

STAYING ON TRACK

A guide to remaining gambling-free

BOOKLET 1

OVERVIEW

Brought to you by the University of Calgary.
Funded by the Alberta Gaming Research Institute.

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About Staying on Track

Staying on Track is a new program offered as part of a research project through the University of Calgary and the Alberta Gaming Research Institute. Its goal is to help people who have quit gambling to stay away from it for good.

Many treatment programs for people with gambling problems offer participants the opportunity to attend support groups for long-term follow-up after treatment ends. Many people choose not to attend these groups. ***Staying on Track*** offers these individuals an alternative approach to preventing relapse.

Many other problem gamblers quit gambling without the help of formal treatment. ***Staying on Track*** can offer these individuals additional help in overcoming this challenging addiction.

Staying on Track contains information that is based on research with problem gamblers who have successfully quit. ***Staying on Track*** is brand new and is being evaluated, funded by a grant from the Alberta Gaming Research Institute. Your experience with this program will be used to further develop and improve these materials.

We ask you to read the ***Staying on Track*** booklet and then save it. Some of the information may be a review for you; other information may be new. Read the booklet from time to time to help you be prepared to prevent a return to gambling.

Nine tips to preventing relapse

1. Avoid relapse by identifying triggers.

There are certain circumstances that are likely to cause urges to gamble in people who have quit gambling. These circumstances can be external situations or internal thoughts and feelings. Based on hundreds of interviews with former gamblers, we know that the following reasons are common triggers: dealing with negative emotions such as anger, sadness and frustration, a desire to make money, combating boredom, and the belief that winning is possible.

Avoiding triggers that will cause you to be tempted to gamble is the first major strategy for success. The situations in which you gambled in the past are most likely high-risk triggers for you.

EXERCISE

List triggers that cause you to be tempted to gamble:



2. Prepare a budget.

First, you will want to figure out your monthly income so that you can successfully put aside money to repay your debt or increase your savings.

EXERCISE

Fill in what your monthly expenses are:

Rent/Mortgage	\$ _____
Bills (power, cable, heat)	\$ _____
Transport	\$ _____
Food	\$ _____
Entertainment (not including gambling)	\$ _____
Medical	\$ _____
Loan/credit card payments	\$ _____
Child care expenses	\$ _____
Other expenses	\$ _____
Debt from other sources	\$ _____
Late bills	\$ _____

TOTAL EXPENSES \$ _____

Next compare your income and expenses:

Total income \$ _____

Total expenses \$ _____

Subtract your expenses from your income.

Balance \$ _____

If your balance is zero or less than zero, you might want to consider how you can change this. Is there a category you can cut back on? Is it possible to increase your income by working more hours or taking on a second job?

If you feel you need some help in getting control over your finances, think about contacting a free financial counseling service agency in your area. Most of these agencies will offer advice on debt consolidation and/or debt repayment.

3. Limit access to money.

In addition to improving your financial situation, it is also important to avoid further losses (i.e. relapsing). Most people find that if they have cash in their pocket they are more likely to gamble. Many people who do successfully stop gambling state that getting their cash flow under control is critical. Removing the temptation to gamble whenever possible will help you to avoid a relapse.

Turn over finances to a trusted family member or friend. It is normal to feel reluctant to hand over control of your money. However, many gamblers have found this to be extremely helpful especially during the first stages of recovery. Getting your family and friends involved and gaining their support is an excellent way to avoid relapse.

If you don't feel comfortable getting someone else involved, continue to manage your finances but arrange to limit your access to money (for example canceling credit cards or not keeping cash on hand).

Remember - it takes time to recover from the financial consequences of gambling. Don't give up. By reading this booklet and making some changes, you can get control of your finances.

4. Develop ways to deal with urges.

To be successful in quitting gambling you must learn to cope with urges or temptations to gamble. The first step is to become aware of the source of your urges. When do you experience these urges? What strategies do you use that work well? What strategies do not work for you?

EXERCISE

Make a list of what causes your urges.



There are two major ways to cope with urges, coping BY THINKING and coping BY ACTING. Here are some examples of how former gamblers were able resist even the most overwhelming urges to gamble:

BY THINKING

- ✓ Talked self out of it
- ✓ Consciously decided not to gamble
- ✓ Thought of the bills they had to pay
- ✓ Realized it is not a way to get ahead
- ✓ Used self control/will power
- ✓ Remembered past gambling problems

BY ACTING

- ✓ Spoke with a friend/spouse
- ✓ Found something else to spend money on

- ✓ Went to see a friend that didn't gamble
- ✓ Made sure they did not have access to money
- ✓ Walked away
- ✓ Did other activities instead
- ✓ Avoided friends who gambled
- ✓ Went to Gamblers Anonymous meeting

EXERCISE

List strategies you can use to combat your urges. Try to list both thinking and acting strategies that will help you to fight an urge.



Studies show that the most successful quitters use self-talk along with an action to resist an urge.

5. Challenge the thinking that allows you to gamble.

We think ourselves into acting. One strategy to avoid relapse is to become aware of the thinking patterns that allow you to start or to continue to gamble. Consider the last time you gambled. What thoughts gave you permission to gamble?

EXERCISE



Go through the check list and mark anything that applies to you.

- ☐ Did you forget about all the money you had lost and, instead, told yourself that you would win this time?

- ☐ Did you convince yourself that your system or skill would come through for you this time?
- ☐ Did you explain away past losses as “a fluke”?
- ☐ Did you convince yourself that you were due to win because of past losses?
- ☐ Did you convince yourself that you could influence the outcome in some way (for example, choosing the right machine, picking the right lines or numbers)?
- ☐ Did you convince yourself that gambling could solve your financial problems?
- ☐ Did you convince yourself that the odds of winning were better than they really were?

These thoughts often occur without our awareness. Focusing on your thinking patterns can bring them into your awareness. It can be helpful to examine how accurate your thoughts about gambling are. What are the odds of winning your favorite game? How much have you lost? Can you really solve your financial problems through gambling?

Prepare some challenges to your thinking patterns:



6. Get more balance into your life.

Too much of one thing can be bad for you. For example, people who are “workaholics” may achieve a great deal in their work lives, but often experience more stress, have strained relationships, face more health problems, (like headaches and high blood pressure) and are at greater risk for abusing substances. A balanced lifestyle is one that includes a good balance of pleasurable activities *and* productive activities.

Since gambling has probably been a central focus of your life, both in terms of time and energy, replacement activities are essential in order to stay on track and quit gambling successfully. Successful change requires a balanced lifestyle because a balanced lifestyle helps you remain stress-hardy. Stress-hardy people can cope well with the minor problems and crises of life. Have you begun to develop new activities to fill the time left from quitting gambling? Be sure to make some of these activities pleasurable, some physically active, some mentally active (such as playing games, reading, doing puzzles), and some social.

EXERCISE

List new activities that you have already begun or could begin.



7. Deal with possible problems of depression.

For many people gambling is only part of the problem. They have battled with depression at other times in their life, even before they had a gambling problem. Their gambling may be, in part, related to a desire to escape from depression. Is this true for you? Are you feeling sad or down most of the day, nearly every day? Do you find that nothing gives you pleasure? Have these feelings continued despite having quit gambling for some time? Depression is associated with relapse in gambling – it is difficult to sustain the energy needed to stay away from gambling when you are depressed.

Effective treatment for depression is available. Talk with your family doctor or call your local mental health service agency (found in all phone books). Recognize depression as a legitimate problem to be solved.

8. Deal with substance abuse problems.

Alcohol and other drug problems are very commonly associated with gambling problems. It is important to make an honest assessment of your use of alcohol and other drugs. Have you felt a need to cut back on your drinking or drug use? Have you felt annoyed by criticisms of your use? Are you drinking more than one or two drinks per day? Have you felt guilty about your use? Has your use increased since you quit gambling? Do you use alcohol or drugs to cope with problems?

One reason to monitor your use carefully, is that alcohol and other drug use can lessen your resolve to stay away from gambling. Do you have the same motivation not to gamble after a couple of drinks or drug use?

EXERCISE

Think about your recent alcohol and other drug use. List some things that you can do to take action if needed.



If you think alcohol or drugs is a problem for you, help is available from your family doctor or local mental health service agency (found in all phone books).

9. Get back on the wagon if you slip

Hopefully you will be immediately and permanently successful in your attempt to quit gambling. However, quitting gambling is a process that often involves one or more slips back into gambling. It is rare that a person quits “cold turkey” and never gambles again. If you do slip or relapse it is easy to become frustrated and to give up. To avoid this it can be helpful to prepare yourself in advance to “get back on the wagon” if you slip. Why did you quit gambling in the first place? What are some of the positive effects of quitting that you are hoping for in the short-term? In the long-term? Who can help to remind you of these benefits if you slip? In short, make a plan to be ready to re-motivate yourself if you need to do so along the way.

EXERCISE

Outline your plan:



Quitting an addiction such as gambling is challenging. Many people report that it took them several attempts at quitting before they were successful. If you have quit gambling for a period of time and then slip, do not become discouraged. Use the tips in this booklet to help you remain on track and stay gambling free.



