



PUTTING "ME" FIRST

If anyone would have told me that I would marry a compulsive gambler, I would have never believed it. My husband was the man of my dreams, a handsome educated professional, and despite our 10 year age difference, we have persevered for over 40 years. However, it's only been the past 15 years where our marriage was reborn – thanks to our respective recovery programs. The prior near 30 years consisted of varying points of devastation. During this time, we had no money for anything, including groceries and rent, became accustomed to living without lights or phone service and were deep in credit card debt.



Little did I know when I met my husband that he was already gambling. It didn't matter where we lived. In Cuba, it was casinos, the old fashioned type. In Puerto Rico, it was the lottery, horse races, poker games with friends, and blackjack at the casinos. He went to the horse races each week and played the lottery daily. I gave birth to a child at the time that died of congenital heart failure and my husband's gambling only made the grieving process that much more unbearable.

The turning point came, or so I thought, when my husband embezzled money from the company he worked for over a decade. Amazingly, his boss let him leave honorably, without being arrested, but he was required to pay the money back. We moved to Florida where we had family. Yet, it didn't take long before he started gambling again,

unbeknownst to me, until there was a shortage of money. His relapse on lottery games nearly resulted in the loss of our home. I was in such a lost and depressed state of mind that I didn't have the strength to go to self-help groups. I was resigned to the fact that I was gradually losing my mind. My sons alternated taking me to the meetings and the rest, I suppose, was a complete leap of faith.

I recall the empowering day when my children and I told my husband that he needed to seek help or get out. We never dreamed he would actually take to the program because we forced him to go. Four years later, my husband was able to pay off his credit card debt and the money he stole from his employer. It was another six years before he repaid others, beginning with our sons, his sister, brother-in-law, and close acquaintances.

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In the interim, I learned to save every penny. I went back to school when our oldest of three children was only age 10, finished a B.A. in psychology and decided to explore what went wrong in our relationship. Thereafter, I attended graduate school, received my degree, and today I am a licensed mental health counselor working with domestic violence victims.

I owe my mental health to the self-help group, Gam-Anon, and to

the countless women and others who have helped me through hopeless times. The best years of my married life have been in the program. I began the healing process and saw, for the first time, how I contributed to my own victimization by allowing the gambling. Meetings helped me to discover how I was part of the problem which was a revelation I wasn't prepared for. Before then, I thought "he was the one with all the problems!"

Today, we attend the English and Spanish group meetings and my husband has become an older mentor, serving as a father figure to many. He also is now the dad he never was. Overall, he is a different person and I am in awe when I hear him speak. I too have learned a few things over the years, including:

- ***You have to become brave!***
Actually, when you get to the point where you become fed up, you become brave.
- ***Intervention is needed.*** The family needs to let out the family secret and pressure the gambler into the program and treatment.
- ***Financial independence is critical.*** We need to put all of our efforts into becoming self-sufficient so we don't become dependent on someone else to make us happy.
- ***Allow the children to help.*** Our children worked paper routes, which not only generated income but built character and resilience as to holding up during troubled times.

Finally, I've learned that there's nothing like crisis to make a person pro-active, provided it doesn't destroy you first.

Carmen