

# RECLAIMING CONTROL

## A GAMBLING RECOVERY TOOLKIT

Short Version

*‘The secret to getting ahead is getting started’*

Mark Twain



# HOW CAN GAMBLING BE ADDICTIVE?



One of the biggest issues with problem gambling (Gambling Disorder/Compulsive Gambling/Pathological Gambling/Gambling Addiction) - apart from the fact that it clearly has way too many names - is the lack of understanding that exists about how a person can become addicted to a behaviour in the first place. Because there is no addictive substance, like alcohol or nicotine, involved - most people believe that stopping gambling should be as easy as steering clear of the Betting Shop or deleting a gambling app from your phone. The reality is that it's far more challenging and complicated than that.

## Gambling Changes Your Brain Chemistry

Just like many stimulant drugs, gambling causes the release of the hormone and neurotransmitter, Dopamine, in the brain. This occurs in the Reward Pathway of the brain - an area which serves the purpose of rewarding us when we eat certain foods or have sex (activities that are strongly linked to the survival of the individual and the species). Gambling, just like many drugs, can 'hijack' the Reward Pathway - so that we 'feel' like we need to gamble (or smoke cigarettes; drink alcohol; use cocaine) in order to survive. Just like with alcohol and other drugs, we develop a 'tolerance' to gambling, over time, and experience 'withdrawal' symptoms, when abstaining. Tolerance and Withdrawal are the key elements of any addiction. The good news is that the brain's chemistry will return to normal levels of Dopamine production, after a period of abstaining from gambling and persevering through withdrawal symptoms. These often include: low mood, restlessness, irritability, difficulty sleeping, anxiety.

## Gambling Taps Into 'Behavioural Conditioning'

Gambling Taps Into 'Behavioural Conditioning': Just as we can be conditioned into checking our smartphones for social media updates, text messages and emails - we can be conditioned into developing an unhealthy relationship with gambling. There are two main types of behavioural conditioning: Classical and Operant. Classical Conditioning is sometimes referred to as a 'Pavlovian Response' - referring to the famous 'Pavlov's Dog' behavioural experiment. Basically, this experiment showed that an unconscious response can be 'paired' with a stimulus (trigger), over time, when the trigger is repeated. A person who has developed a gambling problem will usually start out watching sports without gambling on the outcomes, but, over time, will come to associate watching sport with gambling. The two separate behaviours have been 'paired' together, so that the person feels uneasy when not gambling during a sporting event (withdrawal symptoms). The good news is, that, just like Pavlov's Dog, the conditioning can be broken (extinguished) over time and most people can return to watching sport without having strong urges to gamble or intense withdrawal symptoms. Operant Conditioning works on reinforcing behaviours through rewards - or 'punishing' other types of behaviours - usually through the absence of a reward ("carrot and stick"). 'Star Charts', such as those used in early education, are a form of Operant Conditioning. The teacher rewards behaviours that they want to encourage and see repeated. The Behavioural Psychologist, B. F. Skinner, developed the theory of Operant Conditioning, based on behavioural experiments with animals (the 'Skinner Box'). When he was trying to describe his theories to the public, he compared the Skinner Box to slot machines - because they operate on the same principles. Skinner observed that the most addictive 'Reward Schedule' was a 'Variable-Ratio Schedule'. This means that we all become more compulsive in seeking a reward, when it is unpredictable - rather than when it is predictable. For most people with gambling problems, it is the anticipation of a reward, which provides the excitement, stimulation and Dopamine - not the reward, itself. If you are reading this, as a loved one of a person with a gambling problem, you might not be able to relate to this. However, you may be exposed to exactly the same types of processes in Social Media. You can't predict when you're going to see a post that you find interesting or entertaining - so you keep scrolling. You can't predict how many people are going to like, comment or share your posts - so you keep checking and get a little hit of Dopamine when your notifications go off. Most people who have developed gambling problems are trying to deal with rewiring their behaviours away from both Classical and Operant Conditioning, which, in many cases, has been going on for years - developing deeply engrained, subconscious habits.

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**'Hopium'** Nobody ever believes that they can drink their way out of an alcohol problem - but everyone believes that they can gamble their way out of a gambling problem. The vast majority of people who have gone through our counselling service, or call our helpline, have had some 'big win' (or several big wins). This presents the person with 'evidence' that they can 'dig their way out of the hole' that they have dug themselves into (using the same shovel). Unfortunately, for a person with a gambling problem, this hope is pure 'Hopium' - an irrational belief; a delusion.

A person with a gambling problem will just keep gambling - even after a big win - because they are not addicted to winning money. They are addicted to the process of gambling and money just allows you to keep gambling (stay 'in action') for longer. Many people, who are desperate to pay off gambling-related debts, believe that gambling is the only option available to them. Of course, this isn't true - as so many people who have learned the hard way, can attest to.

# DISTORTED THINKING

**Chasing** Chasing involves the abandonment of your gambling strategy, and/ or the increase in size of your bets, in an effort to win back what you have lost. It is a common tactic used by gamblers who want to recoup their losses. This is an irrational behaviour, though it is likely one that you will have found a way to justify to yourself during your time gambling as there are three common explanations given for chasing:

1. Some gamblers are extremely competitive. They take losing personally and find it intolerable, even inconceivable. The casino or gambling operator has 'their' money and they must get it back.
2. Some gamblers are desperate to replace the money they lost before they are found out. They fully expect their loved ones will abandon them once their 'shameful' secret is discovered.
3. Some gamblers chase out of guilt, believing that if they can win back what they have lost then they can clear their debts and get back to even.

Do any of these three explanations for chasing apply to you?

**Money is the Problem, and the Solution** Gamblers often have fixed ideas around money. The first is that money is the solution to all of their problems. The second is that gambling is the way to get money. This leads to distorted thinking around money, where gamblers often believe that the only way to stop gambling, is to continue to gamble until they have won enough to solve all their problems (problems caused by gambling in the first place).





### Self-deception and Superstition

Our brains are conditioned to look for patterns and to make predictions based on what has happened. This does not work for gambling, yet it is influential in how we gamble. It is often difficult for gamblers not to believe that a machine is 'due' to pay out, even though each play is an individual event. Slot machines, cards, and dice, do not have a memory.

If heads came up eight times in a row on a coin flip, the ninth flip would not favour tails, and yet gamblers would find it difficult to accept the 50-50 odds of that ninth flip.

All online roulette games show the outcomes of the most recent spins - as if this information could, in some way help the player predict the outcome of the next spin. Many people seeing that the last 5 spins were all 'red' might think that they can use that information to accurately predict the outcome of the next spin. This is simply not the case. Every spin is independent from all previous spins. There cannot be 'patterns' in roulette or any other fixed odds gambling product. Ask yourself: why do the gambling industry provide you with this information . . . ?

The amount of skill involved in gambling is often overestimated by the gambler, who believes luck is something that can be influenced or changed.

Superstition is a common trait amongst gamblers. Examples of this include favouring red over black on a roulette table, not placing a bet on a horse because a certain jockey is riding it, wearing a certain hat because they won big money when they last wore it etc.

# PROBLEM GAMBLING SEVERITY INDEX

The Problem Gambling Severity Index is a scoring system used to measure at-risk behaviour in people experiencing problems with gambling. Please answer each question in relation to the past 12 months.

Each item is assessed on a four-point scale ranging from: never, sometimes, most of the time, almost always. Responses to each item are given the following scores:

- never = 0
- sometimes = 1
- most of the time = 2
- almost always = 3

1. Have you bet more than you could really afford to lose?
2. Have you needed to gamble with larger amounts of money to get the same feeling of excitement?
3. When you gambled, did you go back another day to try to win back the money you lost?
4. Have you borrowed money or sold anything to get money to gamble?
5. Have you felt you might have a problem with gambling?
6. Has gambling caused you any health problems, including stress or anxiety?
7. Have people criticized your betting or told you that you had a gambling problem, regardless of whether or not you thought it was true?
8. Has your gambling caused any financial problems for you or your household?
9. Have you felt guilty about the way you gamble or what happens when you gamble?

When scores to each item are summed, a total score ranging from 0 to 27 is possible. Scores are grouped into the following categories:

**PGSI score 0**

Representing a person who gambles (including heavily) but does not report experiencing any of the 9 symptoms or adverse consequences asked about.

**PGSI score 1 to 2** Representing low risk gambling by which a person is unlikely to have experienced any adverse consequences from gambling but may be at risk if they are heavily involved in gambling.

**PGSI score 3 to 7**

Representing moderate risk gambling by which a person may or may not have experienced any adverse consequences from gambling but may be at risk if they are heavily involved in gambling.

**PGSI score 8 or more**

Representing problem gambling by which a person will have experienced adverse consequences from gambling and may have lost control of their behaviour. Involvement in gambling can be at any level, but it is likely to be heavy.



# COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS

Using the following Cost-Benefit Analysis, you can assess what you want your life to look like going forward by figuring out the pros and cons of your current situation.

## Continuing to Gamble

Benefits (Rewards and Advantages)	Costs (Risks and Disadvantages)

## No Longer Gambling

Benefits (Rewards and Advantages)	Costs (Risks and Disadvantages)

There are three main steps that should be taken at the beginning of your recovery journey. This is known as the ATM Model which stands for Access, Time, and Money.



# ACCESS

Limiting access to gambling is an essential step in your recovery journey. Self-exclusion is the best way to achieve this. This may involve physically going into a land-based gambling establishment you would have visited frequently in the past and requesting that they deny you access to the premises. Certain gambling operators such as Paddy Power will apply the self-exclusion to a number of their offices or within a regional area.

For online gambling, the most effective approach is to install a blocking software on all your devices which will then deny you access to gambling sites. Check out the below links to apply one of these software:

[Gamban](#)

[BetBlocker](#)

[Net Nanny](#)

Most major banks in Northern Ireland now offer the ability to block gambling transactions from your account.

Currently, in the Republic of Ireland, both Revolut and AIB offer card blocks for gambling transactions. Further information is available on both by clicking the links below.



People in Northern Ireland can also use Gamstop, a free tool that allows people to self-exclude from all GB-licensed gambling websites. Please click on the link below to find out more.



# TIME

It is likely you will have spent much of your time gambling and may feel anxious now about how to fill that time.

Scheduling activities and tasks for yourself can help to tackle this.

Consider taking up a new hobby, or re-engaging with old passions that were lost while you were gambling.

Another helpful use of time is to continue to reassess your current situation on a deeper level, identifying key areas that you wish to improve upon and finding ways to enact the necessary changes in order to achieve this.

Throughout this toolkit you will find a range of tools and information that you can use to help create a deeper awareness of how you want to spend your time, and which activities you feel deserve your attention and evoke meaning for you.



# MONEY



## Financial Well-Being

### Look at the Big Picture:

Yes, you may be in a financial bind right now, BUT, look at where you want to be in 1/ 3/ 5 years time.

Recognize that it may take several years for you to recoup your financial strength and pay off any debts you may have. The best thing to do is be aware of this while looking towards positive financial strength.

What are your goals for financial health?

Make a list of them. This is important because it gives you something concrete to strive for, not just the feeling that you are chipping away at your debt.

In your financial goal listing, separate the relatively short-term goals from those that are longer term.

### **Assess the Damage Done:**

In order to move forward, you need to know where you stand financially right now. Create a budget/ spending plan going forward.

### **Seek Financial Counselling:**

There are several financial advice clinics, websites, and organisations that you can contact to help you get back on track with your finances.

See the next section for further details.

### **Hand Over Control:**

Having a trusted friend or loved one manage your money for you can help to lighten the load of financial responsibility. This is a good option if you are still unsure of your ability to control your spending at this time.

### **Cut Up Credit Cards:**

This one speaks for itself. The last thing you want to do at the start of your recovery journey is to have credit available to you.

### **Consider Your Banking Options:**

Contact your bank to find out if they offer gambling transaction blocks. If they do not, consider switching your banking provider to one that does.

## **Debt Management**

Many people who have gambled problematically will have accumulated some level of gambling related debt by the time they decide to stop gambling. It's certainly not unusual. If you feel that the debt is unmanageable, it is essential to talk someone who can help.

MABS (Money Advice & Budgeting Service) can negotiate repayment plans with lenders and credit card companies. They will put together a realistic plan which will leave you with enough to live on, and to pay your essential bills.

Feeling overwhelmed by debt can be a very common trigger to relapse. It is, therefore, essential to get a realistic repayment plan put in place and let the direct debits do the work.

MABS have helped many people experiencing gambling harm over the years. They do not judge. They are there to help you.





They also have a number of self-help tools available on the website to help you assess and manage your own finances:

[My Financial Healthcheck](#)

[My Budget](#)

[My Full Financial Picture](#)



StepChange help thousands of people become debt free every year. Their team of experts offer free, flexible debt advice to anyone who needs it.

This includes:

- Helping people take control of their finances
- Giving practical help
- Supporting clients for as long as they need

# Spending Plan

Creating a spending plan is a good step forward in assessing your financial well-being. Try using the following steps to get started:

**1.** List monthly sources of income. List only items that can be counted on each month such as:

- wages
- maintenance
- social welfare payments

Income that varies should be averaged out monthly, including:

- commissions
- tips
- freelance work

**2.** Extra sources of income such as a work bonus or income tax refund for example, should be put towards savings or to pay for one-off expenses such as purchasing a new car or paying for a holiday.

**3.** List basic monthly household expenses such as rent/ mortgage, groceries, utilities, childcare, and loan repayments.

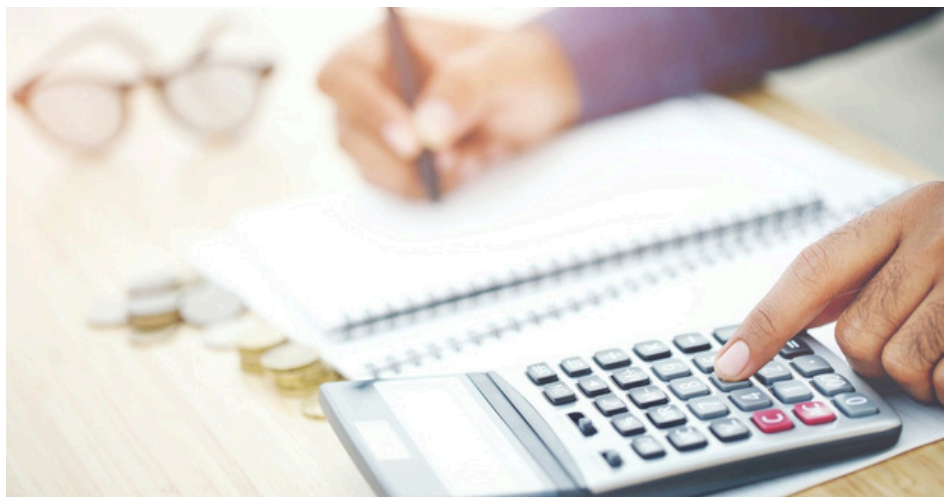
**4.** Savings should always be treated as a priority, even if debts are high. Treat savings as a basic expense.

**5.** The spending plan should be calculated first, without including any debts.

Once basic living expenses are covered, any remaining funds can go towards debt repayments.

If there is not enough income to cover expenses, you may need to consider ways to earn additional income either through a second job or seeking out a better paying job.

You should also look for ways to reduce expenses.



# TRIGGERS

## External Triggers

Walking past a gambling establishment  
Overhearing people around you talking about gambling  
Watching sport on tv  
Receiving marketing communications from gambling operators  
Bombardment of gambling advertising  
Receiving an unexpected bill or notice of arrears

## Internal Triggers

Self-pity  
Unrealistic expectations  
Feelings of depression, anxiety, boredom, loneliness, etc  
Attempting to rationalise thoughts of gambling  
Defeatism

## Interpersonal Triggers

Feelings of stress at home or in work  
Invitations to attend gambling events/ establishments  
Relationship difficulties

When faced with any of the above triggers, it may be helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

- ***What will I gain from gambling?***
- ***What will I lose if I gamble?***
- ***What do I want my life to look like this time next year?***
- ***Would gambling now help or hinder this from happening?#***
- ***What will my relationships with my loved ones be like if I give into gambling now?***
- ***What can I do right now to ensure my commitment to my recovery?***

# URGE SURFING

It is normal for people in recovery to experience urges from time to time. An urge may be triggered by a person, place, feeling, thought, or something else. They may become more intense and you may feel like it will never pass, but it will.

It is important that you can recognise urges as temporary. Instead of giving into it, you can learn to ride it out just like a surfer rides a wave.



## DO

Acknowledge and accept that you are having an urge

Become aware of your thoughts and feelings without judging or giving in to them

Focus on keeping yourself occupied with something else

Speak with your trusted support person

Use positive self-talk and affirmations to reinforce your commitment to changing your life

## DONT

Give in to temptation

Try to justify gambling to yourself

Overthink it

Allow yourself to be in a position where you have access to gambling

Allow yourself access to money to satisfy your urge

# SUPPORT NETWORK



Recovery is a life-long journey that is not always easy. Although there are many triumphs along the way, there are also many hurdles that may lead to relapse.

One of the easiest ways to stay on the right track is by finding support in recovery. Building a support network helps to build connections and may add an element of accountability to your journey.

It is also important to remember that who you spend your time with can impact your recovery for better or worse, so you need to think carefully about who you let into your life at this time.

# Building A Support Network

In order to thrive in recovery it may be necessary to consider the following steps:

## Saying goodbye to some people

Unfortunately, not all of your old friends should be welcomed back into your life during your recovery. Being around the people you used to gamble with regularly could trigger a relapse. Their lifestyles may not be conducive with your new one, and you need people who are going to support your new life, not interfere with it.

## Mend relationships

Chances are that when you were actively gambling you may have behaved in ways that pushed some of your family and friends away. If those people are important to you and could be a good part of your recovery, now is the time to start rebuilding these relationships, one step at a time.

## Ask for help

If you are ready to welcome support into your recovery, you need to learn how to ask for help. Be specific about what you need in order to see the best results.

## Join a group

Joining a class, group, or team, can help you create new bonds with people who have similar interests to you.

## Be patient

Trust and friendships do not happen overnight and building a support network in recovery takes time. Be patient with yourself as well as your loved ones as you all try to navigate uncharted territory together.



## Healing Relationships

Once you have considered the steps on the previous page, start thinking about how best to work towards healing your relationships with the people who are important to you. Identify who those people are, assess your current relationship with them, and make a plan to work towards healing those relationships where needed.

Name	Current relationship challenges	What can I do to improve this relationship?

## Trusted Support Person

An important step for making changes in your life is telling someone you know that you really want to do this, and you would be grateful if they could support you through your journey.

Think about what you may need from your support person.  
What would they do for you?

You may need them to:

- Talk to you about personal goals in changing your gambling behaviour
- Listen to and talk to you about your ideas on how to make changes in your life
- Give you emotional support when you really need it
- Help you take care of your money
- Share some of the new activities in your life that you might want to do instead of gambling

<b>What problems do I have?</b>
<b>Who may be able to help me?</b>
<b>When and how can they help?</b>

# VALUES

Our values are powerful, internal instructions that allow us to live authentic lives. In active addiction, it is common to lose your connection with your values, and while gambling, you may end up acting in conflict with those values.

Taking time to reconnect to your values will help you to make more informed decisions moving forward, and to live in a way that is true to who you are now.

Values are individual and unique to each person.

Take a blank page and design your personal values list.

Try to list as many values as possible and once you have done this, choose between 3 to 5 Core Values (values that are non-negotiable for you).



Evaluate to what degree you are currently honouring or living true to the values you have listed.

How can you improve upon this?

Do you feel more clarity about how you can use these values to inform your life decisions moving forward?

If you find yourself struggling to compose or evaluate your personal values list, try asking yourself the following questions:

***What is important to me?***

***What does (e.g. respect) mean to me?***

***What does it give me?***

***What does this value generate in my life for me/ those around me?***

***What are the consequences of not honouring this value?***

# GOALS

*‘A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step’*

Lao Tzu

This is a Chinese Proverb which teaches us that even the longest and most difficult journeys have to begin somewhere. You are choosing to take that first step and begin a journey of positive change. With all journeys of course, it is important to understand the motivation behind it.

- Why are you here?
- What are you travelling for?
- What does the destination look like?

## **The Importance of Goal Setting in Recovery**

Recovery can be a fresh start.

The benefits of setting goals in recovery include:

Helping you focus on the present and the future

Not dwelling on the past

Developing patience and a good work ethic

Creating a sense of pride when you reach your goal

Once you begin your recovery journey you may find you have more time, money, and energy to do more things. You may want to start developing new skills, and trying new things as part of your journey.

Recovery goals don't necessarily have to focus solely on abstinence from gambling. They can also include goals that apply to different areas of your life, such as improving personal relationships, changing career, spirituality lifestyle changes, or improving financial health.

Before deciding on any goals, it may be helpful to do some reflection. Think about the following:

- What do you like about you life currently?
- What would you like to be different?
- What new things would you like to have/ do?
- How do you want to spend your time?

# SMART CAR GOAL SETTING

You may have heard of SMART Goal setting before which is a tool used in SMART Recovery. This is a well established goal setting tool to help people plan their goals effectively.

The following page contains a variation of this tool called SMART CAR.

SMART CAR goal setting is a coaching tool you can use to plan your recovery goals using a reward-based approach.

Please use this tool for each goal you wish to achieve, and think carefully about the timeline you wish to achieve it in.

If your goal will take several stages, you can use this tool for each page.





## Goal:

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<b>SPECIFIC</b> What is the goal? When do you want it to start? Where does it need to take place?	
<b>MEASURABLE</b> How will you know it has been achieved? How are you going to record progress?	
<b>ACTION-BASED</b> What steps do you need to take? What might distract you?	
<b>REALISTIC</b> Is it possible to implement? Is the time assigned enough?	
<b>TIME_BOUND</b> When do you want to have achieved this goal by?	
<b>COMMITMENT</b> What is your commitment to achieving this goal?	
<b>ACCOUNTABILITY</b> How are you going to keep yourself accountable?	
<b>REWARD</b> How will you reward yourself when you have achieved this goal?	

# RESOURCES

## PODCASTS

- **The Problem Gambling Podcast** - Barry Grant & Tony O Reilly (Ireland)
- **All In: The Addicted Gambler's Podcast** - Brian Hatch (USA)
- **All Bets Are Off** - Ryan Pitcher & Chris Gilham (UK)
- **The Broke Girl Society** - Christina Cooke (USA)



## BOOKS

***The Girl Gambler: A young woman's story of her escape from gambling addiction*** - Stacey Goodwin

***Might Bite: The Secret Life of a Gambler*** - Patrick Foster

***Tony 10: The astonishing story of the postman who gambled €10,000,000... and lost it all*** - Declan Lynch & Tony O Reilly

***Hooked: Addiction and the Long Road to Recovery*** - Paul Merson

***A House in the Countryside: Living Gamble Free and Happy*** - William Halstead



# USEFUL CONTACTS (ROI)



**Phone No:** 1800 247 247



**Alcoholics Anonymous  
Ireland**

**Phone No:** 01 842 0700



**Phone No:** 01 661 7211



**Phone No:** 1800 477 477



**Phone No:** 1800 459 459



**Phone No:** 116 123



**Phone No:** 1800 341 900

# USEFUL CONTACTS (NI)



**Phone No:** 0800 043 40 50



**Phone No:** 0300 304 7000



**Phone No:** 0800 088 6042



**Phone No:** 028 9032 6803



**Phone No:** 116 123



**Phone No:** 0800 915 4604



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