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NEWS: A gambler's tale of addiction

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Jesse Brodie talks about addiction and recovery like a seasoned pro.

It's hard to believe that at just 20 years old, he is.

"My drug of choice is more," he tells me in the sun-filled common area of the Last Door Recovery Society in New Westminster.

It's a well-practiced joke, but it stems from truth. Brodie's been dealing with addiction for most of his young life. He first landed in a residential treatment program here at age 17 to deal with his crack-cocaine addiction. He'd been using since age 11.

After completing the treatment program, things were looking up. Brodie was going to school to become an addictions counsellor and got a job at Last Door. These days though, he's here again as a client. He doesn't hesitate to recall the precise moment of his undoing.

"When I turned 20 it was like, 'hey, wanna play poker?' I thought, 'yeah, I haven't done that in years.' So we played poker at one of my friend's houses and it was just unleashing the beast," he remembers.

After years of struggling to conquer his addictions to substances, Brodie says gambling was new, accessible, and easy to hide.

"It's legal for you — you can go any time you want and do it and there's a possibility of winning. Initially, it was this new coming-of-age rush to go to the casino," he says. "But really, it's just a fucking room with boardgames. It's an illusion."

It took four months for the illusion to break for Brodie. What started as occasional gambling — once every couple weeks — rapidly progressed to a destructive daily routine. He'd play anywhere, at the casinos, which conveniently sent shuttles around his neighbourhood ("that was like putting drugs right in front of me"), online, at home, through lotto and scratch-and-win tickets. By the end of it, the life Brodie had worked so hard to build was in shambles.

He'd quit his job, been kicked out of his house, incurred \$12,000 in debt, and culminated the whole experience by going on a bender. "After all was said and done, I chose to not get honest and work the steps around it, and I ended up using," he says.

Desperate and suicidal, Brodie wound up at a Narcotics Anonymous meeting where he ran into an old counsellor from the Last Door and asked for help.

We don't hear a lot of stories like Brodie's, but they're more common than you'd think, says Nick Ringma, a counsellor at Last Door. As far as addictions go, gambling is largely invisible, surrounded by a lot of shame and stigma that prevents addicts from speaking out.

"If you're an alcoholic, it's socially acceptable. If you're a gambler, you're just an idiot — that's the way it's perceived," he says. Of every 100 people who wind up at Last Door, Ringma says maybe two will have an acknowledged gambling problem. By the time people start peeling back the layers and really examining their behaviour, however, that number is closer to 30.

According to a 2008 government-commissioned study on problem gambling in B.C., about 4.6 per cent of the population — or more than 200,000 people — are estimated to be moderate to severe problem gamblers.

Yet Ringma says access to treatment for gambling addiction is sorely lacking. "If you're gaming, the odds are pretty good you're still employed, and it's much harder to access a treatment bed if you're not on welfare," he says.

Lack of treatment services for problem gamblers is something Vancouver-based addictions counsellor Candace Plattor plans to speak about tonight at the City of Vancouver's public hearing on the proposed Edgewater Casino expansion. The Vegas-style complex would more than triple the amount of slot machines in Vancouver, to 1,500, and promises to bring in more than \$100 million in revenue in its first year of operation.

But Plattor worries that the euphemistically termed "social impacts" of gambling are not being taken seriously. "A lot of things will happen that we can't undo," she says, noting she saw the ravages of gambling firsthand during her 16 years working as a counsellor in the Downtown Eastside. "There's no help for the people who are addicted to this, and it's very easy to become addicted," she says. "There is no real prevention being done right now that I'm aware of."

In 2009/10 the B.C. government put about \$7 million into responsible gambling initiatives such as its 24-hour help line and a voluntary self-exclusion list where individuals sign up to be barred from Casinos and online gaming for a period of months or years.

But compared to the \$2.5 billion the government reaped from gambling revenue that same year that amount is a rather paltry sum, says Plattor, particularly when some estimates say 35 per cent of that money comes from problem gamblers.

Plattor and Ringma both share a disdain for government-run responsible gambling initiatives like the self-exclusion lists. "In my experience with clients, self-exclusion lists are not being maintained, nobody really checks them, and I think that's because they want people to come in and gamble," she says.

Ringma goes even further: "If you put your name on the list, all that means is that if you win lottery games they don't pay you out. They don't actually stop you from entering the casino."

Brodie was lucky in some ways. He knew where to go for help. Though he thought about putting himself on a self-exclusion list he says he doubts it would have made a big difference in the throes of his addiction. Like any addict, he would have found a way to use no matter what.

Putting a bigger casino in downtown Vancouver won't create more gambling addicts, he says, merely attract them. And although plenty of people are able to play the game and walk away, Brodie cautions that we all, as a society and individuals, need to know what we're getting into with expanded gaming. "Don't underestimate it," he says. "I underestimated it and it bit me in the ass. It almost destroyed my life at 20."

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