

Anna Bardsley

I lost ten years of my life to poker machine gambling, some of that was at Crown Casino in Melbourne.

Background - after 44.75 years of marriage, I am divorced. I have five children and two grandsons. Two of my children have died, two of my surviving children have had serious mental illnesses since they were very young.

I am a retired businesswoman, I worked in the bereavement sector, and I am a performer, singer and writer.

Currently - I live alone in my own home in **Confidential** I am a founding member of [Three sides of the Coin](#) - theatre for Change, am employed by Alliance for Gambling Reform in the program, Voices for Gambling Reform: People with lived experience, to support and mentor people like myself who have been harmed by gambling. I am a Member of the [Victoria Responsible Gambling Foundation Lived Experience Advisory Committee](#) and a ReSPIN speaker. I was awarded the Healthy and Active Living Award: 2019 Victorian Senior of the Year for this work.

I dealt with the tragedies and troubles in my life by working harder, pushing myself to be what I thought my family and community needed. I juggled the high needs of my children and the demands of my husband as best I could, but there did not seem to be any time or space for me. I had been raised in a European Catholic family and it was the woman's job to look after everyone.

My history of gambling before pokies was just the occasional tattsлото ticket. I lost 50c on the Melbourne Cup in the 70s and thought 'that was a waste of money' and never did it again, so I didn't see myself as a gambler.

When the pokies were introduced to Victoria nearly 30 years ago, I started going with a group of five women. Two or three times a year, we went for a girls night out, to the local pub or to the casino when it first opened. We had a limit of \$20 each and never went over that amount, and we all knew how to walk away.

One night after a really loud, awful argument with my husband, I grabbed the keys and left the house, drove around for a while and eventually found myself at one of the venues I had visited with my friends. It was the only place open and I knew it was ok for women on their own. I went in, alone in a pub for the first time in my life, alone at the pokies for the first time. I now know that night was the beginning of the end. I stayed longer and spent more than I meant to. It wasn't long before I was going several times a week, not just to the local pubs and clubs but to Crown Casino.

At Crown Casino I had a card that gave me access to free parking anytime - not an insignificant inducement in the city, a 'special room' that only cardholders could access, with a dedicated bar and staff who served me at the machine.

When you walk into the casino there is a sea of machines - the area is massive, being able to go into a smaller, more intimate space to gamble gave me a sense of being special.

The card was an incentive to go to Crown, and once in there, I rarely left until all my money was gone. I tried to 'be responsible' to not stay longer than planned or spend more money than I wanted to, but inevitably, despite all my efforts, I failed to do that. Everytime I left with nothing, I was devastated - that I had done it again. I hated myself and what I was doing. I was too ashamed to tell anyone. I was one of those terrible people, a problem gambler. It was a deep dark secret. I became very good at covering my tracks, hiding what I was doing, where I had been, how long I had stayed, how much I had lost.

For a period of time I had two jobs, all the money I earned would go to gambling, I would juggle the bills with a credit card. Then I would be disgusted with myself and stop for a while, catch up with the debt, then something would happen at home, another argument and I was back.

I was frequently in Crown for many hours, often sitting at only one machine, no one ever came to check if I was ok, other than to ask if I wanted another drink. I have no recollection of signage or any knowledge of gambling help at crown. No one ever offered any help.

There was no sign of Responsible Service of Gambling or Alcohol when I was in Crown, I never saw staff intervene or speak to anyone about their well-being in relation to either gambling or alcohol. I was not aware of any help services at Crown, no one ever offered any support while I was gambling there.

I was deeply ashamed of what I was doing and felt that it was all my fault. The messaging of 'Responsible Gambling' which makes it only about personal responsibility made that worse. I wanted to get out, to be free of the addiction to poker machines, but it seemed impossible. I was responsible in every other area of my life.

Finding the way out has been a long and difficult journey. Included here [is a link](#) to some of my story. As I progressed in my own recovery I came to see that I was not alone in the shame I felt, that being known to be a gambler can have a profound impact on job security and family relationships. I was ready to retire from paid work and with my family's support I stepped out and began talking about what gambling had cost me and how it had harmed my life.

In 2017, I spoke at the Crown AGM about my experiences. James Packer told me that gambling was their core business. This is evident, everything else in the complex is meant to take you to the gambling spaces. It is almost impossible to not find your way to the gambling floor. It was at the AGM that I was told Crown has a Responsible Gambling department. It was a complete surprise to me.

Crown Casino takes a lot of money from people who use their facility and they need to be held accountable for responsible service of their products. With a business model predicated on addiction, their best customers are the biggest losers and when you add up a lot of ordinary people like me, we are a major income stream and a target market.

Poker machines are an addictive product, deliberately designed that way and yet there are no warnings, very few protections for people who use them.

I do not believe there is any room for rewards schemes linked to gambling. We could have a card that people need to use to gamble that would give the information of how much money and time was spent gambling, but there should never be any rewards attached that encourage people to stay longer and spend more than they meant to. This card would also make for a better more effective self exclusion system.

Whenever I tell any of my story, I am conscious of all the other people like me, who fell prey to gambling addiction, and who are not able to speak of it publicly. I have heard countless stories of profound gambling harm happening at Crown. For every person who is able to speak, there are countless others who cannot for fear of damaging their careers, their family relationships and their standing in the community.

Such is the stigma attached to being a gambler that even just that name attached to your bio makes some work impossible thereafter. I was an Office Manager and Bookkeeper, I could never be employed in that way ever again because I am known to have gambled in the past.

It is time for the people of Victoria to be more important than the gambling industry and companies like Crown.