

*AMBIVALENCE, PASSIVITY AND  
RESISTANCE:*

*Engaging the Pathological Gambler in the  
Treatment Process*

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# *“a way of engaging the PG without pissing them off”*

*Adapted Henck Van Bilsen 2006*

- Only very small percentage of PGs access treatment
- Majority of PGs entering treatment not “self” referred
- Heightened state of ambivalence towards engaging in treatment
- Retention in treatment is a problem
- Exploration of the PGs conscious or unconscious attempts to avoid topics or engage in activities that hinder the achievement of therapeutic goals (resistance) can be critical for treatment outcome

# *Ambivalence*

- Gambling used as emotion management to dispel difficult or threatening emotions and often pursued to the exclusion of all else and others
- Gambling idealised with good aspects split off from the bad giving an illusion of perfection
- The resulting severe damage creates a real need to change gambling behaviour and build a new life
- The PG caught in what seems like an unresolvable conflict between the demands of reality on the one hand and the attempt to fulfill the illusion on the other
- Cannot fully ignore reality yet consciously or unconsciously unwilling to surrender the illusion

# *Vulnerability*

- With ambivalence comes vulnerability when contemplating change and experimenting with different ways of behaving and being
- Defended with rigid and inflexible thinking and need to maintain omnipotent control
- As struggle to accommodate the loss of idealised gambling builds is a certain freedom in holding onto or returning to the longed for hopes promised through gambling

# *Problem Resolution*

- Pro-active engagement in resolving gambling problem requires use of adult thinking, feeling and actions
- If approached with ambivalence and resistance then:
  - Information relevant to resolution of problem ignored
  - Aspects of the problem blown up out of proportion
  - Resulting agitation, incapacitation or over compliance
  - Energy directed into these passive behaviours
  - Negative impact on motivation and engagement
  - The gambling problem remains unsolved
  - Detachment or withdrawal from treatment

# *Amal*

## *Family Background*

- Family where there was love combined with severe pressure
- Mother dominant and self-sacrificing
- Father passive and submissive
- Any attempt at assertion or resistance crushed
- “Be a good boy” “Please your mother”
- Gambling an escape from feelings of being trapped
- Always trying to contain gambling for fear of going out on a limb, being found out and then cut off from parental relationships that provided love - but on condition

# *Amal*

## *Presentation*

- A compression of the neck and collapse in the waist indicating a severe holding of tensions causing his body to bend under the burden of his life conflicts
- On conscious level an attitude of pleasing and compliance during treatment
- On unconscious level this false pleasing and compliance denied by a complaining negativity and superiority
- Strong sense of blocked off assertion that could explode in hostility or violent behaviour

# *Problem Resolution*

## *Level 1- Existence*

- Intervention: “It seems like you are keeping yourself in a constant state of tension by continuing to gamble.”
- Amal: “What tension? I’m not tense.”
- Denying the existence of tension and that anything is happening at all as a result of his gambling
- Resistance at the level of existence of stimuli

# *Level 1- Existence*

- Amal: “I’ve told you about my family so you know that tension has always been part of my life.”
- Let himself be aware of tension
- Has not let himself be aware of the possibility that this might be a problem for him.
- Resistance at level of existence of the problem

# *Level 1- Existence*

- Amal: “Anyway, when you gamble you can get tense from time to time. That’s part of the deal. You just have to go through it. Every gambler knows that.”
- Allowed himself to admit that he is tense
- Allowed himself to admit this tension may indicate a problem and be affecting his life
- Dismissing the possibility that anyone can do anything about it
- Resistance at the level of existence of options

## *Level 2 - Significance*

- Resistance on the existence level also means resistance on the level of significance
- “Anyway, when you gamble you can get tense from time to time. ...every gambler knows that.”
- By denying tension might indicate the existence of a problem he is also denying that his tension may have some meaning or significance for him and that it is something he might be concerned about

## *Level 3 - Change Possibilities*

- Resistance on the significance level also means resistance on the change possibility level.
- “Well I guess it makes sense that I should stop my gambling but I’ve been gambling so long I don’t think stopping is going to make any difference”
- Let himself realise that there might be some significance in stopping, that there was something different he could try, but dismissed the possibility it could have any effect
- Denied the solvability of the problem

# *Level 4 - Personal Abilities*

- Resistance on the change possibility level also means resistance on the personal abilities level.
- “I know I cannot expect to continue to do the same things and get different results but I don’t have the nerve. I just don’t know how to do it”
- He realises the problem and that he needs to do things differently if he’s going to get what he deeply wants but dismisses his ability to act on the option, to react differently and ultimately to resolve his problem

# *Summary So Far*

- A PG resisting on any level will also be resisting on all the levels below
- Not allowing themselves to be aware that the problem even exists means that they will be ignoring any perception that the problem may be significant
- And since they are ignoring the existence of the problem why should they consider whether there are options for solving it?
- Furthermore, they will not even be thinking whether they, or anyone else, can resolve the problem

# *Solutions (1)*

- When a problem remains unsolved, despite efforts to solve it, often because the problem is being addressed *on a too lower level*
- We need to begin looking for any form of resistance at the highest level first
- If we discover resistance there, it will need to be addressed before going any further
- If we miss that initial resistance and try to engage with the PG on any lower level our intervention will itself be resisted

## *Solutions (2)*

- Intervention: “I’m concerned about you. I really want you to draw a line under your gambling”
- Intervention is addressing the gambling on the lowest level
- Amal is resisting on a much higher level
- Aware he has tension but dismisses it as being of no concern and doesn’t perceive it to be a problem
- In denying the significance of the stimulus and the existence of the problem he will also dismiss the relevance of the intervention
- Why should he have any investment in stopping his gambling when, as far as he is aware, his tension is not a problem?

## *Solutions (3)*

- Amal: “I know plenty of my friends who’ve tried to give up gambling but they’ve always gone back to it. Once a gambler always a gambler”
- Looks like a Level 3 response about the solvability of his gambling
- Trap is to get drawn into an exposition of the evidence that people can, in fact, successfully give up gambling
- Outside of his awareness, he is still at Level 1 and saying to himself “So, people can give up gambling. What’s that got to do with me? My gambling is not causing me problems anyway”

# *Conclusion*

- Begin by checking for any resistance at Level 1: “Are you aware that you get really tense when you talk about your gambling?”
- If he is aware might then ask “Is this tension something that you are concerned about?”
- If he were to reply “No, not really. It’s something I just take for granted” you have located where the resistance is
- Lets you know that to successfully engage him in the treatment process he first needs to become aware that his tension may indicate a problem and that this problem may be a cause for concern