

STAYING ON TRACK

A guide to remaining gambling-free

BOOKLET 2

AVOIDING A RELAPSE

Brought to you by the University of Calgary.
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This booklet, *Avoiding a Relapse*, is the second of eight in the ***Staying on Track*** series. In this booklet, we cover causes of relapses as reported by gamblers and suggest strategies to avoid a relapse.

What is a relapse?

Relapse can be broadly defined as resuming an activity after you have quit for a period of time. Research indicates that as many as 75% of gamblers return to gambling shortly after a serious attempt to quit. By being aware of high-risk situations for relapse you have a better chance of preparing yourself to deal with these situations, and you will be better able to maintain your goal of quitting gambling. This booklet is designed to help gamblers who have quit gambling become aware of the possible triggers of relapse.

Real stories told to us by gamblers are used to illustrate each cause of relapse. As you read each story, think about whether this trigger is a risk for you.

Triggers of relapse reported by gamblers

Dealing with negative situations or emotions

Many people use gambling as a way to avoid or cope with negative emotions such as anger, frustration, loneliness, guilt and anxiety. Similarly, they may gamble to escape negative situations like family problems or tension at work. Negative situations or emotions make a person feel uncomfortable. Gambling can be viewed as a way to relieve or forget these unpleasant feelings.

Alan:

“My son had told me a few days earlier that he was moving to Saskatchewan to live with his mother. He was out with his friends that night and I came home from work to an empty house. I didn’t even think about it, I just went (gambling). I was very angry that he was moving back.”

Sally:

“In the back of my mind the main reason (for gambling) is because my husband and I had some relationship problems that have caused me some anxiety.”

Seeking excitement and enjoyment

The chance to win money can be very enjoyable and exciting. Society views gambling as an enjoyable form of recreation just like going to a movie or playing sports. People who quit gambling may miss this pastime. Booklet 6 offers some suggestions on how to replace gambling with healthier activities.

Amanda:

“I get to a certain point, it’s usually when I am trying to stop gambling, when I say I’m gonna do other things like go to restaurants and stuff like this, but I always get bored. Then I say to myself the only thing I enjoy is gambling.”

Nick:

“Well it was like entertainment. I could have spent it drinking. It’s something to do. You could have spent \$10 on a movie and another \$10 on popcorn and candy too. Instead I spent the \$20 on gambling.”

The desire to make money

The idea of winning a large sum of money in a short time with little effort is appealing to everyone. Many people who have quit gambling did so because of financial trouble. However, they may still believe that gambling is an easy way to make money to pay off their debts. Booklet 5 explains in greater detail how gambling is not profitable in the long run.

Steve:

“I wanted to win big money. A VLT machine is almost like a savings account. It’s like one of these accounts where you deposit money and deposit money and every once in a while you’re able to make a withdrawal. You know what I’m saying? So on account, I’ve got thousands of dollars. I should be able to make a withdrawal one of these days. But the question is what day, what time of day, and where, which branch?”

Combating boredom

Many people who gamble do so on a fairly regular basis. When a person decides to quit gambling they are left with a lot of spare time on their hands. Sometimes people don’t know what to do with their time when they’re not gambling.

Bob:

“Tuesdays and Wednesdays are my days off from work and I had to find something to do. I guess I was gambling for something to do on those days.”

Socializing and fitting in

For some people gambling is a social activity. If you belong to a social group that gambles, you might feel pressured to continue. If you decide to quit playing poker for example, then you miss seeing your gambling friends on poker night.

Janet:

“My grandma was in town from Ontario, and she really wanted to go to bingo. How could I say no since she was paying? I didn’t feel guilty because I was playing bingo with my grandma after not playing for a while. I was being social.”

Having access to money

You can imagine the temptation for an ex-smoker if they have a package of cigarettes in their pocket. The same temptation is true for gamblers with money in their hands. Ex-gamblers will tell you that they were not intending to gamble but when the opportunity arose and they had the money in their pockets, they just couldn’t resist. Upcoming booklet 3 offers ways to limit your access to money.

Sally:

“The only reason why I wasn’t gambling at that point, was basically because I was very low in funds. I was barely making the rent, never mind the whole gambling experience. Once I had some money in my pocket though, I went again.”

Thinking you can win

Many gamblers report that they relapsed because they were sure they would win, or they saw other people winning and thought they could too. Gamblers often claim that they “feel lucky”, even though there is nothing they can do to influence the chance of winning.

Mike:

“I had to win. I was overdue. Also, it was a full moon and there were signs pointing my way that I was going to be lucky...but obviously the signs were wrong.”

Control issues

Gamblers who have quit decide to see if they can gamble in a more controlled manner. For example, they may try to reduce the amount of money or limit the amount of time they allow themselves to spend gambling.

Carol:

“I had free spare time, availability of funds and I was just curious. I wanted to see what the hullabulla was about cause I thought I was cured.”

Stephen:

“Well I didn’t really consider it a slip, I considered it a test. I would like to be able to just gamble like a normal person. I guess what I was trying to do was lose my \$40 to see if I would go to the bank machine.”

Giving up

Gambling is hard to quit and sometimes people just want to stop trying. The most common reason why ex-gamblers stop trying to quit is a slip. Gamblers will tell you that once you slip, even if it’s only once, it is very easy to become discouraged and give up.

Dwayne:

“After losing as much as I did on Friday, I knew that I had done it again and my money wouldn’t last till the next cheque. So I kind of thought that if I didn’t have enough to get me through till payday then it really didn’t matter that I spent what very little I had.”

Giving into urges

Giving into urges is easy to do since an urge can be very strong. If you enjoy gambling and have quit for a couple of weeks it may be very hard to resist gambling when the opportunity arises. Similarly, if gambling has become a habit it can be very hard to break the pattern. Booklet 4 will advise on how to deal with urges.

Nancy:

“I was walking along the Avenue like I usually do on Sunday afternoons, and I had to stop in the pub because I knew the VLT’s were in there.”

Research indicates that the number one cause of relapse was people thinking that they could win, followed closely by the desire to make money, to combat boredom, giving into urges and avoiding negative emotions. By being aware of high-risk situations, you are better able to avoid a slip.

EXERCISE

Think about your past gambling patterns and list three high-risk situations that may cause you to relapse.

EXAMPLE

Every time I walk past the pub on my way home from work I feel like going in and playing the VLT's.

Situation 1



Situation 2



Situation 3



You will be looking back at this list later, once you have read about some strategies to help you deal with these situations.

Maintaining your goal to quit gambling

The following are some factors people reported as being helpful in staying quit and staying on track.

Support of your family

A lot of gamblers tend to lie to their families about the extent of their gambling. Families of gamblers have reported that once they found out about the gambling problem and its extent, they were better able to understand what the gambler was experiencing. Be honest with family members and friends and they will be better equipped to offer support.

Self-control or will power

Many ex-gamblers will tell you that eventually they get so fed up with losing money or lying all the time to hide the extent of their gambling, they become determined to stop. This type of determination is called will power

Changing your social life activities

Find something else to do socially which doesn't involve gambling. For example, instead of going to the casino every Friday night with friends try going to a hockey game instead. If you regularly meet with friends in a lounge where there are VLTs, you could suggest meeting someplace with no VLTs. See booklet 6 for more suggestions.

Experiencing a change in your financial status

Over the long run, you lose more money than you make gambling. The realization of how much money you have lost due to gambling can be incentive to quit. Similarly, after you quit gambling the money that you save is an incentive to maintain your abstinence.

Developing a sense of accomplishment, pride and self-respect

It feels good when you accomplish what you set out to do. Many people are proud of themselves for being able to overcome a difficult problem like gambling. Ex-

gamblers say that they were embarrassed about their gambling activities. Others say that they were ashamed of all the lies they told in order to hide their gambling. Quitting gambling is the first step in regaining your self-respect. This feeling can make it easier to keep from gambling.

Recalling past gambling problems

Gamblers will tell you that thinking of all the problems that gambling has caused for them, such as relationship problems and financial problems, can motivate them to continue their abstinence.

Out of the seven factors listed above, the top five reasons (short term and long term), which gamblers reported helped them to maintain their goal, were:

SHORT TERM FACTORS	
	PEOPLE REPORTING FACTOR AS HELPFUL
Developing a sense of accomplishment, pride and self-respect	100%
Self-control or will-power	61%
Recalling past gambling problems	57%
Changing the activities of your social life	52%
Having the support of your family	48%

LONG TERM FACTORS	
	PEOPLE REPORTING FACTOR AS HELPFUL
Developing a sense of accomplishment, pride and self-respect	100%
Recalling past gambling problems	86%
Self-control or will-power	79%
Experiencing a financial status change	63%
Changing your recreational activities	58%


EXERCISE

For each of the three high-risk situations you described on page 7, list all of the maintenance factors which you feel will be helpful in preventing you from gambling in these high-risk situations.


EXAMPLE

I will walk home from work a different way so that I will not be tempted to go into the pub and play those VLT's.

Maintenance factors that could be useful in Situation 1:



Maintenance factors that could be useful in Situation 2:



Maintenance factors that could be useful in Situation 3:



By becoming aware of the triggers of relapse you can identify situations in which you are at risk of relapsing. Being aware of these potentially dangerous situations gives you the opportunity to devise a plan to resist gambling before you find yourself in a high risk situation and will help you stay on track.



