

Been there, blown that: ex-gambler

'IT'S ABOUT INSTANT GRATIFICATION'

Two-day symposium will focus on how people get hooked on games of chance

IRWIN BLOCK
THE GAZETTE

It takes an addict to know how to help an addict.

Highly trained psychologists may not agree, but that's Howard Riback's pitch as he seeks to help people consumed by the gambling habit.

Riback, 50, says he's got the scars and the understanding that comes from the school of hard knocks and claims a 97-per-cent success rate with his clients.

He'll be among 200 specialists from several countries attending the two-day Gambling and Addictions Symposium that opens today. It is sponsored by Quebec's Fonds de recherche sur la société et la culture.

About 200 researchers, administrators, and social workers will listen to, and make

presentations on, the state of gambling research, effective intervention and social policy. Training sessions for therapists also are planned.

A self-made lingerie manufacturer who also has a commercial pilot's licence, Riback said he "made it big" while in his 20s.

At the same time as he was building his business and family, he indulged his passion for blackjack.

"I was pretty good at it," he recalls.

He hit the casinos, in Canada, the U.S., Europe and the Caribbean.

Five years ago it got out of control — so bad that he entered rehab for 33 days of therapy for depression and gambling.

Asked how bad things got, Riback says the worst part was his marriage ended.

Though he says he actually stopped gambling "many, many months" before entering rehab, he needed additional support to "knock some more sense into myself."

He credits support from family and ex-wife to get straightened out.

And from his despair, Riback built a new career as a counsellor to those who, like him, have reached bottom as pathological gamblers.

Now that he's cured, Riback says he can have fun and play blackjack "every couple of months," then walk away after spending \$50.

"It means nothing to me now," he said.

"I still go to the casino to check up on patients of mine to see if they're fibbing on me. Now in my new life, this is part of what I do."

He says he has some formal training to beef up his personal experience, including a course at the University of Windsor on Understanding Problem Gambling, and prevention and treatment of youth gambling given at the Addictions Care Centre of Albany, N.Y.

Of all the addictions, gambling is the most insidious, Riback warns.

"It has no smell, you can't feel it, you can't touch it. Gamblers are notorious liars, cheaters, storytellers, fraudsters.

"It's all about instant gratification."

When he meets new clients, he says, he tells them about his own story and "they see hope."

"I've been there and back," he says.

He contrasts his style with that of a therapist who sees a patient once a week for an hour:

"I go in and I clean up the mess that the gambler has made. I treat the gambler and all that comes with it."

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The two-day Gambling and Addictions Symposium starts today and is being held at the Delta Centre-Ville, 777 University St. For more information visit www.jeux-gambling2009.org/accueil/default_e.asp



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