

Members have told us that some gamblers are simply not ready, the idea being that they have not, in 12 Step jargon, “hit bottom”—only after one has suffered enough will there be willingness to face the problem and address it. Some gamblers are said to be looking for excuses (which they inevitably find), and others are said to receive financial bailouts—something against which GA warns emphatically—and then consider their problem solved. GA emphasizes in strong terms that one has a gambling problem and not a money problem. So those who perceive their problem as primarily financial will in most cases either change this view or eventually leave GA, with or without a bailout, simply because they do not identify with the GA program.

Our interview participants stated that women are more likely to leave than men, but they (male and female) did not blame sexism, a “boys' club” atmosphere, or problems of that nature. So-called “war stories”—graphic and disturbing accounts of one's addictive career—are another possible reason. Such tales cause some members to think that, since their misfortunes are not so extreme, maybe they do not need help or are not true compulsive gamblers. Money can be an issue, especially for women. On average, the male GA members report having bet larger

amounts, and a few are even said to belittle the seriousness of smaller bets (even in cases where these bets were made by someone with less money at their disposal). For this reason, there is a countertendency in GA—consistent with GA's official position ([GAISO, 1984, 1999](#))—to emphasize that the amount of money gambled is relative and not an absolute indicator of the seriousness of someone's gambling problem.

GA members also theorized that those who drop out may not begin practicing the 12 Steps quickly enough. The idea is that without the emotional growth brought about by embarking on the 12 Steps, the problems associated with early recovery from gambling are overwhelming. This suggests that GA newcomers may face conflicting advice. On the one hand, they are urged to be patient and to take their time in all aspects of their recovery, while on the other they are warned against the hazards of procrastination. In GA, finding a balance between both impulses is an ongoing struggle. One member, when asked why some do not succeed in GA, had this to say:

Well because they can't seem to make the transformation from the initial rush, the initial excitement, of finding a lot of people like themselves that had gone through the same experiences. And you know the stories—all the rush that we get when we first come into GA. And they can't seem to get to the steps, the 12 Steps of Recovery, fast enough. You know there seems to be a lag between ... some people get the excitement of the program when they first come in. And they get the power of example and the hope and everything ... And they fall off before they start looking, and working the steps. I think that's where we lose a lot of people. (#5, male GA member)

This statement is telling for two reasons: first, there is an implicit critique of GA's slow-paced approach; second, it is consistent with [Brown's \(1986\)](#) observation that those who are overly elated at their first encounter with GA may in fact be less successful in the long run.

A3. How new members are perceived

Perhaps with good reason, more experienced GA members perceive the newcomers as “sick” and troubled souls, with “huge egos” and inflated feelings of entitlement. For example, they say, newer members who have abstained for a week will often express outrage at not being trusted by their spouses, despite having pursued their destructive behavior for many years. Some new members enter GA believing that the fellowship might actually pay their debts. Several informants reported that they were also in this state of mind when they arrived, and one confessed that he would not have remained if not for his mistaken belief that GA might eventually pay his debts.

A4. GA's fear of triggers

GA is more guarded about potential relapse triggers than many other 12 Step fellowships. AA, for example, does not tell members to refrain from entering bars, whereas on page 17 GA members are told to not even *go near* gambling establishments. Many long-standing GA members tend to view themselves as vulnerable to relapse and hence in need of taking precautions.

A5. Spiritual awakening/conversion

GA puts less emphasis on spiritual awakening than do other fellowships, such as AA and NA. GA's Step 2, for example, speaks of a restoration to a “normal way of thinking and living” ([GAISO, 1999](#)) rather than the standard “restoration to sanity.” GA's Step 12 speaks of carrying the GA message to other gamblers, but unlike AA and NA, there is no mention of a “spiritual awakening.” One might suspect that GA, long known to be more secular in orientation ([Browne, 1991, 1994](#); [Ferentzy & Skinner, 2003](#); [Lesieur, 1990](#)), has at least some good cause to have evolved this way. Anything associated with the mystical can be reminiscent of the mystification endemic to a problem gambler's mindset with respect to odds, hunches, or good luck charms.

A6. 12 Steps as key to healthy recovery

There was a strong association between 12 Step work and reported life satisfaction as well as not missing gambling at all. All but two GA members interviewed, even those who do not work the 12 Steps, agreed that those who do work the steps are better off spiritually and emotionally. GA also seems to gear 12 Step work to recovery needs associated with gambling. As mentioned, in GA patience is key, and the 12 Steps are treated to a large extent as an exercise in patience. On the whole, GA members take considerably more time on each step than their AA and NA counterparts.² So the theme of not solving problems quickly is actually practiced while members go through the 12 Steps.

B. Recovery in GA

B1. The 12 Steps of Gamblers Anonymous

[Browne \(1991\)](#) and [Brubaker \(2004\)](#) have discussed GA's early history and how the characters involved influenced the ways in which GA altered AA's 12 Steps. Our concern in what follows is with how GA's distinctive approach to the 12 Steps reflects the recovery needs of compulsive gamblers. Only those steps relevant to this end are discussed, that is, Steps 1 to 6 and 12.

1. *1. We admitted we were powerless over gambling—that our lives had become unmanageable.* GA's Step 1 is the same as AA's, though of course gambling has been substituted for alcohol. In practice, though, GA has

adopted a different approach to “powerlessness,” in that GA takes the concept more seriously. As already mentioned, while AA takes no official stand on whether an alcoholic in recovery can go to bars, leaving it up to the individual ([AAWS, 1976](#)), page 17 of the Combo Book ([GAISO, 1999](#)) contains an admonition regarding gambling establishments: members are told not to go in, or even near. The best way to understand Step 1 in GA is through its interaction with the suggestions on page 17, which is discussed below.

2. *2. We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to a normal way of thinking and living.* Step 2 has been changed from the AA original, and sets GA apart from other 12 Step fellowships. Instead of the standard restoration “to sanity,” GA members are restored simply to “a normal way of thinking and living.” First, GA is less inclined to perceive its membership as “insane” to begin with. Second, the transition is less sensationalistic: our interaction with GA members has led us to conclude that for the most part they seek normalcy rather than earth-shattering conversion experiences. This is partly due to GA's secular orientation, but there is more to it (see Step 12, below).
3. *3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of this Power of our own understanding.* Unlike AA and most other 12 Step fellowships, GA's Step 3 does not refer to “God as we understood Him.” This is a secularized approach to a spiritual process. Though this approach is paradoxical and arguably laden with inconsistencies, of concern right here is what it entails. While in AA and NA there is often debate about whether atheists and agnostics can be “spiritual,” every GA member with whom we spoke agreed that belief in God is not necessary to this end (though they are keen to respect all religious beliefs).
4. *4. We made a searching and fearless moral and financial inventory of ourselves.* Note that beyond a moral inventory, GA members are also responsible for a “financial” inventory. This represents a dramatic shift in the framing of the recovery project.
5. *5. We admitted to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.* Unlike other 12 Step fellowships, GA does not suggest that members admit their wrongs to God, but only to themselves and another human being.
6. *6. We were entirely ready to have these character defects removed.* Again, GA changes the step by not mentioning God as the one who removes these defects (though GA's Step 7 does mention “God of our understanding”).
7. *12. Having made an effort to practice these principles in all our affairs, we tried to carry this message to other compulsive gamblers.* Step 12 is telling in that there is no mention of a “spiritual awakening.” Beyond GA's secular orientation, there is an aversion to the kind of quick conversion experience

some of the first AA members underwent ([AAWS, 1976](#)). An overnight conversion would be akin to winning \$100,000 at a casino. GA's entire culture of recovery seems to turn against such aspirations.

B2. The 12 Steps in practice

As practiced in GA, the 12 Steps are to a large degree geared toward teaching patience. For reasons already discussed, GA treats this virtue as key to a gambler's recovery. A recurring warning among GA members is not to move from Step 1 (admission of powerlessness) immediately to Step 12 (passing on the message to other gamblers). While a warning not to overstep one's ability in the enthusiasm of early recovery is common to other 12 Step fellowships—moving from Step 1 immediately to Step 12 is called “two-stepping”—in GA this warning also involves an emphatic call for patience. To quote a long-standing (35 years) GA member:

You know some people, some people, and thank God, can be on Step 1 for a year. It's only when you jump from Step 1 to Step 12, and forget about all the ones in between, that there's a problem—a very serious problem. (#1, male GA member)

Clearly, if members were to spend an entire year on each step, it would be more than a decade before they were “ready” to spread the word, and act as sponsors. The latter might actually happen after about a year of abstinence (and the person may then be working on Step 3 or 4), but the point is that newcomers are *consistently warned against impatience and much less often against procrastination*. There are many reasons for this. When asked which item on page 17 he considered most important, another member (over 7 years abstinent) replied,

... one day at a time, don't try to solve all your problems at once was very helpful to me as I had to face the chaos that I created but without number one [the first suggestion on page 17]—attending meetings—I wouldn't have ever understood how someone could take their problems one day at a time. (#27, male GA member)

Here, even meetings are treated primarily as a means to achieve patience. Like most GA members, this person had huge debts to pay—gamblers, more so than many other addicts, must understand that it may take time to set things right.

For obvious reasons, an attitude of avoiding quick fixes can be important to recovery from drugs and alcohol. As mentioned, it is simply more pressing to the GA member. Gambling is not only a quick fix in the sense that it may provide an escape or a thrill, it can (conceivably) be a source of quick revenue—and this

temptation can spell death for a gambler. It may also take a gambler longer to earn the trust of family members. Not only has more money been wasted (possibly misappropriated or stolen from family members), but the newly abstinent gambler is not “obviously” abstinent, as a sober alcoholic or cocaine addict might be: it is much harder to tell whether or not a gambler has indulged that day in the addictive behavior. For these and other reasons, some GA members—even after 20 years of abstinence—are in a position where their spouses refuse to let them control more than nominal amounts of money. While the timelines vary, the latter scenario is something for which the new GA member may have to prepare. Again, patience is key. Recovery in GA can be seen as a complex interaction between the 12 Steps and the messages (primarily concerning patience and abstinence) found on page 17. Normally, recovery would begin with Step 1—the admission that one is a compulsive gambler, aided by GA's 20 Questions—and then turn quickly to the instructions on page 17 (some of which could be perceived as parts of, or additions to, Step 1).

B3. The Combo Book

You know—every time you read the Combo Book you get one step closer to understanding it. And every time you read it there's a different meaning to it. There's a different understanding. There's something that speaks to you, you know, depending on your frame of mind, depending on how the page is being read, or even who's reading the page. You know, because it's kind of a magical book. (#2, female member)

One of GA's most striking features is the length of its main text. The Combo Book is a pocket-sized, 17-page pamphlet. At an AA or NA meeting, one might be introduced to one of several lengthy books published by the fellowship, or to one of several pamphlets. GA is grounded almost exclusively in the Combo Book.

A first glance at the Combo Book would not likely vindicate our interviewee's claim of it being profound and magical. It may appear quite simple and even shallow. But the authors of this pamphlet must have had a clear grasp of what compulsive gamblers need to hear. Otherwise, the Combo Book would not be so prominent. More than a few gamblers reported that the Combo Book gave them the feeling that it was written about them personally. The Combo Book speaks to gamblers with more finality than even the famous Big Book speaks to alcoholics. In AA, there is in fact some disagreement—at times heated—over which AA literature is best. Some prefer the so-called 12 by 12 ([AAWS, 1981](#)), which can infuriate traditionalists who prefer the Big Book. Some AA members prefer other AA literature, and a vast majority prefer some variety. In GA, there seem to be no such divisions: practically everyone endorses the Combo Book.

The book begins with a history and then a brief description of GA. By pages 4 and

5, one is already reading the 12 Steps of recovery. Since they are only listed without explanation, GA members must rely very heavily on GA's oral culture to learn about the 12 Steps. They may also go to Step Meetings for more textual assistance and deeper discussion. But such meetings are only recently becoming more prominent, and at the time of this writing there were only 3 in the Toronto area out of about 23 meetings in all.³

Pages 6 and 7 contain The Unity Program, GA's version of AA's 12 Traditions, which are often called the “12 Steps of Unity.”⁴

Pages 8 and 9 discuss compulsive gambling along disease model lines. These pages deal with the need for acceptance of one's condition, qualified by an endorsement of self-diagnosis: only you can decide whether or not you are a compulsive gambler.

Page 10 discusses three characteristics associated with being a compulsive gambler: inability or unwillingness to accept reality, emotional insecurity, and immaturity. Then, page 11 discusses “the dream world of the compulsive gambler,” which may include such amenities as yachts and servants. Yet the dream will never materialize, because the gambler will use any money won to “dream still bigger dreams.”

Pages 12 to 14 further discuss gambling along disease model lines, making it clear that even a penny-ante game or an office sports pool are sufficient to activate the addiction. Most important, perhaps, on page 12 it is explained that compulsive gambling is not a financial problem.

Pages 15 and 16 contain GA's 20 Questions, which help new members decide whether or not their gambling has been compulsive and also help experienced members confirm their status as compulsive gamblers. The book says that most compulsive gamblers will answer “yes” to at least seven of these questions. In practice, however, GA members insist that you definitely are compulsive if you answer seven positively—a contradiction of the previous statement on page 8 that self-diagnosis is the only valid criterion. This paradox is not specific to GA and has long haunted 12 Step/disease model approaches. Two legitimate concerns are involved: first, compulsion, marked by “craving” of any kind, is an experiential phenomenon that only the subject in question can identify with certainty; second, experienced addicts are often able to identify a kindred spirit who may be practicing some denial. A balance between these two legitimate concerns is integral to any healthy rapport with newcomers.

After these sparsely worded 16 pages, one turns to what is probably the most important page of all.

Page 17

Many GA members say that page 17, on its own, can ensure abstinence from gambling if a person takes all the instructions seriously. Others say that page 17, along with the two pages containing the 12 Steps of recovery, are sufficient reading material for healthy recovery. One cannot understand GA without understanding page 17. How could one short page resonate in such a powerful fashion? Page 17 contains seven suggestions, or admonitions. Despite their apparent simplicity, the suggestions reflect a philosophy of recovery as well as ideas about the nature of compulsive gambling. The page begins with bold, uppercase lettering:

“TO ALL GAMBLERS ANONYMOUS MEMBERS, PARTICULARLY THE NEW GAMBLERS ANONYMOUS MEMBERS”

And then the first admonition:

1. “1. Attend as many meetings as possible, but at least one full meeting per week. **MEETINGS MAKE IT.**”

All 12 Step fellowships stress the importance of meeting attendance. Yet in AA and NA, the suggestion for newcomers in the Toronto area is normally 90 meetings in 90 days. In the mid-20th century, AA in the US normally suggested 30 meetings in 30 days ([Kurtz, 1979](#)). So why does GA consider one weekly meeting sufficient for new members? When the Combo Book was first written, GA was smaller and there were not enough meetings in most (maybe all) regions for a more ambitious suggestion. Some of the older GA members in Toronto recall when that city had only one weekly meeting. One may also speculate that a fellowship dominated by war stories with little discussion of life issues, emotions, or other matters—as GA was until recently—would not provide enough variety to entice members to attend with more frequency. But there is more to it. When first achieving abstinence, many compulsive gamblers are busy dealing with debts, legal issues, or both: “When I came in ... the concept was the guy goes out and gets two, three, four jobs if he has to.” (#28, male GA member)

Our experience with GA members also suggests that, in general, they are an ambitious lot, keen to earn good incomes. But regardless of how we explain it, even today when there are plenty of meetings in the Toronto area and the meetings do offer much variety, we have yet to meet a GA member who claimed to attend a full meeting a day for a span of 90 days, though a few have claimed upward of 60 during early recovery.

Normally, a newcomer who attends three meetings per week is considered a good candidate for recovery. Conversely, we have found that it is far more common in NA (and in AA) for newer members to attend considerably more than three meetings a week, with many attending a meeting every day—or

more than one per day when possible—well beyond the first 3 months. It would seem that, for most GA members, such goals are simply unrealistic. But page 17 is well thought out, as the second admonition seems designed to compensate for the relatively less frequent meeting attendance.

2. “2. Telephone other members as often as possible. Use the Telephone List!” While all 12 Step fellowships make such suggestions, we have found that GA members put a very high emphasis on phone contact. Several members interviewed made a point of discussing the amount of time they spend on the phone with other GA members. To whatever extent meeting attendance is less frequent than in other fellowships, GA provides a strong telephone culture as a corrective.
3. “3. Don't test or tempt yourself. Don't associate with acquaintances who gamble. Don't go in or near gambling establishments. **DON'T GAMBLE FOR ANYTHING**. This includes the stock market, commodities, options, buying or playing lottery tickets, flipping a coin or entering the office sport pool.” The reader may be impressed with the vehemence: Don't, don't, don't, and **DON'T**. GA takes these matters very seriously. This exhortation contains two parts. The first provides a very broad notion of what gamblers need to avoid. The second provides a broad definition of “gambling.”

Page 17 applies to all GA members, not just newcomers. One may find it strange that even after years of abstinence, a gambler should not enter—or even go near—a casino. AA, for example, does not tell its members that they will never be able to enter, or work, in bars. The first explanation is that until recently gambling venues were few, so contact with them was not integral to normal social interaction. Conversely, alcohol is everywhere. Today, however, most variety stores are “gambling establishments” because they sell lottery tickets. For this reason, some members have suggested to us that this section may require revision. Still, this does not explain it all. Most long-standing GA members we have spoken to would not enter a casino, or a racetrack. Most would, if need be, go “near” such a place (e.g., they would not take a detour in order to avoid walking past the track). Somehow, GA members perceive themselves as perennially vulnerable to relapse. Before discussing that, here is another consideration:

Interviewer: So what you're saying to me is that a relapse is more dangerous for a gambler than maybe for an alcoholic.

Respondent: The ... only difference is the amount of money. I mean an alcoholic goes back to drinking, he may drink for a month and then go back to AA. He may use up a couple of hundred dollars. If he's not gambling on the side. But a compulsive [gambler] goes back, they go back with a vengeance.

(#1, male GA member)

This subject's words are important, for he is a long-standing GA member and among the two or three most respected figures among GA members in the Toronto area. The perception in GA is that members who relapse usually make up for lost time. And the point he makes is that while there are limits to how much one can drink, there are in principle no limits to how much one can gamble. While it is possible that an alcoholic who slips for a few days may, for example, cause tragedy from behind the wheel of a car, it is likely that when the binge is over a little bit of money (and health) will have been spent and the option to resume recovery will present itself. In the same amount of time, the gambler may have played away the family home or a child's college fund. GA members avoid potential triggers with a passion, and the fact that there are few limits to how much money they could gamble away is one reason. Yet this does not explain everything. Gambling seems to call GA members in a very strong way, so that it is not only the intensity of the relapse that is a concern, but also the perception of a greater likelihood. One member, abstinent since 1968, will enter casinos because his work requires it. But even for work-related reasons, he will not go to a racetrack (horseracing was his game of choice).

I never gambled in a casino. Maybe that's the answer, I don't know. But when they show the news on, and they showed the last 15 seconds ... during the sports they show like the last 15 seconds of a feature race. I have to shut that off. I still, after all these years get anxiety, or my mind right away picks the outside horse, or the inside horse, or the gray horse. (#28, male GA member)

At one meeting, an older member, with over 25 years of abstinence, told the room that he still will not visit relatives in Nevada due to the proximity of Las Vegas.

And the admonition goes even further: members are told not to associate with acquaintances who gamble. While some GA members apply this only to those who gamble compulsively, and others ignore it altogether for the sake of family members or friends who gamble compulsively, there are many who take the warning seriously. They may say "hello" or engage in brief conversation, but they simply will not associate with someone who gambles even if the person only gambles recreationally.

So, rightly or wrongly, GA perceives gambling addiction as a practically all-powerful demon. But there is more: while GA is becoming more spiritual in

orientation, its Step 12 still has no mention of a spiritual awakening. We have discussed possible reasons for this, but it may also be another reflection of what members see as their permanent vulnerability. The AA Big Book mentions that only after such an “awakening” can an alcoholic go safely anywhere, regardless of how much alcohol is consumed. One can speculate over the power of such experiences, and perhaps the prophecies—both in AA concerning one's invulnerability to relapse and in GA concerning one's vulnerability—are to an extent self-fulfilling. Either way, the distinction is not lost on at least a few GA members:

Interviewer: ... Now, all of these suggestions in item 3 imply that gambling addiction is a very serious illness. Now AA for example has no official policy on whether or not members can go to bars, you know, even if different AA members have their opinions. The AA message seems to be that once in recovery and free of alcoholism, an alcoholic can go anywhere.

Respondent: Well because they supposedly have a spiritual awakening ... in some shape [or] manner. (#28, male GA member)

It is possible that as GA becomes more attuned to the spirituality associated with the 12 Steps, it may modify its stance on the suggestions contained in item 3. Still, we should not take this for granted. Some GA informants, who are also alcoholics and attend AA, have said that while they are not bothered by people drinking around them, they would feel uneasy in a gambling environment. Could these individuals be “less spiritual” in the face of one addiction than the other? Or could it simply be that gambling is more likely to present stronger urges? Currently we have no answer to this puzzle. The second part of item 3 deals with the definition of gambling, which for GA includes even the smallest, seemingly insignificant bets and also stock market activity or risky investments such as commodities or options. There seems to have been much conflict over including what many consider legitimate investments in the definition, and this is only a recent addition. There have been conflicts in the Toronto area over whether someone who plays the stock market should be able to receive a “pin” and a special meeting designed to celebrate that person's abstinence. As it happened, they cannot. One might suspect that more than a few GA members at this point simply refrain from sharing that aspect of their lives with the fellowship. This broad definition of gambling reflects GA's uncompromising stance toward what is and is not dangerous. We should recall that members are told not to associate even with noncompulsive, recreational gamblers. One

informant was mainly involved in the buying and selling of real estate—and currently questions his status as a compulsive gambler. GA guards heavily against such developments, and item 3 of page 17 reflects just how guarded GA can be about the dangers of compulsive gambling.

This certainly helps to explain why GA members, rather than simply stating that they are compulsive gamblers when identifying themselves at meetings, prefer a more vehement admission, which can be as adamant as the following: “My name is Betty. I fully and completely accept and admit the fact that I am a compulsive gambler.” This, in GA, can be taken as part of Step 1, which involves powerlessness over compulsive gambling and an admission that one's life cannot be “managed.” Step 1 runs through page 17, and GA takes this step more seriously than any other 12 Step fellowship of which we are aware.

4. “4. Live the Gamblers Anonymous Program **ONE DAY AT A TIME**. Don't try to solve all your problems at once.”

Again, the theme of *powerlessness*: one cannot simply force reality to comply; things will change at their pace, not yours. Acceptance of this is integral to healthy recovery in GA. That is partly why the Serenity Prayer is so central to GA: *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference*. While also important in other 12 Step fellowships, this prayer rings even more true in GA: many members we have spoken to consider this prayer one of the three or four most important components of their recovery. (That the prayer is important to many atheists in GA reflects a paradox that has long haunted 12 Step recovery: the need to retain the word “God” while seemingly doing away with the need for a deity.)

[Browne \(1991\)](#) claims that GA (as opposed to AA) does not focus on self-centeredness as a problem in recovery, and that page 17 is not about that at all. Yet telling gamblers that things will not go their way overnight is, in practice, to tell them to cease being self-centered. The Combo Book stresses the lack of maturity involved in gambling addiction—an assessment to which GA members seem to relate. While there may be more to impatience than self-centeredness, the latter tends to be a key ingredient that must be overcome through maturity and acceptance of events proceeding in ways that may not parallel one's desires.

There are many slogans associated with 12 Step recovery used by members to deal with a host of issues. It is no accident that “One Day at a Time” receives a special mention on page 17. While this slogan can be used to help members struggling with abstinence—it is easier to say that one will not drink, use drugs, or gamble today, rather than imagining an entire future without one's addictive behavior—here the stress is immediately placed on patience (another common interpretation of this slogan). “Don't try to solve all

your problems at once” has, as we explained, a special meaning for those suffering from an addiction geared toward reaping financial benefit. As one GA member, who is also a recovering alcoholic, put it:

Gambling certainly presents a dream world that seems to be something I have to constantly guard against, perhaps made more alluring by my memories of the times I actually won gambling, and the false hope I could win again reinforced by industry and government agency advertising “Millions Win.” I can't imagine harboring such delusions about drinking again, perhaps because I have no memories of “winning” when I was drinking.
(#27, male member)

5. “5. Read the **RECOVERY** and **UNITY** steps often and continuously review the Twenty Questions. Follow the steps in your daily affairs. These steps are the basis for the entire Gamblers Anonymous Program and practicing them is the key to your growth. If you have any questions, ask them of your trusted servant and sponsors.”

Page 17 can be viewed as a tool kit for staying abstinent. So it is a practical guide. Yet members read more into it. We have given some reasons for why this is so. Here, the 12 Steps of recovery are mentioned, along with the Unity Steps, as the foundation of the GA program. While it is true that these aspects of the program are reduced to one item, which also deals with the 20 Questions, page 17 does acknowledge them. First, the steps of recovery and then the Unity Steps—the latter being a political as well as a spiritual set of rules. Yet page 17 has already tried to explain the importance of patience to the GA member, and the seriousness of avoiding triggers has been addressed. [Browne \(1991, 1994\)](#) may have viewed page 17 as simply a practical set of rules, but as we have explained it involves a philosophy of recovery along with a theory about compulsive gambling. Here, another point must be clarified: page 17 is more than just practical.

Interviewer: One thing that struck me is that page 17 is a set of practical principles; it seems just pragmatic, how to avoid gambling and so on. But to some members it's a lot more than just a practical guide. Do you have any thoughts on this?

Respondent: I think it paraphrases the necessity for someone to utilizing the tools of the book. It talks about read the 12 Steps often, read and review the Unity Steps. It encompasses every highlight of the book that I think is necessary. So I think it's way more than practical. I think it's practical and spiritual. (#16, male member)

6. “6. When you are ready, the Trusted Servants will conduct a Pressure Relief Group meeting, or evaluation for you and your spouse (if married), and adherence to it will aid in your recovery.”

Pressure Relief is a process where experienced GA members help a newer member with financial (and sometimes legal) planning. Here the most telling words, consistent with the rest of page 17, are “when you are ready.” Normally, members must demonstrate some commitment to GA at least in the form of meeting attendance before Pressure Relief becomes an option. This is consistent with the overall message of page 17 and GA regarding not rushing into the solving of problems. Some GA members have been critical of this, stating that without early, immediate Pressure Relief, many gamblers return to gambling out of a desperation to win sorely needed funds.

What happens is that there are people in GA that have the concept that says, “We shouldn't give a guy or a woman a budget meeting or a pressure group ... until we know that they're for real....” And there's a lot of advocacy that says 6 to 8 weeks. Which to me is stupid because the pressure, the financial pressure is so great, that sometimes you gotta do it right away or they can't recover 'cause they think that the only way to pay the bills is to go back to gambling and get a big win. (#28, male member)

This may be an example of when GA's recovery culture hits a snag. Could the emphasis on patience, in this and perhaps other cases, be taken too far? In any case, despite its wisdom, page 17 runs into a paradox, as can be seen from our discussion of the seventh and last admonition.

7. “7. Be Patient! The days and weeks will pass soon enough, and as you continue to attend meetings and abstain from gambling your recovery will really accelerate.”

Despite patience being so necessary for successful recovery from compulsive gambling, our meeting observations and interviews suggest that it may be the most difficult virtue for many new GA members to acquire. The last, and most difficult, suggestion on page 17 highlights the fact that this page is not merely a starting point for recovery in GA: it is also an endpoint. Members report that it takes time to “get 17”—which may surprise a casual reader who found the page quite simple. What is required is a profound grasp of what patience entails, along with an emotional state amenable to such wisdom.

Be patient. That is ... there's our magic. That's so hard. But you see, you can't ... I can say to you the first day you come in, “be

patient.” What the hell are you talking about? Here I've got problems up to my, you know? So that's why you don't come to page 17 for quite a while. (#1, male member)

There really is some “magic” to it, as the same interviewee explained at the start of the section on the Combo Book: “I gambled compulsively for 30 years. I come in I got troubles ... Be patient. I don't even know what the word means.” (#1, male member)

Conclusion

GA has been designed to suit the specific needs of problem gamblers, which differ in many respects from those of substance addicts. GA also provides a good example of why it is imprudent to assume that all 12 Step associations are essentially the same. Despite the common grounding in a disease conception of addiction, along with a 12 Step approach, the many fellowships modeled upon AA are nonetheless able to develop distinctive cultures of recovery. While this article provides a preliminary analysis of GA's approach, there is much more to be learned about this mutual aid organization. Given the growing significance of pathological gambling in the wake of the proliferation of legal gambling venues, a better understanding of GA has become an urgent necessity.

Notes

Footnotes

¹This point was brought to our attention by an anonymous reviewer, and also by a woman who attends GA meetings in Regina.

²While we would not hazard to offer average timelines, GA members with experience in AA have confirmed this statement. Our study also involved NA. The main difference seems to be that in both AA and NA there is some debate between those who advocate moving quickly through the 12 Steps and those who argue that the Steps should be worked slowly, while in GA the dominant message is clearly the latter.

³We hesitate to provide an exact number of meetings, as meetings often close down and new ones form. The estimate of 23 is based upon the most recent GA meeting list as well as our own information about newer developments.

⁴The 12 Traditions of AA are a set of rules for the entire fellowship to follow. They were designed to ensure, among other things, a decentralization of authority,

anonymity, and the absence of a profit motive in all AA activities.

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