Compulsive Gambling

“With what trembling, with what faintness of heart do I hear the croupier’s cry... With what greed do I look at the gambling table along which are strewn louis d’or, friedrichs d’or, and thalers, at the little columns of gold when they are scattered from the croupiers shovel into piles glowing like fire, or columns of silver a yard high lying stacked round the wheel. Even while approaching the gambling hall, two rooms away, as soon as I begin to hear the clinking of money being poured out, I almost go into convulsions.”

Even frequent gamblers make irrational and risky decisions largely based on their expectations of luck (Wagenaar et al., 1984). Thus, some gamblers take pride in their skill level and have great expectations for future winnings. However, because winners and losers are determined mainly by the luck of the draw (i.e., chance), compulsive gamblers may be investing their sense of self into something over which they have little control. Continued losses over time may lead to diminished self-esteem (Peck, 1986), which may promote further gambling behaviors. This sense of personal inadequacy and loss compels the gambler to return to the comfort of gambling. If winning occurs, the sense of loss is removed, and an euphoric sense of self-confidence returns” (Peck, 1986, p. 463). Of course, if they do win, the heightened confidence probably also increases the likelihood that the gambler will return to the table. If he loses, the resultant negative mood may make him more likely to seek gambling as a way to escape his mood. Thus, gambling is motivated by both wins and losses, and it is easy to see why it is so hard for the compulsive gambler to stop.

Another limiting factor that promotes self-regulation of gambling is access. Although almost all states have some legal form of gambling (notably lotteries; Lesieur, 1992), casinos are a different matter. Most people do not encounter casinos in their daily lives, and there are relatively few cues to initiate gambling. Thus, other than purchasing lottery tickets or playing cards with friends, most Americans do not have easy access to places in which to gamble. Someone who wants to gamble usually has to travel some distance to do so (unlike food, cigarettes, or alcohol, which are easily purchased). Marlatt (1985) described the case of a compulsive gambler driving from San Francisco to Seattle. Following a fight with his wife he purposefully altered his route from the safety of traveling through Placerville, California, to the high-risk route of driving through Reno. (He justified the change by saying he just wanted a more scenic route). Stopping in Reno, the man “happened” to wander into a casino to find change for a parking meter. He then decided he would just test his luck with one bet. One bet led to another, and eventually took his wife three days to get him out of the casinos following his loss of self-control. Thus, this man had to go a considerable distance out of his way to set up his self-regulation failure: a remarkable illustration of acquiescence in one’s own self-regulatory breakdown. Marlatt (1985) observed that people trying to get over their problematic self-control behaviors (i.e., alcohol, cigarettes, or gambling) often seem to set up high-risk situations, which they then use to justify their resultant lapse or relapse. It is hard to justify losing control of gambling in Seattle, but it is not so difficult in Reno.
FIGURE 1. Pathological Gambling: Development

WINNING PHASE

Occasional Gambling
Frequent Winning
More Frequent Gambling
Fantasies About Winning/Big Win
Unreasonable Optimism

Gambling Alone
Bragging About Wins
Prolonged Losing Episodes
Covering Up, Lying

LOSING PHASE

Increased Amount Bet
Big Win

Thinking Only About Gambling
Can't Stop Gambling/Borrowing Legally
Careless About Spouse/family
Delaying Paying Debts

HomeLife Unhappy

PERSONALITY CHANGES
Introverted, Restrained, Withdrawn

Heavily Borrowing/Legal & Illegal

Unable to Pay Debts

Reputation Affected

Marked Increase in Amount & Time Spent Gambling

Depression

SUICIDE

Emotional Breakdown
Withdrawal Symptoms

Hopelessness
Suicide Thoughts & Attempts
Arrests
Divorce
Alcohol

Emotional Breakdown
Withdrawal Symptoms

Panic

Depression

Emotional Breakdown
Withdrawal Symptoms
Misregulation - distortion in self-knowledge
Underregulation - strength; failure to self-monitor

ANTICIPATION
(relief of problems)

ACTION-PLAYING
(winning; excitement)

WITHDRAWAL
(losing; desperation)

NEGATIVE AFFECTIVE STATE
(depression; low self-esteem)

Strength

Misregulation - gambler’s fallacy
Underregulation - psychology inertia

Misregulation - Distortion
Diagnostic Criteria for 312.31 Pathological Gambling

A. Persistent and recurrent maladaptive gambling behavior as indicated by five (or more) of the following:

(1) is preoccupied with gambling (e.g., preoccupied with reliving past gambling experiences, handicapping or planning the next venture, or thinking of ways to get money with which to gamble)
(2) needs to gamble with increasing amounts of money in order to achieve the desired excitement
(3) has repeated unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop gambling
(4) is restless or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop gambling
(5) gambles as a way of escaping from problems or of relieving a dysphoric mood (e.g., feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety, depression)
(6) after losing money gambling, often returns another day to get even ("chasing" one's losses)
(7) lies to family members, therapist, or others to conceal the extent of involvement with gambling
(8) has committed illegal acts such as forgery, fraud, theft, or embezzlement to finance gambling
(9) has jeopardized or lost a significant relationship, job, or educational or career opportunity because of gambling
(10) relies on others to provide money to relieve a desperate financial situation caused by gambling

B. The gambling behavior is not better accounted for by a Manic Episode
Gambling Dependence (Pathological Gambling)

DSM-IV- Three or more symptoms occurring during the last year

1. **Tolerance** (2. needs to gamble with increasing amounts of money)
2. **Withdrawal** (4. is restless or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop gambling; 5. gambles as a way of escaping from problems or a dysphoric mood)
3. **Larger amounts** (6. After losing money gambling, often returns another day to get even-”chasing”)
4. **Impaired control**- (2. has repeated unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back or stop gambling)
5. **Time spent**- (1. Is preoccupied with gambling) 6. **Neglect of activities**- (9. has jeopardized or lost a significant relationship, job or career opportunity because of gambling)
6. **Continued use despite problems**- (7. Lies to family members or others to conceal the extent of gambling) 8. Has committed illegal acts to finance gambling; 10. Relies on others to provide money to relieve a desperate financial situation caused by gambling)