

Oregon Lottery: Reader stories of state-sponsored addiction (day 1)

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The Oregonian invited readers to share Oregon Lottery experiences in a questionnaire. Because of the personal nature of comments, many asked that their names be withheld all or in part. Share your story at ORne.ws/lottery-questions. We'll offer more in the days ahead.

67-year-old Hillsboro woman:

How much do you spend on a typical outing to play video poker or line games?

It used to be \$500. That was the most I could access from my ATM. They recently changed it to \$600, so now I spend \$600. Sometimes I even go to the bank and write a check for another \$500. Don't ask me why I do this, but I have destroyed our lives.

Have you ever lost more than you could afford?

I cannot begin to tell you the agony and shame that I have suffered from gambling. We are right now in a position that we could lose everything. I have spent more than we had so many times that I cannot remember them all. I spent my husband's entire retirement of 33 years with [a state agency], and we owe over \$100,000 to the IRS with a lien on our home. All of our credit cards are maxed out. We had to borrow money on our vehicle once to cover my gambling, and my husband's brother has given us over \$12,000 to cover. Now he can't give us any more and I still continue to overspend.

When you play, do you sometimes feel you have a problem stopping even though you know you should?

I know I have a problem and I stopped for a while. I love to gamble. I am addicted to trying to beat them. I just don't know what the hell is wrong with me. I understand how much we have lost, and it makes me so disgusted with myself. No one knows except my husband and I how bad it is. We are so ashamed. I just can't talk to anyone about it. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to address this issue. If I won the lottery today, I would be right back at the machines trying to win. Excitement junkie? Bipolar? Depressed? Suicidal? Stupid? Delusional? Maybe all of those things. I think I have spent almost a million dollars in three years on gambling and the consequences.

Do you know other people who have a problem with gambling?

Yes, my sister. She actually is the one who got me started. We started going to Spirit Mountain because she had a friend who was taking her. We would go occasionally. Then it was stupid to drive all the way to Spirit Mountain when we could just go to the local lotto. Now she is 63 and living from paycheck to paycheck, maxed out on credit and trying to find more ways to be able to gamble. I am a decent, educated, financial services professional who has no excuse for not understanding the consequences. I just don't understand.

Has your life been affected by problem gambling?

OMG, I can't begin to tell you. We don't do the things we used to do. We are going to lose everything we have, I hate and despise what I have done, and I just want to turn back the clock and do it differently.

Do you think the benefits from Oregon Lottery revenues — to schools, parks and such — outweigh the harm caused by problem gambling?

You've got to be kidding! I'm sure much more of that money would have gone to retailers and businesses that would have paid much more in taxes than the lottery. What a racket! I am sure that the people I sit next to must be in the same boat! I cannot imagine how many people do the same thing, but if they are like me, they don't want anyone to know and you NEVER TELL ANYONE. It is the most well-kept secret in the world.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

I am so addicted. I would go today if I had any money left. I love it. When my husband first retired, we would go all over Oregon and Washington to all the casinos gambling. It was awesome, exciting, fun and sometimes rewarding. We know every casino and have our favorites. My only regret is that I have no money to continue to go. Sick, reasonable, unbelievable? What is wrong with me?

Pat, a 42-year-old Albany man:

How much (did) you spend on a typical outing to play video poker or line games?

On average I would say that I lost between \$100 and \$300 a day.

What (did) you enjoy about playing lottery games?

At first I enjoyed the chance at winning. When the games got me hooked and turned me into a video poker zombie, I did not enjoy them anymore.

Have you ever won a big prize?

I have won over \$5,000 in one night on various machines. The thrill of the big payouts was a wonderful high.

Have you ever lost more than you can afford?

I have lost an entire paycheck in less than an hour. By the end of my active gambling, I did not care whether I won or lost. I only wanted to keep putting money in the machine. I felt out of control of my actions and needed only to put money in to feel like I was alive.

When you play, do you sometimes feel you have a problem stopping even though you know you should?

I could not stop until I was out of money.

Have you ever sought help for gambling addiction?

[This year], I received a gambling addiction assessment and started in the gambling addiction program through Linn County alcohol and drug prevention offices. I have been clean from gambling since Feb 23. I owe my healthy mental state to this program. I feel that the Oregon Lottery video poker machines hypnotized me and turned me into a person that only cared about putting money into these machines.

I do not ever want to go through that mental hell again, and I hope that other people that have a problem can realize that there is wonderful help out there. I feel that the Oregon Lottery expanded so rapidly that people were not aware of the dangers that having easy access to gambling can have on people. I believe that the reported percentage of problem gamblers is far too low and that the lawmakers in this state are unaware of the widespread epidemic that problem gambling has become.

Has your life been affected by problem gambling?

Where do I start? It ruined me financially and personally. It ruined my relationship with my girlfriend whom I loved dearly. It took all of my self-esteem. It sent me into a deep, dark depression that has taken me about nine months to come out of. I realize that I am responsible for my own actions, but when you realize that your addiction to these video games has left you with no more control over your life and that these games are not only approved by but also advertised by the leadership of this state, it gives me a bad feeling about the direction that we are going as a society.

34-year-old Milwaukie woman:

Do you know other people who have a problem with gambling?

My mother started gambling and now has a gambling problem. It has been devastating. She moved to California where she has had less temptation, but every time she visits, she gets sucked back in. I never experienced or saw addiction before, and I cannot believe how powerful it is.

An example of how it takes over: She was visiting me and my young son, and I let her borrow my car to go to the mall. We had plans to go out for a mother-daughter night that evening. She

skipped out on me and did not return home until 3 a.m. She had been gone for over 12 hours. I had no way to reach her since she forgot her cell phone at home. When she came home I was furious, felt betrayed, and she was emotional and guilt-stricken. It ended up she had been gambling (video poker) the whole time. There have been so many incidents like this where we can't trust her or she put gambling before her family/responsibilities.

I am furious that ... everywhere I go more places with the [Oregon Lottery] logo keep popping up. Strip malls now have not one but sometimes two video poker cafes. Family establishments such as Shari's have them. They are everywhere! But unlike alcohol, which has some limits to times that you can buy it or consume it publicly, gambling is available 24 hours everywhere!

What irritates me the most is how much Oregon Lottery advertises that they give back to Oregon. Has there been any study showing the costs related to gambling? I would bet that the costs associated with problem gambling have a far greater toll on our state than what Oregon Lottery contributes. For example, my mother who has always been very good with money now is behind in her property taxes and is in debt for the first time in her life. Everything she worked hard for is now at risk of being lost just before she retires.

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