

MEDIA RELEASE

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When enough is never enough to pay gambling debts

Lifeline support groups for problem gambling

Flanked by police escorting him from the building, Peter's final departure from the corporation where he had worked for almost two decades was ignominious.

A senior manager with more than 100 staff, Peter (not his real name) was being led away to be finger-printed, photographed and charged with forty counts of embezzlement, having misappropriated almost \$100,000 from his employer to put into poker machines.

Ironically, immense relief accompanied his humiliation and subsequent court case. That last day - when the police came – the burden of lies and secrecy lifted.

"But it was a scary relief," Peter said, several weeks after his conviction on all counts. "A relief that the monkey was off my back, but I knew I was in deep strife – with my family, with losing my job and ending up with a criminal record."

He has only just begun to recover, using as many supports as he can – among them Lifeline Harbour to Hawkesbury's six-week Gambling Support Group.

"When the police were taking me away I was thinking, you know, I worked so hard for so many years to earn the respect of these people and to build teams and do everything right, and this is what I end up doing. But all along I'd known that one day, someone was going to catch up with it (the gambling and theft)."

For years Peter had been pushing money through the pokies with a compulsion and secrecy that rocked all those who knew him.

Peter recently started attending Lifeline Harbour to Hawkesbury's problem gambling support group and he's already chalked up his first 90 days at Gamblers' Anonymous, a group he says inspires and supports the new life he is making for himself. Some parts of that endeavour are harder than others.

He admits he 'feels a bit sick' if young people drop out of the group after a couple of weeks. It is a painful reminder of his own experience when, in his mid-twenties with his first big gambling debt of \$30,000, he confidently thought Gamblers' Anonymous was not for him.

"I lasted three sessions," Peter said. "I felt I was not at the level these people were at. I was controlled, I could control it myself." And he had to. His wife had vowed then not to support him if it happened again.

When the gambling bug returned a few years later, Peter could not allow his forgiving wife to see the hole he was making in the mortgage and the credit card.

“I had it always in the back of mind that I’ve started again and I’ve got to get that money back so she doesn’t find out. It became bigger and bigger. I ended up getting a personal loan for \$50,000 and then the credit card went to \$30,000. I kept thinking if I stop now, maybe I can get it back but it was never enough.”

Peter was leading a double life: “Always thinking of my family while behind that I was gambling. Always feeling terrible, really uptight, knowing I couldn’t pay off the loans.”

The only way around that was for him to find money elsewhere. Work was where he found it, for several years taking what he needed to top up his funds and hide his debts.

Older and wiser now, Peter is finding out from the wisdom of gamblers who have been in recovery programs and support groups for years that they still have ‘a terrible urge’, even after ten years in one instance.

“It’s quite scary to hear that sometimes. Especially after what I did the first time around, when I did walk away and it did all come back again.”

Peter believes he will need Gamblers’ Anonymous for the rest of his life and like so much of what he’s achieved in the past, he is approaching it with a positive attitude.

“I may as well go and enjoy it, which I do,” he said. Peter is in the process of making restitution for his debts at work. He has recently got a full-time job and been able to move into a bed-sit.

But perhaps the biggest job ahead of him, apart from staying away from all forms of gambling, is to make restitution to his wife and family.

“I’ve hurt them all and it’s broken my heart,” he said. “We have our good days and our bad days. We both need space and my wife needs to see change and find trust in me again. It will be difficult but I will at least do my best and give it a go.”

Lifeline Harbour to Hawkesbury is running two six-week Gambling Support Groups this year. The first is currently underway, ending on Wednesday, March 29.

The second group starts on Wednesday October 11 through to November 15.

Bookings can be made by phoning Lifeline on 02 9498 8805, or emailing appointments@lifelineh2h.org.au.

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