STAYING ON TRACK

A guide to remaining gambling-free

BOOKLET 5

CHANGING YOUR THINKING

Contents

This is the fifth booklet, Changing Your Thinking, on preventing relapse in the series *Staying on Track*. In this booklet, you will identify and modify thinking patterns that allow you to gamble.

Thinking patterns that allow you to gamble

This booklet is designed to examine irrational thought processes and give you advise on how to change them.

Thinking and acting

All of our actions have a thinking or "cognitive" component to them. We never act without thinking although sometimes the thinking component is automatic and fast. Because the thinking component is automatic and fast, we often are not aware that it is happening. It can seem as if we are acting without thinking.

<p style="text-align:center">Situation ➡ Thought ➡ Action</p>

For example, Tom is driving his car to work and while he is approaching an intersection the traffic light turns yellow. Tom slows to a stop at the red light. Tom tells himself to do this. The thought that Tom has that makes him take action is "I must stop; the light is turning red". If Tom was just learning to drive this thought might be very conscious and deliberate. In Tom's case, however, he has many years of driving experience. Tom isn't aware of thinking at all about his decision to stop. The thought is automatic.

Our underlying beliefs

The specific thoughts that we have in any given situation are determined by our underlying beliefs. The underlying thought that was inspired by the yellow light was "I must stop". Tom has an underlying belief that stopping at a yellow light is both legal and safe.

Jack, on the other hand, believes that yellow lights indicate the opportunity to make it through the intersection before the light turns red. Jack's thought is "I must speed up if I am going to make it". Jack, like Tom, is unaware of this automatic thought and speeds through the intersection. Imagine being in this situation. What is your automatic thought, your underlying belief, and your action?

Situation ➡ Thought ➡ Action

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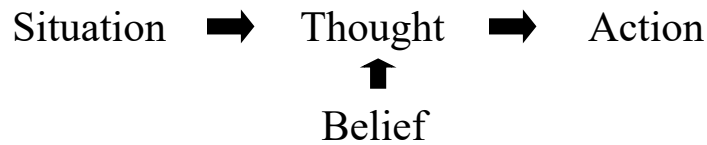
Belief

Changing our thoughts and beliefs

If we can identify our thoughts and the underlying beliefs then we can begin to change them. The process of changing our thoughts and beliefs is difficult because they are automatic and fast and happen almost without our awareness. There are four steps to success in changing our thoughts and beliefs:

> 1. Identify the thought
> 2. Identify the underlying belief
> 3. Develop a realistic challenge to the thought and belief. Are they reasonable?
> 4. Practice, practice, practice challenging the thoughts and beliefs

For example, Jack, who speeds up when he sees a yellow light, hears of a friend who was injured in a car accident because a driver was running a red light. Then, in the same week, he receives a warning from a police officer who spots him doing the same thing. Jack decides to change his belief that speeding through a yellow light is a good thing and also decides to change his behaviour. Monday on the way to work, he realizes that he has done it again as he automatically speeds through the yellow light at the first intersection. As he approaches the second intersection he reminds himself "I must stop. Speeding through is dangerous." He eases up on the gas pedal and stops as the light turns red. At the third intersection, he again reminds himself to stop. At the fourth intersection he is distracted by the radio and forgets to correct his thinking. Once again he speeds through. Jack is motivated to change his driving behaviour but how can he do it? If Jack is going to successfully change his habit, he will need to remind himself repeatedly to stop until this new way of thinking becomes a habit and becomes automatic. This change in thinking takes dedication and sustained effort on Jack's part. Changes in thinking do not come easily.

How your thoughts and beliefs allow you to gamble

You have spent many hours gambling, which means your thoughts associated with gambling have become fast and automatic. Because of this, these thoughts and their underlying beliefs are difficult to identify. This section will help you understand how *your* thoughts and beliefs direct *your* gambling. When researchers asked gamblers to speak their thoughts aloud while gambling, they found about 70% of the thoughts people expressed to be inaccurate. The common mistakes that lead to gambling are listed below.

Selective memory

Many gamblers can easily recall their wins but forget or minimize their losses.

"I always win when it's a full moon."
"I win more than I lose."

Overconfidence in winning

Some gamblers believe that they have a winning system or spend time mastering a game that doesn't actually involve skill.

"My system for the slots works."
"I can double the mortgage payment in a few hours."

Explaining away losses

Some gamblers believe that a series of losses means that a win is near. Some gamblers believe that losses happen because of external reasons. Other gamblers believe they are personally responsible for wins because of their skills.

"The machine is going to pay because it is due."
"The only reason I lost was…"

Illusion of control

Many gamblers believe that they can influence games that have random outcomes. Games are designed to give players this idea. Slots, VLT's, lottery tickets and bingo have no skill component but are designed so that it appears your choices or strategies make a difference. In reality, the player cannot influence the outcome. You cannot become a VLT expert in the way you might be an expert for games of skill (e.g., a chess champion, a golf master).

"If I get my (favorite) machine I can win."
"I know how this game works – I am good at it."

Underlying beliefs

Many of the thoughts that lead to gambling are related to incorrect underlying beliefs. A very common underlying belief of gamblers is that *gambling is a way to solve financial problems*. This belief is often related to having experienced a big win early in their gambling career. Because it has happened before, we overestimate the likelihood that a big win will occur again. We also regularly hear about winners – whether it's the player three machines down the row of slots or the multimillion-dollar winner of the lottery. Winning is noisy but losing tends to be silent; we rarely hear about it.

EXERCISE

Examine any thoughts you have about gambling. List any that are incorrect.

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A second common misconception concerns the *concept of randomness*. A common belief is that if you play long enough, you will win. You know that the outcome you are waiting for will happen if you hold on long enough. Just one more wager…. But, in truth, separate plays or wagers in many games have absolutely no relationship to one another.

For example, if you flip a coin once, your chance of getting heads is 50% and your chance of getting tails is 50% - there are two alternatives and they are equally likely. The second time you flip the chances are the same, 50-50. The result of each individual toss has no relationship to any other toss. The coin does not have a memory. A run of heads does not mean that tails is more likely on the next toss.

VLT and slot players often continue playing even if they are consistently losing because they feel it is their turn to win. Or they feel that the specific machine is due to pay out. The fact is each spin is a separate event and is not affected by what has happened before. A machine that has just paid out is just as likely to pay out as one that has not.

Similarly, in roulette each number has a 1 in 37 chance of winning on a particular spin. If you watch the play for a period of time and notice that a particular number – say 23 – has not come up for a long time it may seem logical to think that it will come up soon. But each spin of the wheel is a separate event. Number 23 has a 1 in 37 chance on every single spin. Neither the roulette wheel nor the ball has a memory.

EXERCISE

Gambling capitalizes on this common mistaken belief. We can easily believe our number is due to come up because it hasn't happened in a while. List situations where this belief caused you to keep gambling.

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Finally, many gamblers do not have accurate information about the odds of various types of gambling. They may realize that the house has the advantage but they like to believe that they will profit from other less lucky players. However, because of the house advantage, there is a *negative rate of return* when you gamble. The games are designed so that in the long run you will lose money. The more you play, the more you lose. For example, the typical payout from a VLT machine is 70%, which means that the machine retains 30%. In other words, for every $10 you put into the machine you will, on average, get back $7. The more you play the

more likely you will achieve this average and there is nothing you can do to change this. Games of chance have a negative rate of return:

Games	House Advantage	Pays to players
VLTs	30%	70%
Horse racing	19%	81%
Sports Select	37%	63%
Lottery	55%	45%
Bingo	35%	65%
Casino games (combined)	21%	79%

EXERCISE

List situations where a mistaken belief about the odds of winning caused you to keep gambling.

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Basic strategy for identifying thoughts and beliefs

You have already begun to think about your common thought patterns and probably have ideas of how your thoughts enable you to keep gambling. The basic strategy for identifying these thoughts and underlying beliefs is to pay attention to what happens in specific situations. You need to slow down a very fast and automatic process.

Start by remembering the last time you gambled. What was the situation? What was the action? What was the thought inspired by the situation that led to the action? Do you remember saying anything to yourself? Is there a belief underlying this thought?

Below are a few examples, followed by an exercise, to help you identify your own thought patterns.

EXAMPLE

Situation	Thoughts	Underlying belief	Action/outcome
Unexpected $50 pay cheque	*I can turn this into $500 (and pay the mortgage).*	*Gambling is a solution to my financial problems*	Visit to Blackjack table at nearest casino.
Feeling bored, wife out of town	*No harm in dropping by the lounge. This may be my lucky day. I usually win when I go on the weekend.*	*I can win gambling (Ignore the negative rate of return)*	Starts playing VLT, spent $150.
Lost $40 in VLT	*I'll get an advance on my credit card. This machine is due to pay out.*	*The outcome is predictable; it is not random*	Continued playing and lost $80.

EXERCISE

Situation	Thoughts	Underlying belief	Action/outcome

Basic strategy for developing challenges to these thoughts and beliefs

If you are going to change these thoughts and beliefs you need to develop realistic and believable challenges. For example, you cannot challenge your thinking that the slot machine is due to pay out if you believe that the process is not random. You may need to become a scientist or detective and collect information that will help you change your belief. Keeping records of your wins and losses is often very helpful in disputing the belief that you are skilled at gambling or that the negative rate of return doesn't affect you.

EXAMPLE

Thought:

> *I can turn this into $500 easily.*

What specifically is irrational about this thought?

I lose more money than I win, therefore in the long run I am not really earning money. There is a negative rate of return with all types of gambling. It is not really easy because it causes me a lot of time, stress, and worry.

Realistic challenge:

Can you really turn this into $500? Gambling is actually an easy way to lose money. Only rarely is it a way to "earn" money. It is not a solution to my problems. I lose more than I win. Look at my bank records.

EXERCISE

Situation 1

Thought:

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What specifically is irrational about this thought?

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Realistic challenge:

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Situation 2

Thought:

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What specifically is irrational about this thought?

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Realistic challenge:

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Situation 3

Thought:

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What specifically is irrational about this thought?

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Realistic challenge:

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We have already mentioned how difficult it can be to change our thinking. It takes sustained practice if you want to be able to make the new way of thinking become automatic. The exercises you have just completed are the first step in bringing your fast and automatic thoughts into your awareness. Imagining various situations can let you practice your challenges in your mind.
When faced with the actual situations, you will sometimes be entirely successful, sometimes partially successful and sometimes unsuccessful. It is important to pay attention to both your successes and failures. What other challenges can you develop for the problematic situations? Keeping records is always beneficial.
Most important, do not become discouraged. Identifying and modifying thoughts that allow us to gamble is a powerful strategy in avoiding relapse to gambling and staying on track.

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