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# Journaling...

## Explored as an Effective Counseling Tool with Women Gamblers

By **Sonya Corbin Dwyer, PhD, Noëlla Piquette-Tomei, PhD, Jennifer L. Buckle, PhD and Evelyn McCaslin, MEd**

With ever-increasing opportunities to gamble and a record number of women reporting problem gambling, evidence-based treatment protocols closing the gap between research and practice are required to best treat female gamblers. One tool with the potential to enhance gambling treatment is journaling.

The process of journaling has been called “expressive writing” or “therapeutic writing” (Kerner & Fitzpatrick, 2007). Just as these terms are often used interchangeably, there is no single approach that can be recommended for every client (Stone, 1998). Stone maintains that it is journaling’s process, not its content, that offers enduring benefits. Calling journaling storytelling to ourselves, Stone claims our stories are how we interpret our lives.

Journaling has been shown to have diverse therapeutic benefits (Zyromski, 2007): clients can use journaling to create their narrative, track their emotions and cognitions, and use this information to make decisions and evaluate their progress. It has the potential to provide clients with a means for working on their issues between sessions and offers another tool for reflection and contemplation (Stone, 1998). This approach, however, is underutilized in many settings.

This article presents one aspect of a larger study focused on the success of an all-woman therapy group for problem gamblers and considers the effectiveness of the journaling process as a therapeutic technique.

### *Study Background*

Selected participants in this study were those attending an all-woman gambling counseling group offered through a health agency in a Canadian city. The goals of the group were to provide education, therapy, and support for women problem gamblers.

For the study, the women were provided journals and asked to reflect on their experiences, thoughts, and emotions after their weekly meeting. Data were gathered from the participants over a six-month period. At the conclusion of six months, the women were invited to continue reflecting on their experiences through a semi-structured, individual interview. At the end of the study, all participants were given an additional data collection tool, a

Research Evaluation Form, which asked for feedback on the research process. Questions included *Was the journaling helpful in providing you with insight into your gambling?* and *What did you like best/least about the journaling?* The women’s journals, interviews, and Research Evaluation Forms were then analyzed for themes using hermeneutic phenomenology.

### *Journaling as a Counseling Tool*

The concept of journaling can be intimidating, particularly for people who believe “I can’t write.” Because short, structured, contained entries can lead to open-ended, unstructured journaling, the women were given a sample of journal entry starters to help them develop journaling skills (Adams, 1998). The women had not previously used journaling as part of the group intervention, so for most of them, this process was new.

Nine women completed the Research Evaluation Forms, which provided the researchers feedback on the journaling process. Out of the nine women, seven submitted journals. Five indicated they found the journaling beneficial and enjoyable, while four did not.

The words of the participants are used below to describe and expound the meaning of their experience. Although they are presented individually, these sentiments were in actuality intertwined throughout the women’s stories of their experiences of participating in the group:

*“Intimate details on paper can be very liberating.”*

*“It helped me to realize where I had been, where I currently am and where I hope to go in the future. The need to analyze what was done at group, the need to pay more attention at the meetings to my thoughts and feelings so I can journal.”*

*“You can write down your anger, be it at yourself, someone else, etc. and no one gets hurt.”*

In response to the question of whether journaling was helpful in providing insight into her gambling, one woman wrote, “Absolutely. I’d write down a question asked, or some question I was asking

myself or whatever came to mind. I was surprised (am).” In response to the question *Was the journaling helpful in providing you with insight into your issues?* she wrote: “Yes, yes, yes. I have written volumes of rationalizations, then self condemnations—then I saw how isolated and self destructive I had become.” The same woman wrote that what she liked best about journaling was that “When journaling, I can hear my thoughts before I place them on paper. It is an excellent way to **listen**—to slow down.”

Another woman noted on the Research Evaluation Form that she “did not do a lot of journaling as it reminded me of the terrible addiction I had.” However, looking at her journal, she wrote two reflective entries: over five pages on one day at the beginning of the research study, and almost five pages on one day three months later.

In response to the question *Was the journaling helpful in providing you with insight into your issues?* a woman who reported she was “not really a journalist” responded “yes,” and that what she liked best about journaling was “getting it off my chest,” though she disliked “reading back all the things I did.”

For many of the women, the journaling they engaged in for this study was beneficial. Results illustrate that the participants often felt helped by the journaling process, gaining insight into their own behavior and motivation. It is important to note, however, that this was not the case for all participants. “*Journaling this time did not give me insight,*” one woman wrote. “But when I first quit gambling, journaling definitely helped, as well it helped release a lot of anger. I find with journaling that you think you have nothing to write down but once you start writing, those deep-dark feelings come flowing thru your pen.” She acknowledged that “trying to get into the habit” was something she disliked about the process.

Those who found that journaling did not provide insight often explained it as a failure of their writing ability: “I am not a writing person. I prefer to express myself verbally;” “Not really a journalist;” “When you look at my journal, you will see it consists mainly of my excuses for not journaling. I feel badly that I had such a block when it came to writing;” “I need direct questions. I am not very disciplined in just writing.”

When asked what they liked least, one woman noted “That I was the only one listening—and that my perceptions are often narrow minded or **self centered**. Me-me-me.” Another wrote, “I sometimes feel I am too repetitive and not gaining from the experience.” Another said the journaling process didn’t help provide insight into her issues because “I seem to be partially unaware of my issues, or at least in denial as to what they are and how I can identify them or what I need to do.”

### *Reflections on the Study and Journaling Process*

For the women in the group who utilized journal writing, the process appeared to serve as an important addition to therapy. Journaling provided an opportunity to add thoughts and explore issues that came up in or out of therapy in greater detail. The women also had the opportunity to share their journal in group, an added opportunity to discuss its contents with the therapist and the other group members.

While participants’ responses illustrate that most perceived the journaling process as beneficial, there were different reasons for

the positive perceptions. Journaling helped some of the women pay more attention to their thoughts and feelings. It also helped extend the process of self-reflection outside the group meeting. It is also important to note that one woman found seeing details of her addiction on paper very difficult. Likewise, the reasons women gave for disliking journaling are consistent with the literature (Adams, 1998), not being a writer and not having time being the two biggest hurdles. However, was it the process of writing or the process of reflection that the women found uncomfortable? Stone (1998) emphasizes that the skill of reflection, like all skills, needs to be practiced, and that journaling is only one way of becoming reflective.

As this study was the first time most of the women engaged in journaling about gambling treatment, the task may have been too abstract or undefined. While most of the women were long-time group members in various stages of recovery, they may have needed explicit instructions in developing journaling skills: building structure, containment, and pacing in their journals (Adams, 1998). Journaling has to feel safe, comfortable, and nurturing. This was accomplished for some of the women, but not all. Likewise, as with any therapeutic technique, it is not universally applicable (Stone, 1998). It is not a good fit for all clients at all stages of their recovery. This may be a difficult balance to achieve in a group counseling setting.

### *Future Directions*

Findings from this study can only be directly applied to the group of women studied; results cannot be generalized to all women-specific group counseling for problem gambling. This research, however, is an important starting point of inquiry for other researchers and practitioners. When considering journaling in a group counseling setting, the facilitator should consider structured versus informal journaling approaches, cultural implications and considerations, and whether participation is compulsory or voluntary. The benefits of journaling suggest that it can be an effective component of group counseling for women problem gamblers as it provides an opportunity for women to write their own stories, and, by doing so, create their own narrative of addiction and recovery. ▼

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#### Authors’ Notes

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