

# **STAYING ON TRACK**

A guide to remaining gambling-free

**BOOKLET 4**

## **DEALING WITH URGES**

Brought to you by the University of Calgary.  
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This is the fourth booklet, Dealing with Urges, on preventing relapse in the ***Staying on Track*** series. In this booklet, we cover gambling urges and how to deal with them in more detail.

## What is an urge?

Most of us have experienced an urge. An urge is a strong desire, temptation, impulse or craving for a particular substance or activity. The strength of an urge depends on the person experiencing it and the situation in which the urge occurs. Dealing with an urge to gamble is not that different from dealing with an urge to eat, drink, or smoke. Some people who have quit gambling have reported that they can physically feel the urge to gamble. This booklet is designed to help you identify your urges and develop effective coping strategies.

### EXERCISE

Take a moment to describe your urges.



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## Identifying urges

Most people know when an urge is happening. Identifying *why* the urge is happening, however, can be tricky. It is important to recognize where the urge comes from as this information can be used to help you avoid the urge and deal with it more effectively. For example, if you experience an urge while driving near a gambling venue, try taking a different route. Urges can occur as a reaction to environmental cues, as a response to internal feelings, or even out of the blue.

It can be helpful to remember specific times that you have gambled since you have been trying to overcome this problem.

## EXERCISE

Try to identify several different occasions when urges occur.



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Appearing below is a list of the various causes of urges, as reported by people trying to quit gambling.

## EXERCISE

Check off all the factors that you feel contribute to your urges to gamble on the occasions you have listed.



- ☐ Boredom.
- ☐ Free time.
- ☐ Feeling depressed or lonely.
- ☐ Wanting to gamble for pleasure, entertainment, or excitement.
- ☐ To escape from problems or to forget troubles.
- ☐ Feeling broke (worrying about debt).
- ☐ Wanting to celebrate.
- ☐ Chasing financial losses.
- ☐ Pressures at work.
- ☐ To avoid people.
- ☐ Problems at home.
- ☐ Out of habit.
- ☐ Having access to money/extra pocket money.
- ☐ To be social with people.

## EXERCISE

List the causes of the urges that you find *most* difficult to resist:



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## Dealing with urges

The ability to deal with an urge (i.e. not gamble) depends on your motivation and coping skills. Increasing and maintaining your motivation is discussed in upcoming booklet 7. In this section, we will look at the coping skills best suited for you.

To be successful in quitting gambling you must learn to cope with urges and temptations. Urges are usually the strongest during the first few weeks of quitting. It is important for you to develop new ways of coping when this happens, but first it is necessary to evaluate your existing coping skills. This will help you to identify factors that cause you to gamble and will increase your awareness about situations where you may be at risk.

There are two types of effective coping:

### BY THINKING

Use self-talk to fight the urge to gamble. In research, almost all the people interviewed who had successfully overcome a gambling problem said that they used “thinking” strategies such as remembering past gambling problems and thinking about how well they were doing in accomplishing their goal.

### BY ACTING

Do things that will help you stay away from gambling. Over half the people interviewed who had successfully overcome a gambling problem reported that they made a change in their leisure and recreational activities. Almost half made a change in their social life.

## Effective coping strategies

Recording your urges and coping strategies can increase your understanding of why you gamble and it can help you to identify the strategies that are most effective for avoiding gambling.

### EXERCISE

Record an example of when you effectively coped with an urge to gamble

### EXAMPLE

Where were you and with whom?

*I was driving alone after a fight with my partner.*

Describe how you were feeling:

*I was feeling angry, upset, and bored.*

What did you say to yourself?

I told myself that if I went gambling (and lost) I would just end up feeling worse.

I also told myself that there were plenty of other things I could do to calm down.

What did you do instead?

*I drove to a friend's house to talk things over and watch TV.*

Did your coping work?

YES ☒ NO ☐

### Situation 1

Where were you and with whom?



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Describe how you were feeling:

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What did you say to yourself?

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What did you do instead?

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Did your coping work?

YES ☐ NO ☐

### Situation 2

Where were you and with whom?



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Describe how you were feeling:

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What did you say to yourself?

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What did you do instead?

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Did your coping work?

YES ☐ NO ☐

### **Situation 3**

Where were you and with whom?



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Describe how you were feeling:

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What did you say to yourself?

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What did you do instead?

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Did your coping work?

YES ☐ NO ☐

The following list may also be helpful when dealing with an urge on the spot.

**D**o something else  
**D**elay - wait 15 minutes the urge *will* pass  
**D**eep breathing  
**D**eny yourself access to money

# Ineffective coping strategies

Almost all gamblers have tried to cope with an urge and failed.

## EXERCISE

Record examples of when you did not successfully deal with an urge and then try and replace it with one that is more effective.

## EXAMPLE

Ineffective coping mechanism:

*I'll just play for half an hour to kill some time.*

*And besides...you can't win if you don't try.*

Why is it ineffective?

*I always lose track of time and miss important meetings.*

New effective coping mechanism:

*I will just walk away and review my reasons.*

*for quitting gambling until the urge goes away.*

## Situation 1

Ineffective coping mechanism:



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Why is it ineffective?

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New effective coping mechanism:

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## Situation 2

Ineffective coping mechanism:



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Why is it ineffective?

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New effective coping mechanism:

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### **Situation 3**

Ineffective coping mechanism:



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Why is it ineffective?

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New effective coping mechanism:

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Here are some examples of how former gamblers fought off the most overwhelming urges to gamble.

### **BY THINKING**

- Talked themselves 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.
- Self control/will power.
- Remembering 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.
- Limited their access to money.
- Walked away.
- Did other activities instead.
- Avoided friends who gamble.
- Went to a Gamblers Anonymous meeting.

Studies show that the most successful quitters use self-talk along with an action to resist an urge. Think of both thinking and acting strategies that would help you to fight an urge.

### **EXERCISE**

Summarize your thinking strategies for fighting an urge.



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Becoming aware of your urges allows you to examine patterns that you may have. Once you are aware of what causes your urges, experiment with different coping strategies to find ones that work for you. Being prepared to deal with urges will help you to stay on track and remain gambling free.



