

Family Therapy for Problem Gambling

Joseph W. Ciarrocchi, Ph.D.

Graduate Programs in Pastoral Counseling

Loyola College In Maryland

7135 Minstrel Way, Columbia MD 21045

410-617-7632; email: jwc@loyola.edu

Co-dependent No More

How Unique are Families Who Cope
with Addiction?

Overview

- Researchers studying alcoholic families have failed to use other stressed groups for comparison.
- As a consequence reached distorted conclusions.
 - That alcoholic families are unique
 - With clearly delineated “types”.
 - That their maladaptive coping patterns themselves represented an “illness”.

Fair Comparisons

- Families living with chronic mental illness
 - Depression
 - Schizophrenia
 - Agoraphobia
- Families living with chronic physically ill members.
 - Type II diabetes
 - Hypertension

Common Effects Compared to Community Samples

- Increased stress, anxiety
- Decreased relationship satisfaction
 - E.g. poor communication, less frequent sex, etc.
- Increased financial problems
- Physical health problems
 - Greater medical costs
- Greater substance use
- Greater depression

Common Coping Strategies

- Wishing the problem would go away
- Self-blame
- Problem-solving
- Providing support to problem member
- Minimizing problems to others
- Focusing on the positive
 - Maintaining family rituals

Does Family Rx Work?

- More effective than ‘standard treatment’
 - Alcoholism
 - Schizophrenia
 - Agoraphobia
 - Type II diabetes
 - Hypertension
- Equally effective
 - Drug abuse

Conclusions

- Families coping with addiction are unique only in the specific features of the disorder
 - E.g., worried about effects of being drunk, versus effects of being depressed.
- Not in terms of the disorder's impact on families themselves
 - They are not ill
 - Normal reactions to highly stressful situations

Family Environment & Recovery

- Health family environment critical to recovery
 - no study, to date, incorporates couple therapy to aid treatment retention for pathological gambling.
- Few resources for family members
 - in state of Maryland three GamAnon meetings

Typical Scenarios

- Acceptance with maintenance of intimacy
 - gambling abstinence
 - continued gambling
- Parallel existence
 - emotional detachment
 - keep up appearances for outsiders or children
- Chronic conflict

The Gambler's Situation

- High emotional distress
- Health problems
- Sexual dissatisfaction
 - 49%
- High divorce rate
 - 35% inpatients divorced, separated, remarried
 - median age only 38.
- Sensitivity to criticism
 - desire pat on back
 - yet get kicked in the teeth
 - fueled by premorbid traits of entitlement

The Partner's Situation

- Severe financial problems
- Major responsibility for children
- Major responsibility for household
- High emotional distress
- Often victims of domestic violence
 - 50% of women partners report physical abuse
 - 10% of children of problem gamblers report physical abuse

Developmental Time Lag

“When you’re along for the ride,
you’re not in control”

Immediate Impact on Partners

- For problem gambler contemplation stage is lengthy
 - perhaps 2-year average
- For families awareness of scope of problem is often sudden & traumatic
 - gambler has to be master of deception
- Research (Stacy Ahrons)
 - women spouses of pathological gamblers
 - were as emotionally distressed as their hospitalized partners
 - yet they had to hold the family together outside the hospital

Short-term Recovery < two years

(Ciarrocchi & Reinert, 1993)

- Male pathological gamblers
 - decreased
 - independence; intellectual-cultural orientation
- Female Spouses
 - decreased
 - independence; intellectual-cultural orientation; active-recreational orientation

Long-term Recovery > two years

(Ciarrocchi & Reinert, 1993)

- Male pathological gamblers
 - decreased conflict
 - increased moral-religious expressiveness
- Female spouses
 - decreased intellectual-cultural orientation
 - decreased active-recreational orientation

Gambler Tendencies & Barriers to Intimacy

- Deception
 - to keep gambling
- Quick-fix mentality
 - from overly optimistic belief system
- Avoid emotional pain
 - belief that it's intolerable
- Hide vulnerabilities
 - so no one knows you're down
- Saying what others want to hear
- Confusing excitement with intimacy
 - driven by love of action

Partner Tendencies & Barriers to Intimacy

- High suspiciousness
 - to prevent being taken advantage of
- Emotional detachment
 - to avoid being vulnerable to inevitable disappointment of gambler
- Defensive anger
 - to access power to protect self and family
- Intense need for control
 - to minimize the destruction of gambling

Crisis Intervention Model

- Control money access
 - involve family/significant others
- Deal with financial crisis
- Assess suicide risk
- Assess legal situation
- Marital/family crisis
- Gamblers Anonymous/GamAnon

Integrating Acceptance into Couples' Therapy

A Model for Long-Term Growth in
Recovery Families

References

- Ciarrocchi, J.W. (2002). Counseling Problem Gamblers: A Self-Regulation Manual for Individual and Family Therapy. San Diego: Academic Press.
- Jacobson, N, & Christensen, A., (1996). Acceptance & Change in Couple Therapy. NY: Norton.
- Christensen, A., & Jacobson, N. (1999). Reconcilable Differences. NY: Guilford Press.

Acceptance vs. Change

- Limitations of change models
 - rapid decay in skills learned
 - feels artificial
- Human relations paradox
 - people resist change
 - unless they first feel accepted
 - but how do you accept someone before they've started to change?

IBCT: Arriving at a Formulation

- Session 1
 - identify problem areas
 - early history of relationship
 - emphasize what attracted you to the other person
 - what needs were being fulfilled
- Sessions 2-3
 - Meet individually with each person
 - relationship history
 - check for abuse, infidelity
 - assess optimal level
 - intimacy
 - control
 - division of labor

Formulation Session

- Review history of problem
- Describe polarization process
 - normalize it as function of unmet needs
- Empathic joining around the problem
 - differences are not intrinsic evils
 - each person has a right to his/her needs

Therapeutic Conversations

- Around the differences of each partner
- Around negative exchanges
- Around positive exchanges
 - particularly when potential conflict was circumvented
- Around upcoming events/projects/social gatherings, etc.

Disarmament Technique

- Obtain gambler's commitment to recovery
- Identifies to the partner all warning signs leading to gambling
 - Worksheet
- Reveals all 'trade secrets' related to gambling
 - ways to get free to gamble
 - ways to obtain money and hide money
 - ways of hiding gambling
 - ways gambler 'got over' on partner