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## Crossroads and roundabouts; the right way forward.

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No power point or notes were used to deliver this presentation. After much personal debate and having tried both methods of delivery – with and without power point - I decided to present without one. A reason for my choice is that I find using power point restricting. It stops me “going off at a tangent” to quote one of my clients reflecting on her own experience of delivering power point. Her comment inspired me to think further about the experience of delivering power point presentations.

One of the benefits of using power point is that I can escape into it if I feel my anxieties about connecting with my audience overwhelming me. It provides me with a safe place to retreat to. In a similar way to the way in which the women I see in my practise retreat into their gambling to feel safe. The comparison is particularly appropriate if we think of the use of computerised images in power point presentations and the recently reported 14% increase in women with online gambling problems. Reflecting on my experience of the client group I specialise in - women with gambling problems – an essential part of the therapeutic process is facilitating her eventually leaving the safety zone of problematic gambling in order to “go off at a tangent” and take the risk of entering into a full life. On a so much smaller scale I am allowing myself the experience of leaving my safety zone and taking a risk today by presenting with no aids. In some ways experiencing some of the anxieties she might feel when she begins to engage with others again in therapeutic group work, without the escape of gambling; fears of being judged or rejected for example.

It may sound like a contradiction to speak of the **safety** of gambling. Surely gambling is all about taking a risk? Not to the women I have so far worked with in my almost 5 years of specialising in this field. To her, the woman who has a gambling problem, the gambling experience although painful is predictable. She knows what she will feel during her gambling experience – ideally nothing that is not directly related to her gambling as what she craves is the safety of being able to block out her thoughts and feelings. She can predict too how she will feel after she has gambled – wracked with

self loathing, miserable, highly anxious as she worries how she will cope financially because often she will have gambled until all she has access to is spent. What she does **not** know is whether or not the thoughts and feelings which she experienced as intolerable and which led to her gambling would pass or would overwhelm her if she had not gambled to escape them.

A vital part of the therapeutic process is to help her to be able to be with that which she has felt is intolerable. What she experiences as intolerable is often that which is experienced in relationship with others. I established the first therapeutic groups in the UK for women with gambling problems over four and a half years ago. Group provides an experience that has just enough elements of predictability for her to feel safe enough to take the risk of attending in terms of the frame work and boundaries. She knows there will be weekly meetings of ninety minutes, in the same venue with a maximum of seven members in attendance with myself as Group therapist. However, within that space she cannot predict what will happen; what might be said, thought and felt. How she might feel in response to another or they in response to her. That is why the idea and experience of Group work feels so challenging, but that too is why Group work proves to be so valuable.

Group will evoke strong feelings towards other members of the Group. It will eventually provoke the feelings that she has experienced that create the urges to gamble to escape, for example anger, sadness, rejection, anxiety. The list of intolerable feelings and emotions is comprised of the whole experience of what it is to be human and is very much subjective. One of the core values of the Group process is in providing a safe space where she can gradually build the courage to experience her feelings, to learn to tolerate that which before felt intolerable and so lessen the likelihood of relapse to problem gambling and / or the other ways of escape and coping she has often turned to such as self-harm or eating disorders amongst many others.

My argument in the abstract which I wrote for this conference presentation was that we cannot ignore that there are differences in the male and female problem gamblers. If we do so treatment is less effective and recovery more difficult.

If we see those of us with gambling problems as 'gamblers' yes, we can put men and women together into a group of problem gamblers. If we see problem gambling as just a problematic behaviour with no underlying meaning then yes, what sex we are may not matter too much. However, what we see is that it is not only the problem gambling treatment services that report a significant rise in women reporting addiction problems. We see similar in reports from the alcohol services and drug treatment services too. This surely has a **meaning**. It surely means that there are increasing numbers of women who are struggling to cope with life. When so many of the problems she experiences in life came from difficulties in relationship it is so very hard for her to be open with this to with others. It is very hard to relate. This is so much harder still if it is a mixed gender group.

Only this week The Times newspaper carried an article on the debate in research as to whether the brains of men and women really are different, do we really have different capacities for empathy, or logical reasoning for example. I do not know what the answers to these questions are but what I **do**

know is what the women who come to Group tell me, and that is that they **feel** they are different to men and want a space where whatever differences they feel exist can be safely acknowledged.

Women consistently report feeling uneasy and guarded in mixed groups. They favour different forms of gambling to men, they seek different experiences from gambling to men and often tell of remaining silent in mixed problem gambling groups as they have felt the male problem gamblers could not empathise with their gambling experience as women.

Even more importantly, women say they feel uncomfortable sharing the underlying reasons for their gambling problems in mixed groups as the triggers for gambling often lie in very sensitive experiences of what it is to be a woman in the world. Whether speaking of experiences of abuse, of finding sexual intimacy problematic or even of the physical and biological issues that are an intrinsic part of feminine identity it is much easier to speak of these things in a same sex group. What does any of this have to do with problem gambling? **Everything** I believe. Recovery from any addiction requires developing the skill of expressing rather than suppressing feeling. I believe there is great value in providing a space where it is as comfortable as possible to do so. Problem gambling as said earlier in this paper is a symptom of problems with life. To begin to discuss what it is that is causing her these problems is at the start of the recovery process.

Another key part of the recovery process is developing her **identity**. After being caught in a long – term gambling problem she has lost sight of who she is; her likes and dislikes what she really thinks and feels her wants and needs. Gradually beginning to connect with other women helps her to feel a sense of identity that is beyond that of ‘gambler’. It gives her a sense of belonging that has often been missing in life outside of the Group and inspires courage to let go of the escape of gambling as there are others she is beginning to trust to support her in facing her problems.

It is the beginning of her developing an identity as a woman and as an **individual**. Once she has a stronger sense of individual identity this leads to her finding the courage to take the valuable step of allowing herself to be a part of a group Initially the therapeutic Group and ultimately in life outside. Life outside is often about groups: families, the work place and in our social life. If we can more fully engage and relate we have “**back up**” and that means we are much less alone with our problems therefore much less likely to relapse to gambling in an attempt to cope by suppressing thoughts and feelings that go with our problems.

The ability to engage with others is essential to letting go of gambling and to remaining gambling free. So many of the women who attend Group are isolated, lonely, living alone or alone with children, unemployed or on low incomes and struggling to “do it all” and thinking and be able to cope alone as they believe that is the way to be strong. They have gambled in an attempt to be strong by escaping feelings that made them feel vulnerable. Through the Women’s Group process not only do they develop valuable relational skills, they experience there is strength in being able to say “I need support... sometimes life feels too hard.” They begin to develop a pride in becoming a whole, thinking, and feeling being. A woman who has strengths **and** limitations and is able to ask for support from others rather than turning to the false sense of safety she found in excessive gambling.