

Hello,

The road to recovery is long and quite often not the straight line we'd like to envision but a bumpy, windy road that sometimes leads you to dead ends.

My story starts when I was just seven years old. Before then, I was a bright and happy child. Blissfully unaware of the events unfolding around me that would have a profound impact on my childhood and follow me into my early adult years.

My parents migrated from El Salvador in the late 80's to escape the civil war. They had very little in the way of support. By the time I was 7 we found out that my father had been abusing my brother for several years unbeknown to my mother this, coupled with her traumatic childhood growing up in El Salvador, left her unable to manage her own, or our emotional needs as children.

They decided to divorce and as a result we became her emotional support. My brother, who was suffering immensely, introduced me to pornography. I was hooked straight away, it was my first escape.

At age 9 I was told my father was being imprisoned for molesting his new partner's daughter, my world changed. I no longer felt like a child.

At 11 I was already comforting myself with alcohol and as I progressed into my teenage years I turned to drugs. I was starting to lose a sense of who I was and it made it difficult to relate or get along with a lot of my peers at school, I was bullied quite a lot. Because of what my father did, my mother completely cut off contact with his side of the family; she had a new partner but for many years it was just the 5 of us, my mom, stepdad brother and sister. I began to resent her because I already felt like an adult, yet, was always treated like a small child. My parents always had good intentions but an inability to deal with their own issues which left me feeling isolated angry and confused.

By the time I was 15 I was set to be enrolled in year 12 after being moved up a year. My relationship with my family had become extremely volatile and I did well at school but all of my circumstances made me decide to move out of home. I started working at an abattoir to fund a pursuit of music. Music is something that has always provided me an emotional outlet. I worked long hours and made good money but I was 130kg's and had unhealthy relationships with food, alcohol, drugs and my family. I was miserable.

I developed an eating disorder and the macho environment of the meat industry did little to help with my negative self-image.

In 2009 when I turned 18 I moved to Adelaide and was working full time, partying, taking drugs with little regard for my personal welfare and my destructive behaviour destroyed many friendships.

This continued for years and in 2012, I was working at a Butcher shop and making good money, I had also been in a relationship for 2 years but I was growing increasingly unhappy with my life.

That same year, I left and travelled overseas, visiting 8 countries and gambling in each one. The butcher shop had a strong culture of drinking at the pub after work, I had played the pokies several times at home with my workmates and partner but this time, I was winning. And I won a lot. This was the start of my problem with the pokies.

When I got back home I felt an overwhelming sadness, my long term relationship was breaking down and I had been unhappy for a very long time. My big holiday had done little to help my self-esteem.

Everything had built up over the years, my weight, my job satisfaction, my habits... I needed an escape and the pokies were there for me. It was just so easy to get lost in the music, mindlessly pressing the buttons. I didn't have to worry about anything else, just chase the rush of free games and the excitement I felt when the money went up, which was hardly ever.

I had already been going with friends so there was no suspicion of any problem and my other habits and ways of coping were well known by then. It started off so small, but escalated so quickly. Before long I was spending hours at a time in pokie rooms.

Leaving a venue or the casino at 3am and having to walk home without a cent to your name is certainly a harrowing experience, yet, I continued to go, losing more and more. I started to get advances on my pay, first 50, then 100, 200. But it wasn't enough, I needed to keep playing, I needed to keep chasing my losses.

Throughout my life to that point I had engaged in self-deprecating behaviour to mask the turmoil I was in but I had never considered causing harm to anyone else.

My desire to keep gambling was about to change that.

It's hard for me to describe the full range of emotions I felt the first time I stole money from my employer. The most fitting description is that it's physically sickening, each time I did it I was sure I would get caught and fear and paranoia took over my life. The amounts steadily increased to up to hundreds a day, I wanted to be caught, I couldn't save me from myself.

I started counselling with Relationships Australia, it helped for a while but the root causes of my addiction were still unresolved. My partner finally left and eventually, fear got the better of me. I left for another job and to engage in study, a fresh start.

In 2013 less than 12 months into my new employment my fresh start had turned into a fresh nightmare and the day I had long feared had finally arrived.

I was called in and told that they knew I had been stealing money from the tills, they had me on camera. I was lucky in the sense that I was able to enter into a contract to pay it all back as to avoid police involvement. My life could be so radically different now had I not received that leniency.

Despite the chance I had been given I was at a new low, I was unemployed and just months after escaping this ordeal I found myself back in a pokie room. I remember in this time sharing an

exchange with a pensioner. She asked me if it was ok if she cried as I had just won free games on a machine she had been playing moments ago. It inspired me to write a song ... every time I perform it and picture her face, it still saddens me.

I felt nothing. I didn't want to be seen around Adelaide and I was constantly fearful my actions would carry further consequences.

I gained employment again and made a close relationship with my employer. Through time I was able to tell her about my issues but in general I continued to isolate myself socially and my gambling continued, my sense of self-esteem was so diminished that I desperately needed that escape, regardless of the cost.

That was, until one night, after losing around \$700 I went home and tried to hang myself. I was found by my housemate who took me to the ER of the Royal Adelaide Hospital where I spent the night. I've never cried so much in my life.

After that incident I found myself enrolled in University. Things were looking up! I focused on a love of running which had helped me lose a lot of my weight, started to play regular gigs after many years of slow progress and started seeing a student psychologist.

Shortly after enrolling I decided to initiate a self-exclusion from many venues with the Independent Gambling Authority. The barring orders worked initially but I found myself back again, the rush of doing something I wasn't supposed to do only made it worse. It was only when I was recognised and asked to leave that they achieved their desired effect, it was an incredibly shameful experience.

Uni was going well though, my brightness started to shine back through and I was really enjoying what I was doing, after lengthy counselling my student psychologist referred me to a specialist psychologist.

It was here I learned appropriate ways to deal with my emotions and addressed the long standing grief and trauma that I had endured. Regularly practising mindfulness and being aware of my

schemas as they arise helps me to understand why I had the urge to gamble and helps in times or situations where I might be susceptible to being triggered.

I still make mistakes. I am human and I accept that but I can finally see the bright, happy child that got left behind 19 years ago. Perhaps the most valuable thing I've learned is that with recovery, there is only so much you can do alone. The valuable insights I gained with my life experiences helped me come to a place where I was willing to accept help but finding positive, inclusive communities and the support of my counsellors have allowed me to develop a much healthier sense of self and grow into the young, confident man you see today.

I wanted to write this to help illustrate the devastating harm that gambling can have on one's life but also, show that recovery is possible with some determination and the valuable support of community.

Thank you.