

Strategies to *Help* PROBLEM GAMBLERS *Cope with Cravings*



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Efforts to abstain from problem gambling will invariably be met with cravings to gamble. This is common and unavoidable in gambling addiction recovery work. Cravings can emerge as part of the natural withdrawal² process as the brain and body adapt to a reduction in the neurochemical ‘high’ associated with gambling. [Note, there are several YouTube videos available on the Neurobiology of Addiction that can help gamblers understand how withdrawal works in a similar way to withdrawal in substance use disorders, for example, Dr. Corey Waller’s [“Addiction Neuroscience 101”](#) or Dr. Luck Clark’s [“Gambling Addiction and Neuroscience”](#)]. Cravings can also be linked to a multitude of internal and external triggers gamblers encounter in everyday life. An external trigger can include things like seeing a billboard for a casino, receiving a text message about free play, or exposure to a gambling environment. Internal

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² Withdrawal symptoms from problem gambling can be like those encountered in substance abuse. Symptoms can include restlessness, irritability, sleep disturbance, anger, guilt, and other emotional disturbances. Wray, I, & Dickerson, M.G. (1981). Cessation of high frequency gambling and ‘Withdrawal’ symptoms. *British Journal of Addiction*, 76, 401-405. Also, see Cunningham-Williams, R. M., Gattis, M.N., Dore, P.M., Shi, P., Spitznagel, E.L., (2009). Towards DSM-V: Considering other withdrawal-like symptoms of pathological gambling disorder. *International Journal of Methods in Psychiatric Research*, 18(1):13-22.

triggers can include things like a thought about the excitement felt when gambling or an unpleasant emotion such as shame, anxiety, rejection.

Simple advice to not think about gambling is naïve and futile. Imagine, **to not think about something, you have to know what it is you're not supposed to be thinking about, and therefore think about it.** This goal is contradictory from the outset and explains why this strategy often fails. As Dr. Richard Rosenthal, a pioneer in the problem gambling field notes, most people can relate to a time when a romantic relationship ended, when a lot of time was spent reminiscing about the relationship as part of the process of letting go. Like the Burt Bacharach and Hal David song suggests, "There's Always Something There to Remind Me." Similarly, ending a relationship with gambling will involve thoughts and memories about gambling. Some people have described this as a grieving process. Thus, strategies that focus on anticipating and responding appropriately to cravings are an important part of addressing a gambling addiction and usually more helpful.

Craving: "The desire to reexperience the effect of a substance or behavior that is strong enough to distract a person from everything else in their life."

Dr. Rory Reid, Research Psychologist
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Defining Craving

The definition of craving has been debated in the social science literature, but a definition based on a review of the literature suggests cravings are "a desire to reexperience the effect of a substance or behavior that is strong enough to distract a person from everything else in their life." (Note: Some researchers suggest 'craving' constitutes a desire and an 'urge' is an impulse to act on the desire). Cravings are believed to be a multidimensional phenomenon consisting of subjective, behavioral, physiological, and neurochemical dimensions making them complex to measure and understand³, but strategies to cope with cravings can be relatively easy for problem gamblers to implement. Our team at UCLA adapted one of the more established scales applied in the substance abuse field, the Penn Alcohol Craving Scale, to gambling addiction. This scale, the UCLA Gambling Craving Scale is intended as a pragmatic tool to be used in treatment across sessions. The scale queries the frequency, duration, intensity, of gambling cravings and allows gamblers to report their response to cravings, identify triggers, and consider ways to change [See UCLA Gambling Craving Scale and the end of this article].

³ Kavanagh, D. J., Statham, D. J., Feeney, G.F.X., Young, R. M., May, J., Andrade, J., & Connor, J. P. (2013). Measurement of alcohol craving. *Addictive Behaviors*, 38, 1572-1584.

Strategies to Cope with Cravings

Many of the strategies used to cope with cravings in substance abuse work can be generalized to gambling addiction. Successful strategies typically involve reorganizing relationships with the craving from an adversarial ‘slay the dragon’ mindset to one of acceptance and curiosity (this does not mean accepting a craving and acting on it). Temporary distraction strategies have also shown to be helpful. Before implementing various coping strategies, gamblers might reflect on beliefs are currently held about gambling cravings.

Activity for Gamblers

What beliefs do you currently have about cravings that increase the intensity or the lure cravings have for you? What beliefs would you need to adopt moving forward to feel more empowered when you encounter cravings?

Reorganize Thoughts about Cravings

It’s easy to develop automatic thoughts about cravings when they arise. For example, problem gamblers often catastrophize the craving with thoughts such as ‘this is too hard, I can’t resist it.’ The antidote to this is to put the craving in perspective. There is nothing magical or mysterious about a craving. Reminding oneself that the craving will not last forever can reduce the intensity of a craving. In fact, if a craving is experienced for 20 minutes each day, this would amount to less than 1% of a person’s waking hours. So, gamblers can tell themselves, “I just need to be strong for 1% of all my waking hours this week; I can do this.”

Cravings are not unbearable. They are uncomfortable like resisting the desire to scratch an itch, but gamblers can tell themselves, “I can survive the discomfort, and the craving will eventually go away.” Anyone who has fasted before surgery knows that hunger cravings don’t last forever. Over time, cravings diminish in frequency and intensity, and gamblers can build momentum with a greater ability to let them go.

The chart below shows several ways gamblers can reorganize their thoughts about cravings from their “Old Relationship” towards a “New Relationship” that will diminish the intensity and duration of gambling cravings. Dr. Reid discusses the process of reorganizing relationships with cravings in the following video “[Cravings and Problem Gambling](#).”



[Cravings and Problem Gambling](#) by Dr. Reid

Reorganizing Relationships with Gambling Cravings	
Old Relationship	New Relationship
Cravings are the enemy	I can co-exist with cravings
Cravings are given special status	Cravings can be put in perspective
Cravings are irresistible	Cravings are uncomfortable
Cravings influence me beyond my control	Cravings influence but don't determine my choices
Cravings are stronger than my willpower	My thoughts are more powerful than my cravings
I have to fight my cravings, tug of war	I can live in peace and harmony with my cravings
Cravings have mystical powers	Cravings are a physical and psychological experience
Cravings are going to get stronger and stronger	Cravings come and go; they rise and fall
My cravings are relentless, they'll never go away	Cravings do not persist or last forever

Figure 1. Reorganizing Relationships with Cravings

Changing Your Thoughts, Changes How You Feel, and How You Behave

Generally, thoughts proceed feelings, including the desire to gamble. If gamblers change their thoughts, they can change how they feel, and in turn, change their behavior. It can be helpful to remind gamblers that thoughts historically led them to develop a gambling problem. This also means changing how they think can help them abstain from gambling. Consider the following example. Many gamblers give their thoughts special status “my cravings are stronger than my willpower and I can't beat this urge” causing feelings of powerlessness that can lead to gambling behavior. (See chart below)

Thought	Feeling	Behavior
My craving is stronger than my willpower, I can't beat this urge	Powerless, helpless, defeated	Gamble

These types of thoughts are self-defeating and can make feelings much more intense or unpleasant than necessary. Indeed, numerous studies have shown that negative self-talk leads to poor outcomes. Conversely, positive self-talk, including positive thoughts, benefits how the mind focuses attention, regulates emotion, and influences our behavior.⁴

“Whether you think you can or think you can't — you are right.” Henry Ford

So what? The pragmatic application is by recruiting goal directed positive thoughts gamblers can powerfully affect their feeling and behaviors. Subsequently, a gambler might alternatively think

⁴ Latinjak, A. T., Morin, A., Brinthaup, T. M., Hardy, J., Hatzigeorgiadis, A., Kendall, P.C....Winsler, A. (2023). Self-talk: An interdisciplinary review and transdisciplinary model. *Review of General Psychology*, 27(4), 355-386.

“My craving is uncomfortable, but it will pass, and I will survive” and discover that changing thoughts, changes feelings, and in turn, changes behavior.

Activity for Gamblers

One activity gamblers report being helpful is to create a video on their smart phone during a moment of clarity and capture themselves talking to themselves in an encouraging and supportive manner. During times of cravings, they can watch the video of themselves providing perspectives, encouragement, and support. Create a video of yourself talking to yourself in a way that will help you through a future time when you encounter cravings.

What Can Gamblers Learn from Smokers?

A study by psychologist Dr. Reuven Dar explored cravings among smokers during airplane flights that forced abstinence. Some of the flights were long, 8–13-hour flights including some from Israel to New York City. During the flights, smokers rated the intensity of their cravings and stress levels. As expected, when smokers boarded the plane, they understood smoking was prohibited and this suppressed craving, even after several hours of flight time. In other words, a psychological factor (the thought “I cannot smoke”) reduced craving. As the flight continued, cravings became more intense the closer the plane was to landing — where smoking would be possible. Craving did not accumulate simply based on deprivation of smoking as measured by flight time, it was related to anticipating the opportunity to smoke as evidenced by the increased craving toward the end of the flight.

What could this study suggest about gambling? First, cues, contexts, and the opportunity to gamble might create a powerful trigger, and in turn, provoke intense cravings to gamble. Conversely, if a problem gambler can reduce exposure to gambling cues (emails, text messages, or other ads for gambling opportunities), contexts (a gaming venue, gambling app on phone, etc...), and opportunity (access to money), then gambling cravings would likely be reduced.

A second finding from this study is equally important. Smoking, specifically nicotine dependence, is touted as a *physiological* addiction with little debate on this point among scientists and researchers. Accordingly, one might have expected cravings to increase with the amount of time the participants were deprived from smoking (the longer one is physically unable to smoke the more they will crave a cigarette). However, this was not the case. The study found that cravings became more intense at the end of the flight when the opportunity to smoke was approaching. Thus, the craving to smoke (and smoking itself) might reflect more of a psychological than a physiological addiction. If true, this finding is good news for problem gamblers. Specifically, gamblers may have more mental control over their gambling than previously thought, especially if thoughts about abstaining are combined with efforts to reduce exposure to gambling cues and contexts where gambling opportunities are possible.

Dar, R, Rosen-Korakin, N, Shapira, O, Gottlieb, Y, & Frenk, H. (2010). The craving to smoke in flight attendants: Relations with smoking deprivation, anticipation of smoking, and actual smoking. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 119(1):248-53.

FIGURE 2

Be Curious and Non-Judgmental of Cravings

What if, instead of fighting a craving, gamblers decided to be curious about cravings and the anatomy of cravings. Gamblers can ask themselves some of these questions:

- How does the craving manifest in the body? What sensations are felt (e.g., increased breathing, heartrate, tense shoulders, etc...)?
- Is the craving linked to a specific memory or experience, and if so, what is the memory?
- Does the craving feel more psychological or physiological? Are cravings experienced during withdrawal the same or different than cravings encountered after a period of abstinence?
- What is the frequency, intensity, or average duration of cravings? What makes it more intense, less intense? For example, do certain thoughts make it more intense such as “I can’t deal with this craving; it’s too strong”? Do certain thoughts make your craving less intense, “I will feel good if I resist this craving and abstain from gambling”?
- What other thoughts arise in the wake of a craving? How does having (or not having) money influence the trajectory of a craving? Do you have thoughts or beliefs about the reward or relief you may experience if you gamble?
- Is the craving about the anticipation of winning or the win itself (is it about the hunt or the kill?).
- Can you be curious about *what you are really craving*? For example, one gambler reported craving the feeling of being special when he won money because people treated him differently, crowds cheered, attractive women would pay attention to him, and so forth. So, what he was really craving was attention, connection with people, and the need to feel special or important.
- What is the expectation associated with the craving, such as winning money and is this a realistic expectation knowing what we do about the odds of winning and that on average, you lose money?
- Contaminating the fantasy or delusion associated with gambling can help you put things in perspective. For example, one gambler found it helpful to remind herself that sports betting took the fun and enjoyment out of watching sports. It negatively affected her mood when watching sports. Conversely, when she watched sports without wagering, she found herself enjoying many of the nuances and excitement of the uncertainty of sports and did not have to worry if a particular outcome translated to a financial win or loss. “I started watching the game rather than looking at my phone app for in-play opportunities to bet. This allowed me to reconnect with the thrill of the sport and the amazing talent of the athletes.”

Being curious about cravings, in a non-judgmental way (the craving is neither good nor bad), can help reduce the frequency and intensity of cravings and empower gamblers to cope more effectively when cravings arise. When a space is created for the cravings to exist without them

becoming the enemy, gamblers will find that the cravings power to lure them will be significantly diminished.

Connecting with a Friend, Loved One, or Support Community

Johann Hari, a journalist and author of two New York Times best-selling books, gave a Ted Talk titled "[Everything You Think You Know about Addiction is Wrong](#)." The essence of his talk asserts that connection is the antidote to addiction. Indeed, connecting with family members, friends, loved ones, or members of a support community can help those who may be struggling with a craving. When connections are made with supportive people, gamblers can put things in perspective, realize they are not alone, and feel supported in their difficult moments. One client commented:



"I had a craving at 2:00 am in the morning. Part of me wanted to rationalize gambling by telling myself there was no one I could call at such an early hour. Then I remembered the www.gamblersinrecovery.com international website and found an online meeting hosted in Dublin, Ireland. Listening to other gamblers from across the world and their experiences gave me hope and inspired me to abstain from gambling. My craving went away and I regained perspective about my recovery from the meeting. Thank God for the Irish."

Yes, cravings can be stressful, but interestingly, the neuro-hormone Oxytocin released by the pituitary gland during stress response motivates us to seek support from others, connect, and share our feelings. This can illicit comfort, empathy, and support from others during difficult times when cravings arise.

*"Between **stimulus** and **response** there is a **space**. In that space is our **power to choose** our response. In our response lies our **growth** and our **freedom**."*

Dr. Rollo May (1963)
Freedom and Responsibility Re-Examined

Triggers, Irrational Thoughts, and Cravings

Cravings are often preceded by a trigger. If gamblers can *slow the process down*, they will be able to identify the trigger, followed by a thought (usually a permissive giving thought), and then the craving. This process can happen in

seconds and become so automatic one may not even realize the space where a thought occurs. Perhaps this space is what psychologist Dr. Rollo May was referring to when he stated "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." If gamblers slow things down, pause, become aware of the moment, the space, they can begin to pay attention to the trigger and subsequent permissive thoughts that precede cravings.



These permissive thoughts are often irrational thinking patterns that attempt to rationalize a choice to gamble. Permissive thoughts include:

- One bet won't hurt.
- I've worked hard, I deserve a reward.
- It's my money, I can do what I want with it.
- If I don't gamble, the urge will just grow stronger.
- I'm feeling lucky, I think today will be different.
- I'm feeling stressed, gambling will give me some relief.
- I'll gamble but I won't drink any alcohol this time.
- I'll gamble for 30 minutes then leave.
- I've had a crappy day, I just need to zone out.
- I'll just gamble the cash I have with me then leave.
- I have a 'FreePlay' voucher so I will not be using my own money.
- I've gambled several days in a row so what difference will one more day make.
- This will be the last time I gamble, then I'll quit for good.
- I'm bored and there's nothing else to do.
- I will gamble just a little to prove to myself it's not a problem anymore.
- My friends invited me to the casino and it will be good for me to get out of the house.
- I really need some money; I know I can win.
- Gambling will be a better alternative to using drugs.

Labeling these thoughts as permissive irrational thoughts can help gamblers notice the distortions and recognize they do have a choice. It can be helpful if gamblers make a contract with themselves that whenever such thoughts arise, they will agree to pause for 20 minutes. This time will help reduce the intensity of the thoughts and any associated cravings that occur. This empowers gamblers to think a little more rationally and in turn, make better decisions. So, taking a 20-minute time out is what's needed this moment. During this pause, gamblers can review reasons why abstinence from gambling is desired and how such a choice will be consistent with long-term goals or help them evolve into the person they are trying to become. Gamblers can also "play the movie forward" which involves imagining the consequences if they gamble. How will they feel afterwards? Perhaps a gambler can recall memories of losses or having to tell a loved one they messed up, or not having money to pay bills, the pit in the stomach after losing, the loneliness of walking to a car in the casino parking lot, and so forth.

Collectively, gamblers will benefit from creating, in advance, a list of rational thoughts they will use to counter permission giving thoughts when they arise. Then, when thoughts turn to gambling, the list of rational thoughts consistent with desire to abstain from gambling can be reviewed. For example, responses to the irrational thoughts noted previously might include:

One bet won't hurt. *One bet is never one bet, once you start gambling, you will make excuses to continue gambling and the outcome of this pattern hurts— a lot!*

I've worked hard, I deserve a reward. *Because I've worked hard, I want to see a tangible reward for my labors (e.g., money toward a vacation, new clothes, etc...). Gambling is seldom rewarding, and even the euphoria associated with winning is short-lived.*

It's my money, I can do what I want with it. *I want it to remain MY money! Moreover, it's a privilege to have money when so many others in the world do not. I want to be a good steward for my money as a manifestation of my gratitude for having it.*

If I don't gamble, the urge will just grow stronger. *If I don't gamble, the urge will fade away, not get stronger. Additionally, the urge gives me an opportunity to experience discomfort and learn to embrace a challenge rather than give into it.*

I'm feeling lucky, I think today will be different. *I've told myself this numerous times in order to rationalize gambling. This is a permissive thought associated with my desire to gamble and luck is just the excuse I make up to rationalize gambling. Believing in luck also represents magical thinking and historically, it's just not true!*

I'm feeling stressed, gambling will give me some relief. *Gambling, will provide some temporary relief but in the end, I will be more stressed figuring out how to make up for losses, pay bills, explain to a loved one that I've gambled again. I can survive these uncomfortable feelings. There are other ways that are healthy that I can relief stress.*

I'll gamble but I won't drink any alcohol this time. *This rarely works out. They will offer me free drinks while I'm gambling and I'll drink because I'm stressed about losses or I'll drink because I'm celebrating wins, either way, my judgement will be impaired along with my ability to resist urges to gamble more and more.*

I'll gamble for 30 minutes then leave. *Regardless of how long I gamble, I usually end up losing more money than I can afford to lose. I have a gambling problem because I haven't been able to set a limit and stay within it!*

I have had a crappy day; I just need to zone out. *Gambling will make my day even more crappy. Zoning out is usually about distracting myself from stress and gambling creates additional stress. I can find healthy ways to 'zone out' that don't involve gambling.*

I'll just gamble the cash I have with me then leave. *If I could set a limit and stick to it, I wouldn't have a gambling problem. In my heart of hearts, I know this is just a rationalization to give myself permission to gamble. I will end up going to the ATM or worse, take out credit to wager more than the 'cash' I have with me.*

I have a 'FreePlay' voucher so I will not be using my own money. *FreePlay is never free, to the contrary, it's very costly. These vouchers and bonus points are used by the gaming venues to get me in the door but I will eventually begin using my own money, and then chase*

my losses. If I win, I will chase my winnings with the belief I will win more, and then lose whatever gains I made. At a minimum, the “FreePlay” will cost me my sobriety.

I’ve gambled several days in a row so what difference will one more day make. *Exactly, one more day won’t make a difference so I don’t need to gamble. Today can be the start of my abstinence from gambling and a day I can feel good and see as the beginning of my journey to a more balanced lifestyle.*

This will be the last time I gamble, then I’ll quit for good. *Why can’t the last time I gambled be the last time I gambled? Once I start gambling, it’s likely I will lose and then want to return to chase my losses. Alternatively, if I win, I will use the win to justify gamble is a good thing and risk more gambling in the future.*

I’m bored and there’s nothing else to do. *Really, nothing else? I’ve created a list of numerous healthy distractions. While these alternatives may not be as exciting as gambling, such excitement will only be short lived and followed by regret, sadness, and disappointment in myself for making bad choices.*

I will gamble just a little to prove to myself it’s not a problem anymore. *This thought is just flirting with temptation and it’s ridiculous. I’m gambling with my sobriety which is a non-monetary form of gambling. I’m not trying to see how close I can get to the edge without going over the cliff. Wisdom would suggest I stay as far away from the edge as possible to ensure my safety.*

My friends invited me to the casino and it will be good for me to get out of the house. *Getting out of the house is good, and if my friends really care about me, they will support me participating in activities outside a gaming venue.*

I really need some money; I know I can win. *Even if I win, I will lose, both monetarily and emotionally. This is just another lie I tell myself in order to give myself permission to gamble. What I need is to not gamble and lose the little bit of money I have.*

Gambling will be a better alternative to using drugs. *Nonsense! Gambling and using drugs are both self-destructive addictions that will ruin my life. They have similarities and differences but one thing they share is a wide array of negative consequences including ruining my friendships, jeopardizing relationships with loved ones, and destroying my self-worth.*

These are just some examples of ways others have challenged irrational thoughts associated with the permissive thoughts that lead to problem gambling. In this way, gamblers can identify

Activity for Gamblers

Make a list of the most common types of permissive giving thoughts that lead to problem gambling. Then, write a response to how you will challenge the irrational thought.

their own unique irrational thoughts and ways to challenge the beliefs that will be empowering when such thoughts arise.

Imagine Playing the Film Forward—What if You Gambled?

When cravings arise, another helpful strategy involves imagining, just for a few seconds, what if a gambler *does* gamble? Gamblers often have *selective amnesia* involving *euphoric recall* about the pleasurable memories of gambling and ignore the vast array of negative consequences, suffering, and ultimately, all of the problems that led them to seek help. Gamblers can counteract this by playing the film forward. Cravings only focus on the first part of the film, but a gambler can play the film forward to remind themselves how the movie ends. What if money is lost? What if losses are chased? Gamblers might imagine what they will feel like afterwards or having to tell a loved one that money has been lost because of gambling. The pit in the stomach, the shame, the hurtful look on a romantic partner's face. What about the anxiety of not having money for other things, having to postpone bills, or work extra hard to make more money to make up for the losses? Yes, sometimes gamblers have won in the past and might be tempted to imagine this. But what if they do win? What happened in the past when they won? Did they chase winnings with the hope of winning more money only to lose it all? How often have they walked away after winning? Could winning actually be worse than if they lost? For example, a win might rekindle false hope and expectations that winning or beating the odds is possible when historically beating the odds over time is an illusion.

Gamblers should not dwell on the thoughts of gambling too long but for a few seconds it can be helpful to imagine the reality of what happens when they gamble so they can connect with the future consequences of a choice to gamble without gambling.

Avoid External Triggers

Avoiding external triggers can be challenging. Everywhere we go there are advertisements, gambling venues, and other activities such as concerts or restaurants hosted in gambling environments. For some forms of gambling such as sports gambling, just hearing about sports can be triggering. However, sometimes simple strategies can be effective in reducing the likelihood of gambling when an external trigger occurs. For example, signing up for self-exclusion eliminates marketing and advertisements from being sent directly to a home address or smart phone (including deleting gambling apps from phone). Canceling a player's card will eliminate the points or status that often entice individuals to return to a gambling venue through free play or other incentives.

Some gamblers have reported it's helpful to find alternative routes home that avoid gambling venues when returning from work or other activities. Triggers vary so gamblers will benefit from being thoughtful about what triggers are unique for them. Understanding the daily activity of gamblers can help highlight possible triggers they might encounter. Sometimes it can be helpful just to ask a gambler, "what things trigger you to gamble?"

Although it is unlikely a person can plan for every possible external trigger, gamblers often report if they anticipate various situations that may arise involving **people, places, or things**, they are able to prepare and plan for triggers and anticipate possible cravings that may arise. Some examples of situations or strategies to respond to possible triggers can include:

- Removing or blocking contacts (e.g., hosts at gaming venues) or ‘friends’ who only call/text when they want to gamble or extend invitations to gamble “we have a special going on now at the Casino for our special guests.”
- Adding software to limit access to gaming sites and apps such as Gamban (<https://gamban.com>)
- Let people such as family members or close friends know “I’m not gambling anymore.” It is not necessary to disclose a gambling problem. Friends, family or co-workers understand that people can become overwhelmed by the gambling industry and need a break or want to step away indefinitely.
- Planning for difficult situations (e.g., receiving bills in the mail that remind them of debt) or other stressful situations that trigger gambling behaviors. For example, one gambler committed to only opening bills in his counseling session so he could process feeling overwhelmed with his counselor.
- Being with supportive friends during significant events where they are more likely to gamble such as Stanley Cup Playoff games, Formula 1, Superbowl, the Kentucky Derby, the World Series of Poker, or an increasing pot for the Powerball Lottery. Alternatively, being with others instead of alone during special occasions like holidays.
- Anticipate stressful situations that can trigger gambling (e.g., tax returns, work deadlines, in-laws visiting town, annual physical exam, conflict with romantic partner, the day mortgage/rent is due, or the day one receives a paycheck, etc...).
- Creating a list of restaurants without gambling so options can be suggested when friends or others offer invitations to get together for lunch, dinner, etc...
- Signing up for self-exclusion programs to eliminate marketing, advertisements, emails, and other attempts by gaming venues that entice you to gamble.

The list of possibilities can be endless so helping clients to focus on the most likely high-risk triggers can be a valuable exercise. Helping gamblers anticipate, prepare for, and respond to external triggers is an important part of reducing problem gambling behavior. Developing strategies for this type of work can also be done in the context of discussing healthy boundaries for recovery efforts.

Activity for Gamblers

In the table about high-risk triggers, identify those that are most difficult and plan on how you will respond in a situation where the trigger arises.

Recognizing Internal Triggers

Several internal triggers have been reported by gamblers. Often, internal triggers can be more difficult to deal with than external triggers. For example, it's much easier to avoid a casino than process an unpleasant emotion. Some gamblers have histories of trauma and any experience that resembles the original trauma is likely to be triggering. This is why strategies to help gamblers respond to internal triggers are an important part of the broader work done in addiction treatment. Common internal triggers reported by problem gamblers include:

- Unpleasant emotions such as depression, anxiety loneliness, anger, rejection, boredom, etc...
- Irrational thoughts about the self "I'm not good enough, I'm worthless" that give rise to shame.
- Any feeling that is historically avoided or led to gambling as a form of escapism/avoidance.
- Increased levels of stress from the belief one is unable to meet demands in their life.
- Pleasant emotions such as happiness or excitement.
- Positive life events or accomplishments trigger the desire to celebrate or give oneself a 'reward.'
- Wanting to feel normal, accepted.
- Conflict with family members, a loved one, friends, co-workers, or a supervisor.
- Overconfidence in addiction recovery.
- Fear of missing out (FOMO).
- Feeling tired or hungry depletes mental resources, energy, and strength that can reduce a person's ability to resist cravings.
- Feeling powerless, out of control, or feelings associated with uncertainty.

As mentioned above, strategies to address internal triggers are part of more comprehensive work done in treatment and can include things such as: stress coping skills, mindfulness practices, cultivating emotional intelligence, and correcting irrational thinking patterns. These approaches target overall emotional well-being and maintaining a balanced lifestyle.

High Risk Triggers	Response Strategies if Triggered
Friend calls to see if you want to gamble	Be honest with friends about my problem gambling and ask for their support by not inviting you to gamble. Suggest an alternative activity.
Getting a bill in the mail reminding me of debt	Schedule a time to open bills with a friend or loved one that can help me put my debt in perspective and not overreact.

Reducing Access to Money Reduces Cravings to Gamble

Having access to money is the lifeblood of a gambling problem. Gamblers sometimes say, “no money, no craving” adding that it’s pointless to crave something you can’t have. Other gamblers take a more modest approach by conceding limited access to money reduces their desire to gamble. Subsequently, strategies focused on limiting access to money can reduce the intensity of a gambling craving and may eliminate a craving all together. This parallels the principle outlined in the short article above that reported cravings were reduced when opportunities to smoke were not feasible. Interestingly, many gamblers report reduced cravings during the pandemic when gaming venues were closed and opportunities to gamble were severely limited. Some ways to limit access to money include:

- Eliminate, or reduce the amount of cash on your person.
- Eliminate or reduce the number of credit/debit cards on your person.
- Consider a [TrueLink Financial Debit](#) card that can be programmed to limit use.
- Turn financial matters over to a trusted friend, family member, or partner. Have them hold on to your cards for any necessary expenditures.
- Use Venmo/Zelle to give money to others if necessary, rather than carrying cash/cards.
- Sign up for [Everi Self Transaction Exclusion Program](#) (STeP) that will prohibit cash withdrawals from ATMs in gaming venues, most which use Everi transaction services.

While these methods will never be full proof, they can make it more difficult for gamblers to access money when gambling thoughts or cravings arise. Moreover, it makes impulsive decisions to gamble less likely. Collectively, if access to money has been limited, the intensity of a craving will be significantly reduced making it less likely gambling will occur.

Healthy Distractions/Diversions

Insofar as cravings are usually short in generation, it can be helpful to develop a list of brief activities that are incompatible with gambling. These distractions or diversions redirect attention so it cannot be focused on craving or gambling. This approach to coping with cravings is about creating a little extra time while the urge subsides and eventually it will go away. Gamblers must be committed to engaging in activities on the list with the belief that while they are focused on the activity they are also utilizing a strategy that will help them address the craving.

Distraction: “A thing that prevents someone from giving full attention to something else”

Diversion: “An activity that diverts the mind from tedious or serious concerns, a recreation, or pastime.”

Oxford Dictionary

Incompatible activities can include a wide variety of things such as:

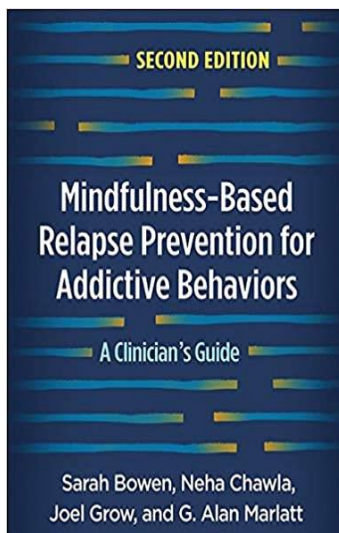
Category	Activity
Exercise	running, yoga, swimming, rollerblading, pickleball, tennis, hiking, stretching
Personal Growth	mindfulness meditation, journaling, gratitude list, spirituality, self-help reading, podcast
Games	crossword puzzles, computer, board games, chess, darts
Learning	a language, a instrument, a skill, a hobby, history information, ask ChatGPT questions
Chores	yardwork, cleaning, laundry, cooking, grocery shopping, organizing
Arts, Creativity	crafts, photo collage, write a poem, draw/paint, visit art gallery, origami, make a wish list
Outdoor	hiking, bird watch, walking, biking, find a new park to sit and relax
Reading	self-help books, GA/SMART recovery materials, new food recipes, emails
Listening/Watching	listen to music, a TedTalk, a movie, find a place to people watch, a podcast
Social	attend a MeetUp, a glub/group activity, connect with friends, family, community events
Volunteer	random act of kindness, donate clothes, homeless shelters, church, hospice, soup kitchen
Planning	plan a trip, a bucket list, a dinner with friends, personal goals
Fun	tourist in your own city, perfect signature, find interesting quotes, explore world records
Connecting	Call a friend/family, meet with a sponsor, mail a letter, attending a meeting

Gamblers can carry this list with them or create and personalize their own list that will always be accessible to them when they experience cravings.


Finally, it's worth mentioning, as gamblers will often observe, "isn't this just substituting one distraction, my gambling, for another?" Yes, but ideally, the alternative distractions are intended to be healthy behaviors rather than self-destructive (e.g., gambling) with its associated negative consequences.

Reorganize Relationships with Cravings through Mindfulness

Several studies have shown mindfulness can be helpful in reducing problem gambling behavior and increase tolerance for addictive cravings. Indeed, mindfulness interventions have been emerging over the past decade to help people cope with various



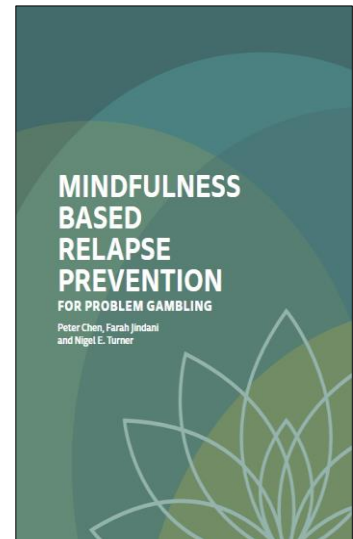
addictive behaviors. These interventions have targeted smoking cessation, substance abuse, alcohol problems, compulsive sexual behavior, overeating, and gambling addiction to name a few. One way mindfulness reduces addictive behaviors is by helping people reorganize their relationship with cravings. In mindfulness, gamblers are taught to be curious about a craving and not get into a tug-of-war with it. This can be scary as cravings historically lead many people to engage in their addictive behavior. But with mindfulness, gamblers learn to pay attention to the craving and notice how they experience craving



[Dr. Hedy Kober](#) discusses how mindfulness can help people cope more effectively with addictive cravings.

in their body without forming a judgement about the craving. Interestingly, this reduces the adversarial relationship often developed with cravings and allows gamblers to be less reactive when a craving arrives. In essence, gamblers learn “I can survive a craving and it’s not going to kill me.” Moreover, recent research that reviewed 30 scientific studies on mindfulness and craving across several addictive behaviors found support for mindfulness in helping people cope more effectively with craving.⁵

A common mindfulness technique to respond to cravings is called **Urge Surfing** developed by the late psychologist Dr. Alan Marlatt at the University of Washington as part of his work on Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention.⁶ Dr. Marlatt recognized that although cravings can lead to relapse, they can also provide an opportunity for growth and learning. The idea is to allow oneself to accept the experience of craving while suspending the judgement of the self or the craving. Initially, Dr. Marlatt was working with a client who was trying to quit smoking (and was also an avid surfer). From their discussions, the concept of surfing urges was born. The client was invited to imagine the idea of a wave steadily increasing as it became more intense and then rapidly cresting as it became less and less powerful. If the surfer could ride out the urges rather than fighting them, the experience would be momentary and then go away. Sarah Bowen, a former doctoral student of Dr. Marlatt discusses Urge Surfing in this [video](#) for the Mind and Life Institute. They have also created a Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention [website](#) for the treatment of addictive behaviors with some Urge Surfing audio exercises.



Briefly put, Urge Surfing teaches gamblers to recognize their relationship with craving from one of fear or resistance to that of “being with” the craving in a curious, non-judgmental way. Bowen and her colleagues write:

“The exercise invites participants to explore a more nuanced experience of craving, observing first the physical sensations as well as the accompanying thoughts and urges, dismantling an often overwhelming experience that might typically elicit reactivity, feelings of defeat or fear, or attempts to control the experience. Participants practice a curious, compassionate presence versus a habitual or automatic reaction. They are invited to look ‘underneath’ or ‘behind’ the craving...staying present with the intensity of craving without becoming subsumed or behaving reactively. Participants are asked to picture the urge as an ocean wave and imagine themselves surfing, using their breath as a surfboard to ride the

⁵ Tapper, K. (2018). Mindfulness and craving: Effects and mechanisms. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 59, 101-117.

⁶ Marlatt, G. A., & Gordon, J. R., (1985). *Relapse Prevention: Maintenance Strategies in the Treatment of Addictive Behaviors*. New York, NY Guilford Press.

wave. They rode the wave of craving through its peak and its decline, without being submerged or wiped out by its intensity...The primary intention in using the metaphor is to convey the possibility of observing urges and cravings without having to act upon or fight them. This practice not only reveals the impermanent nature of craving, but it also increases participants' confidence in their ability to experience discomfort and stay present with intensity."⁷

Two excellent resources to learn more about mindfulness approaches to coping with cravings (and relapse prevention more broadly) are the [Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention for Addictive Behaviors: A Clinician's Guide](#) and the [Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention for Problem Gamblers](#) (Free). These resources provide more specificity about how mindfulness can be used to help clients cope more effectively with cravings and urges.

Gamblers can also find numerous mindfulness exercises in several workbooks readily available such as:

1. [The Mindfulness Workbook for Addiction: A Guide to Coping with the Grief, Stress and Anger that Trigger Addictive Behaviors](#)
2. [Mindfulness and the 12 Steps: Living Recovery in the Present Moment](#)

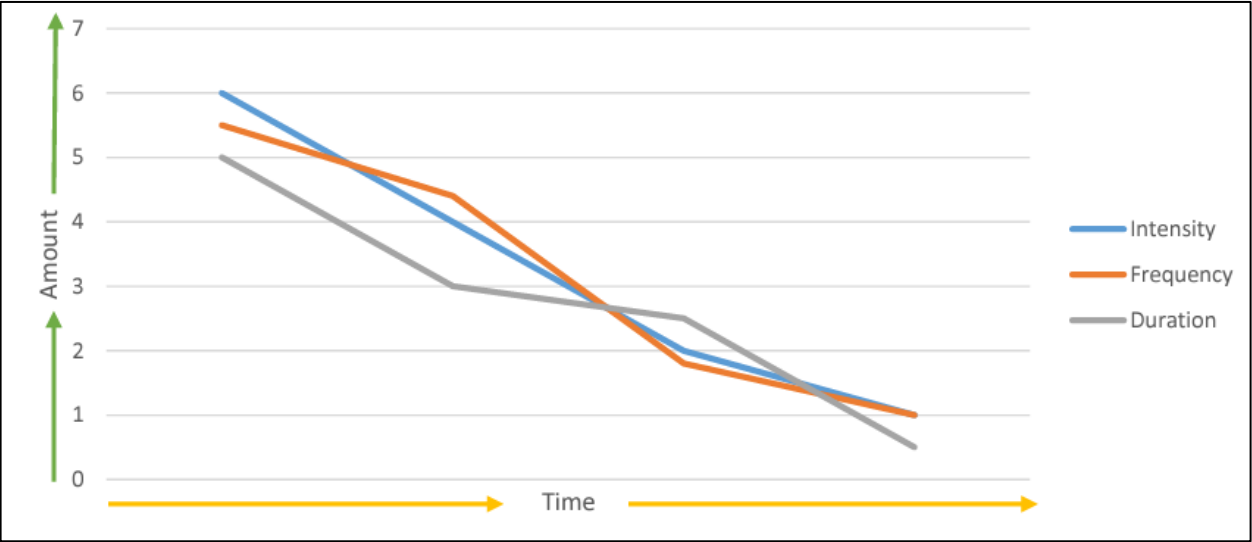
Final Thoughts

Gambling cravings are challenging, but not infallible to the efforts made to cope with them. As gamblers learn different strategies to cope with cravings they will be empowered in their recovery work.⁸ Several evidence-based strategies have been outlined in this article to guide gamblers in ways to address cravings in addiction work.

The chart below can help problem gamblers understand their efforts to cope with cravings will be successful. The chart, developed by the organization ForwardLeeds, illustrates that continued abstinence and using effective coping strategies will diminish craving intensity (how powerful cravings feel), frequency (how often they occur), and duration (how long they last) over time. The chart shows the process of habituation, a scientific term describing how responses to a stimulus can decrease after repeated exposure. Gamblers can anticipate things will get better and they can have hope for a bright future free of problem gambling. As with most things in life, anything worthwhile requires energy and effort. There are no shortcuts. Gamblers didn't develop their addiction overnight and recovery will take time and persistence. But gamblers can have hope that the strategies outlined in this article have been shown to help many problem gamblers and if implemented, can help them too.

⁷ Bowen, S., Chawla, N., Grow, J., & Marlatt, G. A. (2021). *Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention for Addictive Behaviors: A Clinician's Guide: Second Edition*. The Guilford Press, New York, NY.

⁸ Mallorquí-Bagué, N., Mestre-Bach, G., & Testa, G. (2023). Craving in gambling disorder: A systematic review. *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, 12(1), 53-79.



Craving Trends for Intensity, Frequency, and Duration Measured Over Time. Source: ForwardLeads

END

UCLA Gambling Craving Scale on Next Page

UCLA Gambling Craving Scale

Name: _____

Date: _____

Instructions: Below are a number of statements that attempt to understand your experience of gambling cravings **during the past week**. For this questionnaire, define cravings as a desire or urge.

1. During the past week, *how often* have you had an urge or desire to gamble?

2. During the past week, *how much time* was spent experiencing urges or desires to gamble?

3. At the most severe point, *how strong or intense* was your urge or desire to gamble this past week?

4. How *difficult* was it for you to *control or resist urges* to gamble this past week?

5. Keeping in mind your responses to the previous questions, rate your *overall average desire* to gamble this past week.

6. If you gambled this past week, please respond to the following questions: I did not gamble this past week

How *many occasions* did you gamble this past week? _____

How *much total time* did you gamble this past week? Hours: _____ Minutes: _____

What was the *overall outcome* of your gambling this week: _____

What *percentage* of your *weekly* income did you win/lose? _____ % How much money won/lost? _____

Was there a stressor, situation, experience or trigger that led you to gamble this past week (if you gambled)?

- | | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Boredom | Wanted to Make Money | Need for Relaxation |
| Felt Sad/Depressed | Restless | Urges were too Strong |
| Loneliness | Stress Relief | Wanted Social Connection |
| Excitement Felt | Needed Distraction / Escape | Conflict with Family/Friends |
| Anxious | Social Pressure | Conflict with Romantic Partner |
| Felt Lucky | Didn't Care | Wanted Money to Pay Debts |

If you gambled, what did you learn? What will you do differently in the future?