
A SECRET GAMBLING ADDICTION LED HIM TO THE BRINK. HIS SON SAVED HIS LIFE.

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SPEAKERS

Harj Gahley, Naroop Jhooti

Harj 00:00

It's what he said, also how he made me feel that broke me down. He said, "Dad, I'm so lucky."

Now, any father watching this would understand how much that means, knowing that your son is looking at you and saying that they are lucky to have you in their life. He gave me something where I never gave. He taught me love in that moment more than even when he was born. He taught me the value of dependency. He taught me the value of responsibility, because Jieven means life. He saved my life that day. He genuinely saved my life because he made me keep a promise to myself that I won't share. But that's the catalyst that changed everything.

Naroop 01:39

Imagine carrying the weight of expectations, silent struggles, and the pressure to always have it together. The Dad Project is a space for open, honest conversations about men's mental health. Raw, real, and long overdue.

In season two, we go deeper, sharing powerful stories and fresh perspectives from those who've lived it and those who help others through it. Filmed at the Old Court in Windsor, this season is about breaking stigmas, redefining strength, and starting conversations that matter. I'm your host, Naroop Jhooti. Let's talk.

Naroop 02:25

Harj, I know your story is remarkable, but why are you sat here opposite me right now?

Harj 02:35

So, I'm Harj Gahley, a recovering gambling addict. That's not the title that I thought I'd grow up with, especially growing up in a South Asian household. You know, you've been there as well, right? Go to university, get a degree. I don't know, let's think about them: dentistry, optometry, pharmacy, economics, law. That's what I thought my life would be.

But what happened shortly after university was the whole thing that not only made me lose myself, but it changed the trajectory of my life into such a dark path that I couldn't find a way out.

But through the graces of the universe and through this saying that I always tell myself, which is: in life, it could feel like we're taking the wrong path only to find out that we're in the right direction. Sitting here at 40 years old, I found my direction. I'm in my purpose. I wake up every day to walk my purpose and serve those that are suffering in silence, because I've been there. I've been sat in those shoes, and I can't bear another person feeling of how I was feeling.

Naroop 03:43

So, let's take it back to your childhood, because we know a lot of what we face as adults starts from when we're young. What was life like for you when you were a child?

Harj 03:56

So, it was actually a beautiful childhood in a sense where we had total reign of freedom. There was four of us all together: two older, one younger. And it was this whole makeup of where we weren't brothers, but we were more like friends. We treated each other like mates. We could go out, we could do this, we could play with our friends.

And it was that typical Punjabi household. I had a dad that would just drink all the time. My mom was trying to look after the children, giving us thappad, making sure we're in line, meaning slaps. Yeah, man, 100%, because that was what we were. My mom was definitely more of the dominant one where she tried to keep four boys that she had in five years in line.

And my dad, if you ever get the chance to meet him, he was this very timid, very shy, speaks so fast, but he had this lifestyle where it was laid-back. And then my mom would be like, "Why are you laid back?" And so you always have this almost a World War II

household. But then the beauty of it was what we saw around it: the cousins coming over, meeting up, playing, having this fun, unadulterated childhood. But then there was the elements where that 1% of darkness that rained in from an alcoholic father.

Narooop 05:19

You said something, you said a typical Punjabi household, an alcoholic dad. Is that typical?

Harj 05:27

Very much typical. So the thing here is there's a difference between Sikh and Punjabi, hence the reason why I use the word Punjabi. Because if you take us back to when we were going to parties or weddings or functions, what were the men doing? They were all sat on the tables talking to each other, and they would never dance until they've had a glassi or they've had a drink, or to the point where they're absolutely gone towards paralytic.

That's how I saw a lot of childhood parties growing up. That's how I've seen a lot of other people I've spoken to grow up in those households. So yeah, from a Punjabi culture we have seen that typical Punjabi household where people watching this will go, "Actually, yeah, I recognise that, because that was maybe my father, or my massi, or my chacha, or my dada, or someone close to them where drink was everywhere around him."

Narooop 06:21

I think every family within the Punjabi community probably has someone who suffers from alcohol abuse. And I know when I used to go to weddings and even now, and I see uncles, what we call men of that generation drunk, I know how I feel looking at them now. And I remember how I used to feel when I was young looking at them, and my thoughts are still the same. What did you used to feel when you used to see your dad drunk?

Harj 06:51

Not again.

The amount of times I would see my dad, and it wasn't even just seeing him, it was knowing what that night was going to look like. I knew the journey. Anytime a function would come up, you almost had this deep sense of: what is this night going to bring?

To the point where he would typically drive us. Give you an example. My dad drove to Wolverhampton to this wedding function, and he drove there all good. Once he got there,

I was busy playing with my friends and my cousins, and that's how we were, little G.I. Joes running around causing tamasha, causing chaos. But then you'd always see your dad. As the night's going on, you see him start to have this phase where you could see his eyes, you could see his stammer, you could see him slurring, you could see him falling.

Then how he's dancing on the dance floor, to the point where I'm now seeing my mom. Now I'm looking at her and seeing the anger. I'm looking at her going, "She has now got to drive all the way back." And that was always the case. Dad would drive there, Dad would get drunk. Not just drunk, paralytic drunk.

We were at a wedding once in East Ham coming after jaago. Literally after the function, my dad had gone missing. Me, my brothers, my mom, and my dadi were looking for him for ages. We found him in the back of our car. It was just a scene, man, the fact that he'd been vomiting everywhere in the car. We had to drive back from East London with my dad sprawled over us and lying on our lap, having a bag, the smell of puke, my mom shouting and screaming at him, us crying and trying to figure out what the hell is going on. That was a common occurrence.

Narooop 08:42

Why do you think he drank so much?

Harj 08:52

Great question, and it's a question that I still don't have the answer to.

Narooop 08:55

Have you asked him recently? And what did he say? Is that right?

Harj 09:01

Because that's what that generation knew, is how to be silent. I even asked him recently. I said to him, "Dad, there were times that I saw you when we were young, and I loved the dad I saw, the dad that would hug me, that would kiss me." There were very few moments I saw those and felt those, and I could forgive him for everything that he's put us through.

And I did. Recently, being at 40 years old, I said to him, "Dad, I apologise for what I've done, and I forgive you for what you've done. But all I know is that if you're not going to tell us what's been the catalyst, what made you drink, why you caused such chaos in our

life, then all I need you to know is that you can go to your deathbed knowing that at least one of your sons forgives you with all his heart, and that will cherish everything that you've given us."

Narooop 10:07

Have your brothers forgiven him?

Harj 10:10

It's not my prerogative to say what they've done or not done, because that's their life. And the truth is that growing up as brothers, we were never close. There's always this mate perspective, but whenever shit hit the fan, whenever there were problems, we never consoled or looked out for each other. We all went into our own cocoons. We all went into our self-isolation. We all went into this place of: right, I need to become this person to make me feel better. And for me, it was becoming the life and soul of the party.

Narooop 10:47

And how did your mom used to react seeing her husband like that?

Harj 10:57

If you can imagine World War II in a house, that's what it was. That's what it felt like: the shouting, the abuse, the anger, the hatred, almost pity as well. Because you have to think about this: my mom worked nights in Asda where she would leave home at half four. My dad would purposely come home about 5:00 because he knew that he didn't have to see his wife. Every time he walked through that door, he stunk of booze.

Then come 7:00, half seven, 8:00, that guy would be flipping pissed. He'd always have a couple of beers, and always around the house, behind the sofa, behind the sink, behind the cabinets where the plates or glasses were, were always like these half or quarts of Famous Grouse, and you would find them everywhere, and it just stunk. There were times where I caught him lying parallel between the kitchen and the living room.

There's one instance where I was eight, nine years old. Me and my brothers were playing outside with some friends, and all I heard was like this big thump or scream. Me and my older brother were like, "What the fuck is going on there?" We ran straight into the house upstairs because we knew that's where he was. We walked in, and my dad was lying on the edge of the bed, half falling off, vomit on the bed, vomit on the floor, everywhere.

We had to get him undressed, put him in the bath, take his clothes off, take all the sheets and duvets, change all those, clean the carpet whilst cleaning him, put him back into bed, change him. And as I'm doing this, I'm thinking: what is fucking going on? I'm eight, nine years old here. You're the parent. You should be looking after us, not the other way around.

From that day, I had anger. Even up to recently, I had anger for him, because that not only taught me that I didn't have a dad, it taught me that I've got to now look after myself. The truth was, every time I tried to get my mother's affection, she's in survival mode. She's got to look after four boys. She's got to make sure we're ready for school. She's got to make sure the bills are paid, that food's on the table, that she's providing, that she's looking after us. But as a boy, what do we want? We're not getting the respect or love from Dad, we're not getting the love from Mom, and if it is, it's filtered down.

Naroop 13:27

So who did you get love from?

Harj 13:33

From other people. So I said to you before, I was the life and soul of the party where I found myself. I could be that person who walks into a room and lights the whole room up, not just from my presence, but joking, cracking jokes, making fun, dancing. If there was a party going on or something happening, I couldn't miss out.

So the word FOMO, right, the fear of missing out, that was the thing that kept me. I would be like, "I need to be there." If I'm the first one on the dance floor, I'm definitely going to be the last one off, because I had a point to prove. If something happened that I didn't see or feel or experience, I'd be pissed. I'd be like, "Why didn't I notice that? Why didn't I feel that?" And that's what validated me. That's what gave me what I was missing.

Naroop 14:26

From what age was this?

Harj 14:28

From young, from that moment. And it was not just parties, it would be school. I've got to be with the "it" crowd. But the thing was, I could be friends with the sensus kids, or the "it" crowd, or the quiet crowd, or the boffin crowd, all these things. I'd always find myself needing to make sure I'm loved by every single person. Everyone could come up to me and speak to me, no matter who you were or what status you had in school, because I

just needed to make sure I knew what was happening in your life, because I could almost be a person to speak to, if that makes sense.

Naroop 15:07

And how did that make you feel, being that person?

Harj 15:09

Loved it. If I didn't get it, I'd have to go and find it. It was addictive, 100%. Think about it when you're in school, and when people are talking, you're like: are they talking about me? Are they talking about something else, or what's going on here? And you're like, "Fuck, I need to be part of that conversation." But they're in the other part of the class, and you can't step up because the teacher is going to say sit back down. Now you're sitting here with this guilt and FOMO and, "Fuck, I need to know what's going on." So you start chucking letters: what's going on, tell me.

I needed to know what people were saying, because if I didn't, it filled a massive void, and I would start getting annoyed. Annoyed was a word, but I would get furious: if you're not telling me what the fuck is going on, then I'm going to come after you and be fucking angry at you, because we're friends, that's not what we do, we tell each other everything. And that's how I felt.

Naroop 16:10

That's a real search for validation and acceptance, right? Because you were now being accepted by the crowd, or searching for acceptance because you weren't getting accepted at home. So this addictive behaviour of needing that validation, needing something back, that stayed with you, didn't it?

Harj 16:32

Yeah, throughout my whole life, even to now. It lasted through school, college, university, and even after that: that need for attention, that need to be loved, or not even just loved, to be significant is the word I want to say.

So no matter who you were, where you were, it didn't really care, as long as you liked me, we're good. If you didn't like me, it needed to be a valid reason for why you don't like me, because if it doesn't, then I'm going to basically cuss the fuck out of you.

Naroop 17:13

So what would happen if someone didn't like you?

Harj 17:14

I would curse them, or then weirdly, I would make other people realise this is what they're doing. Not in a place of backstabbing them, but trying to make them transparent of who they are as a person.

Narooop 17:29

Interesting. And how do you feel looking back and thinking back of that version of yourself? How does that make you feel now?

Harj 17:38

Stupid and shameful, because what I've come to learn is that that was a reflection of what I was missing. Because I'd be speaking to someone else and they'd be like, "Hold on, I don't feel that way about this person." But no, you have to feel this way about that person, because ultimately, if they're not feeling this, they don't like me.

Hence the reason why that self-validation kicks in: then surely why do you like me? If they don't like me, then you don't like me. And if you don't like me, then they don't like you. So it's almost like this continuous loop. But the loops need to sync with each other, otherwise it just falls out of place. And if it falls out of place, then it ends up becoming: well, fuck you. I hate you. I don't like you. Don't even come into my life.

Narooop 18:16

Wow, that seems like a crazy place to be in.

Harj 18:24

It's binary: either I like you or I don't like you. Fuck off or stay with me.

Narooop 18:26

What did that lead you to do, this behaviour? Where did it take you?

Harj 18:33

First it started with the alcohol, because being around those people, I started drinking quite a bit. Actually, I started drinking quite excessively in my uni days, because remember I talked about that social acceptance, being Punjabi. I was in Wolverhampton at the time, drinking with a couple of friends, drinking snakebites, VKs, before we've gone out, then drinking whilst you're out, then coming back and saying, "Okay cool, we need to be drinking even though we're home."

And the reason why I did that is because my place of dorms was the party place,

because everything came back to who? Me. You're not drinking today, you come back to mine. We're ordering food, we get it back to mine, because I need to make sure I know what's going on at all times.

Naroop 19:18

How did you used to feel when you were alone? I can imagine from how you're describing yourself, being by yourself would probably be like torture: not having people around, not having attention, not feeling validated, not feeling included. Being by yourself probably was the most painful place to be. Is that correct?

Harj 19:38

Yeah. And I would always end up catching myself sleeping a lot more during that time, because I didn't enjoy my own company. I didn't enjoy the person that I was for myself. When the noise is down, there are things I'll do to drown it out: sleep a lot or watch movies.

Even then, the movies that I watched back then were like Braveheart, for example, one of my favourite movies of all time. Why? Because there's a lot of sadness in it. I always focused on that sad element of loss or guilt or something that's been taken away from you. Those are the movies I was more attracted to back then. Anything that was action, fair enough, it ticked the box. But anything that was deeply emotional, where there is a big loss or a big void, I would be weeping, man. Even today when I watch Braveheart, I still love it. My wife still hasn't watched it. I'm cursing it like flipping hell, it's a classic.

One time I was drinking J&B Rare, watching Braveheart. No one around me, no one telling me to do this, but as I'm watching it, I'm actually just going into self-wallowing, self-pitying, and saying: what is my life? Who am I?

Naroop 21:04

Did anybody used to talk to you about mental health then? Did you know what mental health was?

Harj 21:09

Because mental health back then was just get a shot down and go out. And that's what happened.

So that's pretty much when I left university in 2007. I studied law, didn't go into it because it wasn't for me. I actually ended up starting a business, funny enough. I started

up like a mini version of Facebook called Club Gel at the time. Within 2007 to 2009, we grew that to about 65,000 students.

Naroop 21:39

Oh wow.

Harj 21:39

Which is not bad. What I was doing was going around student unions around the whole of the UK and getting them on. The way I positioned it was student clubs had their own little groups: if you've got a hockey club of say Birmingham and you're speaking to someone in King's or City, you can have a conversation. It was a social interaction of student union clubs. So it grew similar to how Facebook started out.

Naroop 22:09

It was just university students, right?

Harj 22:12

Yeah. And the reason why that started off is because in year two of university, I got my student loan and I pissed away that student loan within a couple of days. My parents aren't rich, they're not from a well-to-do background. So if I go back to them and say, "Shit, I need money," they were like, "Okay, we can afford a couple of things, but not that."

So what happened was, do you remember the Million Dollar Homepage?

Naroop 22:43

No.

Harj 22:43

The Million Dollar Homepage was a simple concept. On a web page, there were a million pixels and each pixel sold for a dollar. This guy, I think he was 15 or 16 at the time, had sold a web page of advertising in little pixels and made a million dollars. I was like: surely there's got to be something. So my brain started going, I need to figure out what the hell's going on here. Because to be honest with you, I found law flipping easy, it's just remembering things. So I spent my time learning about this.

Then I learned about click-ad banners, and I heard about this 14, 15-year-old that was making stupid amounts of money at that age. He had a black card from the business. I was like, "Well, what is this black card?" I saw that life, and I was like, "Hold on, these are people younger than me or similar ages that are doing phenomenal things."

So then I heard about click-ad banners. My auntie had a property firm in Birmingham. I said, "Let me do this for you." She was like, "Okay, I don't understand this." I said, "Let me just focus on this. I'll get paid on people that come through to you, all the clicks that you get." I tried to push my luck: "If you make a sale, do you mind if I get commission?" She was like, "No, no, just do the first part first." What happened was every week it would end up being about 100 quid to 200 quid or 250. Christmas got a little bit bigger. I was making money every week by doing that. So that's where my background came into.

Narooop 24:05

So you're quite entrepreneurial from a young age.

Harj 24:07

I wouldn't say entrepreneurial, I would say I'm just a hustler. I just love getting in there, getting stuck in, and finding little opportunities. I'm an opportunist at heart. And that carried on with me.

After two years, what ended up being a conversation with a big media agency because they wanted to promote to these students went from competition advertising to acquiring the company. Listen, I'm 21, 22 at the time. My version of making it in life was getting a good degree: tick box, law; getting a good job: well, I've just smashed that part. If I'm earning 30k, 40k a year, get an Audi, buy a house, get married, I'm made in life. That's what I grew up to believe, maybe not just from my parents, but from that South Asian culture and society.

So for me, I now had more money than I ever could think of. I didn't make as much money as my investors, because my auntie who helped me with the property and the click ads, she's the one that invested into this, so she made crazy money. I made a little bit of money.

My uni friends worked in KFC, and I still stuck around with them because I felt like the baller now. I was like, "Right, cool, we're going out, we're going here." We went out in Birmingham, to Works on Broad Street. We're partying, living up life. I've got money in my bank account, I'm just living life right now. My friend said to me, "Listen man, let's carry on. Harj, you're a party person." I was like, "Yeah, fuck it, let's go, let's carry on." He goes, "Let's go to the casino." I was like, "Why?" He goes, "They give you free drinks, man. They give you free food." I don't know if they still do that, but at that time they did.

I remember going to the casino on Broad Street. When you go in, there's that reception part, and they ask you for your ID: are you a member? If you're not, you have to sign up. So I did that whole member sign-up, got my ID. But you can never see inside, there's always double doors. As I opened the door, I remember this feeling of: what have I walked into? I can hear the croupiers, I can see the lights, I can hear the sounds of people laughing and joking, the roulette machine, the slots. Even now me saying it, I'm smiling because it's taking me back into this place, because what it reminded me of was: I'm in James Bond's world.

I had only associated casinos with the rich lifestyle. I'm walking through, and you almost have this swagger, you bop like: I'm in this cool place, man, check me out. My friends bolted straight to the blackjack table. They've got their money out playing. I'm watching them, my drink has come, my ham sandwich is here, and I'm lapping it up. My friend said, "Harj, why don't you join us? Take some money out, put it on the table, we'll show you."

I took my 20 quid out, gave it to the croupier, and they came back with these little chips. As I'm placing my money down, they're putting out these cards. My friends are coaching me: "Don't take a card here, that's soft 17, blackjack pays two to one." Within about 30, 40 minutes, I turned £20 into £60. Now that doesn't sound like a lot, right? But in my head, I'm like: okay, remember I've got money in my bank account, this is something I enjoyed, it was fun, yet I made money very easily and quickly. I like this.

Harj 28:08

That carried on. We'd go every other week, then it became every week. My lucky streak lasted not just one session, it lasted like a month or two months. I'm loving life. In this one or two months, it went from every other week to every week, then I caught myself going every day.

At this time, I'm saying: do I tell my friends, do I not tell my friends? Even though I'm going every day, I would tell my friends that I'm either there or I'm not there. I knew what I was doing wasn't right, but the reason why was because I started losing money, and I started catching myself trying to chase some of that money back.

It first started from blackjack, then three-card poker, then baccarat, then roulette.

Narooop 29:06

Okay.

Harj 29:06

Now I'm losing not just putting in 20, now I'm putting in £100, now a couple hundred pounds. A few more months go on, and that same friend that I went with introduced me to the bookmakers. Now it's no longer just about the casino; he's doing accumulators and football bets. I never really liked that sort of stuff, I just wanted clean wins.

So I started looking at the horses and the dogs. When I started betting horses, at first it was just: I like the colour, I like the name, or my friends would say, "That horse ran Ascot, they're quite good." Then I started winning money, losing money. It was an up-and-down relationship. At 22, I was like: right, I've now found the casinos, I've now found the bookmakers, now I'm betting every day. Not just betting every day, I'm betting on everything.

I started off doing stupid bets, but then you tell yourself: do you know what, it's that next one that's going to win, that next one that's going to recoup my money. The way I can do that is if I make better choices: if I did this wrong last time, I can do this better this time. To the point where I would start analysing horses. I knew the jockeys, the trainers, Racing Post ratings, speed ratings, going, where they run, long or soft, pre-runs, down to every detail. Because if I can make informed decisions, I'm more likely to improve my chances of winning.

And it did work. When I started testing this theory, it worked. But what I would do is place big bets on them. Now it's no longer hundreds, now it's going into several hundreds. Everything I'm now doing, it seems like I take one step forward and a hundred steps back. Because now I'm chasing these big losses, and you get to a point where it's no longer about the money. I say it's not about the money, but it always is about the money, otherwise why would you be doing it in the first place? But ultimately, I'm just chasing and chasing.

I chased so much that within a year, the money that I made from the acquisition of the company, I had gambled away.

Narooop 31:29

How much was that?

Harj 31:29

You're talking nearly 100 grand.

Narooop 31:38

100 grand in less than 12 months, at 22 years of age.

Harj 31:38

At 22 years of age.

Narooop 31:42

And no one knew about this?

Harj 31:42

No. At this time I was in Birmingham, sitting in my flat. It's about 5:00 in the morning, the sun has risen, and I'm just lying at the edge of my bed thinking: I've got fucking no money in my account. What the hell do I do? I can't get any money for food, I can't pay my bills. So all I did was what I always knew: go back home.

I got on the train from Birmingham, packed my shit up, not knowing how to pay my bills and rent. I went back home. I had to hide in the toilets because I had no money for the tickets. I'm pretty sure people watching this have done that, where they jumped a train, hid in the toilets, waited for the conductors, got back home. I didn't tell my mom that I'd gambled. I didn't really open up. I said to Mom, "Listen, I've made some bad choices, I've lost some money on bad investments. I need to come back and just sort my life out a little bit."

The thing with Indian parents is they don't ask questions. They don't go, "Well, I need to know why." They'll pack your bag up: "Don't worry, child. Come back, we'll look after you and everything will be okay."

I was always confident in my own ability. So I said: you know what, I'm going to start from scratch. Whatever's happened has happened, I've lost that money, I'm just going to rebuild my life again. I started applying for corporate jobs. Within a couple of months, I found myself head of marketing for a technology company. Once again, I bragged, got in there, and when that first paycheck hit, that first paycheck should have been: pay your bills, pay your debts, give some money to parents, start rebuilding. No. What I realised in that moment was: it became my bankroll. It meant every single month I would get a bankroll to fund my addiction, because the truth is I was so deep in, I needed to get that money back somehow.

Naroop 33:55

So when you were on that train journey back sat in the toilets, what was going through your mind? What were you thinking? What were you feeling?

Harj 34:03

How am I going to get the money back? That was my whole focus: how am I going to get the money back? I've lost that money, I'm a fucking idiot, I'm stupid, I should have done that better, I should have done this better.

Naroop 34:19

You were living life, you made money. What people may find challenging to understand in that situation is you had the 100 grand in your account. After you lose 10 grand, surely you say, "Okay, I'm not that good at this, I'm just losing money." Why didn't you just stop?

Harj 34:41

It's a great question, because you're blindsided by the truth, which is that my perception around money was tilted. Pardon the pun, it's tilted because I would have wins where I've won £1,000 a day or £2,000 a day. So it creeps you up to the point where you can see yourself winning that money back. That glint of hope is what keeps bringing you back.

Naroop 35:12

Do you think that you needed validation to make you think that you were good at something by this gambling? Because you were the party boy, you wanted to be the centre of attention, you needed validation, didn't have the love at home. So maybe doing this gave you a buzz: I'm good at this, I can make money, I'm worth something. Was there any of that involved?

Harj 35:34

Yeah. The truth is, I always tried to deem myself as making good choices, doing better in life, because people around me had left university and were getting jobs. That was the battle that the outside world would see. If they saw me on the outside, let's skip a few years: I'm now going into corporate jobs. I'm working with the Royal Family, I'm working with Pippa Middleton and the Middletons. I've now left them and am working in the private jet industry. I'm earning six figures in salary. If anyone looked in, he's in a phenomenal job earning six figures.

I met my wife on a flight back from New York in 2012. Bear in mind, I was in Vegas before then for a mate's stag, gambling like crazy. Whilst I was in Vegas, the time that I spent gambling in one sitting was 40 hours straight.

Naroop 36:37

Wow.

Harj 36:37

To the point where I told my mates to fuck off, leave me alone, I'm on a roll. They went out, but I literally sat and was just gambling. I had my little system. I was trying to validate myself, prove a point to myself: I see my numbers coming in, I'm going to bet. I wasn't continuously placing chips every second, but I was constantly trying to think of when to bet and when not to bet. Ultimately, that was my whole rhythm in life: when am I going to go all in, or when am I going to stand?

Naroop 37:10

What did your friends say to you when you were in Vegas and you told them to fuck off? Did they try to intervene?

Harj 37:17

People tell you about compulsive gamblers, but you become compulsive liars as well, man. Because I could always say, "Listen man, I'm on a run, you carry on going." When they come back: "Listen, I've just won this amount. Let's do a couple of shots." We would go to the nightclub in the casino, but they had tables in the club as well. My mates are partying in the booth, and I'm like: fuck your booth, this is my booth, this is where my fun and action is at.

It consumes every element of your thinking. In my corporate life, there were times where I'd wake up and be gambling on the way to work: auto-spins while I'm driving. I'd get into work and book myself into meeting rooms, gambling there. If I'm up, I'm going to lord it out and buy drinks all night. If I'm down: "Wife, I'm going to work late because I've got a big project on," but I'm gambling.

By the time I came home, my wife had made food. Anyone that was a fly on the wall in my house would have thought I had IBS, that's how much time I spent on the toilet. Surely she must be thinking, "What the fuck is wrong with you?" I knew she went to bed at 10:00, so I'd wait 30, 40 minutes for her to fall asleep. I'd go up and lie next to her,

phone to the side, gambling next to her while she was sleeping. It was consuming every element of my day.

Naroop 39:06

And your wife didn't know about this at all?

Harj 39:11

Not at the beginning, but her gut intuition was there: debt letters, bailiff letters, "Why are we cancelling on our friends again? You keep working late. Hold on, we're not booking holidays like we used to. We're not even going out to eat like we used to."

With drugs or alcohol, when someone is drunk or intoxicated, you can see them in that element. Gambling is not like that. Gambling is a pure emotional rollercoaster. If you're pissed off at work or in a marriage, you get pissed off, right? You use those as excuses for this secret life that you're living. That's what it felt like.

Naroop 40:06

So was it the amount of money that you won that was important, or just the win? Because you were already earning six figures, so you were making money in life. Was it more just about the win than actually saying, "I've won a thousand," or was it just, "I've won"?

Harj 40:28

The truth is, it's not even the win. It's not even the amount of money that I won. It's my self-worth.

Naroop 40:38

Why wasn't being married, having a good job, having your family and friends, why wasn't that enough?

Harj 40:47

Twofold. One, I saw the debt that I was in and how much money I lost. But also, remember, I had been opened up to a new world of business owners making millions. My auntie owned a property company. If you walked into her house, it was like Italian furniture, Versace prints, two kitchens: one she cooks in, and one showpiece. When you're opened up to this new level of life and world, why would you want to come back down?

Even though I was on six figures, I knew that there's a better world and a better life out there, and the only way that I could get access to that world was by gambling my way to it.

Naroop 41:32

Was that the truth? Was that the only way? Because speaking to you, I know you're a super smart guy: you see opportunities everywhere and know how to turn them into something successful and monetise them. Surely there must have been other opportunities for you.

Harj 41:56

When you're in an addictive state, you become the dumbest person alive. That's the truth. Because when your emotions are high, your intelligence is low. Even though you know that's the lifestyle that you want, because your emotions are peaked with anxiety, stress, depression—no one talks about the eating disorders, the sleeping disorders, your whole energy shifting—whilst you can see it, your behaviours and habits trying to achieve it are vibrating at a level 10, not a level 100.

Naroop 42:31

Give me a description of what a typical day would have been like for you when you were at your peak gambling, married. What would you do when you woke up? How much did you eat? How much did you gamble? How much did you work? Talk me through a day in the life of Harj then.

Harj 42:49

A day in the life would vary depending on where it was in the month. For example, if it's payday, people wake up at 6:00, 6:30, 7:00 to get ready for work. I knew the money would hit my account at 4:00, 4:30 in the morning. I purposely set my alarm at that time. Once it hit my account, boom, I've got my bankroll, I'll gamble. By the time someone has even woken up to get ready for work, I've gambled away a month's worth of wages.

Naroop 43:19

What would you gamble on?

Harj 43:19

It was no longer the casinos or the bookmakers, it was Vegas in your pocket. It would be virtuals: betting on two or three different things at one time. If I was up, brilliant. If I was down, I had to keep £100 because at Tesco, you put a pound in the self-filling pump and fill up the rest, which would keep my petrol for the month. I could live off little things:

packets of crisps, bread, because my mom would cook for me so I was sorted from that perspective, but I didn't really care about food.

One point I had gambled and had £9,000 in my gambling account. On the way to work, I bet a couple of auto-spins and was up a couple hundred pounds. I sat in the car outside work and went up another couple hundred pounds. I'm on a roll, hot-streaking. I've gone into work, done my meetings, and then gone into the toilet. I'm thinking: right, I've turned a couple of grand into nine grand, I could turn nine grand into 90 grand.

I've gone to the toilet, 20 minutes in, sat on the toilet gambling away. Within 20 minutes, I had gambled £9,000 away.

Naroop 45:15

Wow.

Harj 45:16

The worst part here is the way you talk to yourself. You want to fucking punch the wall, punch the door, scream. The way you talk to yourself, you wouldn't say to your worst enemies.

Then you have to flip the mask on. Twenty minutes later, I'm in front of colleagues: "How are you doing, man? How's things? Good, we've got a meeting later on." Imagine right now that you've just lost nine grand, but now you have to go back into the office and carry on like everything's okay.

Naroop 45:50

How did you do that?

Harj 45:51

You become accustomed to it, you get so used to that. People with addictive behaviour, especially gambling, money pressures mean zero because they've been in the depths, they've won, they've been in the lows. So in my head, I'm like: okay, I've lost nine grand, so my head is conjuring up another way to get that nine grand back. Who do I need to borrow money from? Who do I need to steal from? Who do I need to defraud from? Where do I leverage credit cards or payday loans to get access to money?

The worst part here is, if you were my friend, I would make you lend money to me, but yet make you feel bad for not lending money to me.

Naroop 46:30

How would you do that?

Harj 46:36

Because I might know what your weak spots are: your partner, your parents, a specific thing you don't like about yourself.

Naroop 46:45

Give me an example. Do it to me.

Harj 46:48

I might turn around and say, "Listen man, I'm in a situation where me and my wife are going through some really hard problems. Bro, you know what I'm talking about. We need to just pay a couple of bills off, and if I pay these bills off, it's really going to help my relationship. I'm only asking for £500. Man, listen, you've been there, you know what it's like. Would you be able to help a brother out? I promise you, when it comes to payday, you know I'm in a good job. I got you, man. All I'm asking for is just that £500 so I can save my marriage. Would you be able to help me, bro?"

Naroop 47:27

My wallet, man.

Harj 47:28

You see how I knew what your circumstances were. As compulsive liars and manipulators, we know how to leverage what you're doing. But the worst part here is that if I took the money off you, I had no intention to pay you back.

Naroop 47:44

Wow.

Harj 47:46

You must have felt guilty doing that to a point, but then you think: fuck it, I'm more worried about the money I've lost. That's the truth.

Naroop 47:54

I like the honesty. And how many friends did you lose?

Harj 47:58

Loads. I call myself the Tasmanian Devil for relationships: I come in a whirlwind, fuck things up, and then move on to another one. Because what I saw friendships as was a

place of using and abusing.

A cousin didn't lend me money, so I stopped talking to him. Gambling requires two things: time and money. People with addiction behaviours become resourceful. I was going to do everything in my power to get access to that money, unbeknownst to the people that really matter. My wife had inclinations: "Why is your mate asking you for money? His wife contacted me saying you have his money." I'd say, "I went out with Chaz and lent him a bit of money and he owed me," making her confused. I was confusing the situation.

Everything ties back to gambling. It's almost like having a toxic relationship, almost like a mistress. Anything that I could do to protect it, I would do everything in my power to make sure no one knew about the secret world I was living.

Naroop 49:17

You described your relationship with gambling as being a toxic relationship when I spoke to you on the phone before coming on this. And now you say it's like a mistress: you want to protect it. What would happen if anyone came next to your mistress? What would you do to them?

Harj 49:33

Anything in my power to stop it: lie, fight, hide letters, dissociate from conversations, create a barrier. The reason why I say it's like a toxic relationship or a mistress is because of the way gambling treats you: it pushes you away, but then comes back and gives you affection. That hit of dopamine and oxytocin eludes you into this false sense of reality.

It's giving me that validation: am I good enough? If I have those wins, that proves my worth, and then I can pour that back into my family. But when it takes it away from you, you miss it. You talk to your phone like a person before jumping into bed: "Listen, I know you've been bad to me recently, but come on, give me some love." People looking at me would think I was delusional, but I was talking to it, giving it love and attention.

Naroop 51:24

I don't mean to laugh, it's just I've never heard anyone describe it in such a way. I think it's really interesting because it can help people who don't understand addiction relate to it, like an addictive relationship with a partner. You've painted the picture vividly. You're a great storyteller, and it's almost like I'm sat beside you as you're going through this.

How much debt did you accumulate all in all?

Harj 52:22

The debt comes from the gambling, but even before we get there, I think it's important to let people know how it got there.

Naroop 52:30

Okay.

Harj 52:31

Living this life of secrecy and shame, part of it was wanting to keep it hidden because within the South Asian culture, gambling is not talked about as much as drugs or alcohol. What would they think of me? There were times where I wanted to tell people, but I feared being judged in a bad lens.

Naroop 52:58

Did you ask for help?

Harj 53:03

No. Why would I ask people, with the fear that these friends might dissociate from me? That people-pleasing kicked in. So I stayed where I was.

It was the 16th of June 2020. We had just gone into the pandemic, and I had just lost my job because companies were cutting back. It was about 8:00 in the morning. I'm walking into the bedroom, and I hear my two-year-old son, Jieven, playing. I walked into the bedroom, and my wife was on the edge of the bed.

I have never seen her in this state before, sitting on the edge crying and breaking down. When she looked up at me, she looked at me with eyes of not just disappointment, but disgust. My first instinct was: what's happened, what's wrong? But then I recognised what she had in her hand: my phone.

All those lies about this and that—suddenly I was no longer worrying about what she was going through, but about what she had found out. She got access to my hidden online bank account: transactions after transactions after transactions. Not hundreds, not thousands, not tens of thousands—stupid money. She looked at me crying and said, "I can't believe you've fucking done this to us. You said to me you'd never hurt me." And it broke me, man.

Naroop 55:53

Was that your money, or was it your joint money?

Harj 55:53

Both at that time.

Naroop 55:57

So you'd been gambling your wife's money as well?

Harj 55:59

Yeah, because I was looking after the bills. We were behind on mortgage payments, gas bills, electricity bills. In that moment, something hit me in the gut. From 2009 to 2020, for 12 years of my life, I had been trying to chase the jackpot. I had the jackpot sat right in front of me: my wife, the life she built with me. Through everything I'd done, she had stuck by my side like a rock.

We had also just found out that we had another child on the way; she was pregnant with our second child. She was screaming, crying, shouting. My father-in-law walked in because we were isolating together during the pandemic, and she ran downstairs with him.

It felt like hours had passed. I was sitting on the bed in my towel, everything looping through my mind: not about the gambling, but about the bad choices I had made in life. A couple of hours passed, and she came back in: "Pack your bags. Get the fuck out." I was crying, begging: "Please give me another chance, I'll make everything right." She wasn't having any of it. She got my bag and threw it out.

I was packing my bag, crying. Forty minutes went by. She brought my son in, and it felt like I was saying goodbye to my son for the last time. I gave him a kiss and said, "I'm so sorry." But I never said sorry to my wife properly like that.

My wife came up to me, sat on the bed, and said, "Harj, if we're going to work on our marriage, you're going to have to get professional help." I had been given a lifeline. Anyone who has been in that situation knows how powerful those words are: "If we're going to work at this." Everything shifted. My energy shifted, and I felt that came from Jieven.

Naroop 59:49

Talking about Jieven, one thing I find challenging: when you had Jieven, your first son, why wasn't that enough to stop you doing what you were doing?

Harj 01:00:13

You always want a better life for your child, right? And if I'm being honest, the only way that I could see to build that better life was through gambling.

Naroop 01:00:23

But you could see that it was ruining your life.

Harj 01:00:28

No, you don't see it. You don't see the ruin or turmoil it's causing. You are blinkered, like a horse with blinkers on. You are solely focused on hitting that jackpot. When I saw my son, in that momentary perspective I loved being a dad, but the only way I thought I could rebuild this life and give everything to my family was by hitting that jackpot. And I missed it. The truth was, I already had it.

Anyone with an addiction has crackhead confidence: this crazy self-belief that they will do whatever it takes to get that outcome, because of the rush or win they expect on the other side.

Naroop 01:02:05

So when your wife said you'll get professional help, that was the point where everything changed?

Harj 01:02:16

Nearly, because my ego nearly stopped me from getting help. As a man, my ego was telling me: you can do it yourself, you don't need anyone else to help you.

I had to drown that noise out. But who do I ask? My parents? My brothers? My friends? The shame and guilt kicks in. When I opened up to my wife about gambling for 12 years, the debt I put us in was £250,000. A quarter of a million pounds. That is a big pill to swallow for anyone.

In the Bible it says if you speak your truth, it shall set you free. But no one equips you for the guilt. I felt relieved that my wife knew, but the guilt was the heaviest thing I've ever carried. It was holding me down. When I sought help, I couldn't go to my family. I

contacted my local temple, my local Gurdwara. My grandmother always said whenever you have a problem, go to the Gurdwara and seek solace there. I came off that call feeling more judged, more beaten, more decapitated as a human being because of how they made me feel: "You're stupid, the Guru tells you it's wrong, holy scripture tells you it's wrong." I know I'm wrong, but help me! Don't make me feel worse about myself.

I Googled, went to the NHS, filled out their form, and spoke to them within 24 hours. My wife watched me like a hawk, keeping tabs on my accounts. Because of the pandemic, everything was online, so I was in group Zoom sessions opening up to strangers like a Gamblers Anonymous meeting I had never experienced before.

Narooop 01:06:06

Was this just gambling addiction, or addiction in general?

Harj 01:06:13

Gambling. As it carried on, I thought I was getting better, but the guilt was weighing me down even more with self-sabotaging dialogue: "You broke your wife's trust, you put your family in £250,000 of debt, your wife is pregnant with your second child, you're not worthy of being a father, you're a waste of space."

Narooop 01:06:40

Didn't you say those things to yourself while you were gambling heavily?

Harj 01:06:47

Yes, but gambling would give me that release to fill the void. Now I had no release. The release was meant to be therapy, but it felt like they were tick-boxing as opposed to helping a human.

Harj 01:06:49

On the 18th of August 2020, that dialogue was really weighing me down. I had offered to help a friend in Nottingham with sales for his security business to help clear the debt. On the way, I messaged my wife to let her know. She was worried I was going to a casino because the trust was broken.

I met my friend and put up the mask, smiling, but behind the smile I was dying. Around 11:00 at night, I set off to drive home on the M1. As I was driving, that internal conversation took over: looking at the £250,000 debt, the broken trust, feeling unworthy of life, worrying about the shame it would bring to my parents and in-laws. The only way

out I could see was darkness.

In the third lane, having just passed Leicester Forest East services, I took my seatbelt off, put my foot down, let go of the steering wheel, closed my eyes, and said, "God, bring me closer." I crashed straight into the central reservation and blacked out.

When I came round, I smelled smoke. I was in my father-in-law's BMW 3 Series. The car's emergency system was asking if I needed help, and I said, "Send everyone." The car was completely written off. I managed to kick the door open, fell out, vomited, and crawled away. Miraculously, no other cars were involved. The emergency services arrived, and a paramedic looked at the wreckage and said, "If you don't believe in a higher power or God, start believing, because people haven't survived less than this."

I walked away without any broken bones, just scratches. I called my wife and told her I had been in an accident, hiding that it was a suicide attempt because of her pregnancy and previous miscarriages. That gave me a wake-up call, but what happened two days later, on the 20th of August 2020, was where everything truly changed.

Naroop 01:14:34

So you felt failed by the temple, failed by the NHS, and your only solution was to take your life?

Harj 01:14:43

I felt failed by myself. I despised myself because I didn't like who I was.

Naroop 01:15:14

So what did the universe do for you?

Harj 01:15:19

Two days later, on the 20th of August, I took my two-year-old son Jieven in the car. As we drove past the McDonald's on Farnham Road in Slough, my son asked for McDonald's—which he had never done before. We went through the drive-thru, ordered some fries, and I handed them to him in the back seat.

Everything slowed down into this quiet cocoon. He took a bite of the fry, looked at me, and said, "Dad, I'm so lucky."

Any father watching this would understand how much that means: knowing your son looks at you and says he's lucky to have you in his life. He taught me love in that moment more than when he was born. He taught me the value of responsibility, because Jieven means life. He genuinely saved my life that day, because he made me keep a promise to myself. That was the catalyst that changed everything.

Narooop 01:18:52

He gave you your self-worth, didn't he?

Harj 01:18:57

He gave me a reason to live, to strive to be the dad I knew I could be, fully present for my family, not half-present.

Narooop 01:19:49

So what did you have to do? What were your actions?

Harj 01:19:56

Simple: beat the addiction by getting the right help. You start asking the right questions, but you might get the wrong answers until you reach the right people. I eventually found the right help through GamCare.

Narooop 01:20:39

A lot of men stop after one or two attempts when asking for help. What advice would you give to a man seeking help who isn't being heard?

Harj 01:21:09

Men need to tap into the energy of a child. Children are relentless: when they want something, they keep asking every single day. Conversations cost nothing, but they can cost you everything. Verbalise what you are thinking internally until you get the answers you need.

Narooop 01:22:38

When an adult man keeps asking, people might judge him or tell him to man up. There's so much shame around men's mental health.

Harj 01:24:00

Shame comes from suppression of emotion. Men are taught from a young age: "Grow a pair, shut up, big boys don't cry." We suppress until we reach a pressure-cooker moment and blow up.

We need to tap into childhood curiosity and self-compassion. Courage comes from compassion for oneself: finding someone you trust and having the courage to say, "I need help."

Naroop 01:26:14

Did that experience lead to the organisation you're building now to help people with addiction?

Harj 01:26:34

On the 5th of October 2021, I went out publicly and shared my story as a recovering gambling addict. In South Asian communities, people often prefer you suffer in silence rather than damage social status. Gambling impacts finances, but more importantly relationships, mental health, and physical health.

I was gifted seva, selfless service. My purpose in life is simple: to help those suffering in silence. Through social media, talks, and outreach, I've reached millions, helped nearly 100 people begin recovery, and intervened with 11 people in suicidal crisis.

Naroop 01:30:11

Have you come to peace with everything you went through?

Harj 01:30:52

I've come to spiritual divinity: peace, love, belonging, seva. You don't have to be religious to be spiritual. Life can take you on what feels like the wrong path only to find out you're in the right direction.

That led to founding Soch Care: focusing on early intervention, education, and culturally informed, trauma-aligned treatment for the South Asian community, supporting speakers of English, Punjabi, Hindi, Gujarati, Urdu, and Arabic. The name comes from the Punjabi word soch, meaning to think or be mindful before taking action.

Naroop 01:33:40

What is the vision for Soch Care over the next five years?

Harj 01:33:58

Breaking stigmas and rebuilding lives.

Naroop 01:34:16

Where do you find the strength to be so vulnerable?

Harj 01:34:43

Once an addict, always an addict. When I was addicted to gambling, I was addicted to a negative outcome. Now, my addiction has shifted into helping people. Consistency in small daily habits compounds over time.

Naroop 01:36:10

For someone watching who knows they're struggling with addiction, what actionable steps can they take right now?

Harj 01:37:12

First, acknowledge the problem. Second, contact your banks to block gambling transactions, install Gamban on your devices, and register with GamStop for self-exclusion. Third, examine what underlying pain is driving the addiction. Fourth, envision what your perfect life looks like without addiction. And fifth, surrender your finances to someone you trust, so you can focus completely on getting better.

Naroop 01:39:49

As we come to an end, what's one thing we should have talked about that we haven't?

Harj 01:40:00

Generational trauma. We must stop telling men to shut up and get them to speak up. Suppressed pain gets passed down to our children, and I refuse to let my children inherit the pain of past generations.

Generational wealth isn't money or material possessions; it's what we leave within our children: love, empathy, kindness, and compassion. Feel it to heal it, and grow through the pain.

Naroop 01:42:30

Couldn't agree more. Thank you so much for your honesty, courage, and storytelling. I'm proud of you, brother. Thank you for coming on.

Harj 01:43:29

Appreciate you, bro. Thank you, brother.