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Net-working the steps: Web-based support for women in recovery from problem gambling



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Computer-mediated communication, echoing other quantum leaps in technology, is transforming social lives on a global scale as networks formed in cyberspace reach across group boundaries, space, and time itself. In some instances, people's on- and off-line lives intersect as they develop multi-dimensional, intentional communities (Rheingold, 2000; Wellman, 2001). Increasingly, professional counsellors and psychotherapists are creatively exploring use of the Internet to augment standard interventions or to reach individuals who are reluctant or unable to use existing in-person or real-time services (Cunningham, Humphreys & Koski-Jannes, 2000; Galanter & Brook,

2001; Hsuing, 2000). Paralleling the boom in the reliance on self-help resources and mutual aid to complement or replace the help of a treatment professional, electronic support groups are forming to help people struggling with illness, disability, loss, addiction and other problems.

Women Helping Women (WHW), www.femalegamblers.org, is a popular Gamblers Anonymous (GA)-based Web site designed to support women's recovery from problem gambling. Marilyn L. and Betty C., two GA members residing in Phoenix, Arizona, began to edit and publish *WHW* as a way to respond to requests for their newsletter, which has been published on-line monthly since July 1999. *WHW* serves both advocacy and information functions, providing a virtual space where women dealing with problem gambling can cultivate an on-line dimension to the self-help resources and mutual help they receive through real-time GA step groups. Moreover, *WHW* responds to the need for gender-specific support expressed by many women in recovery who struggle with the male-dominated dynamics of many GA groups (Arizona Council on Compulsive Gambling Inc., 2002).

The Web site is self-described accurately as "informal but informative." At the centre of the homepage is a menu that changes monthly to highlight the core article appearing in the current issue, or the most recent article in a multi-part series. Consistent with the GA approach to recovery, the central message to homepage readers is that mutual support is critical for recovery. Similar messages provide succinct points for action, and reinforce the existential experience of being a problem gambler (Makela et al., 1996, p.124). As one might expect to see on the walls where a GA or other 12-step group meeting is taking place, slogans, mottos and proverbs such as "You can't do it for me, but I can't do it without you" and "We may not have it all together, but together we have it all" have been hung on most of the *WHW* homepages published on-line since 1999.

The *WHW* homepage is accessed easily through a variety of search engines such as Google using search terms such as "women and gambling" or "female and gambling" on AltaVista. Alternatively, hypertext links are available from a variety of other websites such as the Arizona Council on Compulsive Gambling (www.azccg.org). All past issues of the monthly newsletter can be accessed from the *WHW* homepage, which, in turn, provides hypertext links to a selection of other resources as well. A clear purpose statement appears on the *WHW* homepage: To support and educate women in recovery for a gambling addiction. There is no explicit mention of the orientation of *WHW* as GA-based, but this perspective is readily apparent from the content of the newsletters. The source of the newsletter is obvious, with the editor and publisher providing no less than three places on the somewhat busy *WHW*

homepage where the reader can click to contact them by e-mail.

A private sector Internet service provider, Infinet, is clearly identified as the corporate sponsor, and donates Web server and hosting functions in return for a hypertext link from the *WHW* website. Nine other active links provide quick access to a variety of reliable sources of information, such as an essay on women and gambling from a site hosted by the Substance Abuse Network of Ontario, the text of a lecture on women and problem gambling delivered in 1998 by an Australian gambling expert, and the Web sites published by Women for Sobriety, the Responsible Gambling Council of Ontario, and the Arizona Council on Compulsive Gambling Inc., which provide further links to a wide range of information and other resources.

Raising concerns about the distinction between promoting products or services and providing objective, unbiased information or perspectives (Alexander & Tate, 1996, pp. 26–27), the two remaining links blend advertising and information. Hazelden Books is a well-known publisher of 12-step- and co-dependency-based recovery literature and Viva Consulting is a private Quebec-based company offering a range of counselling, education and other services.

The newsletter is the core of *WHW* Web-based support, replicating the oral tradition of GA on-line in print form. The newsletter is generally brief, comprising narratives provided by readers with occasional submissions from professional therapists. Brief contributions are solicited from the readers, but the newsletter does not function as an electronic bulletin board. Postings to the newsletter must be sent to either the publisher or editor, who choose the contributions to post in the next issue. The newsletter has a limited "snail-mail" distribution also, which included 100 women around the U.S.A. in February, 2001.

In accordance with the philosophy of support groups modelled on Alcoholics Anonymous, the editor, publisher and other contributors to the *WHW* newsletters take their authority on problem gambling and recovery largely from their individual life experiences and existential identity of being in recovery (Makela et al., 1996). Both the editor and publisher are active GA members, a fact that can be confirmed by reading their personal stories in past issues of the newsletter, such as Marilyn L.'s contribution to mark her 10-year GA anniversary.

As with many Web-based sources of information, the reader must take it as a matter of faith that the person contributing to the newsletter is neither misrepresenting her identity nor attempting to deceive the readers in other ways about her personal story. Fortunately, the personal accounts ring true.

Personal stories presented as testimonials and moral tales are a central motif in GA-based recovery; they provide compelling narratives of downward spiralling chaos, culminating in restitution and recovery. Many stories focus on the role of GA in an individual woman's recovery; others provide pointers for "doing GA"; that is, how the GA-based recovery process unfolds and how to "do the steps." Occasionally, a brief article discusses a particular Unity or Recovery step in detail. Other stories provide a motivational or inspirational message, reinforcing the "yes, you can" message, and poetry or prayers appear occasionally. From time to time, particularly in recent issues, articles written by professional therapists are included on the role of counselling and other topics. Clinical Corner was a section that appeared in earlier newsletters published in 2000, but was dropped in favour of an ad hoc approach to contributions by professionals, such as a four-part series on empowered recovery in 2001.

Lest the contributors commit the sin of pride in extolling their successes in recovery, humorous anecdotes and jokes bring the reader down to earth by poking fun at common perceptions, habits, cognitive distortions and other characteristics of active problem gamblers.

WHW is an important resource for women who seek to resolve problem gambling through GA-based recovery processes. In the virtual community created by *WHW*, women will find the more expressive and responsive interactions that many women say is lacking in male-dominated GA groups. Women will read personal narratives that resonate with their own experiences and needs and address life problems that reflect women's socialization and gendered roles. In addition to advice and support for working the GA steps, women will also find other features, such as discussions of professional help and issues that are not often addressed in face-to-face GA groups, such as unhealthy messages about female identity and opportunities that many women absorb growing up.

Simply put, *WHW* places value on women's experiences with problem gambling, recovery and life. For those women who are seeking support in their recovery, but are unable to find a local gender-specific support group or have access to support in the right way, time or place, *WHW* will become a regular stop on the information highway.

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Virginia McGowan, who has a PhD in anthropology, University of Toronto, researches the socio-cultural context of addictive behaviours and community-based approaches for dealing with addiction through field research in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia and Canada. Formerly a research scientist at the Addiction Research Foundation, Virginia was the founding co-ordinator of the Addictions Counselling Program in the school of health sciences, University of Lethbridge, where she is an associate professor. She currently researches indigenous women's narratives of addiction and recovery, cultural perspectives on how people think about gambling, cultural competence in prevention and education program design and implementation, and the application of indigenous knowledge to address addictions and related problems. She is also interested in the shape and form of Web-based social support networks.

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