

# Together AZ

MARCH 2017

Inspiring Success on the Road to Recovery

By Maureen (Mo) Michael, LSAT

According to the Arizona Office of Problem Gambling, between two and three percent of Arizonans suffer from an addiction to gambling, many who are women. I'm one of them.

People with gambling problems may not physically appear to have a one. We don't slur our words, or have bloodshot eyes. Our consequences result in financial, social and legal issues, resulting in bankruptcy, divorce, job loss, jail time and too often suicide, or attempts at it.

To the person without a problem, it's a form of entertainment. Gaming is legal in many states, and can be indulged in online making it a universal enterprise.

Most states encourage it through state-supported lotteries and scratcher games of all types and denominations. It's easy to satisfy an impulse to gamble, even at a weekly poker game at the neighbor's house.

My first exposure to gaming was at the ripe young age of eight. My adopted parents loved to play, and many of our family vacations were to Las Vegas or Laughlin, Nevada. It seemed normal to me.

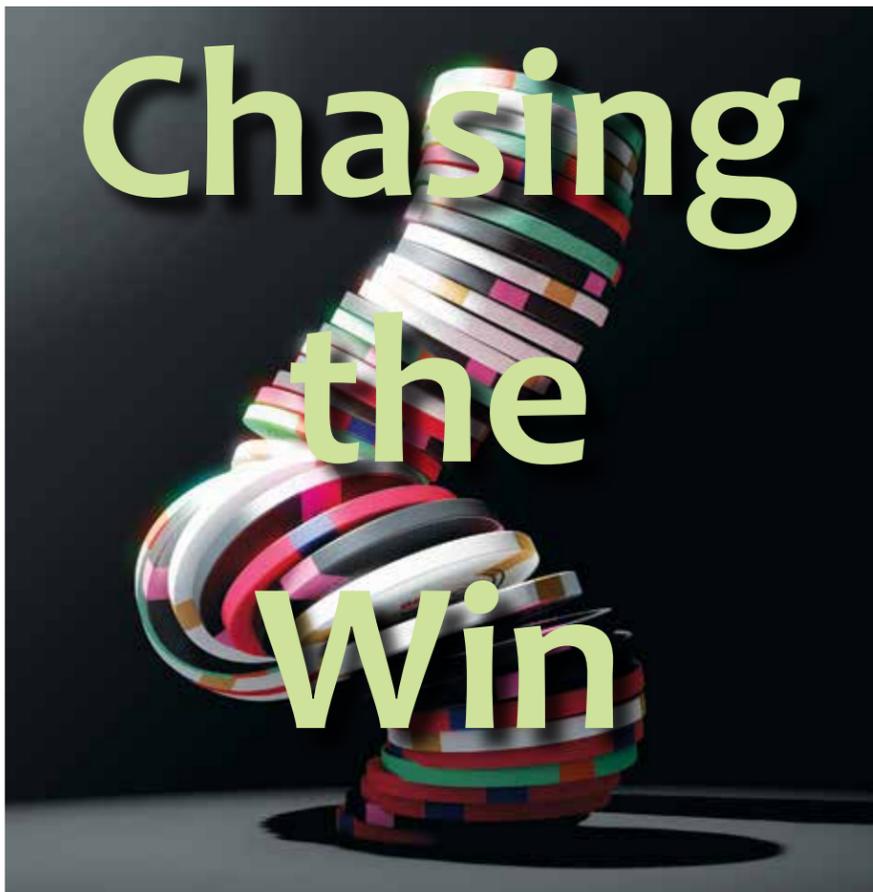
## Problem Gambling Warning Signs

- Have you ever felt the need to bet more and more money?
- Have you ever lied to people important to you about how much you gambled?
- Have you repeated unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back or stop gambling?
- Do you gamble as a way of escaping emotional or physical pain?
- Have you ever relied on others to provide money to relieve a desperate financial situation caused by gambling?
- Have you ever jeopardized or lost a significant relationship, job or career opportunity because of gambling?
- Have you gambled to get money with which to pay debts or to solve other financial problems?
- Have you borrowed money to finance your gambling?
- Has gambling ever made your home life unhappy?
- Do you gamble to try to get your money back?

## The Four Phases of Escape Gambling

- Problem gambling is thought to be a progressive disorder, traveling through four phases. Although this describes the four phases of what is commonly called the "Escape" gambler, anyone experiencing problems in life due to gambling will probably be able to identify with this progression.

Need information? Visit <https://problemgambling.az.gov/signs>. Call 602-542-8998



To make our trips more kid friendly we often stayed at *Circus Circus*. My siblings and I were given rolls of quarters to spend on the midway, while Mom and Dad played their games. I loved hearing the shuffle of cards, sounds of the slot machines and watching stacks of chips slide across the tables. On one trip we stopped at a state line casino and my mom let me drop a few silver dollars in a machine. It was a thrill pulling the handle, especially when a few coins came out.

From then on I expected we would stop there on the way home from every trip, but my dad usually drove right past. I remember feeling sad and disappointed. Did gambling have a hold of me then?

By age 18, I had learned how to play blackjack, and always tagged along on trips with my folks, until I figured out a way to get fake ID. I went to casinos with older friends or alone. I thought about gambling when I wasn't playing, and my adrenaline skyrocketed when I knew I would.

## The Slow Spiral Down

At 20 years old, on a weekend trip to Laughlin, I met a black jack dealer. I extended the trip to stay with him and found no reason to call my job or family. I was living with a man who worked in casino, "Who could ask for anything more?"

That relationship wasn't working out and a few months later I came home, *very broke and very pregnant*. Not being in any position, financially or emotionally to raise a child, I gave my son up for adoption at birth. After signing the papers giving up my rights to him, my gambling compulsion accelerated.

I began to lie to friends and family on reasons why I needed to borrow cash. I needed to pay bills I pleaded, but of course it was used to feed my growing need to gamble. The big win was near,

I could feel it and I chased it. Of course after hitting the jackpot, I'd quit.

Even though I had lost jobs, places to live and friends over my debt, I could not stop, and soon found another way to fill the void — a man.

We hit it off and moved to Tucson for his job and watching over our finances was my responsibility.

While he worked six or seven days a week, my days were spent in casinos. I had access to his money and the ATM became my best friend. My scheme worked until we started looking to buy a home. At the bank, he discovered our accounts were near empty. I had to admit what I was doing and *promised to stop*.

Soon after we moved to Phoenix. I managed to stay off the bet for nearly six months but was constantly taunted by casino signs luring me in. And just like any relapse with an addict or alcoholic, before I knew it, I was in front of a slot machine, zoned out, chasing again.

Because I could no longer take his money, I found another way to fund my habit. I stole from my employer but was caught and fired. To make the situation worse, I was pregnant again. The thought of losing our child if I went to jail horrified me and I called a gambling hotline, and attended my first GA meeting. My boyfriend paid back what I had stolen from my employer.

## Attempts to Stop the Madness

I went to meetings until the birth of my son, never gambling during his first year. While I often thought of it, I never talked about it to the recovering gamblers I met at meetings — I wasn't ready to give it up.

On the move again, we were in Flagstaff. While there were no casinos in town, I located one an hour away from home. After settling in, I took a job at a restaurant and hid most of my tips until I had enough for a quick trip. I stuck to my plan and stayed one hour and won. Denial told me *"there's no problem here you've got winnings in your pocket."* So there! I proved everything was under control. Yet it wasn't long before my casino time increased from hours into days. Win, lose, win a little, lose all.

Confronted again by friends and family, I returned to GA. The members suggested I work the steps and get a sponsor, I did neither and my attendance at meetings was infrequent. I didn't want to stop or be around people who had.

So I kept alive by pawning items I did or didn't own, and embezzling again. Each time I wrote a check to myself, I vowed it was the last. I was working for people who trusted me with their books and payroll, and there I was taking advantage of them, and their bottom line.

## The Consequences Chase Me

Somehow I managed to get another great job as an accountant but after four years of the vicious cycle of gambling and stealing; as I was leaving the office one afternoon, the gig was up. The police were waiting. Handcuffed and humiliated, could my life get any worse? I was booked and released and told everyone I lost my job. I could not admit the truth.

Over six months passed and I had not heard anything about my arrest. "Was I forgiven? Did the company I stole from write off the loss?"

I returned to GA, still unwilling to be honest with anyone. And I fell further down by playing away all the money I had cashed in from a 401K. I was living paycheck to paycheck and had severe legal problems.

Nearly two years after the arrest, a packet from the DA's Office with my indictment papers arrived. As I ripped it open — my heart sank.

At a meeting with the public defender the outcome looked like incarceration was in my future. My attorney suggested it would be favorable if I had a chunk of money at sentencing to show remorse and willingness to pay the victim back. This financial stress pushed me right back to the casino. **"I absolutely must win now."**

A few weeks before sentencing, due to downsizing I lost another job. Why I thought I would get away with any of this is beyond me.

Back at home, I looked at my boys, thoughts of going to prison and not watching them grow up left me paralyzed. My mind raced trying to figure out a way to get out of my self-created disaster and fear filled my body.

Around that time I received a call from my first born; the son I had given up for adoption had found me. He was 18 and coming into my life when I was an absolute mess. While he wasn't ready to meet in person, we did communicate by email.

A few days before sentencing, I took the money I saved to pay the court and went off to win enough to pay restitution. In a panic I packed my car, took my boys to their dads and drove off to Laughlin to win my fortune.

***Suicide rates among gambling addicts are staggeringly high. The National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG) has estimated that one in five problem gamblers attempt to kill themselves, about twice the rate of other addictions.***

Because of that poor decision I missed my court date. Now, officially on the run, I was going to hide out until I won enough to repay every penny of my debt. Ten days later, I lost my last dollar. And there I was, thinking the only way out was to end my life.

Financially ruined and facing prison, I figured my children and everyone else would be better off without me. I thought about taking pills and leaving a note — but I couldn't get my boys sweet faces out of my mind. "I can't do this to them," I cried out, and asked God for help.

Somehow I found the strength to get out of that dingy hotel, drive home and decided to turn myself in. I had to tell my younger sons what I had done, and sent an honest email to my eldest. Even knowing the truth, he wanted to meet before I went away. We all met for the first time. Looking back, the irony is, at the start of my addiction I gave him up for adoption and at the beginning of my recovery — we were reunited.

## Facing Reality

Walking into the police station, heart thumping, I told an officer about the warrant and was there to turn myself in. The next few weeks were a bit of a blur. I wavered back and forth about my decision and desperately tried to find someone to bail me out. **No one did.** The consequences were mine — mine alone.

After all counts were officially charged, 53 felonies were against me. As the months passed, I attended every AA, GA and NA meeting I could find. I wanted to turn my life around no matter what.

My first plea was for 7-12 years in prison. My attorney asked for an evaluation by a psychiatrist and it was concluded I suffered from pathological gambling. The plea remained the same. I vividly remember the prosecutor referring to my gambling as "Miss Reilly's so called Addiction."

During the next few months I came to peace with my fate. My attorney located a counselor in Phoenix who specialized in gambling addiction

and told her my story. We met and I told her every last detail. She wrote a recommendation to the prosecutor and judge asking them to allow me to receive treatment in lieu of prison. After days of negotiation, I had 2 pleas on the table; 7-12 years in prison, or one year of treatment with maximum probation time (14 years).

The women in my jail pod encouraged me to take the prison deal because 14 years was too long "on paper", they said. I was torn on what to do, but a guard said, "If you really want to change, it won't matter how long you're on probation; don't get a DOC number." I took those words to heart and sincerely wanted help.

Most of the charges were dismissed except for two felonies. I attended long term treatment and slowly began to put my life together. When I arrived at the facility all I had were the clothes on my back and a bible from jail.

After treatment I moved into sober living. Seeking employment was a challenge due to my felonies, but I was offered a position as house manager. That is when I discovered I wanted to work with others with gambling issues like mine and returned to school.

## Wanting What I Want

At two years clean, I wanted to have my boys back and they did come to Prescott to live with me. I found an affordable apartment, enrolled them in school and we began our new life — until my middle boy announced he wanted to return to his dad.

Stubbornly, I didn't listen, I so desperately wanted my way. But I had to agree to let him return to his father. Over the next few months my younger wanted the same opportunity and again I couldn't let go. I was so selfish it was difficult to consider what his needs might be.

I had dropped him off at his fathers and as I was driving away my heart physically hurt because the pain was so unbearable. Who loses their kids in sobriety? I needed relief and knew how to get it 50 miles south of Flagstaff at my 'playground'. I was almost hysterical as I drove down the highway, screaming at God—how He could let this happen.

## Ready to Surrender Again

I am not sure why, but on the drive I picked up the phone and made a call, and another, until I reached my boyfriend. He talked with me all the way home and I didn't gamble.

## Beyond the ABC's of Eating Disorder Treatment

At Remuda Ranch at The Meadows, we go above and beyond treating only the symptoms of an eating disorder. Unlike most other eating disorder treatment programs, we address the underlying issues contributing to a person's dysfunctional behavior and teach them real life skills for recovery.

Our goal is to give adolescent girls and women with complex eating disorders and dual diagnosis conditions a foundation for restoring their healthy relationship with food or creating one for the very first time. We use a specialized approach that combines proven medical and clinically intensive treatment with an extensive experiential program to reach the underlying cause of the eating disorder. Additionally, our female-exclusive environment, situated on a scenic ranch property, offers a safe and non-institutional healing environment.

Remuda Ranch at The Meadows offers a Critical Care Unit, inpatient and residential programming, and a dedicated adolescent unit. Call us today to find out how we can help.

**REMUDA RANCH**  
AT THE MEADOWS

866.390.5100 | [www.remudaranch.com](http://www.remudaranch.com) | Wickenburg, AZ



BBC provides counseling and treatment to those facing challenges related to Substance Use Disorders, and Mental Health Concerns.

- Intensive Outpatient Treatment
- Individual, Couples and Family Counseling
- DUI/DV Evaluations, Education and Counseling
- SMART Recovery Meetings
- Specialized Programs for LGBTQA

602.626.8112

4225 W. Glendale Ave., #E-108, Phoenix, AZ 85051 • [www.bbcaz.com](http://www.bbcaz.com)

The next few days I stayed in bed and cried. I couldn't get up. On day three of this behavior my roommate came into my room and said "Get up!" I refused. She insisted. While I am not sure why I listened to her I returned to work, to life.

I am very grateful now that God put people in my circle who did not allow me to wallow for too long in my pity. I was back in meetings and spent hours with my sponsor reviewing and re-doing the 12 steps to get back on track and connected.

And another miracle occurred. I was approved to visit the women's prison as a guest. I will never forget returning there, I even jumped with fright when the doors closed behind me.

But all of the tension and anxiety was worth it as I walked into the room for a meeting. I had the freedom to leave when it was over. Sharing my story with them was one of the most humbling experiences I ever had. Maybe I did have a reason to be here.

### Continuing the Journey

After starting school in 2009, I received my B.S. in Counseling in 2014 and began working on my master's in Professional Counseling in 2015.

My purpose became realized helping other problem gamblers. Today I'm married and together with my husband work in the field of treatment and was offered an opportunity to open Compass Recovery Center, along with my brother-in-law.

The blessings in my recovery are many. Sadly not every gamblers' story turns out as positive as mine.

### What Keeps Me in Recovery

There are actions I must take daily to stay on the path. Connecting with my 12-step program and sponsor are an absolute must. I cannot play lottery games, bingo and I won't flip a coin. I stay away from places where I don't belong, and all games on Facebook or other devices are triggers. For some it's fun, for me it's complete devastation or my demise.

The only win I'm after is another 24-hours of sobriety and *it doesn't get any better than this!*

### About the Author



Maureen "Mo" started working in the treatment field in 2008 where she first started as a residential house manager. Mo currently works as the Program Director for Compass Recovery Center in Prescott, AZ. She is currently pursuing her Master's Degree in Professional Counseling at Grand Canyon University. Mo began her own journey in recovery in 2007 and believes that working with others to recover from addiction is what she is meant to be doing. Mo loves the outdoors, playing softball, cooking, riding her Harley, and spending time with her husband, kids and grandkids. Mo believes the key to happiness is having "An attitude of Gratitude."

To reach her email: [mmichael@compassrecoverycenters.com](mailto:mmichael@compassrecoverycenters.com) or call (928) 863-8703.

## Resources

Gamblers Anonymous/Gam-Anon meetings  
<http://www.gaphoenix.org/>

**Arizona Office of Problem Gambling**  
<https://problemgambling.az.gov/>  
**1-800-NEXT STEP (1-800-639-8783)**

**Compass Recovery**  
**1-800-216-1840**

**National Gambling Hotline**  
**1-800-522-4700**

**AZ Council on Compulsive Gambling**  
**1-800-777-7207**

**ACT Counseling & Education**  
**602-569-4328**

A comprehensive Gambling Treatment Provider list is available: [problemgambling.az.gov/treatment-counseling/treatment-providers](http://problemgambling.az.gov/treatment-counseling/treatment-providers)

Gambling affects men, women, teens, young adults and seniors. It does not discriminate by race, age, religion or socio-economic background. If you suspect a problem with a loved one or yourself, reach out for help.

# RECOVERY IS POSSIBLE



**CBI**  
COMMUNITY BRIDGES, INC.  
CELEBRATE BELIEVE INSPIRE

**We Can Help**  
**480-502-7000**