


A Compassionate Path of Recovery for Gamblers: Mindfulness Theory, Research and Treatment

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Learning Objectives

- We will explore various aspects of Mindfulness Gambling Recovery and its promotion.
- Examine the theory and research on mindful compassionate recovery for gamblers.
- We will discuss the benefits of compassion practice for gamblers and professionals.
- Review the skill set of the mindful helping professional.

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TAKE A DEEP BREATH

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Mindfulness Practice


- The distinction between fostering the practice/as a basic human quality or ability
- *state mindfulness* – immediate experience
- *trait/dispositional mindfulness* – lasting habits, being more mindful in daily life
- Mindfulness as a “continuum of practices involving states and processes”
- Some practices emphasize
 - focused attention*
 - open monitoring*
 - loving kindness*

Lutz, A. Jha, A.P., Dunne, J.D., Saron, C. D. (2015)

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The Beginner's Mind

- Beginner's Mind...is exactly what it sounds like: a term used to describe the mindset of a true beginner.
- While as young children we naturally "live the questions," as poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, as adults we've come to assume the answers. Filled with endless bits of information, we find it difficult to sit with the ambiguity of not knowing
- *"If your mind is empty...it is open to everything. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few."*
~ Shunryu Suzuki



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Mindfulness Meditation and its effects on Gambling Recovery

Mindfulness Meditation allows gamblers to detach awareness of subjective experiences that can cause unpleasant or overwhelming feelings.

Meditation allows gambling disordered individuals to switch their mind to the present instead of focusing on negative actions

Mindfulness Meditation may improve executive functioning and decision making relevant to problem gambling

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Results found using Mindful Meditation

Mindfulness Meditation can assist in coping with mental events and provide a more positive response.

- Providing a gambler with a choice about how to best respond to gambling related cognition (Toncauto, 281).

Mindfulness can modify tendencies of impulsivity, urges, boredom.

- Cognition altering qualities of gambling can be altered through mindfulness
- Outcome is awareness based response in the presence of gambling triggers and high risk situations, rather than repeat the automatic behavior (Toncauto,281).

Mindfulness can help the ability to cope with urges and cravings which may allow a more stable recovery.

- Mindful meditation can be considered a form of counterconditioning, this means that by increasing the present moment awareness and relaxation may invoke an impulse to reject the experience underlying the craving (i.e anxiety, depression) and weaken the association between the craving and gambling (Toncauto, 281).

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Results found using Mindful Meditation

Mindfulness Meditation may cause a direct relationship between concentration on breathe and awareness.

- This can reduce tendencies that lead to distraction
- This is helpful in recovery because when a gambler feels overwhelmed with the consequences of gambling, mindfulness meditation can help maintain positive therapeutic motivations helping the person continue in treatment rather than relapse (Toncauto,822).

Mindfulness - based interventions have been proven effective in reducing variables in relapse.

- Mindfulness may reduce the intensity of variables that trigger relapse
- Mindfulness facilitates an attitude of reflexivity, perspective, and insight into the conditioned connection between subjective experiences and behavioral activity. As a result, impulsive, spontaneous, compulsive, or otherwise automatic response patterns are attenuated and replaced with the discernment that, in the face of compelling subjective experiences, the individual has choices and alternatives to act in ways other than gambling (Toncauto,282).

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Mindfulness and Problem Gambling Treatment

- The purpose of this study was to evaluate the feasibility of teaching problem gamblers about mindfulness meditation as part of regular treatment for problem gambling. The researchers integrated into the problem gambling treatment service offered by the Problem Gambling Institute of Ontario (PGIO) at the Centre of Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto (Chen,1).
- The act of gambling involves automatic thoughts which means that the act itself is placed outside of someone's awareness. By implementing mindfulness techniques may allow problem gamblers to distinguish mental events from automatic responses (Chen, 4).
- The researchers believe that if people can be aware of their thoughts by practicing mindfulness techniques, the urges and cravings that often drive a person to gamble, or relapse to gambling, can be overcome (Chen, 4).

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Study

Method: The study evaluated an 8-week mindfulness group program that included 2 hour sessions once a week. The researchers used questionnaires that were distributed before the first group session and after the final group session. The evaluation was a mixed method design that included both qualitative and quantitative feedback about the group. (4)

Participants: In total, 27 clients from the Problem Gambling Institute of Ontario at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. The average age of the clients was 52.7 years (SD = 14.8). Groups 1 and 2 each started out with 8 clients, and group 3 started with 11 clients. (6)

Scale: Each group ran separately and was evaluated using the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale. (4)

Results

- For the 17 clients who completed the group sessions, average pre-treatment score on the MAAS was 3.65 (SD=1.01) and post treatment score on the MAAS was 4.40 (SD = 0.78). This difference was significant, $t(16) = 4.9, p < .001$ (Chen, 7).
- Clients learned mindfulness techniques
 - Participants reported being more aware of the activities that they engage in on a daily basis and using this enhanced self-awareness to separate themselves from their thoughts. Accept thoughts instead of being controlled by them (Chen, 12)
- Awareness of triggers, increased coping ability
 - Using mindfulness allowed the clients to be aware of their triggers and allow them to improve their ability to cope (Chen, 11)

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Results cont.

“person noted that mindfulness is now a main tool for resisting the urge to gamble” (Chen, 11).

- Feel calmer or more relaxed
 - Able to complete a task without becoming overwhelmed and stressed (Chen,11)
- Improved self discipline and self control over gambling
 - Clients noted they were able to control their behavior, able to stop and think about what they are doing (Chen,11)
- Increased interpersonal skills
 - People with addictions commonly have difficulty with intrapersonal relationships due to mindfulness, clients noted they had a better understanding of social relationship which improved their interaction with others (Chen, 12)
- Gained positive experiences in their lives
 - After the study clients stated they felt better about themselves. Mindfulness allows clearer thinking and improving mental and physical health (Chen, 12).

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Effects of Mindfulness based cognitive therapy in reducing gambling - related craving

This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of mindfulness based cognitive therapy group training to reduce gambling related cravings. (113).

- Automatic behavior in problem Gambling
 - Gambling involves automatic behavior patterns which means that the person impulsively responds to the triggering stimuli. This can cause a high concern of relapse (108).
- Mindfulness- Based Psychotherapy
 - Mindfulness allows someone to change their relationship between one's thoughts and feelings by a non reactivity to inner experience, observing and attending sensations, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings, acting with awareness, labeling with words, and no judgement (111).

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Study

First, the researchers compared a Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) intervention with a standard mutual-aid group intervention delivered in a pathological gamblers' association (Ventola, 13)

Second, the researchers analyzed whether increases in mindfulness skills correspond to reductions in craving-related variables (intensity, frequency and urge of craving) over time (Ventola,113).

Third, the different facets of mindfulness are further analyzed to determine how mindfulness and craving could be related to each other (Ventola,113).

Participants: the study consisted of 33 participants in total

Design: The study consisted of two groups the Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and the mutual aid group. Both groups were conducted by health psychologists and had similar structure. Both groups had 8 weekly sessions. There were a total of six trials completed with questionnaires or interviews (Ventola,113-114)

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Results

“The participants experienced no relapses during and after the mindfulness training” (Ventola,126).

- The results revealed that the mutual-aid group intervention produced only moderate reductions in craving intensity ($\eta^2=0.27$). In contrast, the MBCT program significantly increased the scores of the mindfulness-related variables (η^2 ranging from 0.84 to 0.99) and reduced the craving intensity ($\eta^2=0.95$), frequency ($\eta^2=0.93$) and urge ($\eta^2=0.91$) (Ventola,1).
- Mindfulness helped reduce craving, intensity, frequency, and urgency
- Mindfulness may prevent a person from engaging in impulsivity driven maladaptive behaviors, even if emotions are present (Ventola,125).
- The results showed that Mindfulness based cognitive therapy increased the mindfulness levels among participants such as awareness, attitude, nonjudgmental, nonreactivity (Ventola, 125).
- Mindfulness also improved participants coping skills allowing them to shift their cravings and prevent relapse (Ventola, 126).

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Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy

- **The 3 Minute Breathing Space**
 - Becoming Aware*
 - Gathering*
 - Expanding*

Adapted from *The Mindful Way Through Depression: Freeing Yourself from Chronic Depression* by Williams, Teasdale, Segal, Kabat-Zinn

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The importance of Self-Compassion

“self-compassion involves generating kindness toward ourselves as imperfect humans, and learning to be present with the inevitable struggles of life with greater ease” (Neff, 1)

Self compassion is not about being “good” or “bad” but about motivation to improve ourselves.

Developing Self-Compassion

- Self-compassion is a trained trait. Practicing self-compassion may generate feelings of positivity and goodwill towards the self and others.(Neff,9)

Three Facets of Self-Compassion

1. **Self Kindness:** allows one to recognize struggles and difficulties are a natural part of life and should be embraced (Neff, 4).
2. **Common Humanity:** Connects imperfections with shared human experiences allowing one to feel included instead of isolated (Neff, 4).
3. **Mindfulness:** because we do not fully acknowledge the pain we go through, mindfulness allows us to be aware of what is going on rather than being fixated on the pain of the process (Neff, 5).

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Research findings on Self-Compassion

Self-Compassion and Well-Being: Self-compassion shows psychological resilience. Self-Compassion gives people the emotional resources to endure painful or challenging experiences such as addictions (Neff, 5). Research states people with self-compassion took a more general perspective on their issue and experienced less feelings of isolation, anxiety, and self-consciousness (Neff, 6).

Self-Compassion and Self-Esteem: Self-compassion is related to a more stable feeling of self-worth. Self-compassion was found associated with lower levels of self-comparison, anger, self-consciousness. This is beneficial for a successful recovery (Neff, 8).

Self-Compassion and Interpersonal Relationships: People who practiced self-compassion were found to be more emotionally connected and accepting. These participants were also found less controlling and angry (Neff, 9).

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Research findings on Self-Compassion

- Self-compassion entails being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate, rather than ignoring our pain or flagellating ourselves with self-criticism.
- When used as an [addiction recovery tool](#), self-compassion has **shown** to help people overcome cravings, deal with the stresses of early recovery, and better manage their emotions. It involves being mindful, but the practice also boosts self-esteem, reduces self-criticism, and allows the person to feel more comfortable in his or her own skin – qualities that are essential for lasting sobriety.
- Compassionate mind states may be learned, and may alleviate shame, as well as other distressing outcomes, such as depression, anxiety, self-attacks, feelings of inferiority, and submissive behavior.

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Science Based Reasons for the Practice of Loving Kindness Meditation

- Increases Positive Emotions & Decreases Negative Emotions
- Increases Vagal Tone – Increase of PE and Feelings of Social Connection
- Healing of Mental Disorders – Reduces Depression and PTSD Symptoms
- Emotional Intelligence – Activates Empathetic Responses & Emotional Processing
- Increases Grey Matter Volume
- Best Way to Increase Compassion
- Increases Social Connection
- Curbs Self-Criticism – Increases Self-Love
- Effective in Small Doses
- Has Long Term Impact

Loving-Kindness Meditation

Emma Sappala, PhD – Stanford University Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education.

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”You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe deserve your **love and affection.**”

– Buddha

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Peace

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