

Beginnings your debt

Addiction counsellor helps clients deal with their habits, friends, family and loan sharks

Name: Howard Riback aka "the Cleaner"
Age: 50
Occupation: Addiction counsellor
Bio: This sassy Côte-St-Luc heart-breaker had been your typical happy-go-lucky occasional gambler most of his life until le Casino de Montréal came into being, and then, kapow, before he knew it, he was hooked, massively in debt, separated from his wife and "depressed beyond words." After "a couple of alarmingly ugly events parallel to something you might see on



CSI," not the least of them involving unhappy, violence-prone loan sharks, Howard checked himself into a rehab facility "as much for depression as for my gambling addiction. Basically, I'd been out of my mind, no longer knowing right from wrong, but once I got there, I was lucky to be one of those people who immediately 'got it' and never looked back." After returning to university a few years ago to study addiction, Howard has begun selling himself as "the Cleaner," claiming to have a 97 per cent success rate helping similarly lost souls overcome this most miserable of conditions. Contact him via theribackgroup.com.

How easy is it finding rehab facilities that specialize in gambling issues? Not easy at all, given "there are none whatsoever in Canada and only a handful in the States. They say 88 per cent of addictions have the same causal route, so most gambling addicts go to the same facilities as alcoholics and druggies."

Are relapses as common with recovering gambling addicts as with drug addicts? "Absolutely. Very few people only go to rehab once."

So you or someone you care about has a nasty gambling habit and you decide you'd better call Howard up. What happens next? "I do a few things: conduct interventions, deal with the banks on the gambler's behalf, deal with employers, employees, family members and friends who are angry and pissed at them. I try to have the gambler reconcile with family and friends so life can hopefully get back on track for them. I'm known as the Cleaner, which means taking care of the gambler is only part of what I do. I take care of everything in their life that has to do with gambling."

Isn't, um, Benjamin Bratt kind of "the Cleaner"? "Okay, I stole the name. But what he does on TV is exactly what I do, except he does it for druggies, I do it for gamblers."

Something else Howard will do for you: Negotiate with loan sharks on your behalf.

Don't most self-respecting loan sharks just go, "Who the fuck are you, asshole? Perhaps you'd be wise to mind your own business if you'd like to keep living" when Howard comes looking to re-negotiate somebody else's debt for them? Not as quickly as you'd expect. "All I have as the Cleaner is my word, and my word is everything. With loan sharks, a deal is a deal, all you've got to do is keep your word. Still, before I go making any arrangements with them, I make sure my client has given me the money they owe in advance so I don't wind up looking like an idiot later on when it comes time to pay up."

Last book read: *The Audacity of Hope*, by Barack Obama.

Musical preferences: Simon and Garfunkel, Bono, Josh Groban.

Words of wisdom: "Your greatest strength is you."

COMMENTS? DIMWIT@HDOT.NET