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She Bets Her Life

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By Mary Sojourner. (2010). Seal Press, Berkeley, CA, USA. 281 pp. ISBN 978-1-58005-298-6. \$17.95 USA (softcover).

In the book *She Bets her Life: A True Story of Gambling Addiction*, Mary Sojourner combines her personal memoirs with stories about other women's gambling experiences, and supplements this rich anecdotal base with findings from the scientific literature on addiction. The result is a refreshing and candid look at the problematic gambling behaviors that some women experience.

A writer by profession, Mary recounts her 14 years of gambling, nine of them “compulsively”. A testament to her compositional skill, the account is beautifully written and seamless. She interweaves the stories of seven other women who share her journey of recovery in a self-help group known as Scheherazade's Sisters. These women come from diverse cultural backgrounds, range in age, and represent different sexual orientations. They disclose unique histories and identify personal mental health struggles – but all have become overwhelmed with the consequences of problematic slot machine play.

Mary goes beyond these individual stories and provides multiple vantages from which to observe gambling, using her own experience and examinations of the problem gambling literature to do so. One chapter focuses on the role of the brain in addiction, considering the contribution of genetics, and noting the brain's inability to fully utilize the neurotransmitter dopamine. She writes: “Brain chemistry and the unwillingness to grow up account for...90 percent...of why I became a full tilt gambling addict” (p. 149).

In another chapter, Mary summarizes psychotherapeutic explanations of gambling, and meanders at a leisurely pace through the works of Freud and Jung. She then describes Blaszczynski's Pathways Model, and stops to examine the colourful discoveries of Skinner and the behaviorists in understanding the role of intermittent reinforcement in creating compulsion. She goes on to expose the manipulations of

the gaming industry in their commitment to push the player to financial “extinction” through casino design, promotion, and the mechanics of the slot machines themselves.

I found the chapter on gender particularly important. Here, Mary highlights the function of gambling as an escape mechanism for the Sisters. Among other things, the chapter speaks to the power of a women's group for energizing and nurturing recovery.

As a whole, Sojourner's book is a vivid and multi-faceted exploration of women's gambling and recovery, and one that does more than educate—it inspires and validates women's experiences of gambling. A wonderful addition to the literature, *She Bets her Life* is a critically important read for women struggling with slot machine gambling and others who may want to learn more about what makes women's recoveries unique. I will recommend it to my clients.

I will add a few caveats to this recommendation, however. As a clinician specializing in women's gambling, I found certain parts of *She bets her Life* a little unsettling. A few elements in Mary's reflections did not easily collate with my experiences. Mary writes, for example, of the easy laughter the women share in group, explaining it as a jubilation “about having gotten away with mischief” (p. 17). Women do laugh a lot in group—sometimes about the crazy and embarrassing things they have done, sometimes to relieve stress, and always in relief to feel less isolated and weird. But in my personal experience I have never heard women laugh at “getting away with something”.

Elsewhere, Mary describes feeling a lack of remorse after gambling, and an ongoing exhilaration. At one point, for example, she had lost all her savings and money, but recalls that she was “still a little high” while driving home. Her dominant feeling is nostalgia:

Memories of hot wires under my skin pale against recollection of the fun... Three hours later ... I'm grateful I don't feel worse than I do. I'm still a little high. I know it will last for maybe a day. I'll ride it while I can. And then maybe something will happen ... am still in a lingering buzz. The crash will come. (p. 144)

The attraction of gambling for Mary is strong. She wishes that looking back would “provoke feelings of embarrassment, regret, even anger. Instead I am always longing - for the way my heart leapt the instant I thought I'm going, for the heedless joy felt every second on the way to the casino, for the sheer relief that flooded me as I slide my first five into the bill receiver”(p. 133). In a rare moment of depersonalization, she adds: “Even to this day she [Mary's gambling self] isn't angry about what we lost in the casinos (p. 134).

Mary claims that powerful euphoric recall is typical of the Sisters:

Not one of us has ever said that the thought of gambling disgusts us....although we are shaken by our memories of how deeply hooked we were and the consequences of our gambling...we still live with the sparkly memories and urges more often than we would like. Perhaps that is the power of euphoric recall specific to slot machines. Perhaps we are unusual in our lack of disgust. (p. 162)

Perhaps the Sisters are unusual in this regard. Euphoric recall does often lurk in the shadows, especially early in recovery when the addictive habit still exerts itself. I have yet to meet a client in early recovery from gambling or drugs who does not experience some ambivalence about making changes. Yet it is also common for women to ultimately shift in their thoughts and feeling about gambling, to react with anxiety and disgust, not excitement, to the thought of gambling and all it entails.

Thus the personal experience of Mary and the Sisters—being so far along in their recovery—does appear to be somewhat atypical, running counter to the pained reactions of many women in treatment who describe remorse as immediate and overwhelming, and who are often riddled with shame and depression as they confront consequences similar to those reported by the Sisters: consequences such as relationship stress, loss of self-esteem, financial devastation, lost homes, legal charges, incarceration, and suicidal urges or attempts.

For me, there were two levels from which to appreciate this book: first, as a book about women's gambling—articulating lives and struggles, the triggers, the lure of gambling as an escape from stress, and the painful aftermath that ripples through the many areas of their lives. It conveys beautifully how women become ensnared in a cycle of chasing, describes cogently the manipulation by the gaming industry, and outlines practical treatment options and resources.

A second vantage highlights (or identifies) the high levels of comorbidity among many women who struggle with problematic gambling. Mary speaks candidly of her own struggles: “I suspect I have a graduate degree in comorbidity. Most of the women in Scheherazade's Sisters feel the same. All of us have gambled to medicate our feelings” (p. 194).

Anxiety is one of the feelings that the gambling serves to soothe. Mary writes of anxious thoughts as triggers for gambling as a compulsive behavior:

I remember so many gambling trips that began with my obsessive compulsive brainstorm— not bright ideas but finding myself suddenly thinking I couldn't think. My miracle drug was my slot machine. The second I made my first bet my brain stopped rattling. I could think

through situations... plan for the future, feel optimism...I felt like myself again. Gambling was my medicine. *I'd still use it if the side effects hadn't become intolerable (italics mine).* (p. 195)

Over time, gambling progressed from being a fun (but not intoxicating) effort to win to “trancelike preoccupation in which perpetuating the trance was reward enough” (p. 148). Mary felt “calm and whole” and fully herself only in the hours between the decision to gamble...and a day or two later when the *drug (italics mine)* finally wore off”, after which she returned to the “dead zone in her mind and heart” (p. 154).

Mary also reveals childhood trauma, describing her coping as a training ground for becoming a “classic addict”. Her pain is palpable when she tells the Sisters of her childhood experience during her mother's first psychotic break. Kept from attending kindergarten—her mom was afraid to be alone—Mary recalls:

Except this time there was no radio coming from the kitchen. Instead there was just a crazy singing that sounded like it was coming from a monster. I had a coloring book in my lap. I didn't read yet. So there was this terrible monster singing in the kitchen where my mom was supposed to be. Footsteps started coming towards the bedroom... Here's where the slots come in. I heard the footsteps and all I could think to do was look down really hard at that page in the coloring book, and when it didn't make what was happening go away, turn the page like a little robot and stare down at that page, and the next.

I was five and I had already taught myself to go away from reality into something I was staring at...So I learned how to go away and I learned how to be compulsive. Being able to do those two things saved my life as a child...I suspect that gambling compulsively gave me a place to retreat from crippling anxiety so that I could stay alive and write (p. 49)

Mary's anxiety permeates her life. Gambling has the allure of Christmas morning, “the only four hours of guaranteed safety in my childhood” (page #). The anxiety follows her to University where, at the age of 18, she has a debilitating anxiety attack in her new college dorm: “In those days no one knew...about anxiety disorder, PTSD, separation anxiety or depression, much less how a young woman who'd been her mother's mom might feel the loss of that role [a mother figure] as utter annihilation” (p. 129).

Mary's resilience is evident as she describes the moment she made a conscious choice not to give in to anxiety in a graphic moment of derealization. Thoughts of her mother's illness prompted her to keep her feet planted on the asphalt. Mary practiced her own version of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) for decades, teaching herself to “walk through difficulties” because of her feeling that “...if I give

in to the fear that has arisen I will make it stronger” (p. 197).

Mary also writes of a family history of bi-polar illness and laments the seething turmoil of her own moods:

I have never fully accepted the depth and persistence of my mood swings—and the even more painful reality that I cannot seem to sustain ordinary happiness or remain interested in a loving relationship once it stabilizes. (p. 194)

Mary's struggles with mental health may contribute to the difficult “withdrawal” that she describes. When she stops gambling she is overwhelmed with anxiety, which she poetically describes as a “brain on automatic horror” (p. 180). She fears that she is losing control of her mind, waking up early in the morning, riddled with phobic fears that she has Alzheimer's, brain cancer, or insanity.

In her efforts to understand what is happening Mary discovers information on gambling withdrawal, “which can involve symptoms such as sweating, palpitations, depression, confusion, stomach troubles, headaches, physical tension, irritability, trouble concentrating/listening/remembering, agitation, inability to feel pleasure (or)...look forward to future events” (p. 187). Finding these explanations provided Mary with great relief. Indeed, she indicates that her desire to share was “the primary reason” she writes the book.

There is no question that recovery for Mary has been a heroic struggle. At the same time, from a clinical perspective, it is important to recognize that not all women suffer the extremes of withdrawal described by Mary. Mary, like many women, did not start gambling until later in life. But she writes: “I've been an addict all my life, I've been in withdrawal all my life”. This reference to earlier struggles provides important information about premorbid conditions that made the gambling fit for her like a hand in a glove. The gambling was a bandage and she bleeds profusely when it is removed, less able to cope with the pre-existing anxiety and finding a resurgence of previous coping strategies (e.g., overeating, bad relationships).

Many of the women who seek treatment have no prior history of addiction and may not face the extreme symptoms of “withdrawal” that Mary describes. From a clinical vantage point, then, there are concerns about the impact on a woman gambler reading the account. First such extremes are not universally or even commonly a consequence of stopping gambling. I would not want women to fear or anticipate the dramatic consequences of stopping that Mary describes. There is grief, yes, and yearning, and some euphoric recall. But women can and do learn to walk, in their minds, through the glitter of the casino to the reality of the distressful aftermath of gambling. This cognitive skill serves to counter the emotion-based,

impulsive urges and images. The second concern is that some readers, when comparing their own experience to the extremes described by Mary, might incorrectly decide that their own gambling is not problematic.

Making changes is not easy. Some find it easier than others. Those who, like Mary, have a stronger attachment to gambling because of the payoffs in dealing with mental health issues and the monsters threatening them from the kitchen, may have a tougher battle in that both the gambling and the underlying stressors must be addressed in recovery.

Caveats aside, Mary is a gifted writer, and offers a wealth of invaluable information that every woman who gambles would be wise to absorb. However, it could be helpful to also read it as a phenomenological study of gambling by a woman with a complex history, and whose recovery is not necessarily normative. Overall though, it is a true gem of a book—one that I found brilliantly orchestrated, compelling and empowering.

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