

## **Jim's story**

My first and only conviction was for attempted robbery at a Bookmaker's when I was 28 years old. I owed a lot of money due to my gambling debts. I couldn't see a way out of it at the time. I got sent to prison. I'm 31 now.

It was dark, about 4pm one winter's day in January. I brandished a knife at the two counter clerks and they gave me £500. There weren't any punters in the shop, just the two women behind the counter. They must have been terrified. It was over in a flash.

I owed money to some people you really don't want to be owing money to. Really high rates of interest. And big problems if not paid back. I had to make a payment that day.

I'd been in the bookies a few times that day. Mulling things over. It was more on impulse than planned. If I'd planned it professionally then I don't think I'd of got caught.

It was four months before the police caught me. I didn't have a previous record. But my fingerprints were on record from some years back when I'd been charged, later dropped, for theft.

I was called to an ID parade. It was only then that I decided to admit I was guilty. I didn't want to put those two women through all that. I was sorry for what I'd done. I just wanted it over with.

I was bailed, which surprised me. I had come clean and revealed the full extent of my gambling addiction to the Probation Officer when he did my Pre-Sentence Report. Maybe that was why.

I knew deep down I'd be found out. My Barrister advised me to plead guilty saying that I would likely get up to three years. So I was shocked when I got four and a half years. I served two years, three months and one day inside. I was released on licence, which means I am answerable to my Probation Officer and have to report regularly until the full sentence is served.

It was the horses that gripped me. I started placing bets with my dad when I was young. It went on from there. I did go through a phase on the fruit machines but I grew out of it.

As I got older I never got on with my dad. There was a big gap, which grew.

My gambling wrecked everything. I put my girlfriend through too much. She's the mother of my daughter. They visited once soon after I went into prison in the June.

By the Christmas she'd cut off all contact. I could always talk to her. Talk about anything. About me, who I am, who I was. But she didn't want to bring a child into that environment. Fair enough I was the loser. I'd gone too far. Couldn't blame her at all.

I trained and worked as a stonemason. It was a good job. But the money was gambled away by yours truly.

I always thought I had it under control. I'd wake up in the morning with £400 on me. By evening I'd either be a winner or have nothing. It dictated how I felt. Horses running my emotions. Jumping the highs and lows.

This is how you know you've got an addiction.

In prison I got in touch with a solicitor about access to my daughter. She's six now. They put the wheels in motion. When I was in an open prison I got to see her for a few hours on my visits home.

I'm working as a driver now. Living with my parents – it's been a shock going home to mum at my age. I left home all those years ago at 16. But I can pay off my debts – including the £1,000 rent arrears to the council. I'm hoping in about 8-9 months time I'll get back on the waiting list and eventually get a flat again.

I'm seeing my girlfriend every week now. I even took my mum, sister and girlfriend out to dinner recently. I never did anything like that before.

My girlfriend's family are still very upset. They've known me for 15 years – which I've gambled my way through. I am just hoping that as time passes I can prove to them that people can and do change.

### *Inside prison*

There are opportunities to gamble in prison, people run books. The currency includes tobacco and phone cards. I didn't gamble.

Attending Gamblers Anonymous (GA) was a part of my sentence plan. I can see that it helps some people – but it wasn't for me.

I'm not sure if it is good to force people to go to GA. As I thought people did it so it looked good for their parole but they weren't really committed.

I never want to go back to prison. It doesn't hold any fears for me now I've done it. It took me about three and a half months to get over the shock and get used to it.

Mentally prison gets to you though. I can see why there is a high suicide rate. There's no constructive regime to give people a structure. I felt a loneliness in prison that I've never felt anywhere else. Like you are abandoned and there is no one for you. People just wallow.

There are people around to talk to. But no one to talk to about things that really matter.

That's why I know I've changed. Prison changed me. I was all self, self, and self before. Now I think of others. I can feel some of their suffering too. I've got my emotions back now I'm not gambling.

My first night in a cell was spent with a man who cried his eyes out. He only got nine months. I was there for him. He wrote to me through my sentence. We're still in touch. He's a pilot. We hope to get some cheap airline tickets and go off somewhere when my licence period ends.

I stayed in five different prisons while I did my time. I decided early on to make a go of it. Get something positive. I was polite to the prison staff. In order to get respect you have to give it.

### *Becoming a Listener*

I became a prison listener with the Samaritans inside. I used to do the 'nonce' wing – which is prison-speak for sex offenders and paedophiles. People on rule 43, who need protection – in danger or threat.

I was given a pass and allowed off the wing to visit people.

The case I remember most was a man sentenced on remand for 8 years. Two days prior to his sentence he'd been diagnosed with cancer and given six months to live. I was at a loss to know what to say. I stayed with him for one hour. I felt wholly inadequate when he thanked me for listening and told me it was good to talk to someone.

I also worked in the crisis suite. This is a facility for inmates who are suicidal. You are on a roster and get called out to stay up and talk with them.

Quite a few of the prison officers go on courses about suicide – recognising it, its causes and prevention.

About prison suicides – I would say that it was down to the conditions. It's the time to think that seems to send people's mental health spiralling down.

I believe there is likely to be fewer suicides where there is a constructive & structured regime with courses & activities through the week. Something to occupy people's minds. Just offering an hour in a gym twice a week isn't enough. I tried to get on every course that I could.

Bullying is like at school. The strong prey on the weak. It is a clash of cultures. So the first-timers in prison are more prone to be preyed upon.

#### *Fathers Inside*

This was the best course I have ever been on. It really helped me when I came out.

It teaches people to look at the sort of fathers they are. And gives help to improve.

It made me realise that you don't need lots of money to have a good relationship with your children. You can make stuff out of cardboard and plastic bottles – and children need your time more than anything.

It also looks at how you were brought up yourself and how that influences your children.

At the end of the course there was an open event where participants' children could visit. But my daughter didn't come.

#### *Victim Awareness*

This was a 3-day course with 12 inmates. It helped me. I started to have feelings about what I'd done to others. There are direct victims – the women I'd threatened in the bookies and the indirect victims, like my girlfriend, daughter and parents.

There was an opportunity to meet with your victim through a mediator. I was willing to do this. To explain why you'd done the crime. Understanding the reasoning behind a crime can help victims. But I didn't get to do it in the end.

### *Giving up gambling on the outside*

I did a couple of bets on the footballs as soon as I came out – and that was it. I stopped it all from then.

1. I've stopped associating with my past contacts or people in the bookies
2. I don't visit the bookies or arcades and I switch off the TV when racing comes on
3. I stick to my daily structure:
  - go to work every day – not like before when I took days off to gamble
  - visit my girlfriend once a week
  - go to snooker once a week
  - take my daughter out
  - got out with my mum and sister
  - use my money to buy things for my daughter or myself
4. Attending counselling session for addiction.

### *My future*

I'd like to teach basic skills. I've done a City and Guilds course to become qualified. And I'm going on to the higher level qualification.

I've been selected for quite a few interviews and narrowly missed being the successful candidate. What's holding me back is experience. But I'm working on that now.

I'd like to help others.

**ends**

### *Editor's note:*

*Since writing this story Jim has had a lapse with his gambling behaviour. He was at risk of re-offending which could have led to him being recalled to prison.*

*After discussion with his Probation Officer in the West Midlands Area, Jim agreed to enter a residential rehabilitative programme especially tailored for gambling. It is in the south of England and he expects to be there for 6-9 months.*

*Jim maintains regular contact with his Probation Officer, and during a recent phone call to her he said: 'Now I am where I need to be.'*

