



UCLA
GAMBLING STUDIES PROGRAM

Complementary and Integrative Treatments for Gambling Disorder

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UCLA Gambling Studies Program

Four Directions Conference

September 11, 2025

Goals and Objectives

- Define complementary and integrative health treatment approaches for gambling disorder
 - Explain the scientific rationale behind incorporating the holistic approach to addressing the physical, emotional, and psychological aspects of gambling disorder
- Discuss practical considerations and best practices for integrating CIH practices into existing addiction treatment programs, including tailoring treatment plans to individual needs and preferences.

Ellie

- 72 year old female with depression, fibromyalgia, and gambling disorder and gaming disorder
 - Solitaire video games (no money)
 - Social casino games (slot simulators for money)
 - No brick and mortar gambling
 - Gambling harm; time, financial, emotional stress

Ellie

- Conventional treatment approaches
- Biological
 - Does not want prescription meds (anti-pharma)
 - Sleeps and eats well enough
 - Physical exercise is difficult due to fibromyalgia

Ellie

- Psychological treatment
 - Open to individual psychotherapy
 - Prefers in-person and not open to telehealth therapy (some technological phobia)
- Social treatment
 - Not open to GA due to fibromyalgia, fear of others "invading her space"

Ellie

- After 8 sessions of supportive psychotherapy, very little progress made in gambling behaviors, mood or quality of life
- Ellie referred to acupuncture clinic in her neighborhood (5 minute drive from her house)

Ellie

- Begins weekly acupuncture treatments
- Continues with monthly supportive psychotherapy visits
- 8 weeks later
 - General state is improved
 - Less time and money spent on phone
 - Attribute improvement to acupuncture and relationship with TCM physician

Current Treatments for Gambling Disorder



Biological



Psychological



Social

Current Treatments

Biological

- Medications
 - No FDA-approved meds
 - Naltrexone, Nalmefene, Lithium, N-Acetyl Cysteine,
- Sleep
- Physical Movement
- Nutrition

Current Treatments

Psychological

- Individual Therapy
 - Many different treatment modalities
 - Which one works best?
- Family Therapy
- Group Therapy
- Principles of Addiction Care
- Principles of Behavioral Healthcare

Current Treatments

Social

- Gambler's Anonymous
- Peer Support and Recovery
- Community activities
- Self-exclusion
- Digital Therapeutics
 - Gambling blockers
 - Recovery Apps

Limitations of Current Treatment Options

- Slow development and translation from idea to research to clinic
 - Lack of funding, people, participants
- Co-occurring disorders often missed or treatment options are limited
- Demand for treatment fluctuates as most with gambling disorder don't seek or don't know about treatment options

Traditional Treatment Settings

- Treatment occurs “within the walls or virtual meeting”
 - What happens outside of the office?
- Provider-client dynamic and hierarchy
 - From me to you
- Therapy healing is relational
- Concepts of boundaries
 - Who made these up?

Complementary Treatments

Complementary Treatment (CAM)

- The term “complementary” is defined as “used in addition to conventional treatments,” and “alternative” is defined as “instead of conventional treatment”
 - Not to be viewed as “less than or ineffective”
- “integrative” can be viewed as adding to conventional treatment
 - Not substituting

Role of CAM in Gambling Disorder Treatment

- Bring more patients into treatment (hesitant or resistant to traditional forms of treatment)
 - Close treatment gap
 - Increase treatment retention
- Treat co-occurring disorders
- Expand treatment toolbox
- Honor cultural traditions and practices

Favorable Aspects of CAM

- Favorable opinion
 - Clients survey embrace these practices
- Many are already using them
- Low-tech
- Low-cost
- Low-risk side effects

How Do Complementary Treatments Work?

- Do they address the underlying condition (e.g. restore or heal?)
 - What are their mechanisms of action?
 - How do they work?
- How do they address co-occurring conditions?
- Are they a part of self-care routine or can they set a new baseline?

Hesitancy Toward CAM

- Not “science”- based
- Mechanisms of action aren’t clear and precise
- Seen as “alternative”, “soft” “not real treatment”
- Couldn’t I figure it out on my own? Why do I need a professional to tell me this?

Complementary Treatments (A Partial Tour)

Acupuncture: How It Works

- Traditional Chinese medical practice that involves inserting thin needles into specific points on the body to treat pain and improve overall health.
- Disrupting the body's life force energy, known as qi, causes illness.
- Stimulating these acupuncture points, practitioners aim to balance qi and restore yin and yang,

Acupuncture


- Practiced for more than 2000 years.
- scientific evidence supporting acupuncture's effectiveness is variable.
- Efficacy data for a variety of conditions, including chronic headaches, knee osteoarthritis, chronic pain, dysmenorrhea (painful periods), and some musculoskeletal injuries.

Acupuncture

- Acupuncture needles are significantly thinner, smaller, and not hollow as compared to hypodermic needles
- Needles are all about as thick as a human hair.
- In place for 10-15 minutes, can be manipulated
- Side effects – generally, low but include redness, bruising, minor bleeding, or swelling.

Who remembers this?

- Lori Ruggle
- Tri-Meridian Treatment Center
- Residential Gambling Treatment Program (1990s)
- Used Acupuncture as part of residential treatment experience

▶ Med Acupunct. 2022 Oct 17;34(5):331–336. doi: [10.1089/acu.2021.0013](https://doi.org/10.1089/acu.2021.0013) 

The Role of Acupuncture in Treating a Patient with a Gambling Disorder

[Yolanda Teja](#)^{1,✉}, [Irma Nareswari](#)¹, [Christina L Simadibrata](#)¹

▶ [Author information](#) ▶ [Article notes](#) ▶ [Copyright and License information](#)

PMCID: PMC9595637 PMID: [36311885](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36311885/)

Acupuncture: Mechanism

- Acupuncture helps regulate the reward system, stimulates release of various neurotransmitters in the brain (how?)
- induces neuroprotective effects, and activates certain brain areas to suppress impulsivity and craving, and to balance emotions in patients

How acupuncture could help

- With positive reinforcement, acupuncture can activate the GABA receptor, which decreases dopamine in the nucleus accumbens.
- With negative reinforcement, acupuncture stimulates the hypothalamus, increasing dopamine release in the nucleus accumbens.⁷


Yoga:

- This practice combines poses, controlled and purposeful movements, and deep-breathing exercises.
- Many, many different styles / varieties

Yoga

- Yoga (to join) is a mind-body practice which involves following certain principles
 - Personal discipline
 - practicing physical postures
 - breath regulation
 - sense control
 - concentration
 - meditation
 - contemplation
 - absorption/stillness

Yoga

▶ J Neurosci Rural Pract. 2018 Jan-Mar;9(1):117–122. doi: [10.4103/jnrp.jnrp_243_17](https://doi.org/10.4103/jnrp.jnrp_243_17) 

Role of Yoga in Management of Substance-use Disorders: A Narrative Review

[Pooja Patnaik Kuppili](#)¹, [Arpit Parmar](#)^{1,✉}, [Ankit Gupta](#)², [Yatan Pal Singh Balhara](#)¹

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PMCID: PMC5812135 PMID: [29456355](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29456355/)

Yoga

- Studies on the effect of yoga on stress system showed that yoga can reduce stress by improving the neurobiological determinants of stress.
- Since yoga has been shown to improve brain's reward system, stress system and inhibitory control, it can be speculated that yoga can be useful in the management of addictive disorders

Yoga and Gambling

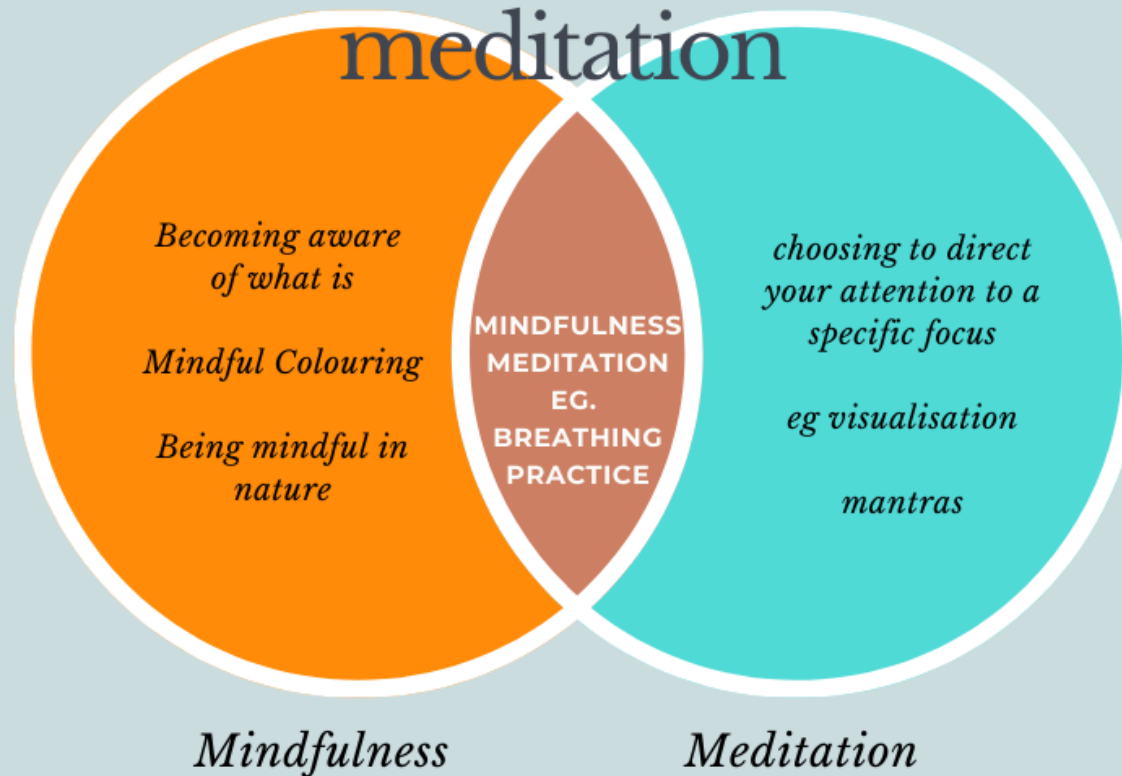
- **Stress Reduction:**
 - These practices promote relaxation, deep breathing, and physical movement, helping to calm the mind and reduce stress levels.
- **Emotional Regulation:**
 - individuals can develop a non-judgmental attitude toward their emotions, allowing them to process and manage them in healthier ways

Yoga and Gambling

- **Improved Self-Reflection:**
- They encourage individuals to cultivate a deeper understanding of their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, including the underlying motivations behind gambling addiction.

Mindfulness Meditation

The difference between mindfulness and meditation



What's the Difference?

- Mindfulness is the mental state of being in the present moment, non-judgmental awareness,
- Meditation is a formal practice used to cultivate mindfulness and other qualities like focus, attention and calmness

Mindfulness

- Mindfulness practices encourage present-moment awareness and non-reactivity.
- For gambling addiction, as it allows them to pause and consider their choices before acting impulsively.
- Develop a greater sense of self-control, enabling individuals to make conscious decisions aligned with their recovery goals.

Mindfulness-based relapse prevention (MBRP)

Integrates carefully tailored meditation practices with cognitive and behavioral skills building.

Manualized delivery

session-by-session implementation guidelines, sample scripts, and reproducible handouts and forms.

MBRP Exercises


- An example of a typical meditation exercise might instruct a client to sit quietly, either cross-legged or on the floor, and focus attention on the somatic sensations of breathing.

Articles

Mindfulness in Patients With Gambling Disorders

Rory C. Reid , PhD, LCSW , Chloe Di Tirro, BS & Timothy W. Fong, MD

Pages 327-337 | Received 01 Apr 2014, Accepted 11 Aug 2014, Published online: 21 Nov 2014

“ Cite this article  <https://doi.org/10.1080/1533256X.2014.958493>



Gamblers vs SUD on Mindfulness

- The gambling-disordered patients exhibited significantly lower levels of mindfulness, emotional regulation, stress coping, and impulse control compared to the non-gambling-disordered group
- May require unique strategies of mindfulness

Mindfulness-Based Approaches in the Treatment of Disordered Gambling: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis

[Brandy R. Maynard](#) , [Alyssa N. Wilson](#), [...], and [Seth W. Whiting](#)  [View all authors and affiliations](#)

[Volume 28, Issue 3](#) | <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731515606977>

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Results:

Thirteen studies met criteria for this review and seven met criteria for meta-analysis. Effects were moderate to large for gambling behaviors/symptoms ($g = 0.68$, 95% CI = [0.39, 0.98], $p < .01$), gambling urges ($g = 0.69$, 95% CI = [0.18, 1.20], $p < .01$), and financial outcomes ($g = 0.75$, 95% CI = [0.24, 1.26], $p < .01$). Heterogeneity was low and nonsignificant.

Conclusions:

The findings provide support for mindfulness-based interventions in the treatment of disordered gambling. However, these results are necessarily tentative, limited by the number and quality of eligible studies, and differing conceptualizations of mindfulness.

FIRST EDITION

Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention *for Addictive Behaviors*

A CLINICIAN'S GUIDE



**Sarah Bowen
Neha Chawla
G. Alan Marlatt**

SECOND EDITION

Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention for Addictive Behaviors

A Clinician's Guide

**Sarah Bowen, Neha Chawla,
Joel Grow, and G. Alan Marlatt**

MINDFULNESS BASED RELAPSE PREVENTION

FOR PROBLEM GAMBLING

Peter Chen, Farah Jindani
and Nigel E. Turner



Plant-Based Medicine

- **Herbal remedies / phytotherapy**
 - **Nutraceuticals**
- Natural products that may help with symptoms such as pain, mood disorders, or irritable bowel syndrome and a whole host of other conditions

Mushrooms

Psychedelics

- Classical psychedelics, both plant derived and synthetic compounds, include serotonin-2A receptor agonist drugs that have powerful dose-related effects on perception, cognition, and emotion.
- Examples include lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), psilocybin and ayahuasca.



Psilocybin

- Psilocybin (*4-phosphoryloxy-N,N-dimethyltryptamine*) comes from certain types of mushrooms
- When a person takes psilocybin, their body converts it to, psilocin.
- Psilocin attaches to and activates the serotonin 5-hydroxytryptamine 2A (5HT2a) receptor

How people use

- Today, people ingest mushrooms in search of a unique, interesting, enlightening, and/or spiritual experience.
- Others take very small amounts of the substance regularly, a practice called microdosing, trying to improve their mental state and productivity.

What is a microdose?

- 5-10% of a typical dose
- Psilocybin mushrooms: 0.1 – 0.4 grams
- LSD: ~10 μg



Notes from users

Microdosing claims

Psilocybin mushrooms: In general, a tiny dose of psilocybin makes me think much more deeply in every aspect of life. Instead of having a monkey mind, creating noise, my mind is still. It is in a mode that it has been in before, but that was a long time ago. Psilocybin makes me feel exactly how I felt when I was a kid in school. It is happiness, because you realize that you have all you need. During my test days, I feel more love for myself, and I can give that to others. I also have this sense of being the pilot of my body. My cravings for sugar, smoke and sodas nearly went away. I wanted to give my body the best fuel, I feel like I attract positive people and happenings in my life. I got a job offer landing on my lap, without working for it. I can't prove that there is some connection, and scientist would deny it, but I feel like there is something bigger going on.

Current thinking from American Psychiatric Association

APA Position:

There is currently inadequate scientific evidence for endorsing the use of psychedelics to treat any psychiatric disorder except within the context of approved investigational studies. APA supports continued research and therapeutic discovery into psychedelic agents with the same scientific integrity and regulatory standards applied to other promising therapies in medicine. Clinical treatments should be determined by scientific evidence in accordance with applicable regulatory standards and not by ballot initiatives or popular opinion.

Psilocybin and Addictive Disorders

- Preliminary research indicates that psilocybin may be helpful in treating substance use disorders, including tobacco use disorder.
- NIDA is funding a large, multi-site study on the effectiveness of psilocybin versus a nicotine patch, in combination with therapy, to help people stop smoking.
- Brain plasticity = teach people new things

Psilocybin and Gambling Disorder

- Romero P, Czakó A, van den Brink W, Demetrovics Z. Psychedelic-assisted therapy for people with gambling disorder? J Behav Addict. 2024 Feb 28;13(1):6-11
- Gibraltar

Psilocybin and Gambling Disorder

- Dr. Romero --
 - Psilocybin-assisted therapy may help people affected by GD by increasing self-awareness, promoting introspection, and facilitating a spiritual experience that can help individuals break free from negative thought patterns.

Psilocybin Situation

- Schedule I drug
- States are decriminalizing
- Rise of “big mushroom”
- How similar to the story of medical cannabis?
- Does this add to the toolbox or distract from the toolbox?

Traditional Chinese Medicine

Traditional Chinese Medicine

- In Chinese Medicine, addictions are caused by underlying physical and mental imbalances that need to be identified and addressed to ensure a successful, long-lasting recovery and avoid relapse.
- Formal training and a wide range of practices of healing are utilized (acupuncture, massage, herbs, crystals)

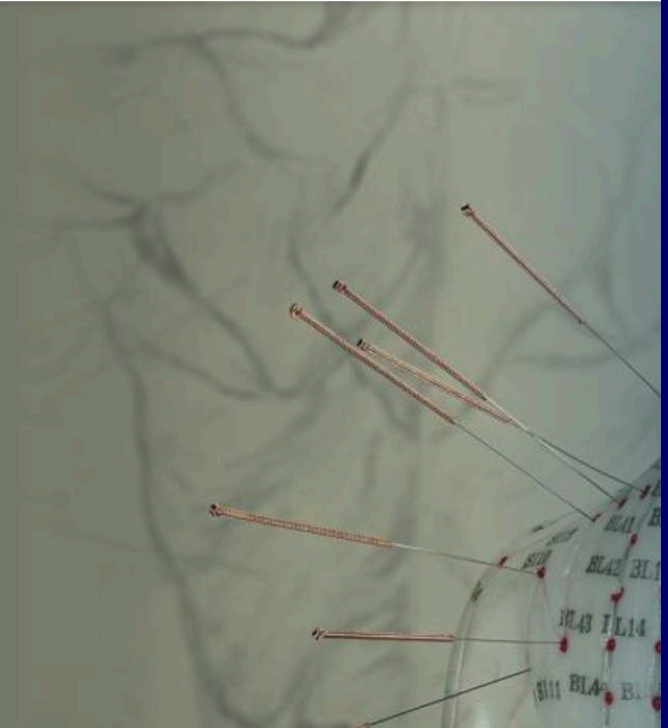
TCM Approaches

- As well as rebalancing neurotransmitter and hormone
 - addiction to stimulating substances may be treated by ‘clearing heat, calming the spirit and nourishing yin and blood’, while dependence on sedative substances may be treated by ‘moving qi, transforming phlegm and nurturing the Heart ZF’.

What This looks like at UCLA

East-West Medicine

We offer integrative medicine for both hospitalized and ambulatory patients in several locations, blending the best of modern Western and traditional Chinese medicine, all with outstanding customer service.



Animal Assisted Therapy

How Dogs Can Help Overcome Gambling Addiction

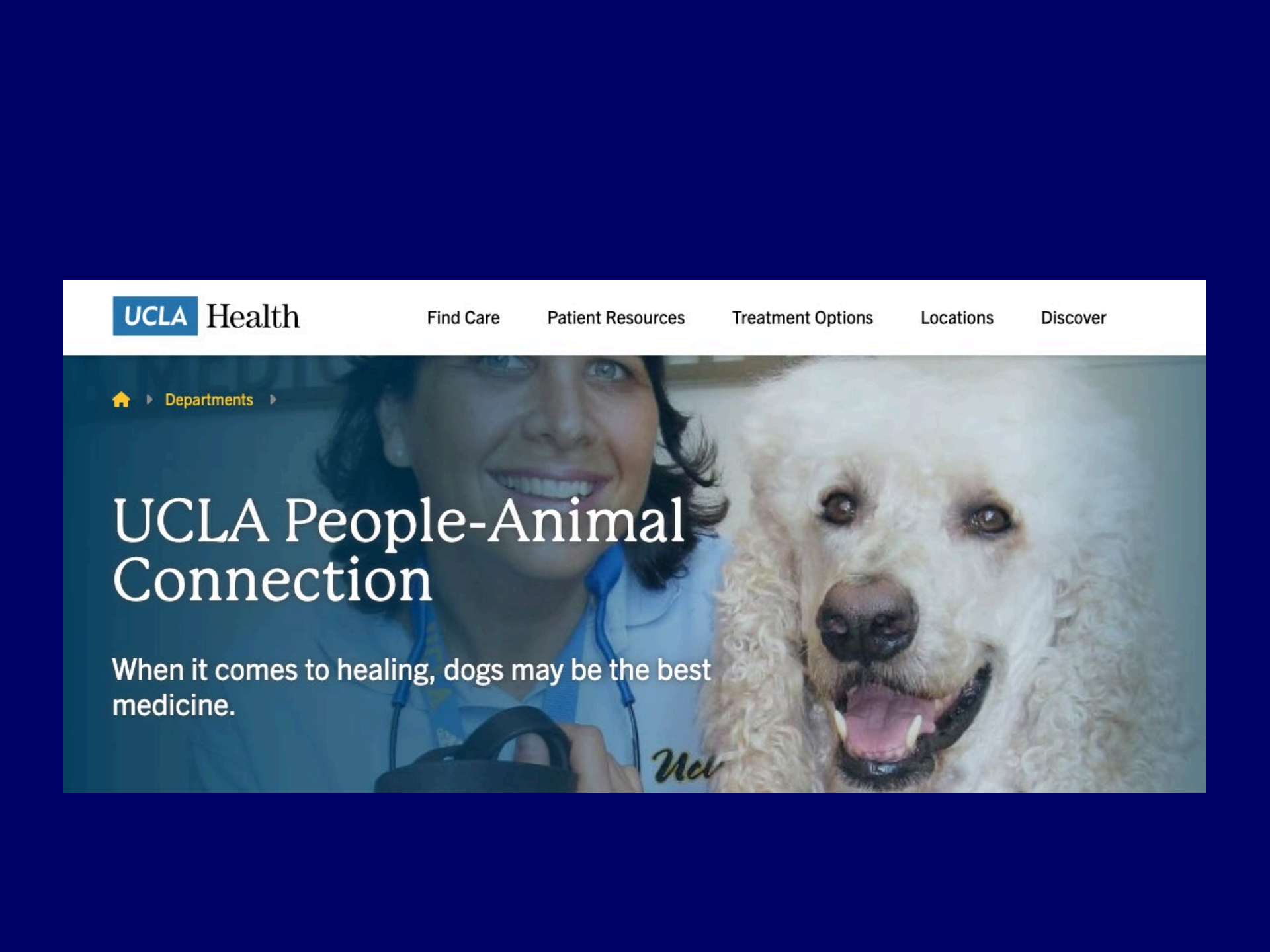
Guest blog by Desislava Bezinska-Sheinkova
- Licensed Psychologist, PhD



UCLA People-Animal Connection

When it comes to healing, dogs may be the best medicine.

UCLA



Animal Assisted Therapy

- The simple act of petting animals releases an automatic relaxation response. Humans interacting with animals have found that petting the animal promoted the release of serotonin, prolactin and oxytocin- all hormones that can play a part in elevating moods.
- Lowers anxiety and helps people relax. Provides comfort. Reduces loneliness. Increases mental stimulation. Assist in recall of memories and help sequence temporal events in patients with head injuries or chronic diseases
- Can provide an escape or happy distraction.
- Can act as catalysts in the therapy process.
- May reduce the initial resistance that might accompany therapy.

Original Articles

Animal-Assisted Therapy in the Treatment of Substance Dependence

Martin C. Wesley , Neresia B. Minatrea & Joshua C. Watson

Pages 137-148 | Published online: 28 Apr 2015

 Cite this article  <https://doi.org/10.2752/175303709X434167>

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Animal Assisted Therapy

- The results of the study indicate that, overall, the therapeutic alliance is enhanced with the addition of a therapy dog: the AAT group had a more positive opinion of the therapeutic alliance,

Weighted Blankets

The effect of weighted blankets on sleep and related disorders: a brief review



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Weighted Blankets

Methods: A literature search was conducted using PubMed, Embase, Web of Science, MEDLINE, Cochrane Library and CNKI databases. Eligible studies included an intervention with weighted blankets and outcomes covering sleep and/or related disorders (behavioral disturbance, negative emotions and daytime symptoms). Studies using other deep pressure, compression, or exercise-related interventions were excluded.

Conclusions: Most of the included studies showed that weighted blankets could effectively improve sleep quality and alleviate negative emotions and daytime symptoms in patients with sleep disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism spectrum disorder, and other related disorders, with a possible mechanism of deep pressure touch.

Blue Light Blocking Glasses

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Review Article

Evening wear of blue-blocking glasses for sleep and mood disorders: a systematic review

Landon Hester , Deanna Dang, Christopher J Barker, Michael Heath, Sidra Mesiya, Tekenari Tienabeso & ...show all

Pages 1375-1383 | Received 25 Feb 2021, Accepted 11 May 2021, Published online: 24 May 2021

 Cite this article  <https://doi.org/10.1080/07420528.2021.1930029>



 Full Article

 Figures & data

 References

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Blue Light Blocking Glasses

- Wear 2 hours before bed
- Simulates darkness, correct circadian rhythms
- Enhance melatonin production
- Counters the stimulating effects of screens
- Improve sleep = improve recovery

My Personal Favorite

The Cardiometabolic Health Benefits of Sauna Exposure in Individuals with High-Stress Occupations. A Mechanistic Review

by Kaemmer N. Henderson , Lauren G. Killen , Eric K. O'Neal  and Hunter S. Waldman * 

Human Performance Laboratory, Department of Kinesiology, University of North Alabama, Florence, AL 35632, USA

* Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health **2021**, *18*(3), 1105; <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18031105>

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Published: 27 January 2021

(This article belongs to the Special Issue **Injury Prevention and Safety Promotion: A Physical and Cognitive Ergonomic Approach**)



Future Directions of Complementary Treatment

- Should and how will insurance companies be involved?
- How will the research to be done?
- How do you regulate quality, consistency of complementary treatment?
- What does an integrated model look like?
- What will you do differently?

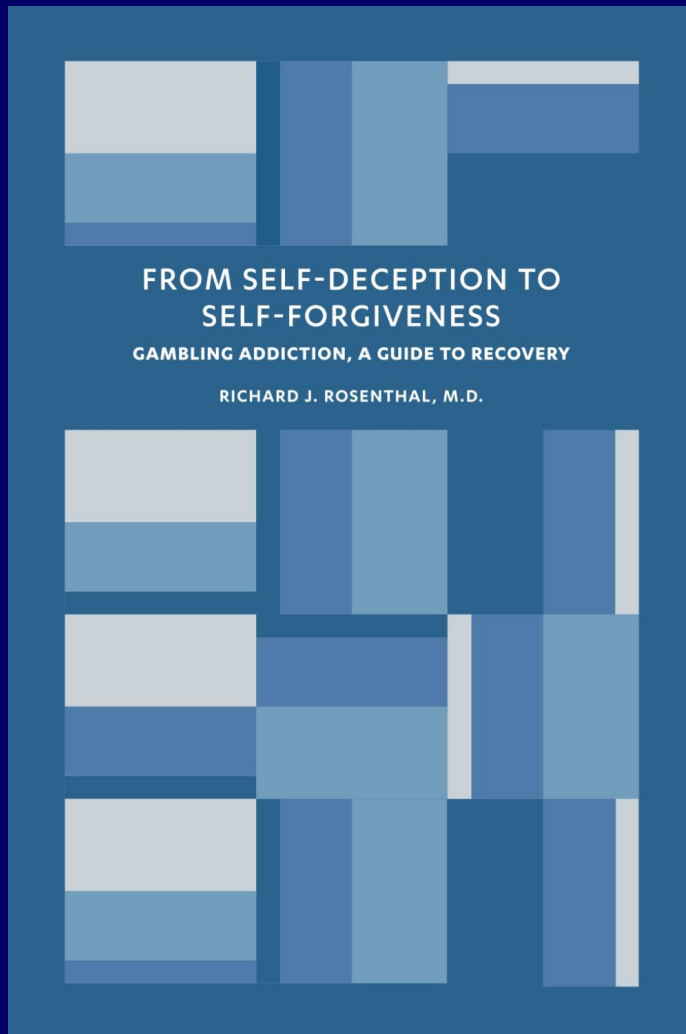
Resources

California Gambling Education and Treatment Services (CALGETS)

problemgambling.ca.gov



<https://www.amazon.com/Self-Deception-Self-Forgiveness-Gambling-Addiction-Recovery/dp/B0DSC39NWN?source=ps-sl-shoppingads-lpcontext&smid=ATVPDKIKX0DER>



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The Hot New Form Of Fantasy Sports Is Probably Addictive, Potentially Illegal And Completely Unregulated

Dr. Fong discusses the rise of paid fantasy sports
Sacha Feinman and Josh Isreal interview Dr. Timothy Fong for an article on fantasy sports betting for Think Progress

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Freedom from Problem Gambling

The UCLA Gambling Studies Program (UGSP) is a non-profit organization within the Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences at the University of California, Los Angeles. Our mission is to reduce the individual, familial, and societal harm caused by pathological gambling. Since 2005, we have been engaged in conducting research, providing cost-effective prevention and treatment services, and offering education and training opportunities to healthcare providers and the community at large.

Research

UGSP is committed to the advancement of research. We use a wide range of research methods to continually investigate the biological, psychological, and

Treatment

UGSP has a number of outpatient treatment options available for problem gamblers and their families. Our team of experts understand and treat problematic

Education

UGSP provides educational and training opportunities for mental health providers across Southern California. We also welcome local and international volunteers,

Acknowledgements

UCLA Gambling Studies Program

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Beit T'Shuvah

Westside Gambling Treatment

UPAC

CalGETS Providers

CalGETS Supervisors

CCPG

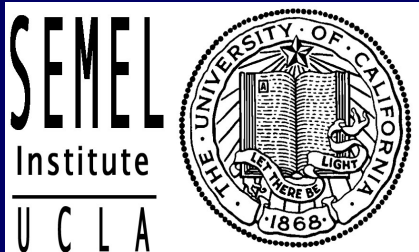
NCPG

RSBIHC

Vision y Compromiso

Friday Night Live

Q and A



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