

SENIORGRAM: SENDING A MESSAGE ON SENIOR ISSUES

Older Americans are the fastest growing segment of compulsive gamblers

Barbara Bodzin,
 Executive Director, LifePath

The long-awaited MGM Springfield opened in August and has become a new destination for area adult communities, assisted living centers and even churches who organize outings to nearby casinos. For most, it is a day of fun and socialization. For some elders who need to limit activities due to health conditions, it is an exhilarating and accessible activity to enjoy. However, for about eight percent, compulsive gambling is an addiction that can cost elders their retirement nest egg, and it is anticipated with the opening of the MGM, our communities will see a spike in numbers.

“About 40 percent of the people we see are over 50,” says psychologist Robert Hunter, who directs the Problem Gambling Center in Las Vegas. The number of casinos has exploded over the past few decades, and today casinos operate in more than 30 states. Add state lotteries, Powerball and now Internet gambling sites, and there are plenty of ways to try your luck and lose a little cash.

The nation’s \$40 billion a year gambling industry aggressively targets older customers, as they have accumulated wealth and are especially vulnerable, experts say, to wagering more than they can afford.

Rachel Volberg, a UMass researcher who studies gambling trends in the state, found a quarter of those she polled who have gambling problems said they’d like to get help. However, most do not seek out support. “Internationally, we know that problem gambling is associated with a great deal of stigma and shame,” says Volberg, “and people much, much prefer to try and manage it by themselves.”

In 2013, for the first time, the American Psychiatric Association officially recognized compulsive gambling as an addiction (rather than a personality disorder), acknowledging that it shares many features with alcoholism and drug addiction. However, “we consider it the hidden, or invisible, addiction,” said Marlene Warner, who runs the Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling. “You don’t come home with track marks in your arms. You might come home a little



While gambling is fun for some, for others it is an addiction that can have a negative life-altering impact. Photo by Benoit Dare on Unsplash.com.

bloodshot, because you’ve been at the casino several days, but it’s just not revealing itself in the same way that another addiction would.”

Compulsive gambling is linked to a range of serious health problems, including obesity, heart disease, intestinal problems, fibromyalgia, migraine, depression, insomnia and other stress-related disorders. “The worse the gambling disorder, the worse the chronic health conditions we typically see,” says University of Iowa Psychiatry Professor Donald M. Black, M.D., one of the country’s leading experts on compulsive gambling.

Older people with dementia are at especially high risk because they

are unable to recognize limitations or use appropriate judgments. Psychologists also suspect that people are more likely to run into problems if they turn to gambling for the wrong reasons – to escape loneliness, depression or even chronic pain.

Warning signs of gambling addiction include:

- social withdrawal
- borrowing from friends and family
- gambling with money meant for food, rent, or medicine
- gambling on credit
- already struggling with some form of addiction
- lying about or hiding gambling

To find help, contact the Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling at 1-800-426-1234. They aim to reduce the impacts of gambling disorder and strive to make gambling healthy and safe for the people of Massachusetts.

Resource specialists at LifePath are available as well to provide support and information. Call us at 413-775-5555 or 978-544-2259, or email info@lifepathma.org.

Read past articles in the Seniorgram column online at LifePathMA.org/news/stories/seniorgram-sending-a-message-on-senior-issues

FREE, LOCAL RESOURCES FOR PEOPLE WITH CHRONIC PAIN

If you have chronic pain, you can still live your life to the fullest. Here are two local resources that can help.

“Chronic Pain Self-Management” (CPSM), offered by the Healthy Living program at LifePath, is an evidence-based program that has been researched and proven to have positive results for participants.

Healthy Living workshops are free to participants. CPSM helps people build self-confidence to assume an active role in managing their chronic pain by exploring...

- The root cause of pain
- The mind/body connection, including distraction and relaxation techniques
- Techniques for dealing with difficult emotions, stress, fatigue, isolation, and poor sleep
- Appropriate exercise
- Strategies on healthy eating, weight management, and nutrition
- Pacing activity and rest
- Appropriate use of medications and evaluating new treatments
- Effective communication with family, friends and health professionals

“The Pain Pals support group offers people who are experiencing chronic pain the chance to meet with others who live with chronic pain, in a safe and supportive environment.”

Workshops are highly interactive, provide mutual support and build participants’ confidence to manage their pain and remain active. Caregivers and family members are also welcome in the program.

The CPSM workshop series meets once a week for six weeks. For more information and a calendar or upcoming sessions, visit LifePathMA.org/events/healthy-living-workshops or contact Healthy Living Program Manager Andi Waisman at awaisman@lifepathma.org, 413-773-5555 x2297 or 978-544-2259 x2297.

“Pain Pals of Franklin County” is a free chronic pain support group that meets weekly in the community from 3 to 4:30 p.m. on Wednesdays at Valley Medical Group. The group is led by Terry Desautels, a former medical social worker who is also experiencing chronic pain after a severe trauma, a near fatal accident.

Pre-registration is required. If you’re interested in attending, call Terry at 413-659-3143 for an interview or more information.

The Pain Pals support group offers people who are experiencing chronic pain the chance to meet with others who live with chronic pain, in a safe and supportive environment. Discussion topics are relevant to life with pain.

A CAREGIVER'S STORY: DEB & ALAN BACHRACH

Aging in place with dementia support services

Alan Bachrach lived with his wife Deb in Petersham, in a home filled with their love of animals and each other. "Alan was a veterinary ophthalmologist," says Deb, "and, like most veterinarians, that was his life."

Their restored 260-year-old home features outbuildings for the veterinary practice and their many animals, including dogs, cats, llamas, goats, and sheep. "A lot of our hobbies were based around animals," says Deb.

While he was still practicing, Alan began to show signs of dementia. "The first sign that I noticed was that he was having trouble following a complex story," says Deb, "and then I noticed when I would go over patient history in the office, he wasn't always paying attention. He wasn't able to follow. And then the next thing I noticed, he was having a really difficult time keeping up with notes."

After initially working with Alan's primary care physician, for a couple of years Alan was treated for depression, but eventually further evaluation led to a diagnosis of dementia with Lewy bodies. "He's a really, really bright, very well-educated person," says Deb, "and I think that probably masked things for a long time."

Deb sought help to be able to care for Alan, who needed 24/7 assistance, at home. In addition to support from the Visiting Nurse Association, Deb found her way to LifePath. "When I knew the organization as Franklin County Home Care," says Deb, "I thought it was Meals on Wheels. As I looked further into LifePath, I realized just the array of services that were available."

A case manager from LifePath met with the couple and offered assistance through dementia coaching and additional support services and resources for both Alan and Deb as his caregiver.

Deb had spent time caring for her mother, who had Alzheimer's disease, but "caring for my mother is quite different than caring for a spouse," says Deb. Dementia Coach Linda Puzan helped Deb to learn more about caring for someone with dementia with Lewy bodies in particular. "This is such a different disease that the tricks that we knew were helpful with my mom were not helpful with Alan."

Linda helped Deb to think about ways to increase Alan's safety, such as making the home safer with some dementia equipment such as door chimes, door locks, and stop signs for when he was walking around the house. "We did have a little bit of trouble with wandering," says Deb. Ideas like these helped Deb to feel "more at ease" and less anxious while she went about her day.

Also helpful to Deb's wellbeing as a caregiver was the Dementia Caregivers Support Group, available remotely and in-person through LifePath. "I think the nicest thing



Alan and Deb Petersham are shown here enjoying the company of their dogs, Bela and Zoe, in 2017. Alan is listening to music on his iPod, provided through a partnership with the Alzheimer's Music Project. Alan, who had dementia with Lewy bodies, found the music to be soothing and often sang along.

about support groups is you can share whatever you want to share," says Deb. "And these are people that are having the same experiences. It's really tough for me to explain to our friends and some of our relatives because they're not in it. To be able to talk with someone who's in it, we can trade stories and things that work and things that don't work."

Linda also recommended a way to help stimulate Alan's mind and improve his mood.

At that time, Alan was speaking only in very short sentences and was having difficulty staying engaged at home. "Alan has always been known as the class clown," says Deb, sharing photos of Alan dressed up in fun and creative costumes. "He used to read nonstop when he wasn't at work. He stopped reading, stopped listening to music. That was I think because he couldn't figure out how to turn the CD player on."

Linda connected Deb and Alan to Peter Acker from the Alzheimer's Music Project, which provides iPods loaded with customized playlists to people living with dementia. "I gave her genre-specific artists that I knew Alan would like to listen to. She then sent that list along to the folks at the Alzheimer's Music Project," says Deb. "The night this thing arrived, at first, Alan was really apprehensive because anything electronic had really been throwing him lately. And he's never been a tech whiz at all; like, the simplest of simple is good for him. So he was really nervous about it."

Peter went over instructions for how to operate the little iPod. "He put the earphones on, and Alan went from saying nothing to within a couple minutes singing along," says Deb. "There's Alan with the headset on singing and smiling, just a completely different person." Alan went from occasionally speaking in short sentences and mostly sleeping to listening and singing along to his favorite songs for hours on end.

After gaining a better understanding of dementia with Lewy bodies and feeling more supported in her role as a caregiver, Deb says she felt like things settled into a more supportive routine for herself, which in turn benefited Alan. "He had a remarkable little rally this summer," says Deb, "and I am thankful for every second of it." The home felt more relaxed again, and Alan started sleeping better. In May and June of this past summer, he began to have better days, common with dementia with Lewy bodies, with its symptoms that Deb says "wax and wane." Alan and Deb were even able to go out to dinner.

Until the end, all of these services helped to keep Alan at home, where he wanted to be.

Alan Bachrach passed away at the end of the summer. He is missed by his family and many friends, animal and human alike.

To learn more about these and other services to support people living with dementia and their caregivers, contact LifePath at 413-773-5555 or 978-544-2259 or email info@lifepathma.org. Read more online at LifePathMA.org.

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