

'Living hell' for family members

Theresa tan

The Straits Times, 24 October 2012

LIFE with a gambling addict can be a daily hell, a study has found.

Family members face not only being wiped out financially by the gambler's debts, but also being ostracised and living in a state of "persistent fear".

The qualitative study of 50 relatives - including gamblers' spouses, adult children, parents and siblings - is the first in Singapore to examine the impact of gambling addiction on families, said Institute of Policy Studies research fellow Mathew Mathews.

Dr Mathews was commissioned to carry out the study in 2010 by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports. Yesterday, the ministry made the findings public at a conference organised by the National Council on Problem Gambling.

While it is common knowledge that compulsive gambling tears families apart, Dr Mathews' research showed just how bad it can get.

He said: "Everyone in the family feels the burden of the addiction. The closer you are to the gambler, the worse the impact."

The formerly middle class families studied found themselves plunged into poverty by the gamblers' debts, which ranged from tens to hundreds of thousands of dollars. About a quarter of those interviewed had to sell their houses to pay loan sharks and other creditors.

Some then lived like nomads, shuttling between relatives who would put them up. Their wives had to find work or take on an extra job. Some children had to earn their keep by working after school or during vacations in places such as fast-food restaurants.

And as the gambler begs repeatedly for loans, his relatives will often shun not only him but also his immediate family members.

Families find it hard to share their woes with their friends for fear of being shunned again.

It is no surprise then that the gambler's family lives in a state of "persistent fear" and struggles with anger, helplessness and other painful emotions.

Dr Mathews said: "The threats never end and the problems never stop. It could be threats from loan sharks or the gambler threatening suicide. And you will never know how much more the gambler will borrow from loan sharks."

Unable to cope with the avalanche of problems, some family members fell into depression and needed psychiatric treatment.

A handful of spouses also ended their marriages. Despite their divorces, their ex-husbands continued to hound them for loans.

Dr Mathews said American research has found that each gambler's addiction affects up to 10 people, although the number could be higher here.

This is because Singaporean families are closer-knit and many continue to give the gambler money to clear his debts out of guilt, fear and shame, especially given the face-conscious nature of Asian culture.

His research did not measure how many family members were affected by one person's addiction. He did, however, examine the different ways families dealt with the problem.

Those who coped well were able to come together to find solutions and act with an united front. For example, everyone agreed to stop bailing the gambler out financially and convinced him to get treated for his addiction.

Putting up a united front is crucial as gamblers exploit tensions and secrecy among family members to borrow money.

Dr Mathews said: "What is not helpful is continuing to give in to the gambler's demands for money as he will just continue to gamble. These demands never end. "My advice to families is: Get help."