

# the trouble with pokies ...

The earliest study in Victoria of women with gambling problems found that women gamble to relax and to escape problems at home (The Age 3/8/96). A study in 1997 found that the most common reasons women gamble are loneliness, isolation and boredom with 'other strong motivating factors' as depression, financial reasons, increased accessibility, excitement, emotional reasons, stress and relationships (Brown and Coventry, Queen of Hearts, Financial and Consumers Rights Council, 1997).

More recently the *Playing for Time*<sup>1</sup> study worked with women to find the meaning that gambling has in their lives. The women all identified as 'problem gamblers' who gambled on the pokies. There were 28 women. Assuming that women who play the poker machines are not stupid, the study asked 'what is the function of gambling' for these women.

Most of the women in the study said they gamble because they want 'time out' from the expectations they experience in their normal every day lives. When they play the pokies they don't have to be dealing with demands that are often unrelenting or have to meet the standards expected of them.

"... you don't have a role when you go in there, you're not the mother, the wife, the 'whoever' you are, whatever you do. You don't have to work, you don't have to do anything when you go in there – except blow your money. Initially it's just that – the anonymity of it. I don't know why but there seems to be some sort of lure - **you can go somewhere and just not 'be' anything.**"



Some women said that doing what they are expected to do just wasn't enough:

"Gambling fills a void – whatever that void might be – and that will be different for every individual on this earth..."

Even when things were going well, some women reported that they were very susceptible to gambling at times of change in their lives, such as finishing at uni or getting a new job or even getting rid of old responsibilities. A change in status or experience left some women at a loose end or in 'new territory' where they weren't too sure they knew how to be.

"...I just didn't know how to proceed in this new context"

"It was like I didn't care what I was doing, how much I was doing and then I suppose it stemmed from that..."

"...I've always been super responsible, with a big R, and I think gambling for me is about being a bad girl, which I hadn't done much of in my life..."

This idea of women acting out the 'bad girl' through gambling comes up often throughout the study:

"I am really responsible in my work life, I've always been responsible for my family – the gambling is about breaking out, about me being really bad, something I just do for myself..."

"Women can ... gain by living out another aspect of themselves..."

"When I go to the casino I am anonymous and I can be 'abandoned'. I like the company of others who too are 'on the edge' so to speak..."

"There's something about that need for 'out' that's really huge these days, for women. It's like a by-product of our times.... To try to go out and have a good time at the pokies, even if having a good time is costing a lot in terms of self esteem – or even if you don't have a good time at the pokies! It seems to be like some sort of acting out."

<sup>1</sup>Di Surgey, *Playing for Time: Exploring the Impacts of Gambling on Women*, Victorian Government Department of Human Services, March 2000

The women in this study were very articulate about recognising that they want time out from expectations, roles and realities. Ironically, they were trying to exert some control over their own lives through gambling:

"It's (about) controlling what you do... in a way, you're controlling time.. it's a sense of no-one can tell me what to do when I get there, no-one can stop me when I get there, no-one can tell me to leave when I get there. I can basically do what I want and hang out there as long as I want and no one can tell me anything else..."

Some of the women said that the atmosphere and the set up of the pokies venues makes them feel comfortable, no matter how they're made to feel in the outside world. The venues provide them with...

".. a place to go where you can be with others and not have to be any type of woman – just be!"

This doesn't mean that the venues are all about social exchange and conversation. As one woman put it:

"I do it because there's a sense or feeling that I don't have to put such effort into socialising... I don't feel isolated but at the same time I don't have to talk to anyone."

In the same light, another woman said:

"You don't really have much social interaction as such, but it's a bit like a meditation process – everyone's doing the same thing and it feels okay to sit in a room with a lot of other people and do something which is completely mindless and not be judged for that. It's an opportunity for participation that's quite rare for women in this society."

Rather than a sense of community or social exchange, doing the same thing as everyone else gave some of the women a real sense of permission to relax and, importantly, to feel anonymous:

"I want to be on my own. I want to be self sufficient in the way I blob out".

"To an extent it's about being anonymous – that's different to being alone."

Hanging out in pokie venues and doing the same thing as everyone else gave these women a sense of 'shared location'. When you have a sense of 'shared location' you also have time out from being perceived as 'the other', the 'stranger', the 'misfit'.

An earlier survey of 56 women, conducted by Breakeven Eastern Problem Gambling Service (The Age 8/11/1996) found that one in three women seeking help for problems with pokies consciously gambled to harm themselves and this was supported by some of the data from the *Playing for Time* study, though not in a simplistic way:

...it's in part a treat, because I feel I've been dealt with badly by the world and in part it's punishment because I haven't been able to meet the standards that I think are imposed on me..."

".. it was like I wanted to have some very connectable reason as to why I felt crappy, other than the real reason, which had to do with the bad things that happened earlier"

"it's like 'things can't possibly go so well, I gotta fuck myself over'.... "

Often the women were fully aware that they were not going to win big bucks at the pokies. As one woman said:

"..women probably know they're going to lose. They have a different kind of investment in it."

And another pointed out:

".. and if I do win I think 'I've been there for six hours to win a stupid little bit of money - I could make more money with a single phone call'."

A simple question then, is why do women continue to play the pokies even if they assess their chances of winning money as relatively small? Maybe it's about looking for change:

"..Now I go to be a winner in a world where secretly I feel like a very big loser.."

"You're very visible when you win on a machine - the sounds and everything - it all sends out a message of 'here is a winner'."

Significantly, many of the women in this study were reporting that what they got from gambling was a sense of timelessness, an altered state, a chance to change 'the present' by replacing it with 'oblivion':

"(I'm) sort of like in a dream world, in oblivion for a while. You just live for that moment, whatever, in that time frame, and you don't have to consider what's really going on in your life."

"It's like this is the recreation you learn to do, and nothing else takes its place."

"It's like a drug that gets you - and then you're thinking 'this is the best thing I could be doing right now'."

Sadly the solution too often becomes becomes the problem:

**'Now I gamble because I gamble...'**

If you're doing sex work to finance your gambling, or if the proceeds from sex work are being eaten up by the pokies, you might want to talk to someone from Gamblers Help on 1800 156 789.

Call us at RhED on 9534 8166 if you'd like to be involved in a project about problem gambling and sexworkers.