

## Gamblers Anonymous

A family looks back at how it began

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They do not look like a family who were once in turmoil. Frank is 91, gentle, elegantly dressed, balding, charming, a former GP. Sara, his wife, is a few years younger and has devoted her life to her husband and three children. At the end of last year they celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary. The Queen sent a card, and it still sits at the front of a table displaying more than 100 others.

One afternoon a few weeks ago, the couple were visited by their son Dan, and they gathered in the lounge of their warm and comfortable flat not far from Oxford Street, in London's West End, to talk about things of which their neighbours are probably unaware.

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**Frank:** I was born in London, and I grew up in Glasgow. Ever since I was young I'd always liked a flutter, and there was a lot of gambling in my family. My father was a bookie's clerk. I graduated as a doctor in 1938 and during the war met my wife Sara in the Long Bar of the Cafe Royal. She was eight years younger than me.

**Sara:** I think it really became a problem when he decided to take up bridge. We were expecting our third child, and Frank said one day he'd like to go to a bridge club. He said it would entail going once a week for a couple of hours, and before a month had gone he was there three nights a week. And he lost a lot of money. There were many crises. He would come home at three in the

morning, I would cause a huge scene, and of course that would give him the excuse he wanted to go out again.

**Frank:** I used to go to the dogs. Then the casinos. Sara In those days Frank handled all the bank accounts. One day I came into the bedroom and I found him crying. I'd never seen a man cry before. He said, 'I owe a lot of money,' and that's when he told me for the first time that he'd been gambling. That was in the early Fifties. My father paid his debts, and of course he promised he would never gamble again. They all promise.

**Frank:** I was a GP in London, and I used to be cunning the way I got money. I'd charm my patients. They would see something was wrong and say to me, 'Doctor, you look unhappy, what's the problem?' I used to say it was nothing, but they persisted and said, 'Is there anything I can do to help?' I would tell them I was having a few financial problems and they would insist on lending me money.

**Sara:** There were many times I threatened to leave with the children, and it almost happened in the summer of 1964. We were in our lounge, and Frank was pacing up and down like a wild animal, and my brother said to me, 'You know, you really can't go on like this.' My father said he would find somewhere else for me and the children to live. My brother said, 'Why don't you say to yourself that in four weeks you'll be leaving, and then in three weeks you'll be leaving, and that will make it a little easier for you to accept it.'

**Dan:** The problem had been going on since I was born. The first thing I remember is the rows, the shouting at night that woke me up. Maybe I was six or seven. I was shut out of the lounge, but I would sit on the stairs and I could always hear them. She kept on pleading, "How can you say that you love me and still do this to us?"

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Dan is a successful businessman and writer with a teenage

daughter. I've known him for years, but I had never asked very much about his parents. Not long after I met them he sent me an email about them:

'They are very remarkable people. It is hard to remember now, 41 years down the road of recovery, just how much pain there was in those first 17 years of my life. My mother is and always has been an incredibly strong woman, although I doubt if she sees that in herself. She has loved my father so much and for so long - it really is an amazing love story.'

Dan said that his parents always hoped that others might benefit from what they went through. And he wanted the story of his parents to live on after they were no longer able to tell it themselves.

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**Dan:** Dad always said he'd been visiting patients, because this was in the days when GPs still used to do that. He'd pop out at 6.30 and say he'd be back for dinner, and he'd be back at two in the morning. My mother would be at the window waiting for his car to come up the road. Perhaps initially she thought he'd been with another woman. Every few months there would be this crisis, when we would be absolutely desperate for money. During one crisis she locked him in the bedroom so that he couldn't go out gambling that night. My father isn't a violent man, but he punched the door of the bedroom and it came almost all the way through, like Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*.

**Frank:** When the casinos started in London I was out all night. Dan He was always immaculately dressed, always wore a bowler hat. One of his patients was a Savile Row cutter, so he got the great quality but at a friend's prices. We lived in East Acton, and his surgery was part of the house. He was a really popular doctor. People would call up in the evening for advice, and occasionally the normal pleasant tone would be different, and I'd know that it was someone that had lent Dad cash and now wanted it back.

**Sara:** At the end I kept a ledger of all the people we owed money to. There were about 85 names on it. Dan For a while with him it was mostly the dog track. One afternoon I was sitting on the stairs listening to him tell my mother that he would never gamble again, and then he left to see some patients, and I decided to follow him. I was 15 or 16 at the time, he was in his car and I was on my bike. I think I knew exactly where he was heading - the White City dog track. I got there just as he reached the turnstile. I felt I owed it to my mother, so I ran up and said, 'You bastard!' and punched him in the stomach as hard as I could. I'd never hit my father before. The look of self-loathing in his face. I don't know if I hurt him. But he went straight through to the track.

**Sara:** The first meeting of Gamblers Anonymous in this country was on 10 July 1964. There was a lot of coverage in the newspapers, and people who knew Frank was gambling got in touch with us. One of Frank's best friends, and also a patient, was a bookmaker, and he wanted Frank to go along. Frank said he would but didn't.

**Frank:** They were begging me, but I was at the casino instead.

**Dan:** We didn't know about the idea of compulsive gambling, or that it was an illness. Before 1964 no one did. We just thought that he must hate us.

**Frank:** I went to the fourth meeting. A police officer was in the chair, he was a member. Eli the Cab was there, Ron the Butcher, Harry the Milk, Ron the Print, there was a Harley Street plastic surgeon and an accountant. My life was very nearly at an end. I had gambled myself into the ground and I felt useless and helpless.

**Sara:** For the next three meetings he just couldn't sit down like the others in the room, he was constantly pacing. They all listened to a man called Henry who had managed to give up his gambling in New York and had come over to Britain to share the experience and show it was possible. Frank saw how happy Henry was.

Everybody in the room was on a high. The meeting took place on a Friday, and on the Saturday morning every single person in that room phoned us up to say well done for coming and to give support. Every one of them. By this time we had no other friends.

**Frank:** The following Monday I was gambling again. I thought I could control it. But something from that meeting had got through to me. I had my last bet on 13 August 1964.

**Sara:** In the following months I went around with him to all the people he owed money to. We still had a tiny car, which somehow hadn't been sold, and we went around in that, and Frank went to every patient and told them he was a compulsive gambler and he was doing something about it and eventually they'd get their money. And every single one of them then came out to me in the car, and I'd wind my window down, and they'd all say, 'Thank God.'

**Frank:** I was so enthusiastic about GA that after a year I went with Sara to Glasgow and formed the first group in Scotland. Then new groups in Dublin, Southampton, Manchester and Birmingham - all over - and I was still a GP, a much better GP.

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Sara made some tea and brought in a stack of papers. There were some handwritten notes and old Gamblers Anonymous magazines in which Frank had written of his travels to GA groups throughout the country and Sara had put down some thoughts about Gam-Anon, the support group for partners of those in GA. She said that Gam-Anon was set up initially for the wives, but now it's for male partners and parents of gamblers as well. The meetings usually take place at the same time as GA.

The consistent tone in the literature she had brought was one of relief, and a few phrases would appear frequently. Frank wrote he always thought he should have the initials NYSO after his name, for Not Yet Struck Off. He wrote that ever since he stopped gambling 'Every day is a holiday, and every night a honeymoon.'

There was also an orange booklet with many answers to frequently asked questions and a list of the 12 Step recovery programme familiar to members of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous (Step 1: We admitted we were powerless over gambling - that our lives had become unmanageable.) There were many practical and spiritual tips (GA is a secular organisation), and at the back there was a table outlining a 'daily moral inventory'. On one side there were liabilities to be wary of: self-condemnation, envy, false pride. On the other a list of assets for which to strive: self-evaluation, generosity, simplicity.

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**Sara:** Gamblers Anonymous has no problems with people gambling as such, because they enjoy it. It's just when people start gambling with sums they can't afford, gambling the mortgage and money for food.

**Dan:** I went to my first casino when I was still at school. I looked older than I was, and I had some older friends. They took me to Charlie Chester's in Archer Street. I thought I would never end up like Dad, and I was determined never to hurt someone as much as he hurt my mother. I thought I'd be like the kids playing pontoon at school.

I think I played blackjack and I won a little bit, and I thought I must be a really lucky gambler. I could afford to go because my grandfather had a food wholesale business and I worked there during the holidays, lifting crates and cans. One day I went along with my £10 earnings and lost it all very quickly. I had great self-hatred for having worked so hard and then done that.

**Sara:** It took Frank 17 years to repay all his debts. It never occurred to me that Dan would start gambling as well.

**Dan:** When I was 18 my grandfather showed me this secret compartment that he had in a wardrobe in his flat. He felt he could trust me with anything. In there was a bulging leather wallet with

£300 in cash. I was staying with them, and I was gambling, usually going out in the evening after they were in bed. I thought I'd borrow £50. One always thinks one is just borrowing. I got a taxi to the Mississippi Room, above the Whisky-a-Go-Go in Wardour Street. I was playing Chemin de Fer - chemmy. The idea is that you put £1 down, and if you win 10 times you win £1,000. The problem is, if you lose 10 times you owe £1,000, and all the time you're just trying to get your £1 back ...

It's the most dangerous game a compulsive gambler can play. I got into that game quite deeply. So one night I turned up with the £50 I'd borrowed, and lost that, and then I took the taxi back to the flat and got another £100 from the wallet, went back to the club, then I lost that, and I think I went back three times. It got to five in the morning and I was still there with my last bit of money and a guy came in the room, a short guy built like an oak tree, and his name was Curly King. He had an Oyster Rolex on.

At that point my luck changed. I'd been thinking about what I was going to tell my grandparents, and then slowly I began winning again, and I managed to win back the whole £300. So I decided to leave, hugely relieved. But with chemmy you don't win off the house - the money you win comes from the other players. So Curly King goes, 'You're not going anywhere, son.' I said, 'You don't understand, this is my grandparents' money, I borrowed it.' He said, 'I don't give a fuck about that.' I said, 'Really, I've got to go.' Fortunately the manager intervened and persuaded Curly I was out of my depth and that I should be allowed to leave.

I went back and put the money back in the wallet. You have no idea how terrible you feel having spent eight hours gambling for nothing. Anyway, my grandparents never knew. And then the next night I did it again, and lost it all.

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Last month I went with Dan to a meeting of Gamblers Anonymous in West Hampstead. He hadn't been for a while. It was a Saturday

afternoon, and about eight people were expected, but 14 turned up. There were four women, which I was told later was an unusually high proportion. The youngest of them, perhaps in her late-twenties, came up to me to say she was hoping to start a women-only meeting of GA in the next few weeks, and she'd try to put details on the website.

The chairman asked everyone to introduce themselves by their first name, and he asked if anyone objected to having a journalist present for the first of two hours. Then people asked themselves questions from the opening pages of the handbook, the same one Frank and Sara had given to me. There were 20 questions in all, and you could classify yourself as a compulsive gambler if you answered yes to at least seven. 'Do you lose time from work due to gambling?' The reader said he had done. 'Is gambling making your home life unhappy?' The reader of that question was Dan, and he said it once did. 'Have you ever considered self-destruction as a result of your gambling?'

One member who used to drive Frank and Sara to meetings read another excerpt from the booklet: Isn't compulsive gambling basically a financial problem? 'No, compulsive gambling seems to be an emotional problem. When in the grip of this illness, we create mountains of apparently insoluble problems. Of course, there are financial problems, but we also have to face family problems, employment problems, or problems involving ourselves with the law. We lose our friends, and relatives have us on their personal blacklist.'

A few people then shared some personal experiences with the group - a dream they had last night, how they coped with a recent bereavement, the temptation to gamble an unexpected windfall from the sale of a computer. For one member this was only his second meeting, and for one member it was his first.

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**Dan:** I told my dad about the £300 after the morning surgery had



finished. By that time he'd been in GA for about a year. He was obviously understanding. He said, 'You have to pay it all back over time. You've got the same thing I have. You have to go to Gamblers Anonymous.'

I told my grandfather, which was even harder. He was very upset, but he loved me so much. So I went to GA meetings in Marsham Street, by the Houses of Parliament, a bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling. I went for a while, but eventually I started again.

In 1971 bank cards had just come in, and you could get a guaranteed £30 from every bank you went into. I discovered there were about 150 banks within walking distance of Oxford Street. By the time Charlie Chester's opened at 2pm I had about 30 little packs of £30. I had to go to the toilet to put all the little bundles together into one pile. In a week I went through about £4,500, which would be about £40,000 today.

Within a couple of days I knew that the bank would find out what had happened when all the cheques I had written came in. I thought I was either going to go to jail or somehow beg forgiveness. So I did the latter, and every month I would have money to live, and the rest would go out. It took four or five years. Then I went back to GA, and I thought that was it, but nine years later I was back gambling.

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I spoke to a longstanding friend of Frank, Sara and Dan who told me what a fine speaker Frank was, and how new members of GA were touched by the fact that he always remembered their names. The friend used to design furniture for restaurants, and one day he got a call from a man who had won a restaurant in a poker game:

'He called me in to redo it. One day when I was working on it, he said he was just going next door into the casino, and did I want to come? I had never been to a casino before and I wasn't interested in gambling. I said OK.

'I played roulette and I remember the adrenaline going, and I came out winning. The next day, two o'clock on the dot, when it opened, I was back there by myself. They said I had to wait 48 hours after I signed in, but I bribed the bloke on the door. I was already addicted.

'I hardly left the place in the next five years. I loved it. My life was a mess, and I didn't care, it was wonderful. Only afterwards did I realise that when I got married years before it was in a place called the Crystal Ballroom of the Mayfair Hotel, and that room was sold by the hotel to a company that renamed it the Palm Beach Casino. And that's the casino where I was now spending all my time.

'Going to GA and giving up was a huge struggle at the beginning. Every week I used to look back at the previous week and see how my life had changed since I stopped gambling. Every week I would notice minute improvements on the week before. I would lie a bit less, or I would be a little more diligent in my work. And then gradually I could look at people straight in the eye, and they would do the same with me, and I liked that.'

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**Dan:** Even yesterday I was thinking of having a bet - it was both a serious and a fleeting thought, and I knew I'd probably lose. I knew that I couldn't take that risk any more, but the thought was still there. I feel it whenever I'm depressed. But I haven't had a bet since 1980. I haven't been going to GA either. I suppose because I feel that as I've grown up around it I don't need it. I wouldn't recommend that view to anyone else.'

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A few days after I had met Dan at his parents' house, he called to alert me to an article on the front page of the Financial Times. The headline was 'Scramble for super-casino turns into lottery'. The story explained that the man in charge of deciding where this Vegas-style casino will be in the UK has no idea on what grounds

he should make his decision. There had been more than 40 applications for the one licence. There will be one super-casino, eight large ones and eight small ones.

We talked about how casinos had always been an alluring prospect for a certain type of person, but how others encountered serious trouble by playing fruit machines and roulette games at bookmakers, and by becoming part of the \$12bn a year boom in online gambling. Those who played online found it easy to run up huge bills on their credit cards, but rather more difficult to share their dilemma with their partners or others. There are about 175 GA groups in the British Isles, but it is fairly rare for online gamblers to attend. This may change. Increasingly the Gamblers Anonymous website carries stories from those who have lost all their savings and self-respect to internet poker and other imaginative gambling games aimed at the younger market.

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**Dan:** It's very difficult finding a specific card for a 60th wedding anniversary. Dad was also celebrating 41 years in GA, and there were a lot of GA people at the party we held at the Ritz. Everyone said what an amazing man my father was, and how his friendship had helped them so much, and how tirelessly he had worked for other compulsive gamblers. I spoke and some friends spoke, and then my father said a few words.

**Frank:** My memory isn't quite what it was. Every day is a holiday and every night is a honeymoon. Thank you, Sara, for 60 wonderful years.

*Some of the names in this article have been changed*