

Childhood Experiences of Living Within a Problem Gambling Family

“Your father might not come home.” That’s what my mom said to us 40 years ago; the words still echo in my heart just like it was yesterday.

My name is Ivan. I am from Malaysia and grew up in a family where Chinese traditions were firmly upheld. Before I turned six, I lived a very normal life with my three older sisters who adored me, and my parents who ran very successful small businesses - a hair salon and a restaurant.

Short-lived childhood happiness

I lived in Johor Bahru in Malaysia; a city that is next to Singapore and connected by a causeway. We had a perfect life, and it was the envy of our relatives.

On Sunday, my father would take mom and travel to Singapore to watch the horse racing. It was a popular thing to do back then. We had no idea at the time of the impact that journey across the causeway was going to have on our family life.

One day, my mother burst into tears and told us that our father might never come home again. He was missing for a few days and when he eventually returned, a fight broke out between my parents. I later learnt that my father had lost a significant amount of money.

The impact of my father’s problem gambling

Our family life shifted dramatically as my father went deeper into his gambling. To pay off his debts, he sold his very successful restaurant business. When I was around the age of nine, my mother took me to stay with a relative. Our family were separated; my sisters lived with different relatives, and we didn’t see each other for a while. I did not know the reason, and I was missing my mother terribly and crying every day in school. At first, my teacher would comfort me but my sadness went on for a long time. Eventually, I would sit outside the classroom to cry by myself until I stopped and returned to the class. I can’t recall how long this went on.

Finally, the principal called my parents to come and pick me up, which was a three hour drive for them. When they arrived, I remember a long conversation took place in the school office.

What followed was my first experience of depression and anxiety.

Life became very challenging for us. We were continually moving from place to place, and sometimes my parents would ask relatives to look after us. The home was never the same again - it was chaotic, broken and lonely. I could not make any friends at school, nor could I tell them where I lived or invite friends to visit. I felt alone and isolated.

My mother - my hero

Father hardly ever came home and I witnessed my mother taking care of us as well as running her small hair salon to sustain our income. My mother had a habit of praying in the morning to a Chinese deity, and she would be in tears. I witnessed it with a broken heart as a teenager.

Mom worked a long day, and we all helped run the household to make sure she had a good rest after work. We knew she cried herself to sleep at night. It was hard to be a teenager, and witness my mother going through this. I felt hopeless and helpless while harbouring anger toward my father.

In February 2001, I came to New Zealand. Through studying Social Science and Psychology, I realised my childhood trauma had severely impacted my wellbeing.

I joined Asian Family Services (AFS) in 2018 as deputy director and public health lead. For over 18 years I have worked in mental health and social development, in NGOs, local government and the public sector in New Zealand.

I wish there had been services like AFS back then in Malaysia - a service for individuals and affected others to gain help and support. Life could have been different for my parents and for me.

I am sharing this in the hope that people, especially Asians, will come forward to get help.

Help is available and it's free, and completely private

Alex, an AFS counsellor, says the story about Ivan's father is a typical example of when gambling starts out as entertainment but leads to harmful gambling.

"Professional support is available for anyone experiencing harm from their gambling in New Zealand and their affected others, such as family and friends," he says.

"People who are being harmed by their gambling can fully recover with the right support and early intervention."

"Ivan's story shows that a family can experience significant harm due to someone's gambling. The harms can range from emotional to psychological. But if the help is received early, those issues are addressed at the early stages, often bringing positive outcomes from the intervention," Alex says.

Asian Family Services is the only agency in New Zealand providing support in several Asian languages. It is private, confidential and a free service for anyone who is impacted by gambling harm – both the gambler and affected others. The service is funded by the Ministry of Health through a gambling levy.

Alex says no one is born as a problem gambler and it doesn't discriminate – it can happen to anyone.

“If you know someone who is experiencing harm from their gambling, encourage them to get help understanding and support from professionals. Hope and help is always there for you,” he says.