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Welcome to my relapse

📅 August 11, 2015 👤 Thomas Cummings 💬 18 Comments

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I thought I'd made it; I really thought I'd made it. I believed I'd put enough time and space between myself and the person I used to be. I thought I was finally safe.

I was wrong.



January 2014. It had been over thirteen years since I'd last played a poker machine. And believe me when I tell you that was something of a big deal... there had been a time when I would play for hours every day, spending hundreds or thousands of dollars while the world around me faded away. But all that was behind me now.

And for the past three and a half years I'd been on something of a crusade. I'd publicly outed myself as a



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problem gambler, a recovering poker machine addict. I'd started a blog and written at length about my own problems and the industry in general.

I'd fronted up to Senate committees to talk about my experiences; I was quoted in the official reports they released. I'd published in newspapers and magazines. I'd been on the radio and even on TV, talking about gambling and telling the world in general that I'd beaten the machines, and that there was more, so much more we needed to do as a community to address the wider problems that poker machines bring to society.

In my mind, I was that thing that everyone seems to want and need: a survivor. I'd worked my way through, damaged but intact, and was trying to make a difference. I'd won.

Then came January 2014, and out of the blue my addiction did what addictions do so well.

There was no triggering event in my life that caused it. In recent years I'd been through a divorce, moved house three times until I ended up in a place of my own, kicked cigarettes and got myself in shape physically. There had been some close calls along the way, days when I'd been so low that I craved the comforting numbness of the machines, but I'd made it through unscathed.

I'd turned my career around and was enjoying work for the first time in years. I was making friends, going out, enjoying myself. And I saw my kids every chance I got. Things were looking up.

That all broke on the evening of January 20, 2014. I was writing an article for my blog, about the recent changes affecting poker machine venues in Victoria. One of the changes was the removal of ATMs; I knew that EFTPOS was still being used, and that many pubs and clubs had actually installed EFTPOS cash dispensers, similar to ATMs, to make the experience simpler for gamblers.

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I hadn't actually seen one of these EFTPOS cash dispensers. I hadn't been into a gaming room to see how they worked. So I decided to do just that.

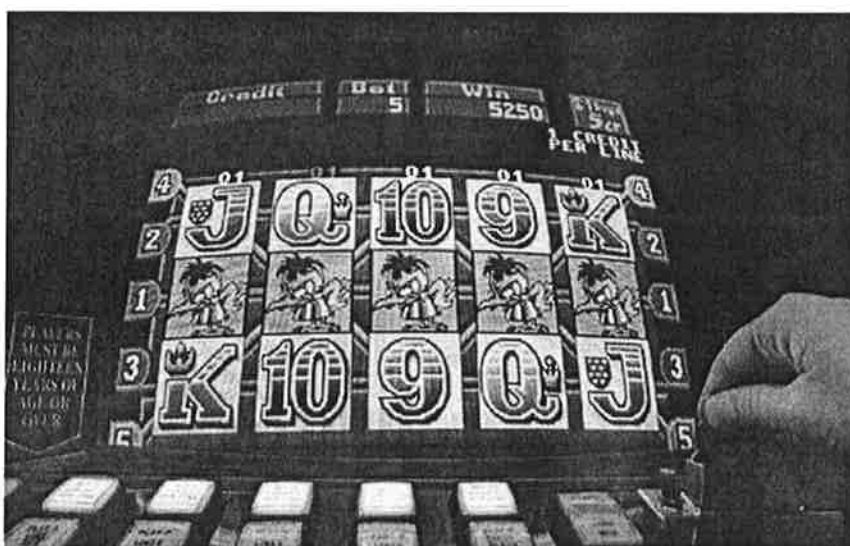
Now, I'd been into gaming rooms on plenty of occasions in the past few years, alone and in company, for a number of reasons related to my writing, but I'd never been tempted to play. There was no reason to think that this would be any different.

So I got in my car, and drove down the road to the Burvale Hotel. I remember the Burvale the way it used to be, before it became a pokies pub, but it's a very different place now. I parked around the back, near the entrance to the gaming room, and walked in.

I wandered around for a while, looking at the machines, then went up to the bar and asked how I got money out. I was directed back out into the lobby, where I was joined a moment later by a staff member who put my EFTPOS transaction through. We chatted for a moment, then I went over to the EFTPOS cash dispenser that the staff member pointed out, and collected my money.

I meant to walk out the door and drive home.

Instead, I walked back inside.



Over the next ten days, I came back again and again. It was all I could think about. There was a voice in my head,

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screaming at me to stop! Walk away! What the hell was I doing? But I couldn't.

June 2010

May 2010

I knew what I was doing. Knew it probably better than anyone else could, but still I kept going back. I'd slipped straight back into the habits I built up when I first started gambling on poker machines, the habits formed and nurtured by the addictive nature of the machines. I knew what they were, knew what they were built to do.

And I let them in.

On the tenth day, it was my youngest daughter's birthday. I woke up that morning and the full gravity, the full magnitude of what I was doing finally came home to me. Belatedly, the self-control I'd discarded came flooding back and this time, I held firm. I wasn't going to see my kids until the next day but I was damned if I was going to be a gambler when I did.

That was the end of it. I didn't know how much money I'd lost but I walked away from it, kissed it goodbye. I turned back to the life I'd made for myself, back to my kids, my house, my job.

But it was different now. I was different. I'd changed. I was no longer the person I'd built myself into, the person with rock-solid defences and a past that stayed in the past. I felt I had betrayed everything I had said and done over the past thirteen years; betrayed my children; betrayed myself.

I was a fraud. A hypocrite. I had failed. I used to count the years since I'd gambled on a poker machine; now I was counting the days.

And I found I couldn't write any more. Couldn't talk about it anymore. My blogging dried up, my advocacy for gambling reform faded away. What right did I have to talk about gambling addiction if I couldn't even take care of my own?

And so, even as my life continued to improve in every other respect, I faded back into silence in this one area that was so important to me. I looked for other things to talk about,

other causes to champion, rather than face up to the failure I felt I had become.

But still, I didn't realise just how deeply I'd been affected by this until recently. When the wakeup call came, it was impossible to ignore.

In my job, I get the opportunity to attend talks and presentations covering a range of topics of social importance. Recently, I listened to a presentation from Pride In Diversity, about LGBTI inclusion in the workplace, and another from Rosie Batty about domestic violence. I also undertook a training session on responding to family violence in the workplace.

On each of these occasions, when the talk turned to secrecy and hiding who we really are, I triggered. Massively. I experienced an irresistible emotional response and sat there, weeping, as the talk went on around me.

The first time it happened, I put it down to an emotional response to an emotional topic, one I firmly believed in. But then came a second time, and a third; something was going on, something deeper.

It became clear to me that there was a part of my life that I wasn't dealing with, something that had changed... something I was hiding. It didn't take me long to realise what it was.

And that's why I'm writing this. It may be that no one ever reads it, that this blog post will sink without a trace. I don't care. This is my way of standing up and saying "I did this". This is my way of freeing myself once more from the secrecy that I'd let entrap me.

I'm not going to be quiet any more. I don't care how much it hurts or how uncomfortable it is; I don't even care if no one is listening and I end up shouting into the void. The alternative is to shuffle away, to hide and pretend it never happened. And I won't do that anymore.

Anyone can stumble; anyone can fall. Our strength as people lies in knowing we are all fallible, we are all imperfect, and that we all need help, just to get through every day.

If we slip up, it's ok. We can get through it. We need to accept that in others; we need to accept it about ourselves. Mistakes don't make us lesser people; they make us human.

It was only a couple of weeks ago that I finally went back through my finances. In those ten days in January 2014, I lost over \$1400 on the machines. You can say it was only ten days, what's the big deal? I could afford to lose it, no one was harmed, so where's the problem? Believe me, I tried telling myself that too. But it's a lie.

I lost more than money; I lost who I was. It took me a year and a half to get that back.

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18 thoughts on "Welcome to my relapse"

- Tony
- August 11, 2015 at 1:49 pm
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Thanks for sharing this Tom. It's a braze thing to admit when we have setbacks, even though they happen to all of us at some time in our lives. Glad to have you back blogging again.