

GAMBLING WITH THEIR LIVES

As the federal government continues to debate poker machine reform, Joanna Tovia examines the increasingly feminine face of problem gambling

Gabriela Byrne is sitting on the edge of her daughter's bed, a copy of Enid Blyton's *The Magic Faraway Tree* open on her lap. Lying under a doona crowded with pink princesses, six-year-old Jennifer's eyelids grow heavy, and Byrne closes the book and kisses the girl's warm, pink cheeks. But before she can leave, Jennifer holds up a piece of paper. Checking her moneybox for \$15 her nanna had given her – it is a box adorned with coloured stones where she keeps everything she

treasures most – Jennifer found an IOU where the cash had been that morning. "Mummy," she whispers, sleepily, "why can't Daddy buy you a poker machine so you and the money can stay at home?"

"I just choked up," says Byrne, recalling the darkest moment of her four-year gambling addiction. "I cried and cried. I was supposed to be the role model and solving her problems, and I felt like my little girl was trying everything she could think of to try to help me."

The day had been one of mindless desperation for the mother of two. After taking Jennifer to school and her toddler to day care, she went straight to her local pub to play the pokies. ▶

When she ran out of money, she remembered the box on Jennifer's bookshelf.

Racing home, Byrne opened the lid and, without hesitation or remorse, took the cash. With no other money in the house, it was her only option. "Once you make the decision that you want to keep going, you just do what you have to do," she explains. She scribbled the IOU and tucked it inside the box in case Jennifer realised the \$15 was missing before she had a chance to replace it – which she would, of course, with her winnings.

Byrne did eventually get help. But stories like hers are becoming more and more familiar. An Australian study* released earlier this year found that the expansion of poker machines since the 1990s has fuelled a "feminisation" of gambling. So socially acceptable has it become that an increasing number of women are developing serious problems. Once they start, they progress more quickly than men from recreational to problem gambling. In fact, the proportion of women in treatment increased from about 10 per cent before the liberalisation of gaming machines to 40–60 per cent afterwards.

Women are also being drawn into betting from their computers and mobile phones. While they typically start playing pokies in their 30s and 40s, women of all ages are trying out new forms of gambling online – sports betting, in particular – and new players are being recruited through social networking sites.

Freed from the need to visit betting venues, "there is definitely a shift", observes Dr Sally Gainsbury, a clinical psychologist at the Centre for Gambling Education and Research at Southern Cross University in Lismore, NSW. "More women are feeling more comfortable to do it. As more people try online gambling who wouldn't otherwise gamble, greater numbers are at risk of developing gambling problems."

Byrne, a personal assistant at a large corporation in Melbourne, started playing the pokies at age 36. What started out as a bit of fun after work with colleagues soon turned into a solitary daily habit. "I was there as often as I could get there, sometimes more than once a day," she admits. She compares her addiction to

a "hot, passionate love affair". "Nothing else matters. It gives you something that you seem to desperately need at the time and you're completely absorbed." So deceitful was Byrne about her gambling habit, her husband thought she was cheating on him. He was actually relieved when she admitted to her addiction.

Despite Byrne's confession, within five months she had spent the \$40,000 deposit the couple had saved for a house. "I'm an intelligent person," she says. "I knew this was stupid and that I shouldn't do it, and that I was hurting my family, but it was like this beast had taken over."

Byrne's children were aged three and six when her gambling was at its worst. "When I was home, I was still the responsible mum, but the minute I decided to go gambling I was ruthless and irresponsible and there was nothing stopping me," she explains. Byrne remembers buying her kids an ice-cream on a hot day and leaving them in the car so she could go into a nearby pub to play the pokies.

She missed more school concerts than she cares to remember and knows the time she lost with her children is something she'll never get back. Her children were also living with a stressed mother whose moods reflected her success or failure at the pokies. Daughter Jennifer was showing signs of stress at school. "My husband and I were fighting all the time and Jennifer heard the word 'divorce', so we decided to tell her it's not her fault and that Mummy had a problem we were trying to fix," says Byrne. "It was hard to tell her, but I think it's one of the few things we did right."

About 12 per cent of Australian adults gamble at least once a week, with about eight per cent of these estimated to be problem gamblers. For every person with a gambling problem, another 5–10 people are said to suffer along with them, particularly family members. It isn't just that their loved one has gambled and lost money that does the damage, but that they have lied to cover up their shameful addiction.

And having a flutter has never been easier to hide. Whether you're at home or at work, or even in line at the supermarket, smartphone apps have made it possible to gamble anywhere, anytime. "These apps are instantly accessible and



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you can hook them up to your credit card and away you go," notes Dr Gainsbury.

Women are also being drawn into online poker and casino games, such as blackjack and roulette, and bingo sites are targeting women by creating social communities around games through chat forums and instant messaging.

In Australia it is illegal for internet providers to offer gambling online, apart from licenced wagering and betting sites. But unregulated offshore sites are using names like Aussie Casino Games to attract players. Free-play sites are also common and, although no money is involved, they can be a training ground for people who want to replicate their big "wins" using real money.

But while internet gambling is on the rise, poker machines are still more addictive than any other form of gambling. The bigger the gambling problem, the more likely it is to be related to the pokies.

The first time Alison Ward** gambled, she was a young girl. With \$50 in her hand and Lotto on her mind, she walked into her local newsagent, marked a number on the form and crossed her fingers for a win. As luck would have it, she won \$150, but it was a win she now regrets. The rush of the windfall stayed with her and, at 22, when she dropped her first coins into a poker machine, before long it was all she wanted to do. ▶

"It drew me into another world and I remember thinking, 'Wow! This is so much fun!'" says Ward. She started playing more often, and the \$100 she used to spend in a session soon escalated into the thousands. "In the past couple of years, the most I've spent in one hit is \$4000 over 24 hours nonstop at a casino."

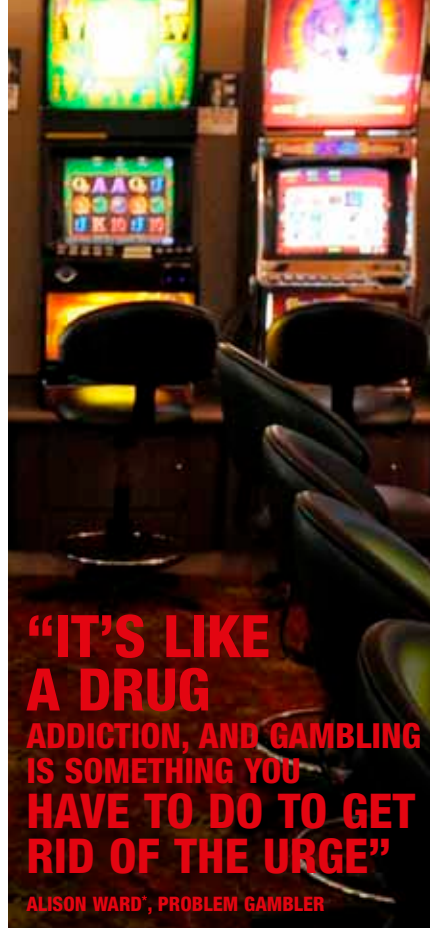
Now 37, Ward, a clerical worker, has had a gambling problem almost all her adult life. She shakes her head in disbelief as she looks back. "I tried to stop myself; every time I went I was devastated. Every time just killed a part of my soul, but I didn't know what to do about it. I just thought there was no way out."

When the urge to gamble came on, she would try to talk herself out of it. "It's like the angel and the devil are in you, and the devil is just so disgusting and you let it win," she remarks. "It's just sickening, but it's like a drug addiction and gambling is something you just have to do to get rid of the urge."

Problem gamblers say the urge to gamble is more powerful than anything they've ever experienced. Their heart rates, adrenaline levels skyrocket, and shaking and sweating is not uncommon. Once they give in to that urge, it's difficult to stop, despite most knowing how slim their chances are of winning. After all, it might be the next press of a button that triggers the jackpot.

Ward thought she was different from the "losers" she saw playing the pokies because she could go up to six weeks without it. But when she needed a fix, she would take the day off work, withdraw all the money she had in the bank, and spend at least eight hours playing the pokies at her local pub or casino. Although she played to win, she wanted to win only so she could keep playing: "I played to play more. I just loved playing."

When she ran out of money and had to go home, Ward would be filled with self-loathing: "Every time was the same. I would cry for the next 24 hours, not just over the money, but because of the damage I was doing to myself. I despised myself that I could be so weak. You just want to stay in your bed and die." She would be so distraught, she would have to take another day off work to recover, or would borrow money and head back to the pub to try to recover her losses.



Psychologists say that women enter pokie venues as a way to escape problems or to cope with boredom, loneliness, depression or anxiety. Most are also under some kind of stress and living with unresolved trauma, including abusive relationships or childhood sexual abuse. Pokie venues provide a welcoming, safe place for women to go alone, and create a false sense of community.

Psychologist Dr Kirsten Dunn, from South Australia's Statewide Gambling Therapy Service, says pokie machine venues create an atmosphere that allows women to leave their troubles at the door. "It's really reinforcing in terms of providing that escape from the stress or distress that's pervading their lives elsewhere," she remarks. "The only problem is that when they leave, all of that is still waiting for them and most of the time they've lost all their money. This then creates greater psychological distress, which then leads them back into the venue. So it's very much a vicious cycle."

When a woman first comes to Dr Dunn for help (less than 20 per cent of problem gamblers seek help), she says some have just started to lose control over their gambling, but most are at crisis point and have lost everything – their relationships, jobs, houses and even access to their children. There is such a sense of shame associated with gambling problems, particularly for women, that seeking help is often a last resort. Instead, they usually chase another jackpot to get themselves out of trouble. "People think they should be able to fix

this themselves, but that the only way they can fix their financial difficulties is to have a big win, which means they have to go in and gamble again," says Dr Dunn.

Unfortunately for some, death seems like the only way out.

In 2010, the South Australian coroner found that 24-year-old Katherine Natt's suicide in 2006 was the direct result of her gambling addiction. Natt was the mother of two children, aged two and six, and had suffered heavy financial losses through her pokie machine use. She was worried about losing custody of one or both of her children, and a journal entry shortly before she died revealed that she blamed gambling for her marriage breakdown: "I ruined my marriage with my pokie addiction and then it affected my dad financially when he had to bail me out of the mess that I had gotten myself into ... I CAN'T STOP!"

In the weeks before her death, bank records show Natt withdrew money as frequently as every two hours and gambled up to \$1800 a night. By the time she died, she had run up a debt of \$100,000.

Byrne came close to suicide herself before finding the strength to seek help and recover. Now 56, she has dedicated her life to helping others through her Free Yourself program (www.freeyourself.com.au), and education and activity programs to help ex-gamblers move forward. Recovering is possible for everyone, she insists. "Pokies don't attract me at all anymore. It's a bit like the old flame you thought you couldn't live without and now you can't see what you ever saw in them."

As for Ward, it's been six months since she played the pokies. She sees a psychologist and is learning how to manage her urges to gamble. "It's not a sense of shame for me anymore. I don't have this horrible secret and I don't have that weight on my shoulders. I feel like I'm floating," she says, smiling. "I'm proud to say it didn't beat me. I want people to know there is a way out of this because, my God, there is. There is a way out." ■

If you think you may have a gambling problem, call the Gambling Helpline on 1800 858 858 for counselling or referral to specialist support.