

People with lived experience share their stories of gambling harm



Contents

Ross's Story part 1: the secret life of a gambler	3
Ross's story part 2: the last spiral and a new beginning.....	4
Darren's story: overcoming problem gambling	6
Darren's story: sharing experiences of gambling harms two years on.....	8
Martin's story: living with problem gambling	9
Colin's story: my experience of gambling	11
Chris's story: my journey with gambling	12
Anonymous story: my journey of gambling and recovery	13
Anonymous story: engulfed in gambling's 'perfect storm'	14
About the ALLIANCE	15



Ross's Story part 1: the secret life of a gambler

“I started gambling back when I was just a young lad. I wasn't aware I was gambling as I put two pence pieces in the slots at the amusements on holiday. I never realised this is probably where it all began. The thrill of the lights and the noise of the coins coming down the metal casing.

When I got my first job in my teenage years, I would finish my shift then put a few quid in the bandit in the bar. That led onto going to the bookies and putting a few coupons on at weekends. Yet that wasn't where gambling took a hold of me.

It was online and online slot games that got my attention. I remember a time before Wi-Fi and Internet was so easily accessible. I was at home playing an online slot game and the house phone rang. The computer screen froze, and the adrenaline lasted longer than usual as I wouldn't know the result of that spin till, I got reconnected online, waiting for my Mum to get off the phone to see what happened. The buzz and getting lost in the moment of gambling was what got me hooked.

It is very easy to hide a gambling addiction. Although come the end, with the time I was having off work and my moods and tiredness, many knew something was up. Throughout my 20s and into my 30s the viscous circle continued. I would be gambling at every opportunity I got. I would spend hours in my room gambling or sneak to the toilet to gamble. I would risk my life as I drove home from work, with one hand on the wheel and one hand on my phone. Once I bumped the kerb and was lucky to not cause any serious damage to my car, and even luckier there was no pedestrians.

I managed to stop for a month or so just but one day in December 2017, I got a promotional email from a company. I signed up and started gambling again. This is where my gambling binge started and eventually lead me to Gordon Moody Rehab in 2019.”



Ross's story part 2: the last spiral and a new beginning

"I can't remember what made me do it, but it was going to be the start of over 12 months of lying, manipulating, stealing and anything I could do to get my hands on money to gamble.

On a bleak winter day, a couple of weeks before Christmas I was at home living with my parents. Sitting in the living room I went online and used the free bets on Santa's Wishlist or some sort of Christmas game. I quickly got a small win- the amount is irrelevant as it was gone within a few spins. Before I knew it, I was depositing money into the betting account.

I was thinking all week about how to get my hands on some money to hide the gambling and to get Christmas presents for my family. We had scrap copper and lead at work, and it was my responsibility to take it to the scrappies and hand the money in. Instead, I did something I am ashamed of, I took a risk and kept the money. It was paid into my account. I didn't gamble it straight away, I waited for the work night out the following day. Instead of doing the sensible thing I stayed out and ended up at the casino on my own, losing the money I had stolen.

I was all over the place. I never knew how to deal with things, I thought gambling was the way to deal with it. It was an escapism. I was unhappy, I was living at home with my parents, never had a steady relationship and feeling I only had my job at the college because of my dad.

Everything was negative in my head, but on the outside, I was laughing, smiling, joking, and hiding everything from everyone.

I struggled to understand why I couldn't just stop, why I no longer could think rationally, why almost everything was a trigger to gamble. I lost everything, or at least that's what the addiction made me believe. I was self-harming, I was overeating, my physical and mental health went downhill and my relationships with everyone were affected. I was not the real Ross.



Now I look back and realise that the addiction played on my vulnerabilities. I am fortunate enough to know what a life without gambling is like. Your senses come back, you see clearly again and appreciate life so much more.

I can enjoy spending time with friends and family. It is not easy to make the changes and reach out, but it is the best thing you can do.”



Darren's story: overcoming problem gambling

“Throughout most of my teenage years and continuing on into most of my twenties, I struggled on and off with gambling: mostly on sports betting, which manifested into Casino games – namely roulette and for a time, online slots. But at the height of my addiction, I was chaotically betting on pretty much everything. I tried giving up, but I always found myself back at square one.



I really needed help.

I was going through a tough time, and my lack of real awareness and attention to detail was affecting me privately and at work. This led to a diagnosis of ADHD and became the first big step in moving forward, as it led to me to taking an interest in how the brain works and how important self-care is. I recognised, that if I could just understand *why* it is I behave the way I do, then I would hold the power to tackle the problem thoroughly and through a fresh way of thinking.

A colleague at work was training to be a Life Coach and asked if I wanted free coaching, as part of her qualification. It was a process that would change my life: I felt fresh, clear, focused and empowered. I realised my gambling habit for what it was (an addictive and destructive habit) that needed positive, specific and tailored action.

I safe-guarded my finances; I put blocking software on all of my devices; I became healthier mentally and physically.

I gave up gambling and felt free.

As the days and months passed, I made a promise to myself that if I could go two years without gambling, I would help others who are struggling. Five years later, I'm well into that commitment:

I volunteered for Gambling Therapy, on their online chat: a charity that offers practical and emotional support to gamblers worldwide.

I have also been quite active on Instagram, where you will find short, one minute videos offering my own tips and advice on how to give up gambling.

And I have a blog: where I can dig deep and reflect honestly with limited distractions.”



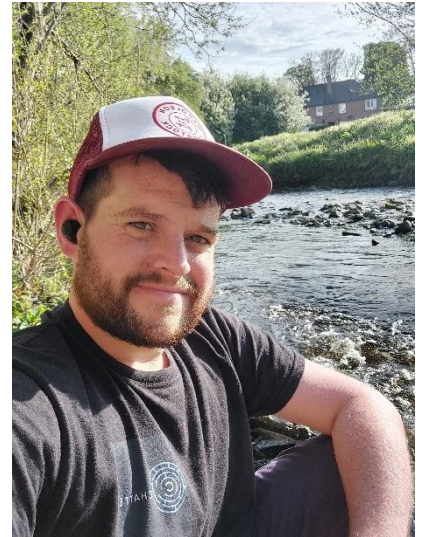
Darren's story: sharing experiences of gambling harms two years on

“I think it's important to be in the right mindset first before reaching out to help others. But there also needs to be more understanding and appreciation for people that are sharing their story. They can be vulnerable too.

I've got a lot of time for anyone who is looking for help and support and reaches out to me. I like helping people in that way. Personally, if I had someone who understood gambling harm (maybe a similar age to me and I could've met up with them, chatted to them online) if I had had access to anyone like that, I probably would have done a lot better. So really it was quite simple. I just wanted to offer peer support to anyone that might need it. Because I knew it was something I could have used at the time. I went from feeling alone and keeping all that in, to suddenly opening the door. There's so many other people that I had no idea were there. They were in a similar position as me and understood what I was going through too.

You're fighting a really tough battle if you're struggling and not reaching out, but it's one of the hardest things to do. Many of these products are highly addictive and your mental health can be destroyed. Once you get that understanding, you get clarity and realise that you need some support. I would always recommend to everyone if you can, if it's available, to get professional help. I only know what I know based on my own experience.

I'm not the kind of person who is into mindfulness. And I'm still not in many ways. But the difference is I've got a healthy respect for it because that's really what changed my life. I tried meditation, I tried hypnosis, I tried mantras, I tried life coaching, the whole thing. But because I was ready and in the mental state where, you know, I was up for giving up gambling, or at least giving it a good go, it just clicked. It's not something I do every day now, but I could always go back to if I needed to. I've got those tools in my arsenal if I need them.”



Martin's story: living with problem gambling

“Gambling consumed all my thinking. It was all about gambling and how to get funds to fund it and how to avoid having to tell your wife you’ve done it again. It took me away from all the important things in my life.

Certain gaming machines are designed to addict you and unfortunately I was one of the ones that got addicted. The machines in the bookies were called the crack-cocaine of gambling and that’s what they were. They got introduced to the betting shop and I was just an ordinary punter but the machine took over my life. I would go out and do a twelve hour taxi shift, cash in hand, and it became a daily thing and caused problems for about 15 years of my life. Now that they’ve been restricted, operators have gone online. Everyone now has a casino in their pocket, 24/7.

People get hammered by gambling to the extent of suicide, it’s treacherous. It ruins relationships because when you’re a compulsive gambler you become a compulsive liar. There’s a stigma to it too. There’s depression and frightening anxiety and suicidal thoughts.

I was a wreck and suicidal and things had to change, I was so drained. I would be going out and doing my 12 hour shifts and I’d lose all my money within five minutes, it was devastating. I didn’t have the tools to change and the cravings were too much. You put a mask on and then behind closed doors everything caves in.

People don’t understand it. Mental health and addiction go hand in hand. It should be a public health issue. It should be about protecting our children and grandchildren. It should stop seeing the broken as people with ‘illness’ but recognise the cause of this misery as resting with the unregulated supply of addictive products. There’s a ripple effect through society. Families, friendships, work spaces, the economy all suffer.

The adverts are 24/7, the glamourising of gambling needs to stop. I would tell people who run into big problems with gambling it’s not their own fault, the gambling industry draws people in, targets them.



I campaign now for things to change. It needs much tighter regulation. Mental health organisations need to recognise the devastation it's causing and to highlight this as well as providing pathways to support. There needs to be a watershed for advertising though I'd prefer to see a ban on all advertising, as is the case with tobacco. Gambling also needs to be in the school curriculum, and parents need to be aware that their kids can be targeted too through advertising on loot boxes through gaming. At the end of the day, gambling generates nothing but misery.”

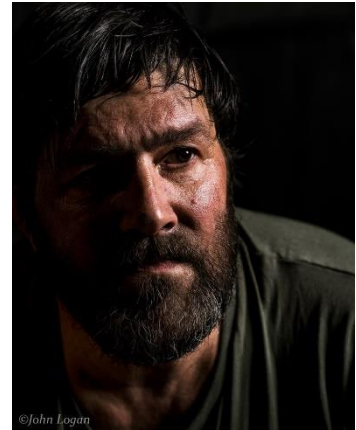
Find out more about Martin's film 'One Last Spin' which he coproduced with people with lived experience of gambling harm:

<https://onelastspin.vision/>



Colin's story: my experience of gambling

“As for gambling, I’m in a great place to speak about it. I’ve been on both sides of the fence. I was a croupier in casinos for thirteen years and I’ve seen men crying through their losses. They become bad gamblers. They chase their losses and get themselves into all sorts of trouble involving borrowing from friends and family. They don’t know when to stop trying to scoop back what they have gambled away. Me, I’m a bad gambler.



I should know better because I’ve seen what gambling can do. I didn’t gamble for twenty odd years, I’d never thought of it as I knew it was a mug’s game, but something drove me to it. I sat back one day and wondered why I’ve become like this, especially with my background and knowledge.

Then I came up with an answer to my demise. Up until 10 years ago I had, for most of my life, been in receipt of natural highs through playing football and audience applause when I was a singer. All these rises in my endorphins ended when I had to retire early after a massive heart-attack. I put on weight and I had nothing giving me these natural highs in life anymore. I started to play online poker for fun with no money involved and found I got an endorphin lift when I won, but it wasn’t enough, so I started to play for money for a bigger kick and that was me, the man who swore he’d never gamble...hooked!

That’s one of the problems with gamblers. People get bored and have nothing to do and they turn to gambling as a form of excitement. It’s often not to do so much with the money until they lose and chase the loss.

I’m horrified, horrified with the money I’m spending firstly chasing my natural high then chasing my loses. I’d like to be back in the days when I could play poker for fun with no money. Gambling is a disease that can be caught. The odds are always against you.”

Chris's story: my journey with gambling

"I had my first bet on a horse ridden by Lester Piggott in 1981 which won me £4.50 and until this year I rarely stopped. From standing in a smoke-filled bookie shop aged 15 to sitting beside my girlfriend last year, glued to my phone checking results. Hours after her father died of a heart attack.

I was completely consumed. You would never know though. Held down my job, somehow kept my relationship intact but while most people went off to enjoy their weekends, I would be buried in the racing papers plotting my next flurry of losers or sitting alone wondering how to get money to gamble or in fact, eat. Gambling can take you to really dark places and although it didn't take my life, it most certainly took most things from it. Not only nearly every penny I earned, but any social invites would dry up because I always made excuses to gamble instead. £100 loans became £1000s and I spent most of my adult life juggling or avoiding bills. I was heavily in debt and my relationships were superficial at best

Gambling greatly improves your ability to lie. And that's what it was. A 35-year period of lying to myself and others. The irony is, that for most of my working life, I've worked in coaching and training. Showing others what to do and help them clear the path to success. But I could never apply those skills to my own situation.

Thankfully since February this year, I am bet free. I still attend GA not only to maintain my own recovery, but like many ex-addicts, have developed a real desire to prevent others going down the same deadly path. I'm now very active on social media whether that be campaigning for gambling reform or putting myself out there so others can benefit from my lived experience. I would encourage anyone with gambling addiction to seek help. You won't get the money back, but that's a small price to pay for having the life you deserve."



Anonymous story: my journey of gambling and recovery

“Gambling started at a very, very young age. I grew up in a family that was quite dysfunctional, we had all different addictions. I was introduced to gambling at the age of fifteen. I was sneaking into the bingo halls and when I started playing these fruit machines I came alive, I’d arrived.



I ended up with a very unmanageable life. What I didn't have money wise I would gamble to try and win. When I did win big it wasn't enough. I was trying to fill a void in my spirit with gambling.

I joined Gamblers Anonymous but I didn't grasp it. I totally lost my personality through gambling. I was selfish, inconsiderate and greedy. I was very dishonest. I was all that stuff and I just didn't know how to stop and that progressed for many years.

Sadly at 25 years of age I tried to take my own life. At that point I wasn't going to gamble again. But it was too powerful. I came out the hospital and next day I was gambling. I went on to steal. That's where the addiction took me to, to desperate, desperate measures.

I was in and out of Gamblers Anonymous for many years. I wasn't willing to work it. I failed myself. But I came back about four years ago. I'd had enough. I was lost in addiction. I really meant business. I had to give it my best shot. And that's what I done. I got good people around me who understand. I get therapeutic value working with another addict. It's been hard but how I stay well is by giving back to my family. This is a family illness and a family recovery.

My experience is you can recover. I have a beautiful life today. I have a loving, caring partner who I love with all my heart. I've got love in my heart, I've got happiness, I've got peace, I've got sadness. I've got all the emotions that one person should feel. And I'm able to be a mum, that's all I ever wanted.”

Anonymous story: engulfed in gambling's 'perfect storm'

“Admitting any addiction is not easy. For me, it was gambling, and while I now haven’t had a bet for eight years, it’s only now that I am comfortable to talk openly about it. I do so today in the hope that my story can help others avoid the harm gambling can wreak when it hurtles beyond a fun pastime.



Both my Grandads were gamblers, so perhaps it’s in my DNA, but I was drawn to the thrill of a bet from an early age. ‘Pitchy’ in the playground by 11, cards by 13, down the dog track by 15, sneaking into bookies by 16. The allure of getting a coupon up or landing a Lucky 15 provided hours of enjoyment.

And it genuinely WAS enjoyable to begin with. However, this hobby mutated into a harmful obsession, and I later found myself engulfed in a perfect storm of easily-accessible online sports betting and credit cards on tap. Spectacular wins gave way to mounting losses and the intense pressure of trying to dig myself out of a dark hole.

It was all-consuming. There were days I would bet on every horse race in Britain then follow it up with a punt on an obscure overnight football match, thousands of miles away. Not so enjoyable.

Gambling at that frenzied pace affected my mood and relationships, caused stress, anxiety and debt. It got to the stage where I daren’t look at my bank statements. Ironically, my salvation finally came because somebody else did just that.

My perceptive partner knew something was amiss and recognised the tell-tale signs of a problem gambler. She staged an intervention, opening my bank statement, challenging me and most importantly offering to help.

For me it was blessed relief, I wanted to quit but I couldn’t do it alone. Faced with the realisation that it was gambling or her, I swore never to bet again.

Less than two years after making that promise, my partner tragically died from breast cancer. I owe it to her to forever honour that vow.”





About the ALLIANCE

The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (the ALLIANCE) is the national third sector intermediary for a range of health and social care organisations. The ALLIANCE has a growing membership of over 3,000 national and local third sector organisations, associates in the statutory and private sectors, disabled people, people living with long term conditions and unpaid carers. Many NHS Boards, Health and Social Care Partnerships, Medical Practices, Third Sector Interfaces, Libraries and Access Panels are also members.

The ALLIANCE Scotland Reducing Gambling Harm programme hosts the Scottish Lived Experience Forum for reducing gambling harms. The Scottish Lived Experience Forum contribute to ongoing work of the programme to ensure the voice of lived experience embeds policy and action to reduce gambling harm in Scotland.

For more information about the ALLIANCE Scotland Reducing Gambling Harm programme, visit: <https://www.alliance-scotland.org.uk/people-and-networks/scotland-reducing-gambling-harm/>

All ALLIANCE Scotland Reducing Gambling Harm Humans of Scotland stories can be found at: <https://www.alliance-scotland.org.uk/blog/news/the-alliance-launches-humans-of-scotland-series-on-gambling-harm/#expanded>.

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