Ask a professional counselor or psychiatrist to define problem gambling and you’ll get a variety of definitions depending on that person’s level of training and practice. Ultimately, they would likely turn to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) to determine if a gambler displays any or all of the characteristics listed, and then classify them as at-risk, early problem or a pathological gambler.

While this is appropriate for clinical use, the general public doesn’t have the same knowledge and approach when defining problem gambling.

“A professional counselor or psychiatrist to define problem gambling and you’ll get a variety of definitions depending on that person’s level of training and practice. Ultimately, they would likely turn to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) to determine if a gambler displays any or all of the characteristics listed, and then classify them as at-risk, early problem or a pathological gambler.”

Late last year, Northstar sought to better understand public perceptions about gambling behaviors that were causing problems. In addition, we wanted to explore various ways to communicate this public health issue so that people would understand its implications and know how to take action.

The research, which included individual interviews and focus groups, showed that problem or compulsive gambling is not clearly understood by the general public. Any layman’s description of the behavior lacks the definitiveness or common understanding of terms such as alcoholism, drug addiction or other mental health issues.

One interesting finding was that the term “problem gambling” was not strong enough to completely define the severity of problems faced by some gamblers, their families and friends. Research participants preferred the use of phrases such as “gambling addiction” or “compulsive gambling” that they felt more fully described the problem. As one study participant said, “If it is an addiction...”
FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The Impact of Addiction on Affected Others

When I was young and first confronted with the effects of addiction in my family, I couldn’t make sense of what I was seeing. All I could say to those involved was, “You can’t do this,” “You have to stop!” and “What’s wrong with you?” It was an agonizing time watching everyone in the family clash with each other on “what to do about the addict.” Trying to grasp the idea that I had no control over that person’s behavior was incomprehensible to me. I knew nothing about the underlying issues of addiction, nor the means to help someone face their issues. The family was splintered and everyone, including the addict, was in pain.

This edition of Northern Light includes a recovery story that highlights the devastating effects of gambling addiction on a family. It reminds me much of what I went through, including the ever-present concern and gut reaction that the addict was slipping back into old behavior – even years into recovery.

As family members and friends of addicts, we have to find our own recovery to develop healthy and appropriate boundaries and ways of dealing with the addiction that help not only ourselves, but the person we are concerned about. Learning is so vital. The more you understand the addiction, the better chance you have to lessen the emotional reactions to the behavior, and develop a thoughtful and more balanced approach to the person, the behavior and the addiction itself.

There are excellent sources of information available for family and friends of problem gamblers, alcoholics, other drug addictions, and various co-existing mental health issues. If you ever feel that tightening in the pit of your stomach as you deal with someone’s addiction, you owe it to yourself to begin the journey of learning about this prevalent disease. You can get off the emotional roller coaster and find better days ahead.

Cathie Perrault
Executive Director
NPGA

WE NEED YOUR SUPPORT!

We thank all our members, donors, volunteers and affiliates who have contributed to our mission.

Become a member today. Visit www.NorthstarProblemGambling.org to join us.

Northstar Problem Gambling Alliance is a nonprofit agency whose mission is to help those affected by problem gambling in Minnesota. We do this by promoting awareness and understanding of the issue via our website, newsletter, community education programs, sponsorship of the Minnesota State Conference on Problem Gambling, and training of professionals in preventing and treating problem gambling.

Northern Light is funded by a grant from the state of Minnesota. Designer: ESD Graphics. Writer: Bill Stein
**NPGA Board Member Profile: LANA NELSON, MSW, LICSW, LADC, NCGC**

Lana Nelson, Northstar board member since 2006, could be straight out of central casting for a social worker. Her mother was a nurse, known for her caring ways and ability to listen carefully to someone’s concerns. Lana inherited many of the same traits. “I’ve always felt like a social worker to my core,” says Lana. “It’s a good fit for who I am.”

As a natural outgrowth of her concern for others, Lana desires to be an advocate and a voice for those in need. Her involvement on the board of Northstar gives her the opportunity to expand awareness about a cause she takes great interest in.

Lana’s initial involvement with addicted gamblers stems from when she co-created a problem gambling treatment program in 1999 at Recovery Plus, a behavioral health program at St. Cloud Hospital. She went on to earn her national gambling counselor certification and became a state-certified gambling provider in Minnesota. Lana’s credentials include MSW, LICSW and LADC.

In her current work as a psychotherapist with Centracare Health System in St. Cloud, Lana provides individual and group therapy for a variety of mental health patients. Approximately a quarter of her caseload consists of problem gamblers.

“*In my experience with problem gamblers, they’re very willing to make changes,*” says Lana. “*I see them when they’re in the pain of their addiction and they tend to be highly motivated because they’re dealing with the consequences of their gambling. The challenge is to reach them before they reach such a crisis.***”

Beyond that, Lana views her clients with gambling addiction in the same way she sees other clients with mental health problems. “My philosophy is that when you see someone who’s struggling, you want to help them and meet them where they are. As a person-centered, solution-based therapist, I look at the total person and seek to identify how gambling plays a role in their pain – whether as an escape, a form of self medication, etc.”

**“As a person-centered, solution-based therapist, I look at the total person and seek to identify how gambling plays a role in their pain – whether as an escape, a form of self medication, etc.”**

**93**
Percentage of Minnesotans who agree that problem gambling is an addiction similar to alcohol or drug addiction (source: NPGA Research Survey, Nov 2011)

**$93,900,000**
The amount of dollars wagered on Super Bowl XLVI (source: Frank Streshley, Nevada Gaming Control Board, in USA Today)

**1,208**
The number of licensed charitable gambling outlets in Minnesota (source: MN Gambling Control Board)

**$90 to $100 million**
Estimated amount of dollars wagered on the 2012 NCAA men’s basketball tournament (source: Jay Kornegay, LVH Race and Sports Superbook, in USA Today)

**1**
Number of phone calls needed to get help for gamblers and families: 1-800-333-HOPE.
Although Dianne is not a big football fan, she'll never forget the Monday night football game between the Minnesota Vikings and Dallas Cowboys on January 3, 1983. It was the first major bet her husband, Don, placed on a football game. He bet a whopping $1,500 – an amount to cover accumulated gambling losses to date – and lost.

More than 25 years later, Dianne shudders at the memory of that night. She looks back on it as the beginning of a 14-year period in which her husband’s gambling took the family on a roller coaster ride it never wanted.

Shortly after that Vikings game, Don’s gambling losses began to mount, leading to another experience that haunted the family: his young children watched in dismay as a stranger came into their house to remove a Betamax machine, the sales proceeds of which were used to settle gambling debts. In the first of many gambling-related lies to his children, Don explained that the machine was broken.

In time, Don’s betting advanced from football to all other sports, and he soon had his own bookie. “I bet every day of the year except the Monday and Wednesday before and after the baseball all-star game, the only two days of the year when there was no sports betting,” says Don.

After Don’s bookie was the subject of a police raid, federal agents dressed in suits and badges came to the house. That development sent shock waves through the family. “That really scared the kids and I felt we couldn’t have that,” says Dianne. She subsequently packed up the kids and moved in hopes of finding a more stable home environment.

The sight of an empty house served as the first wakeup call for Don. He began attending Gambler’s Anonymous in 1986 and convinced Dianne he was ready to quit. Only he really wasn’t. Shortly thereafter, Dianne came across a piece of paper with a list of football games while the couple was away at a cabin. “I was
assured by Don that they were old games because he’d quit gambling.” She later confirmed the list was for current football games.

As a result, Don became increasingly sneaky in his dealings. He cancelled handball games with friends and rearranged work shifts so he could find more time for gambling at the casino. Don learned to kite checks from three checking accounts he created, and found himself visiting a banker every day. “I could at least relax on the weekends when the banks were closed,” recalls Don some 20 years later. He was working one job and half of another “to keep all the balls in the air.”

“Dianne’s stomach still turns when she sees her husband turn the channel from one football game to another, conditioned for so many years to think he’s checking on games he bet on.”

Don forged his wife’s signature a few times to take out loans to pay gambling debts. With a flexible work schedule, Don, who controlled the family’s finances, arranged to be home when he knew the mailman would arrive, meeting him several houses in advance. “The joke was that I was having an affair with the mailman,” says Don.

The cycle of lies and deceit – as well as a general absence from the family – continued through 1994, about eight years after Don first attended GA. On Tuesday, December 27, 1994, he called in sick to work and cancelled a handball match with a friend so that he could stay at a casino. When Don, who called his wife every afternoon like clockwork, didn’t call at the usual time, Dianne suspected the worst. Late that afternoon, a call finally came. “Would you mind if I cashed another $100 check,” Don asked? “Do whatever you want, stay as long as you want, I don’t care,” said his defeated wife of 16 years.

In truth, Don’s years of gambling and the problems it caused had taken a severe toll on Dianne. It contributed to a depression that left her suicidal and hospitalized. “I simply didn’t know how to cope with Don’s gambling,” says Dianne.

However, Dianne did make a pivotal decision that Tuesday night. She locked the bedroom door, so that when Don eventually came home in the wee hours of the morning on Wednesday, there was no question that things were going to be different.

“I knew I’d hit rock bottom and had to stop gambling,” says Don. He went to GA that night and has been attending religiously every since. That Tuesday night was the last time he’s ever gambled.

Today, Don is well into his recovery and is a thriving member of society. He considers himself fortunate in that GA has helped him, and helped him at an age where he can still repay his debts and hopefully accumulate something of a nest egg. Other gambling addicts require individual treatment and counseling to help in their recovery.

The road has been long and not without challenges. “It was particularly tough to quit at the beginning,” says Don. “Even several years into it, I remember seeing a list of football games and asking myself if the Packers would cover the spread, etc.” For her part, all these year’s later, Dianne’s stomach still turns when she sees her husband turn the channel from one football game to another, conditioned for so many years to think he’s checking on games he bet on.

Forgiveness, after so many years of deception, is difficult to grant. In Don and Dianne’s case, a more complete healing didn’t occur until well after Don had quit gambling and the couple had engaged in Retrouvaille, a type of marriage counseling that’s similar to a 12-step program.

Thankfully, much of the damage caused by Don’s gambling has gradually healed. His daughter, who wouldn’t allow him to attend her high school graduation nor be part of her wedding, has reconciled with Don. “Our kids carried around a ton of hurt from what their father did,” says Dianne. “It seemed like every time we wanted to do something as a family, all of a sudden he was gone. For the kids, it was one broken promise after another.”

Today, 17 years into his recovery, Don’s promises are as good as gold.
A longtime advocate for special needs children, Susan is also particularly sensitive to the plight of problem gamblers. “I see problem gamblers as being lopped off from the rest of the world,” says Susan. “You don’t hear a lot of people talking about gambling addictions as they do with other addictions. Yet, with treatment, problem gamblers can be giving, contributing members of society.”

Susan’s role is to ensure that Northstar’s roster of problem gambling professionals and people in recovery are available to connect with communities through a variety of outreach events. “We want to get the word out about problem gambling to help people understand the complexities of the addiction and how and where to get help.”

Speakers from the Northstar speaker’s network are available to discuss problem gambling with any number of community groups and organizations. Recent programs have included talks to Rotary and Kiwanis groups, the Optimists Club, Metro State University students and several faith groups. The speaker’s network team also provides training to professionals such as lawyers, addiction counselors and corrections officials.

“There is so much that isn’t being done about problem gambling,” says Susan. “We want to talk to as many people in the community as possible to educate them about this serious addiction.”

Programs are generally offered free of charge, though donations to the Northstar Problem Gambling Alliance are always welcome. For a listing of upcoming speaker network events, please consult the NPGA website at www.NorthstarProblemGambling.org/events.

What Does “Problem Gambling” Mean to the General Public? continued from page 1

then call it an addiction.” This feeling is somewhat contrary to the public awareness approach that has been taken over the years, where communications were developed primarily under the heading of “problem gambling.”

Another important, and positive, consensus among the group was that compulsive gambling is thought of as a treatable addiction caused by neurological issues in brain chemistry. While not being able to detail existing treatment resources, participants did define their expected outcome for treatment help – i.e., that the gambling addict would be able to recognize and accept their problem, learn how to deal with it, and take ongoing action to manage the issue.

However, while most people embrace the concept of gambling addiction, a small percent cling to the position that if a gambler really wanted to stop, they would.

The study also explored reactions to different communication approaches, addressing such questions as: Is this an emotional or intellectual message? How does this message affect how you see or view a problem gambler? How persuasive is this message? Would you seek help based on this message?

Ultimately the feedback from the participants clearly showed that messages should be hopeful, and directly address the fact that people with gambling problems can take responsibility for their problems, get help, and with the right treatment and support, achieve recovery.
Visit our new website ...  www.NorthstarProblemGambling.org

Northstar’s new website was unveiled earlier this year. The site provides a complete offering of resources for problem gamblers, counseling professionals and the general public. Some site features include a blog, event listing and an archive that includes presentations, research reports and a variety of Northstar publications. In addition to the revised website, Northstar also maintains an online presence with Facebook and Twitter.
Attend the 26th National Conference on Problem Gambling

Moving Forward in a Challenging Economy

July 13-14, 2012
Milwaukee, WI

For more information visit:
www.ncpgambling.org

IN THIS ISSUE

• What Does “Problem Gambling” Mean to the General Public?, p. 1
• NPGA Board Profile: Lana Nelson, p. 3
• Real Voices, pp. 4-5
• Northstar Speaker’s Network, p. 6

Changing Problem Gambling Behavior through:
AWARENESS • EDUCATION • RESEARCH • ADVOCACY