



Gambling

For many, gambling is an attractive, fun form of entertainment. It's typically conducted between two or more parties and can be categorised in four main categories: Gaming (e.g., cards, fruit machines); Betting (e.g., sports, political events); Lotteries (e.g., scratch cards, raffles); and Speculation (e.g., stock markets, insurances). Based on uncertainty, outcomes of events determine the distribution of items (or behaviours) of value. However, for some, gambling can become a problem (or addiction, compulsion, dependency, pathology, etc.), reinforced by frequency of betting, short delays between "purchase" and "outcome", and ease of access.

Problem gambling affects all subtypes of people (any age, gender, ethnicity), but there are 3 main paths suggested:

- (1) The "normal" problem gambler who's influenced by (or learnt from) environment, circumstance, and socialisation from TV, family, and/or friends;
- (2) The psychologically vulnerable gambler, who's susceptible to stress, anxiety, and/or depression, has potentially experienced a trauma/upheaval in life and gambles to emotionally escape (dissociate) or to cope;
- (3) The impulsive gambler, who's impulsive by nature, easily bored, overactive, and requires much stimulation and novel experiences, giving little forethought to consequences.

Regardless of the pathway used, problem gambling brings relational, social, and personal chaos, can be evasive, and hard to control; it can be all consuming for a person who considers gambling as primary to most other life factors:

- ❖ **Before Gambling:** Craving/Preoccupation; Fear of missing a win; Over-confident in winning; Excitement of buying "winning" ticket; Irritation/Anger with obstacles to gambling.
- ❖ **During Gambling:** Focus solely on gambling; Excitement/physical arousal; Irrational self-talk; Superstitious behaviour to increase chance of winning.
- ❖ **After a Win:** Relief; Anticipating next bet; Confidence/"all skill"; Elated mood; Inflated ego; Pride.
- ❖ **After a Loss:** Guilt/Remorse; Fear of being caught; Money worries; Preparing lies to conceal; Self-directed anger; Determination to never gamble again, whilst planning chasing losses; Overlooking problems or blunting them with substance abuse.

Signs of Problem Gambling

For Partner's or Family to consider

Lengthy or unexplained absences from work/home
 Complaints of poor productivity in work
 Multiple/large bet betting slips
 Preferring gambling alone when in social setting
 Preoccupation with gambling
 Frequently short of money
 Numerous credit cards with no credit, loans, friends highlighting money owed, bounced cheques
 Money/items disappearing from home
 Mood swings coinciding with sporting events
 Discover less money in accounts than ought to be

For Individual to consider

Due to Gambling:
 Lost time from work, day, reality
 Decreased ambition, efficiency, reputation
 Lessened home-life happiness, disinterest in family and own welfare, incompleteness of responsibilities
 Increased financial problems, guilt/remorse, lies and fights
 Begged, borrowed, stole
 Feelings of depression, anxiety, anger, self-harm, substance abuse, distraction, and social, family, and work problems
 Gambled to:
 Solve financial problems
 Celebrate, distract, self-soothe, escape worry or distress

Initial and ongoing phases of gambling vary between individuals, and one can go back and forth:

- ❖ **Winning Phase:** often introduced by family/friends, one quickly learns that gambling is linked with fun, excitement, and distraction. A win ensues quickly and fantasies of winning more strengthens.
- ❖ **Losing Phase:** good luck fades and one loses more than intended or can afford, and "chasing" ensues. Unpredictable and Intermittent wins reinforces gambling and loss of control.
- ❖ **Desperation Phase:** lack of control and irrational gambling increases and responsibilities, friends, family etc are neglected. Gambling is prioritised and damaging behaviour ensues, then shame.

Such phases are driven by our schemas (i.e., sets of thoughts, beliefs, memories, attitudes, values, and images) that drive how we behave, e.g., "gambling is a disease", "gambling helps me cope", "I'm only worthy when I win", "I can only get rich by gambling". By identifying the faulty or irrational schemas, analysing them and creating plans of behaviour to challenge them, one can overcome problematic behaviours. A big challenge is the ambivalence of wanting to change vs not wanting to change. Some people need multiple supports and fundamental shifts in their schemas; and very few people (if any) can be "forced" to change by other people. The information below merely highlights some techniques that can be supplemental to approaches in overcoming problem gambling.



Brief Overview of Framework to Overcome Problem Gambling

Abstain or Reduce? Whilst reducing gambling can be achieved by some, the reasons that some people can succeed and some can't are not fully known. Abstinence is a good starting point as it avoids exposure to risk of a behaviour that hitherto was hard to control and is more helpful to eliminate an urge to gamble. Reduction helps to measure improvement and a sense of personal and financial autonomy.

Write and compare ranked lists of 10 Reasons For and Against Abstinence and For and Against Reduction.
For each item, consider whose and what needs are being met.

Clear the Decks (where possible, relevant, and appropriate to do so, do the following:)

- ❖ Current financial problems: list all debts owed, give partner details of debts, take responsibility of/plan repaying them, have pay put into bank account, make a budget plan with partner, involve partner in support
- ❖ Legal problems: disengage from any illegal activity (if doing so) and consider unburdening by discussing actions with partner, taking legal advice, and taking responsibility for your actions
- ❖ Substance abuse: abstain from substance use, know triggers to substance use, seek help if needed
- ❖ Relationship problems: if not resolved by yourselves seek help as strife can be triggers/"reasons" to gamble

Step 1: Motivations and Goals. Whether or not you think you might have a problem or you hit "rock bottom", write and compare a ranked list of 10 reasons to cease gambling and to continue gambling. For each item, consider whose and what needs are being met. Typically, people want to stop because they realise that their behaviour is badly affecting others and all areas of their own life and that their gambling is based on satisfying their own needs and is emotionally draining them and others.

Step 2: Monitoring Gambling. Gamblers are more likely to remember the wins than the losses and to overlook the actual money spent to get a win. Monitoring is key to get objectivity, records of actual money spent, and patterns of behaviour, thoughts, and emotions. Create a database with the following headings: 1. Time and Place; 2. Feeling and Thoughts before Gambling (rate tension on scale of 1-10); 3. Borrowings; 4. Cash at Start of Session; 5. Cash at End of Session; 6. Win; 7. Loss; 8. Feelings and thoughts after Gambling (rate tension on scale of 1-10); 9. Net Money. Complete sheets throughout the days and weeks and Review often.

Step 3: Urge Control. Whilst tension and stress of daily life are common triggers to gamble, tension and stress can also occur when usual behaviour is not fulfilled. Key to overcoming problem behaviours is distraction, substitution, and/or relaxation. Simply distracting from the urge can be helpful, but not always enough: replacing problem behaviour with healthy behaviour can help. Relaxation, meditation, focus on breathing, mindfulness can help, as can "imaginal desensitisation" (see Blaszczynski (2010) for more).

Step 4: Trigger Control. People, places, times, environments, emotions, activities, etc. are gambling cues which create anticipation, pleasure, and physical excitement in winning. Review Step 2 and consider people, places, etc. for cues to gamble. Write it down. Where possible, eradicate your environmental cues, avoid/remove cues, say no to cues, ask friends/family to stop introducing cues: consider how to productively spend time with self and others. Consider your emotional, psychological, and physical cues to gambling, and strategies to manage life better to minimise these cues, e.g., instilling disciplined routine to reduce time management stress.

Step 5: Beliefs, Thoughts, Attitudes. Write a 20 item list of your attitudes and beliefs about (your) gambling. How many are erroneous, faulty, or irrational? E.g., gambling is an easy way of making money, I'm a better than average gambler, I win more when I wear red—such leads to minimising losses and exaggerating wins, chasing losses, feeling bad with losses, taking more risks, gambling preoccupation, and believing gamblers who "win overall". Consider illusion of control: lucky charms, turning cards a certain way, rhythm used playing the slots, familiar courses, machines, numbers, etc. all of which do not determine the outcome of the result. If "beating the system" or winning implies skill, what do losses imply? "Nearly winning" does not increase winnings or future chances, but it does increase the buzz/continuation of gambling. Challenge items on the list with positive, rational, alternative thoughts.

Step 6: Prevent Relapse. Focus on goals, not hiccups or slips. **HARDLOSS.** Hurt will subside but can lead to feelings of victimisation, desire to gamble, etc. Your responsibility to deal constructively. **Anger.** Use energy positively and/or remove self from difficult situations. **Rewards** (healthy) are important. **Depression** and other neg feelings can instigate prob beh's. Try to resolve it. **Loneliness** comes with maladaptive behaviour and "slipping". Increase groups, family, friends time. Loneliness won't kill; it's uncomfortable but will pass. **Overwhelmed,** be realistic and careful of how much stress you can manage. Patience and planning are key. **Stagnant,** "Boredom!" is lethal. Be careful. Get variety, get busy, get interested/ing. **Self Pity,** "Poor Me!" We all struggle. Recognise, accept, move on. Be strong.