

book review

All bets are off: Losers, liars, and recovery from gambling addiction

Wexler, A., & Wexler, S., with Jacobson, S. (contributor). (2015). Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press. ISBN 978-1937612757.

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Rarely does a reader come across a text where integrity oozes out from between each line. That is always a treat, and Arnie and Sheila Wexler's book is one of those. Perhaps this should not be surprising—after all, Arnie brings to the table a half-century of personal and professional experience in recovery from problem gambling (PG). In fact, as a PG scholar who has communicated with Arnie in depth over the years, I can make a claim that few in the field would disagree with: No human being has devoted more time and sweat to this cause than Arnie Wexler. The one exception, perhaps, would be his co-author and wife, Sheila Wexler. I would also be remiss if I didn't mention Steve Jacobson, contributor, who assembled their narratives into a cohesive, beautifully written story—one in which many problem gamblers and their loved ones will recognize their own lives and struggles.

The authors use the designation “compulsive gambling” when discussing PG, which is favored by Gamblers Anonymous (GA), though generally in disuse by the scientific community. So what? “Compulsive” is just as good a word as “pathological,” “disordered,” or “problem.” Arnie is old school, and even though I disagree with him on many points (sometimes I think that Arnie and I disagree about everything), there is nothing wrong with old-school lingo, or even an old-school approach, so long as other options are present.

Arnie is an old-school gambler and an old-school tough guy, and it shows, even as he challenges ideas such as that drugs and alcohol are more dangerous than gambling. Of course, Arnie was in the game when most people thought just that, despite having a decent grasp on alcoholism and drug addiction. On page 1, Arnie lets you in on how he sees it (and how he sees himself): “I always knew I was going to be a compulsive something or other.” Yes, had the dice rolled just a little differently, maybe Arnie would be recovering from crack and booze (like this reviewer), and maybe this reviewer would have a history of compulsive gambling. No one can say for sure, and Arnie understands that truth with as much clarity as any researcher with whom I have worked.

The book is laden with sophisticated takes on complex issues (e.g., Arnie comes out as an agnostic with respect to PG etiology) and some really glaring generalizations (e.g., the “mindset” of the compulsive gambler is discussed with sweeping statements). So, on the one hand, Arnie understands how difficult it is to pin down causation and that, even if it were possible, the account would vary from one person to the next. On the other hand, he often claims that all compulsive gamblers think this way and that way. Even if many of these generalizations were true in the vast majority of cases, they could never apply to each and every one.

Let us recall, though, that the book is more experiential than scientific. Arnie often makes personal statements, and with full regard for how they are personal. So even though gamblers—according to 12-Step lore—are said to dream about yachts and such, Arnie apparently was an exception to that rule: “Most people who buy those \$100 million lottery tickets enjoy a few moments daydreaming about what they’d do if they won: pay off the mortgage, buy a new house, a new car.... Not me. Nope. I just thought of paying off gambling debts and having some money left over to bet even more. That was *my* fantasy” (p. 8).

As gamblers go, Arnie was as pure as they come: “when I had a good day betting, I was so high I didn’t need sex” (p. 31). Sheila concurs: “Arnie wasn’t interested in making love” (p. 37). Later, she elaborates on this singular drive: “Over the years, I learned to understand the grip his addiction had on him. Even when he knew he was going to lose, he had to make a bet” (p. 40). After Arnie stopped gambling, so ended the high, and the book covers the struggles he encountered during those early years of his recovery, especially the depression. For his wife, the greatest struggle appears to have been finding the strength to forgive her husband. The two perspectives play off each other throughout the entire book, generating a dynamic that made me feel like I was a part of their reality.

Even after decades in recovery, Arnie explains how he is still an addict and therefore must always be vigilant. To illustrate, he tells the story about a time he was playing golf, and was surprised by a sign that greeted him at the second hole, advertising that a hole-in-one would win him a car. “I was shaking like a leaf as I addressed the ball. I was afraid to take a swing. I ‘accidentally’ knocked the ball off the tee, so...I was shooting for a hole in two.... I was safe” (p. 104).

This book will walk you through the world of GA in all its specificity, vis-à-vis other 12-Step programs. For example, in Alcoholics Anonymous, the fourth step involves taking a moral inventory, but in GA one needs to do a moral and financial inventory (p. 102). Arnie is not entirely uncritical of the 12-Step model, however, and freely expresses his disdain for the anonymity insisted upon by the fellowship. That statement, in itself, amounts to heresy in the 12-Step world, but Arnie feels strongly that disclosure is essential: Gamblers should stop hiding.

That’s what Arnie thinks, and he says what he thinks.