

---

# Mindfulness Approaches for Problem Gambling

## Handout

---

Dr. Rory Reid, Ph.D., LCSW, ICGC  
Asst Professor of Psychiatry, Research Psychologist

Email: roryreid@ucla.edu

UCLA Gambling Studies Program  
Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences  
University of California Los Angeles

### **Purpose**

This module is intended to provide you with an overview about mindfulness and how it can be applied to some of the issues commonly encountered by problem gamblers in their efforts to reduce or stop gambling.

### **Mindfulness Approaches to Problem Gambling Recovery**

Mindfulness appears to be emerging everywhere these days – for stress reduction, anxiety, and overall quality of life – *but for gambling addictions?* The short answer is yes. In fact, addiction counselors and therapists are integrating mindfulness in problem gambling treatment all around the world with promising results.

Practicing mindfulness will help you learn how to respond rather than react to situations that might otherwise trigger problem gambling. It can help you learn how to interrupt the many automatic responses you've developed to challenges by teaching you how to slow down, consider your options, and respond in a more thoughtful way.

The main strategy used to cultivate mindfulness is meditation, and although several meditation techniques have their origins in Buddhist spiritual philosophies, contemporary psychology has focused on mindfulness-based clinical applications for a variety of mental health issues associated with distress and emotional suffering. Since many people with addictions also have co-occurring mental health problems, it makes sense that mindfulness interventions are also being explored in the field of addictions with some promising results, as noted in a [separate article](#) authored by Dr. Judson Brewer at Harvard.

Now, emerging research suggests mindfulness meditation may be useful to help individuals with gambling addictions to increase tolerance for cravings, enhance stress coping, and improve their ability to manage unpleasant emotions. Some have also offered that mindfulness can help reduce impulsivity, a common contributing factor to problem gambling and relapse in recovery.

## Activity

Watch this brief video by UCLA psychologist Dr. Rory Reid discussing how mindfulness can help people with addictions reorganize their relationship with “cravings.”

Video: [Using Mindfulness to Embrace Addictive Cravings](#)

### What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is typically defined as the process of bringing awareness and non-judgmental acceptance to one’s present moment experience of thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations. Essentially, mindfulness consists of two components.<sup>1</sup> First, it involves

---

*We should not underestimate the power of breath. Researcher James Nestor recently authored the book “Breath: The New Sciences of a Lost Art” wherein he offers compelling scientific reasons we should take time to focus more on our breath.*

---

the *self-regulation of attention*, so it is directed and maintained on the immediate experience (including unpleasant emotions, addictive cravings, or whatever else may arise at a given moment). This is why a lot of mindfulness meditation is dedicated to simple exercises, such as focusing and sustaining attention on something like our breathing. Patients will often report this is much more difficult than they expect. In part, this is because our minds have a tendency to wander off and entertain a great deal of “chatter” – thoughts, memories, experiences, or various worries about unfinished tasks. It can be a real strain just to learn how to focus and regulate our attention. This is *why* we practice, so we can cultivate a better ability to “attend” and as part of this process, we also increase our awareness of things that may historically have gone unnoticed. For instance, someone may begin to appreciate small things in life for which they are grateful or discover aspects about themselves that were previously outside of consciousness. This in turn, can significantly enhance the depth and breadth of our life experience.

The second component of mindfulness entails adopting an *orientation towards one’s present experience* characterized by openness, curiosity, and acceptance. That means we don’t pass judgment on the various experiences that arise in any given moment. Consider the application of this principle in the wake of an addictive craving. Historically, problem gamblers frequently get into a tug-of-war with their cravings and approach such cravings with an “I have to slay the dragon” mentality. In part, this is because the cravings are judged as “bad” or “problematic.” Yet, in reality, the cravings are simply a physiological and psychological experience that is neither good nor bad. A mindfulness approach doesn’t give the experience special status or indulge the craving, but we don’t ignore or avoid the craving either. In mindfulness, we simply pay attention with curiosity to how we experience the craving, the bodily-felt sensations that accompany such

---

<sup>1</sup> Bishop, S. R., Lau, M., Shapiro, S., Carlson, L., Anderson, N. D., Carmody, J.,...Devins, G. (2004). Mindfulness: A proposed operational definition. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 11(3), 230–241.

cravings, in a non-judgmental manner. Being mindful is about recreating a new relationship with the craving that allows it some space to co-exist with the self. If the craving feels too intense, we can take a break from it by focusing our attention for a short period on something neutral like the breath. When we are ready, attention is refocused in being present with the craving again. As part of this practice, various thoughts will arise and in mindfulness we just note such thoughts rather than getting wrapped up in them. A thought is just a thought, not a fact!

This is what mindfulness is about. Being present in the moment with an experience, rather than getting caught up with the stories we often tell ourselves about what the experiences should mean (e.g. this craving is too difficult, I can't handle it, etc.). With problem gamblers, the practice of mindfulness teaches individuals to "lean into experiences" rather than avoid them by turning to one's addiction.

Dr. Hedy Kober, a professor from Yale University shares her perspectives on Mindfulness in a TedTalk. This video will help provide an basic introduction to mindfulness and then later in this module we will apply some of these principles to problem gambling.

### Activity

Dr. Hedy Kober from Yale University studies the relationship between mindfulness and addiction gives a TED Talk introducing mindfulness. [Dr. Kober TedTalk on Mindfulness](#).

As you listened to Dr. Kober, what are three things you learned about mindfulness?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

How do you think the research Dr. Kober presented on decreased brain activation in response to stress among individuals who were attempting to reducing their smoking might apply to problem gambling?

---

---

### Mindfulness Practice

Mindfulness is often cultivated through meditation practices. It's important not to get the two confused. Often, people say that mindfulness is meditation. This would be like saying taking a road-trip on a vacation is synonymous with just traveling in a car. While a car is the vehicle through which one can visit a constellation of destinations and attractions that contribute to the overall vacation experience, we would be amiss to limit the description of a vacation to simply just riding in a car. Similarly, meditation exercises are a vehicle that allows us to cultivate a wide array of mindful moments, experiences, and increased levels of new awareness.

Several forms of meditation are taught in mindfulness-based approaches to psychological treatment with gamblers and each have similarities in their procedures and goals. An example of a typical meditation exercise may instruct a patient to sit quietly, either cross-legged or on the floor, and focus attention on the sensations of breathing. This might include the temperature of the air as it flows through our nostrils, the rate, depth, or rhythm of breathing. Efforts to regulate the breath are discouraged as mindfulness is about accepting whatever arises in the moment without trying to change it in any way. As various thoughts might compete for attention, a patient is encouraged to take note of them (e.g., a planning thought, a worrying thought, a judging thought) and then let go of the thought while returning the focus of attention to the breath. Throughout this process, patients cultivate the ability to observe incoming thoughts without over-identifying with them or judging them (e.g., my thoughts are neither good nor bad, they are just thoughts). Moreover, when a shift in self-awareness occurs, patients are instructed to redirect focus back to the breath and away from distressing thoughts or ruminations.

Patients are further encouraged to apply the concepts learned in meditation to activities in their daily lives, including various thoughts, feelings, and cravings associated with gambling behaviors. In essence, one goal of mindfulness is to help reorganize our relationship with these experiences in such a way that we don't allow them to provoke us in a way where we engage in self-destructive addictive behavior.

### **Activity**

Dr. Judson Brewer from Harvard who studies the relationship between mindfulness and addiction gives a talk titled "[A simple way to break a bad habit.](#)"

As you listened to Dr. Brewer, what are three things you learned?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Describe one thing you learned that might help you with problem gambling behavior?

---

---

### **Mindfulness and Gambling Disorders**

Dr. Reid and his colleagues at UCLA have conducted research showing increased levels of mindfulness are linked to a reduction in tendencies to engage in problem gambling and the host of distressing emotions often encountered by those with gambling disorders. Other studies have found evidence that cognitive behavioral

therapy when combined with a mindfulness intervention can reduce gambling severity.<sup>2</sup> Thus, those with gambling disorders should consider participation in mindfulness training as part of their recovery process. As with most things, proficient mindful practice requires an investment of effort and energy. However, sobriety in recovery is about commitment and dedication to worthwhile activities that can facilitate the process of positive change. Mindfulness appears to be one of these meaningful activities leading to powerful experiences for those with a gambling addiction.<sup>3</sup>

## Activity

In the following video, Dr. Rory Reid from UCLA discusses how principles and practices of mindfulness can help problem gamblers in their recovery work. [Mindfulness and Problem Gambling](#).

As you listened to Dr. Reid, what are three things you learned?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

In the video by Dr. Reid, you had an opportunity to practice some mindfulness meditation exercises. What was your initial reaction to these exercises?

---

---

## Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention

Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention (MBRP) is a treatment for preventing relapse in addictive disorders that integrates mindfulness meditation with standard relapse prevention practices typically associated with behavioral therapies. It was developed at the Addictive Behaviors Research Center at the University of Washington by the late Dr. Alan Marlatt and his colleagues to help people in their recovery from addictive behaviors. The primary goals for MBRP are:

1. Help develop awareness of personal triggers and habitual reactions and learn ways to create a pause in this seemingly automatic process that contributes to addictions.
2. Help people with addictions change their relationship to discomfort, learning to recognize challenging emotional and physical experiences and responding to them in skillful ways.
3. Help people foster a nonjudgmental, compassionate approach toward ourselves

---

<sup>2</sup> Toneatto, T., Pillai, S., & Courtice, E. L. (2014). Mindfulness-Enhanced Cognitive Behavior Therapy for problem gambling: A controlled pilot study. *International Journal of Mental Health & Addiction*, 12, 197-205.

<sup>3</sup> Some of the content for this module was part of an article first written for the American Addictions Centers Pro Talk Series by Dr. Rory Reid. This content was updated and modified in January 2021.

- and our experiences.
4. Help people with addictions build a lifestyle that supports both mindfulness practice and recovery.

They have several free audio exercises for individuals struggling with addiction that you can try out for free on their [MBRP website](#).

### Summary

Mindfulness approaches to problem gambling have shown promise in helping individuals reduce, control, or stop gambling behaviors. Mindfulness has been used by the healthcare community over the past 20 years to help alleviate suffering with a wide variety of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, ADHD, trauma, and addictive behaviors. Mindfulness can help problem gamblers 1) increase tolerance for uncomfortable feelings, 2) cope more effectively with stress, 3) reorganize their relationships with gambling cravings, 4) enhance their ability to regulate attention, and 5) reduce impulsivity.

Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention is a specific approach to helping individuals in addiction recovery incorporate mindfulness principles. Many of the MBRP exercises target helping people cope with various addictive cravings and other challenges that increase relapse.

Research has shown that people who practice mindfulness consistently experience brain changes that are associated with a reduction in their problematic behaviors.

### Additional Resources to Consider

Video: [Mindfulness-based Practices for Effective Prevention and Sustainable Recovery](#) by Dr. Dessa Bergen-Cico, Professor in the Department of Public Health, Coordinator of the Addiction Studies Program at Syracuse University.

Website: [UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center](#)

Video: [Mindfulness, the Mind, and Addictive Behavior](#) with Dr. Judson Brewer

Video: [The Importance of Meditation in Addiction Recovery](#)

Website: [MentalHelp.net](#) on MBRP

Video: MBRP for Addictions [Vol 1](#) and [Vol 2](#)

Numerous other resources introduce Mindfulness such as [LifeHack](#), [Mindful](#), [VeryWellMind](#), [PsychologyToday Mindfulness](#), [PsychologyToday Mindfulness Practice](#), [New York Times Article](#), [The Wellness Society](#), and [The Free Mindfulness Project](#).]