

Chapter 1 - Self-knowledge

Understanding your gambling problem

I know that I won't win, but I'm hoping that I do – Barry

When I gamble, I don't think about anything. It's just me and the machine and everything else is forgotten. – Fiona

By learning the causes of gambling, you can understand why you have struggled to control your own gambling and decide what you need to do to stop.

Introduction

Gamblers often struggle to understand their gambling. When you step back and look at it, gambling doesn't really make much sense. Why do you keep gambling when you nearly always lose? For many, gambling is quite out of character. They are intelligent people. They are disciplined in many areas of their life, such as work or family, but they just can't stop gambling. Some gambled happily for years without a problem, but now they can't stop gambling. What's more, these losses have a devastating impact. Finances are destroyed. Massive debts are run up. Relationships fail. Jobs are lost. Some gamblers even end up in jail. Yet, the gambling goes on.

It is very difficult to change a habit if you don't understand what causes the behavior in the first place. Recently, researchers have begun to explain problem gambling using a cognitive behavioral model. This model closely examines the thoughts, feelings and behaviors of problem gamblers and provides clear directions about what problem gamblers need to change in order to stop gambling. It is very practical and straightforward approach to the problem. Let's look at this model more closely.

The cognitive behavioral model

When you ask problem gamblers to explain their gambling, you get some interesting answers. Quite often the first response is "I am addicted" or "I am compulsive". Some gamblers say that they must want to punish themselves by gambling. It is the only way they can understand their continued gambling in the face of massive losses. However, when asked to monitor their thoughts, feelings and behaviors before they gamble, the responses are quite different. Far from wanting to punish themselves, problem gamblers are actually hoping to get something positive out of gambling.

As you can see in the following testimonies, one of the most common responses is that they are hoping to win money:

I think about winning back the money that I have lost. – Robert

Before I start gambling, I'm hoping for a win. I'm thinking that maybe today will be my day. – Joel

What is crucial here is that problem gamblers HOPE that they will win money. Even though they have experienced years of losing and they know that they are unlikely to win, problem gamblers enjoy feeling hopeful that something good might happen to them. Gambling gives them hope and they are prepared to ignore past experience to get that feeling again.

Another common response of gamblers is that they gamble to escape.

I gamble because I am lonely. – Joan

I gamble to get away from feeling depressed. I know eventually it makes me feel worse, but it helps me to get away from feeling down, even if it's only for a short while. – Don

I gamble because I'm bored, then I lose and my life is even more boring. – Tom

In this sense, gambling is used as a way to escape from unpleasant feelings, rather than as a punishment. Even though in the long run, gambling causes even more negative feelings, in the short run, the easy option is to get away from everything by gambling.

How gambling traps you

If people gamble because they feel hopeful about winning and to avoid unpleasant feelings, continued heavy gambling starts to make a bit more sense. Roy's story can give us some insight:

I started gambling when I was 19 or 20. It was fun. I won a few times, but I never bet very much. I looked forward to gambling. It was a chance to make some money. In my early 20's, things started going well at work. I was promoted and I started to make good money. More money meant I could do more of the things I wanted. I bought a CD player and clothes. I was able to borrow money for a car. I was able to gamble more. I had the money to play more often and for longer. I started betting bigger, hoping that I'd win more. The losses were bigger, but they didn't hurt me too bad. I was single and living at home. Things were easy.

When I was 26, Mum and Dad retired and moved up the coast. I moved in to my own place. Things were OK at first, but I was pretty lonely there. I started to go to the pub three or four times a week, just to break the boredom. I was losing more, because I was playing more often. Soon the bills started to mount up and I was finding it more and more difficult to pay them. I borrowed more and more against my credit card. The more financial trouble I got in to, the more I gambled. The less money I had, the less able I was to go out with my friends or do fun things. I was even more bored and I began to feel depressed. These feelings just made me want to gamble more. I wanted a big win to get out of trouble fast and I wanted to get away from feeling down.

Within a year or so, as soon as I got paid, I'd go and gamble. It felt like it was my only escape and my only way out of trouble. The

debts got bigger and bigger, as I lost more and more. I was so stressed and depressed. I couldn't think straight. I started to drink heavily. I'd borrow money from friends and not pay them back. I'd lie, I'd make up stories, anything to get money. My family and friends wanted nothing to do with me. My isolation, however, just made me gamble more.

I hit rock bottom one night after I lost all of my wages. I drank two bottles of bourbon and woke up in hospital. The psychologist there put me in touch with the gambling clinic and I started the slow road to recovery.

Roy's story is typical. The gambling begins harmlessly enough. It is understandable that people would be drawn to gambling when the gambling industry spends \$500 million on advertising. However, as circumstances change, the impact of gambling becomes more severe and gamblers become trapped. You gamble to win money and to escape. You lose money. This makes your financial position worse. You feel more depressed and stressed. You think gambling is a good way to get out of the mess and to get away from everything. You gamble more. Once in a while, you win. This reinforces that gambling is a good thing to do. It feeds in to your feelings of hope about gambling. It makes you think it is possible for gambling to give you what you want. You gamble more. You lose. Your financial position worsens. Your gambling is now causing significant problems in other areas of your life. These problems make you feel even more stressed and depressed. You start to think that gambling is now the only way out of trouble. You gamble more. You lose. And so on and so on. The following diagram demonstrates this trap.

The Heavy Gambling Trap

HEAVY GAMBLING CAUSES:



CONSEQUENCES:

*Financial problems
Relationship problems
Employment difficulties
Social problems
Isolation*



FEELINGS:

*Worry
Anxiety
Depression
Low self-esteem
Fear
Panic*



THOUGHTS:

*Gambling is a good way to escape
A big win will get me out of trouble
I'll just put \$20 in and see what happens
I'll get away from everything for a while
A win will give me some extra cash to pay all my bills*



GAMBLE:

As play, forget about problems for a while. Feel distracted and hopeful

WHEN YOU LOSE:

*Makes consequences worse as financial problems increase.
Makes feelings worse as related problems intensify*

WHEN YOU WIN:

*Reinforces positive thoughts about gambling.
Makes gambling seem more appealing.*

Is controlled gambling an option?

So how do you get out of the trap? Many gamblers think that if only they could control their gambling, they would avoid getting in to the trap in the first place. Often when gamblers seek help, they ask whether controlled gambling is a

possibility. They hope that they can learn a safe way to gamble that somehow avoids the associated problems. However, there is very little evidence to support controlled gambling as a treatment option. Once at a venue, gamblers find it extremely difficult to think rationally and to stay in control of their emotions. There's an old racetrack saying that goes "You walk through the gate and it's off with the head, on with a pumpkin". Robert's testimony demonstrates this point well:

Every pay day I'd tell myself "Just put in \$50 and see if you can win a couple of hundred. If you lose the fifty, then go home". I'd play and lose the fifty straight away. I'd think "Another fifty won't hurt." Then I'd lose that and think "The machine's got to pay soon. I'll put another fifty in." I'd lose that too, and suddenly I'm starting to worry. I'm thinking "I can't afford to lose \$150. I'll have nothing left when I pay all my bills. I'll put a hundred in. That will give me a fair go. I'll get back to losing a hundred and then stop." Of course, I'd lose that, too and now I'm panicking. I can't even pay my bills now. I'm thinking that the only way out is a big win, so I put another hundred in. When that's gone, I stop caring. I feel numb and blow the rest of my pay. I look back afterwards and I don't understand how it happened. I really wanted to bet \$50, but once I start playing, all that goes out the window.

Robert's testimony is all too common. He had every intention of controlling his gambling on the day, but ended up losing everything. How does this happen?

When you are gambling, you experience a roller coaster of emotions. You feel hope, anger, despair, elation, disappointment, worry, joy, relief, panic and fear, all in a very short period of time. These powerful feelings make it difficult to think rationally and, as you lose more and more, your thinking becomes less and less rational. Staying in control becomes almost impossible.

There is also very little in the gambling environment to help you stay in control. For example, have you ever noticed how difficult it is to collect money from of a poker machine? The machines have the technology to take your notes, but for some unexplained reason, they do not pay you in notes! We know that the technology is available. ATM's with this technology are often situated in the venues themselves, usually near the door so you see them or near the machines themselves. It's also interesting that nearly every gambling venue provides alcohol, often at discounted prices. With money and alcohol so readily available in the venues, it is very difficult for problem gamblers to become controlled gamblers. This means that giving up gambling completely really is the only option.

Why can't you just stop?

Many gamblers find it frustrating that they can't stop gambling. They find it easy to stop gambling when they have no money. The withdrawal symptoms from ceasing gambling are minimal compared to those experienced by smokers, drinkers or drug users. So why is it so difficult to stop?

If you've only been playing the pokies heavily for two years, its likely that you have pressed the button on the machine around 200,000 times!!! Whatever your gambling type, the thoughts, feelings and behaviors associated with gambling have been repeated over and over again. This repetition means that the behavior has become a deeply engrained habit.

A good way to understand this is to think of a champion tennis player or golfer. They do not have to think about how to hit the ball. After years of practice, they just see the ball and hit it. It's the same with driving a car. When we accelerate, brake or change gears, we don't really give much thought to putting our feet on the pedals. We just respond automatically to the situation. Gambling is similar. Gamblers have practiced the thoughts, feelings and behaviors associated with gambling over and over again. As soon as gamblers receive some money, they immediately think about gambling. They feel hopeful as soon as they think about it. If they feel stressed or down, the automatic response is to think about going to gamble. They have trained themselves in gambling and have become experts at it!

Now if gambling is so deeply engrained, you will need more than just willpower to stop. When smokers give up smoking, their bodies immediately start repairing themselves. As the body recovers, the craving is easier and easier to deal with. The longer that their body is free of nicotine, the easier it is not to smoke. However, gambling is not a pharmacological addiction from which the body recovers. Rather it is more like a psychological addiction. Your body won't really help you very much. To break a psychological addiction, you will need to learn some special skills.

The skills approach

Put simply, gamblers get trapped in a pattern of problem gambling. They gamble to win and to escape from problems. After a period of time, their losses mount up, leading to financial and other difficulties. They think that the best way to cope with these difficulties is to gamble some more. They lose again and their financial difficulties worsen, so they gamble again and the pattern goes on and on. To break this pattern, gamblers need to learn the following eight skills:

The first skill you will need can be termed **self-motivation**. It's hard to break a deeply engrained habit. It will require some hard work. You won't do this work unless you really believe that it is worth while and you really want to change. Chapter 2 teaches you how to motivate yourself to give up gambling.

The second skill is **self-education**. There is very little in the gambling environment to actually educate you about gambling. There's advice on how to play and signs telling you how much you will win. In some states, there are even signs that tell you the game's percentage return. However, there is nothing that explains exactly why it is impossible to win at gambling in the long run. Chapter 3 teaches you why you do not and cannot win at gambling in the long run.

The third skill is called **cognitive therapy**. Gamblers THINK that they might win at gambling. They THINK that gambling is a good way to escape from problems and negative feelings. Chapter 4 teaches you how to change the way you think about gambling, in order to break the entrapment of gambling.

The fourth skill concerns finding **alternative responses to gambling**. To break a habit, you need to replace the damaging behavior with a range of healthy and useful behaviors. When the urge to gamble arises, you can then respond with a different behavior to gambling. Chapter 5 teaches you how to find these alternative responses.

The fifth skill is **problem solving**. Gambling is often a response to problems and a cause of further problems. Chapter 6 teaches you how to solve these problems effectively without gambling.

The sixth skill is **emotion management**. Gambling is often caused by and a cause of unpleasant feelings. Chapter 7 teaches you techniques to cope with negative and unpleasant feelings without gambling.

The seventh skill is called **relapse prevention**. Stopping gambling requires one set of skills. Staying off gambling for good requires another set. Chapter 8 teaches you how to identify, avoid and deal with high-risk situations that may cause you to return to gambling.

The eighth skill is **self-esteem building**. Many years of gambling destroys a gambler's beliefs about their worth as a human beings. These beliefs can undermine recovery or result in a return to gambling. Chapter 9 teaches you how to re-build your self-esteem.

Your first task

By identifying the thoughts, feelings and situations that occur before and during a gambling session, you can start to understand the causes of your gambling. This knowledge is important if you are going to break your gambling habit, as you need to know exactly what triggers each episode. The self-monitoring exercise can help you to collect this information.

Think about your last gambling session. Try to remember what was happening before you gambled. Where were you? What were you feeling? What were you thinking? Then try to remember what was happening when you made the decision to gamble. What situation were you in? How were you feeling? What were you thinking? Now try to remember the actual gambling session. If you were losing, how were you feeling? What were you thinking? If you won, how did you feel? What were you thinking? What did you do next? Using a self-monitoring sheet can help you in this task. I have provided some examples on the following page to show you what to do. Note that you work down the sheet towards the bottom of the page.

Self-monitoring sheet - Examples

	Date	<i>4 April</i>	<i>20 May</i>	<i>30 November</i>
Before you gambled:	What was the situation?	<i>Bad day at work. Driving past the pub.</i>	<i>Pay day. I was in the pub having a drink.</i>	<i>At home by myself.</i>
	What were you feeling?	<i>Stressed, tired and angry.</i>	<i>Drunk.</i>	<i>Bored and lonely.</i>
	What were you thinking?	<i>Just put \$20 in.</i>	<i>I always lose. Surely I'm due for a win.</i>	<i>Gambling won't hurt. It's a good escape.</i>
When you decided to play:	What were you feeling?	<i>Hopeful.</i>	<i>Happy.</i>	<i>Excited.</i>
When you were gambling:	Were you winning or losing?	<i>Losing \$300</i>	<i>Winning \$200</i>	<i>Losing heaps.</i>
	What were you thinking?	<i>I can't afford to lose. Machine must pay soon</i>	<i>I'm on a roll. Bet up.</i>	<i>Who cares if I lose?</i>
	What were you feeling?	<i>Panic. Scared.</i>	<i>Excited.</i>	<i>Depressed.</i>
	What did you do next?	<i>Lost another \$200 chasing after the \$300.</i>	<i>The roll ended and I lost everything.</i>	<i>Went home and felt even more bored and lonely.</i>

Now you have got the idea, fill in the self-monitoring sheet for the last three times that you gambled. If you can't remember the last three sessions, write answers for some sessions that you stick in your mind.

These monitoring sheets will provide you with important information for the coming chapters, so keep filling them in whenever you gamble. Looking back over the monitoring sheet, do you notice any patterns in your gambling? Did any common situations or feelings trigger gambling sessions? What sort of thoughts allowed you to gamble?

Self-monitoring sheet

	Date			
Before you gambled:	What was the situation?			
	What were you feeling?			
	What were you thinking?			
When you decided to gamble:	What were you feeling?			
When you were gambling:	Were you winning or losing?			
	What were you thinking?			
	What were you feeling?			
	What did you do next?			

Now that you have some insight in to the causes of your gambling, you are ready to begin learning the skills that you need to give up. The first skill is self-motivation.

Biographical note acknowledgements and further advice

Simon Milton, BA Hons, MPsych, MAPS, is a clinical psychologist who specialises in the assessment and treatment of problem gambling.

This chapter is taken from Stop Gambling: A self help manual for giving up gambling which was originally published in Australia by Pan Macmillan in 2001. It may be copied and freely distributed without alteration. It is based on various published studies including those by myself, Dr Fadi Anjoul, Dr Louise Sharpe and Dr Robert Ladoceur.

Self help manuals can play an important role in the treatment of some gambling problems. However, not all gamblers respond to the techniques set out in these chapters. A qualified gambling counselor can provide personalized treatment that specifically addresses your circumstances. Seeking such help is highly recommended.