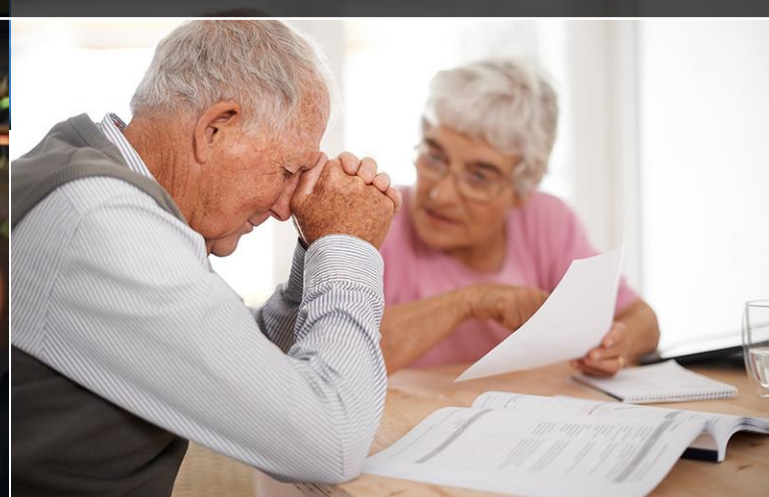
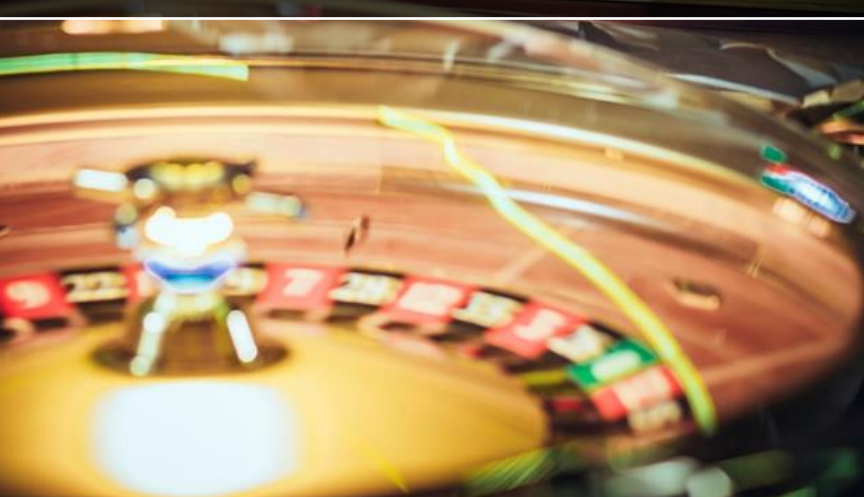




Stress Coping Strategies for Problem Gamblers



SELF-HELP WORKBOOK



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WORKBOOK

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Disclaimer: The content of this workbook is intended to provide helpful suggestions for those who may be working through their addiction recovery. While much of the material is based on empirical research from the social sciences and other widely reputable sources, suggestions throughout this workbook are not intended to be a substitute or replacement for advice obtained from your healthcare provider. Readers should consult with their healthcare providers for any medical advice related to their health and well-being.

Stress Coping Strategies for Problem Gamblers

Purpose

Stress is often a trigger for problem gambling behaviors. Ironically, people often report gambling to relieve stress but eventually discover that gambling can lead to greater stress. Stress is often closely intertwined with anxiety, fears, and worry. This module will help you understanding these challenges and provide you with scientifically supported approaches to coping more effectively with stress, worries, anxiety, and fear associated with problem gambling.

Coping with Anxiety, Worries, and Stress

Understanding ways to manage worries, fears, anxiety, and stress is critically important in gambling addiction recovery. Indeed, many people who have struggled with problem gambling report an inability to manage these unpleasant experiences. This deficit creates a reoccurring trigger in the addiction cycle. In this section you will learn about these unpleasant emotional states and pragmatic solutions to help you cope with, and reduce, the discomfort associated with worry, fear, anxiety, and stress.

Activity

This brief video explains the circularity to using gambling to cope with stress titled [“DSM-5 and Circularity with Stress and Problem Gambling.”](#)

Comment below on the extent do you find this circularity pattern with stress true in your own gambling behaviors?

Defining Stress

First, what is stress? As we might expect, the answer to this question can be challenging depending on who you ask. Scientists and researchers who study stress often find its definition somewhat elusive. Some characterize stress as anything likely to cause a stressful reaction. This approach assumes we all react to a potential stressor in the same manner. However, you’ve likely noticed there is variability in what causes stress for each of us. For example, job loss may devastate one person, yet for another, it might be a welcomed relief or opportunity to make changes. The severity of a

gambling loss, and subsequent stress, may be determined by how much income someone makes. Thus, stress reactions vary from person to person.

Complicating matters, people use the word 'stress' to describe a wide array of things from trivial matters and inconvenient annoyances to traumatic experiences, death, or serious injuries. Although the word stress is often used interchangeably with anxiety, worry, or fear, stress does have some unique characteristics that distinguish it from these other uncomfortable experiences. More importantly, given the research linking stress to problem gambling severity¹, it is important to understand stress and how you can reduce stress in your life.

Dr. Kelly McGonigal, a health psychologist at Stanford University, gives a broad definition stating, "stress is what arises when something you care about is at stake."² Authors of the book [Stress the Psychology of Managing Pressure](#) suggest stress is the body's physical or psychological response to "the **perceived** inability to meet life's demands," or, as others have stated, a "conviction that we

We should avoid judging others during difficult times and recognize everyone has unique challenges that differ from our own in contributing to the experiences that give rise to their stress.

won't be able to cope with the challenges we're facing."³ Perhaps, it is most important that we acknowledge what makes something stressful is subjective; that is to say, it's based on our own perception which can be influenced by many factors. Subsequently, we should avoid judging others during difficult times and recognize everyone has unique challenges that differ from our own in contributing to the experiences that give rise to their stress. What is important is to identify our own stressors and any patterns where stressors increase the likelihood you will turn to gambling to distract or escape the stress.

What's the Difference between Worry, Stress, Fear, and Anxiety?

Worry is a product of the mind and a behavior that focuses on negative thoughts, uncertainty, or imagining things that could go wrong. [Dr. Luana Marques](#), Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School suggest worrying is what we do to try and appease thoughts about uncertainty or unpleasant situations and can serve a role to help us problem-solve or take action. She suggests worrying is one way our brain attempts to handle problems to help keep us safe. For example, worrying about not having enough money to pay bills if you experience gambling losses is a legitimate

¹ Ronzitti, S., Kraus, S.W., Hoff, R. A., * Potenza, M. N. (2018). Stress moderates the relationship between problem-gambling severity and specific psychopathologies. *Psychiatry Research*, 259, 254-261.

² McGonigal, K. (2015). *The upside of stress: Why stress is good for you, and how to get good at it*. Penguin Random House, New York, NY.

³ McIntosh, D., Horowitz, J., & Kaye, M. (2017). *Stress the psychology of managing pressure*. Penguin Random House, New York, NY.

worry, to which the appropriate response is to abstain from gambling if you can't afford to lose money or fail to gamble within pre-determined monetary limits.

[Dr. Seth Gillihan](#), Clinical Psychologist and Assistant Professor at the University of Pennsylvania

says, "When we care about some event *in the future* and the outcome of that event is *uncertain*, it leads to a state of tension. Worry can be thought of as a *behavior* that is intended to reduce that state of tension by thinking through possible bad outcomes and how to prevent them." However, when we get stuck in unproductive repetitive thoughts about a future event with an uncertain outcome, worrying can become dysfunctional. In other words, worry can be useful if it helps us change or avoid an undesirable consequence such as those associated with problem gambling; otherwise, worrying becomes an unhelpful obsessive pattern of thinking. Interestingly, the use of several gambling-related irrational thinking patterns to interpret or make sense of uncertain outcomes is linked to problem gambling, which may explain why many problem gamblers don't worry so much when taking big risks with the potential for adverse consequences. Yet, outside the world of gambling, there are other worries that can give rise to your stress.

"Worry isn't worth what it can cost...after all, most of what we worry about never happens."

Dr. Seth Gillihan, Psychologist and Professor
University of Pennsylvania

In addition to stress, fear and anxiety are also related to worrying but are different, as explained in Figure 1.1. It is generally accepted that fear is a primary emotion involving a temporary physiological response to an "imminent and identifiable danger or threat," whereas anxiety is considered a "sustained state of apprehension about a perceived future threat" and is associated with tension, excessive worry, and a feeling of insecurity. Fear is typically short in its duration, whereas anxiety is much more prolonged. Research studies have identified different brain regions activated by the feelings outlined in Figure 1.1, giving validity to each state being associated with a distinct experience.

As an illustration, it can be helpful to differentiate the experiences outlined in Figure 1.1 in the following way:

"Worry is having thoughts that something bad is going to happen, anxiety is prolonged excessive worry that interferes with life or our ability to make meaningful changes, fear arises in the moment our worry becomes a reality in a threatening way, and stress is the belief that we're not going to be able to deal with the bad things we've been worrying about, anxious about, or feeling afraid of."⁴

⁴ This illustration provides a simplified way of differentiating worry, anxiety, fear, and stress. More complex definitions characterize additional psychological and physical symptoms of these feelings.

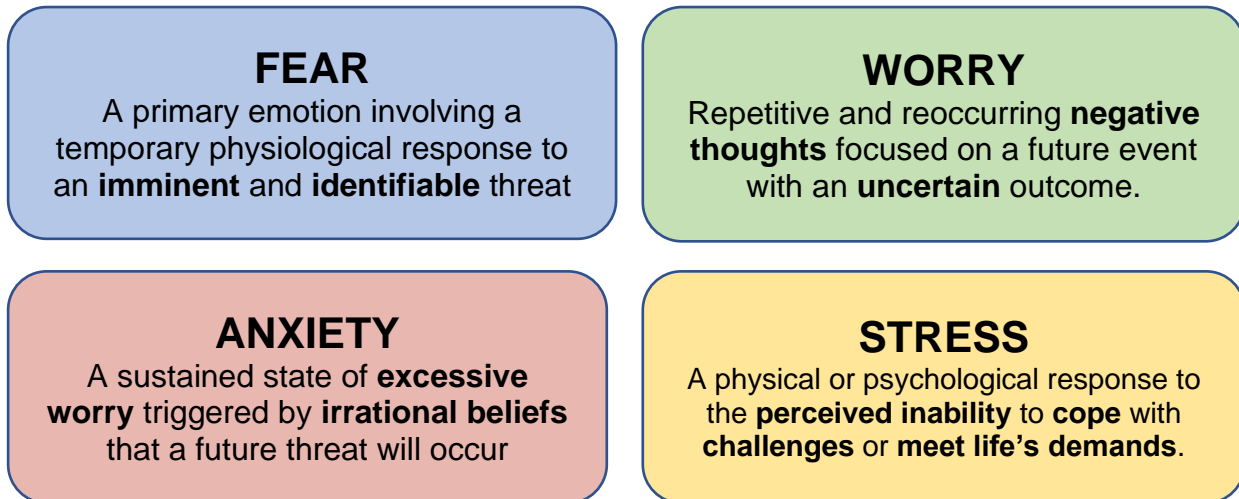


Figure 1.1 Differences Between Fear, Worry, Anxiety, and Stress

When individuals experience an unhealthy type of worrying that becomes chronic and excessive, it can cause clinical levels of anxiety or an anxiety disorder. People with an anxiety disorder often report, “I’m always worrying about something,” and their worries are “excessive and difficult to control.” Anxiety often interferes with our quality of life and prevents us from doing things we want or need to do. Several studies have found those with gambling addictions are more likely to have co-occurring anxiety, with some researchers finding 41.3% of problem gamblers have an anxiety disorder.⁵ In such cases, anxiety should be treated concurrently with the gambling disorder. [See also the [National Institute of Mental Health](#) or the [Anxiety and Depression Association of America](#) for more information about Anxiety Disorders and possible treatments.]

Worry, Anxiety, and Stress Can Be Linked to Irrational Thoughts

People who suffer excessive worry, anxiety, or stress often have beliefs or thoughts that contribute to their difficult experiences. In the field of mental health, irrational thoughts (e.g., [cognitive distortions](#)⁶ or irrational thinking) can trigger these unpleasant emotional experiences. Simply put, cognitive

“A lot of times we worry about things we fear. Yet fear only becomes a reality when the things we worry about actually happen, which is usually the exception, not the rule.”

Dr. Rory Reid, Research Psychologist
UCLA Department of Psychiatry

⁵ Petry, N. M., Stinson, F. S., & Grant, B. F. (2005). Comorbidity of DSM–IV pathological gambling and other psychiatric disorders: Results from the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions. *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 66:564–574.

⁶ In 1976, psychologist Aaron Beck first proposed the theory underlying cognitive distortions and in the 1980s, Dr. David Burns, a Stanford University Professor of Psychiatry was responsible for popularizing it with common names and examples for the distortions in his book titled “[Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy](#)” (See Table 1.1).

distortions are like a pair of glasses with the wrong prescription making the viewer see things differently than how they really are. This isn't uncommon. Many gamblers who have excessive worry or anxiety will acknowledge they are thinking irrationally but find it difficult to stop. The good news is we can reorganize our thoughts in ways where our worry, anxiety, and stress are significantly reduced. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy ([CBT](#)) attempts to identify, challenge, and replaced irrational thoughts with more rational patterns of thinking in order to reduce the severity of worry, anxiety, or stress. It's like getting a correct prescription for the glasses so we can see things more clearly and focus on life experiences more realistically. There is a substantial body of scientific research supporting CBT approaches to many mental health challenges including gambling problems.⁷ Although cognitive distortions will be discussed in a different section, research on irrational thinking patterns indicates how we think can significantly influence our worry, anxiety, fear, and feelings of stress, either positively or negatively.

SO WHAT?

So What? How Do We Reduce Stress and Worrying?

Strategies to reduce worry are outlined below. Many of the recommended strategies are also helpful for reducing anxiety and stress. This makes sense since anxiety manifests as excessive worry, and stress also involves worrying that we will be unable to cope with challenges or meet life's demands.

Activity

The [Exercise 1.1 Identifying Your Worries](#) invites you to identify and categorize your worries. After completing [Exercise 1.1](#), begin reading the section below about different ways to reduce your worry. As you read the section below, keep in mind the worries you have written in [Exercise 1.1](#) and determine how you can apply the strategies below to the things you worry about.

⁷ David, D., Cristea, I., & Hofmann, S. G. (2018). Why Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is the current gold standard of psychotherapy. [Frontiers in Psychiatry](#), 9(4), doi: 10.3389/fpsy.2018.00004

How to Reduce Worrying that Causes Stress?

Several strategies may be helpful to reduce the amount of time and energy spent worrying. As discussed previously, worry is repetitive and reoccurring negative thoughts focused on a future event with an uncertain outcome and can contribute to significant stress. While it can be helpful to anticipate possible bad outcomes (practical worry) and how to prevent them, unhealthy worrying does not serve any meaningful purpose. This is especially true when people move from practical worry to hypothetical worries. Hypothetical worries consist of the many “what if” thoughts we entertain and apply to situations or things over which we have little control. Insofar as problem gambling can



be linked to many negative consequences associated, practical worry about ensuing problems related to gambling is appropriate. For example, worry that creditors will contact you for debt collection is a common occurrence. Subsequently, planning on how to negotiate payment schedules or getting a second job to pay down debt is part of problem solving associated with practical worry. However, hypothetical worry about every aspect of life or imaging the worst possible outcome for every aspect of one's life is unwise. Below are several strategies⁸ that can help reduce unhealthy worry.

1. **Containment:** Limit time spent worrying to a specific period each day (e.g. at the kitchen table from 3:00 to 3:20 p.m.). It's ideal not to have this period too close to bedtime in order to avoid having anxious thoughts before going to sleep. During this time, allow yourself to worry, write your worries down on your 'worry list' and attempt to see if there are any worries you can reduce or eliminate by finding out more information, talking to someone, or changing a daily routine or behavior. If you find yourself entertaining worrying thoughts at other times during the day, take a moment to write it down on your worry list and postpone thinking about it until your scheduled worry time.
2. **Challenge Worrying Thoughts:** Identify irrational thinking patterns (e.g. cognitive distortions) associated with worries and identify more correct rational ways to think. For example, consider what evidence supports your worry. What about evidence that refutes your worry? What is the probability your worry will actually happen? If it's unlikely, what are some more likely things that might happen? Is it helpful or hurtful

⁸ Content derived from research with some material adapted from [HelpGuide.org](https://www.helpguide.org)

to entertain the thoughts you worry about? If someone else were struggling with the same worry, what would you tell them, and what advice might you offer?

3. **Differentiate Worries with and without Solutions:** Worrying and problem solving are different activities. It is helpful to distinguish worries that have practical solutions from those that do not. In other words, focus on worries that have solutions and then focus your attention on problem solving (coming up with a specific plan to solve the things you are worrying about and then executing the plan). For example, if you're worried about paying bills, you can contact creditors and discuss flexible payment options. Unproductive worries, such as hypothetical worries, are those that have no immediate identifiable solution such as "what if I get into a car accident" or "what if I develop a chronic disease?" In the latter situations, we have to focus on increasing our tolerance for uncertainty that may be associated with our worries.
4. **Understanding the Need for Certainty:** Worrying is often used to cope with our discomfort of uncertainty or the changes that are a natural part of life. Unhealthy efforts to deal with uncertainty can include 1) excessively seeking reassurance, 2) micromanaging people so they will do things our way rather than delegating tasks, 3) manipulating situations or people to do things a certain way in order to reduce uncertainty, 4) procrastinating or avoiding decisions/situations to prevent change that might bring uncertainty, 5) hyper-focusing on situations or events by repeatedly checking again and again to make sure you haven't overlooked or missed details that might undermine your ability to predict future events.

One way to decrease worry is by considering the reasons we believe we *need* certainty or immediate solutions to situations that haven't yet occurred. We might ask ourselves:⁹

- a) **What are the advantages of certainty? What about disadvantages?** Certainty can make life more predictable, help us feel safe, or reassured. However, good things can come from uncertainty, surprises, spontaneity, or trying something out of the ordinary. Opportunities can unfold from unexpected moments and facing uncertainty can provide chances to learn, adapt, overcome obstacles, and increase our resiliency. Indeed, unplanned adversity can be the precursor to growth.
- b) **How much of life can we really predict with absolute certainty?** Do any of us know what tomorrow will bring? Are there guarantees of good health or job security? Reassurance-seeking behaviors, worrying, micromanaging, procrastination, or attempts to manipulate others only offer the *illusion* of having some control over our circumstances but do they really offer certainty? Regardless of how much we attempt to create certainty in our lives by preparing for every possible outcome, unexpected challenges will arise, and life will throw

⁹ Suggestions adapted from HelpGuide.org

curveballs our way. Effort and energy devoted to creating certainty are time consuming, exhausting, and only perpetuate the cycle of worry. However, in the end it is more helpful to accept, and even embrace, the uncertainty of life.

- c) **Do we assume uncertain outcomes will mean something bad will happen? How likely is it that uncertainty will cause bad things happening?** People who worry often assume that uncertainty will inevitably result in something bad happening. Fear of the unknown can lead us to overestimate the likelihood of something bad happening and underestimate our ability to respond effectively if it does. In most cases, the probability that something bad will happen is low. It is much healthier to accept the small chance that something bad might happen in the wake of uncertainty and focus our attention on more likely outcomes instead. Interestingly, some people report their initial appraisal of an experience as “bad” changed as they faced the challenge leading them to conclude in the end, it was a “good” thing.

As we challenge our need for certainty, we can learn to accept uncertainty, reduce unnecessary worry, stress, and fear which in turn, can create time for us to focus our attention on more meaningful things in our lives.

5. **Increasing Tolerance for Uncertainty through Acceptance:** Insofar as it is unlikely something bad will happen related to the many routine things about which we worry, it is more adaptive to accept some risk and learn to coexist with uncertainty. We can increase our tolerance for uncertainty by doing several things, including:

- a) **Identify Triggers:** While irrational thoughts can be the strongest trigger for discomfort with uncertainty, exposure to some external sources can also trigger heightened anxiety about uncertainty. For example, putting ourselves in risky situations, spending time consuming content on social media that is based on half-truths or gossip, watching news that is sensationalized to capture our attention by preying on our fears, or talking to anxious friends or family that make our worries worse isn't helpful. Identifying and limiting our exposure to these triggers can help us avoid unnecessary worry about uncertainty and limiting other uncertain aspects of life, making them less overwhelming and more tolerable.

Accepting Uncertainty Doesn't Mean We Avoid Planning

“Accepting uncertainty doesn't mean you shouldn't have a plan for some of life's unforeseen circumstances. It's always good to have some savings put by in case of unexpected expenses, keep a preparedness kit handy if you live in an area at risk for earthquakes or hurricanes, or have a plan if you or a loved one falls ill. But you can't prepare for every possible scenario. Life is simply too random and unpredictable.” HelpGuide.org

- b) **Sit with Discomfort:** We often tell ourselves that uncomfortable feelings are “bad” or “problematic.” Yet, it is often our reaction to these feelings that creates most of our challenges. People who learn to accept and be present with the discomfort of uncertainty find its ability to cause them distress is significantly reduced. One way to do this is to meditate on the actual feeling of discomfort and be curious about it, rather than treating the feeling as the enemy. Some people find it helpful to “sit” with their discomfort through meditation exercises. [[Coping with Uncertainty Meditation](#)]
 - c) **Reorganize the Narrative:** The narrative we attach to uncertainty is that it will result in something bad happening. We get caught up in the stories we tell ourselves about our inability to cope with the ‘bad thing.’ In reality, we are much more resilient than we often acknowledge. Moreover, the stories we make up in our head are often much worse than what would happen if our worries came to fruition. One way to increase our tolerance for uncertainty is to reorganize the narrative or stories we attach to uncertainty. We can tell ourselves “uncertainty is uncomfortable, but I will manage whatever challenges arise” or “the stories I’m making up in my head are so much worse than what normally happens.” In this manner, we reorganize the narrative we attach to uncertainty and diminish its ability to cause us so much distress.
 - d) **Reducing Worry through Distraction:** Although avoidance is not a long-term solution to worry, sometimes it can be helpful when our mind is racing with various worries and it’s difficult to stop. We can refocus our attention on something else for a time. We can talk to a friend, listen to some comedy, learn a new recipe, listen to a podcast, read a book, etc.... The idea is to focus our attention on something that will mentally stimulate us and take our mind off our worries. This can help interrupt the cycle of worry and be combined with the suggestion to set aside time to worry and do some containment around that time period. Distraction is not intended to ignore practical worries or avoid problem solving. It’s simply a coping strategy for those moments when our worries feel too overwhelming or relentless to handle.
6. **Differentiate Worry from Problem-Solving:** Sometimes we believe we are problem-solving when in fact, we are worrying. Worry focuses our attention on the future and things that might go wrong. Problem-solving involves coming up with solutions to deal with something *after* it has happened. We work on solving the problem once it has occurred. As discussed previously, productive worry involves planning ahead for problems that might arise and considering how we might react if the thing we are worried about happens. This can be productive. However, if our worry is focused on imagining worst case scenarios without thinking about what we can do to problem solve, then it is unproductive, and we should redirect our attention elsewhere.

7. **Letting Go of Things We Cannot Control:** Many people exhaust themselves in an attempt to fight against a simple truth in life, namely, there are many things we simply cannot control. One man stated “Almost everything in my life that I’ve had to let go of has scratch marks on it.”¹⁰ The point was about how difficult it was to let go of things he couldn’t control and hanging onto them desperately was evidenced by the scratch marks. Part of the process of letting go is underscored by a more critical question about why we get attached in the first place. Indeed, we typically worry about things we care about such as material possessions, people, our expectations, or our beliefs and we’re afraid that something bad will happen to these “things.” Letting go is the choice to not fixate on these “things” or the belief that something bad will happen to these “things.” In other words, we are letting go of the way we are focusing our attention and redirecting our attention towards things we can influence or change. It’s letting go of the belief that everything we are attached to is the source of our happiness and somehow needs to be controlled. Change is inevitable. Loss and suffering are a part of life. These are things we cannot control. However, we can control how we react or think about change, loss, or suffering as an opportunity to grow or learn.

Letting go is hard, but sometimes, holding on is harder.

8. **Self-Care:** Adequate rest, proper nutrition, and daily physical activity have all been shown in research to reduce worry, anxiety, stress, and promote more optimal physical and mental health.¹¹⁻¹²
9. **Social Support:** Turning to a social support network, even one or two friends to talk with can help people reduce worry and reduce stress. [See [Social Support in Section on Stress Coping Strategies.](#)]
10. **Mindfulness Meditation:** There has been a growing body of compelling evidence to support mindfulness practices which have been shown to reduce anxiety, worry, and stress. [See Mindfulness Meditation in Section on Stress Coping Strategies.]
11. **Relaxation Techniques:** Several relaxation techniques have been shown to reduce worry and stress. They can include a variety of practices such as progressive relaxation, guided imagery, biofeedback, self-hypnosis, and deep breathing exercises. All of these techniques have a common goal: to produce the body's natural relaxation response, characterized by slower breathing, lower blood

¹⁰ Francis, C. A. (2020). How to learn to let go of what you can’t control. [LifeHack](#).

¹¹ Moylan, S., Eyre, H. A., Maes, M., Baune, B. T., Jaka, F. N., & Berk, M. (2013). Exercising the worry away: How inflammation, oxidative and nitrogen stress mediates the beneficial effect of physical activity on anxiety disorder symptoms and behaviours. *Neuroscience & Behavioral Reviews*, 37(4), 573-584.

¹² Mikkelsen, K., Stojanovska, L., Polenakovic, M., Bosevski, M., & Apostolopoulos, V. (2017). Exercise and mental health. *Maturitas*, 106, 48-56.

pressure, and a feeling of increased well-being. A number of resources are available to educate and introduce various relaxation techniques: [VeryWellMind](#), the [National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health](#), [Mayo Clinic](#), [HelpGuide](#), [WebMD](#), and [HealthLine](#).

In summary, we've talked about different types of worry and ways to reduce unhealthy worry. We've discussed how anxiety occurs when our worrying is prolonged, excessive, and unmanageable, and how fear is related to these emotions. We used the following illustration:

***worry** is having thoughts that something **bad** is going to happen, **anxiety** is prolonged excessive worry that interferes with life or our ability to make meaningful changes, **fear** arises in the moment our worry becomes a reality in a threatening way, and **stress** is the belief that we're not going to be able to deal with the bad things we've been worrying about.*

Now we will continue with the discussion about stress which was defined as a physical or psychological response to the perceived inability to cope with challenges or meet life's demands (see Figure 1.1). As with the discussion about worry, there are different types of stressors and ways to reduce unhealthy stress which will be discussed below.

"If you are uncomfortable — in deep pain, angry, yearning, confused — you don't have a problem, you have a life. Being human is not hard because you're doing it wrong, it's hard because you're doing it right. You will never change the fact that being human is hard, so you must change your idea that it was ever supposed to be easy." Glennon Doyle

Different Types of Stressors

The type of stressors we encounter can impact our ability to cope. Stressors can be categorized by duration (temporary or long-term), polarity (positive or negative), and level of perceived control. Many of the stressors we face in life, such as stress about going to the dentist, are temporary in duration. Nevertheless, even temporary stressors can be challenging. We can also think about the polarity of stressors as being positive or negative. Positive stress or 'eustress' might include things like getting a promotion at

work, buying a home, having a child, or getting married. Negative stress or ‘distress’ consists of the things typically associated as being stressful such as job loss, divorce, chronic illness, or death. Stressors can also be evaluated on our perceived level of control/powerlessness over the source of the stress, which by extension, is usually measured by the presence or absence of resources to cope or reduce the stress. For example, not having accurate information about potential consequences we might face may be stressful and leave people feeling powerless, whereas finding accurate information may help people feel more empowered and decrease stress.

Activity

Before proceeding, complete [Exercise 1.2: Stress Inventory](#). Once completed, ask yourself the following questions?

How do you feel as you look at your current stressors? Does it feel overwhelming?
What is your biggest concern?

Share your list with one or two people you trust and ask them the following questions.
Do they experience the same or different stressors? Why or why not?

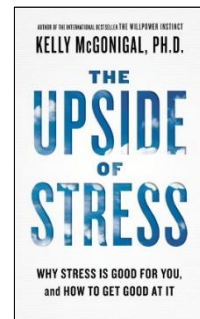
Do they see your stressors in a different way and if so, why did they “perceive” things differently?

What, if any, resources do they have to help them reduce or cope with their stress? Do you have access to the same resources? What about ways to decrease demands?

What do they do about sources of stress over which they believe they have no control? Are they able to “let go” of these sources of stress and how do they do this?

Reorganizing How We Think about Stress

A lot of emerging research suggests our traditional way of thinking about stress may undermine opportunities to reframe stress as something that can help us grow, learn, or develop new skills. An innovative leader in this new frontier of reframing stress is Stanford University health psychologist, Dr. Kelly McGonigal. She introduces some of her novel thoughts about stress in her TED Talk titled “[How to Make Stress Your Friend](#).”



Activity

As you watch her talk “[How to Make Stress Your Friend](#)”, write down five new things you didn’t know about stress but learn by listening to Dr. McGonigal using [Exercise 1.3 Five Things I Learned about Stress](#).

An important take-home message from Dr. McGonigal is “How you think about stress matters.” Pragmatically, Dr. McGonigal is not suggesting we put on rose-colored glasses and pretend that stress doesn’t exist. All of us have challenges, days that we struggle or times where we feel discouraged by the onslaught of novel stresses that are part of our world. Although some choices might be limited, we can choose how we think about the current stressors in our lives including those that may be unrelated to problem gambling or directly related to problem gambling. This is what Dr. McGonigal is inviting us to consider, namely, that stress can give us meaning in life, that we can reorganize how we stress, and believe that perseverance through the adversity we currently face can make us stronger individuals. That is her message.

Stress Coping Styles

Like many problem gamblers, you may find yourself attempting to prevent or reduce stress in different ways often through gambling. In psychology, we generally categorize coping styles into two broad domains: **problem-solving** and **emotion-focused** coping. Problem solving approaches focus on practical ways to tackle an issue or change a

situation in order to reduce stress. Problem-solving seeks to find ways to increase resources or decrease our demands as a way of reducing stress.

Demand	Resource
A demand is anything that requires us to use up available resources. Demands can be tangible such as the pressure to come up with money to pay a bill or requests for our time. They can also be intangible such as the perceived need to perform a task exceptionally well (e.g. perfectionism), tendencies to ruminate about a problem, difficulties coping with uncomfortable emotions, the inability to prioritize, or difficulties focusing/concentrating.	A resource is anything that helps us meet or satisfy a demand. Resources can include something concrete and tangible such as having food, money, a place to live or intangible assets such as the ability to be assertive, knowledge, time, access to reliable information, intelligence, adequate physical health, effective communication skills, problem solving abilities, optimism, thinking outside the box, having supportive friends, or having optimal emotional health.

Table 1.1 Definitions of Demands and Resources Used in Stress Appraisals

For example, if you're feeling stressed about your ability to effectively communicate with others, counseling might be an example of a resource they could utilize. Alternatively, you could read a self-help book on communication, search the Internet for various resources, or look for Podcasts, or TED Talks on the topic. These types of investments would also create a demand for another valuable resource, *time*. Thus, in the example above, it would be important to find a balance between spending time cultivating effective communication and devoting time to other important activities of daily living. You might also find that being a more effective communicator saves time from misunderstandings and miscommunication that result from ineffective communication. Again, balance is the key.

While problem solving focused strategies are ideal, such approaches are not always possible because you may lack access to resources or feel unable to decrease your demands. In other words, factors outside your control make increasing demands or decreasing resources more difficult. [Note: In some cases, we can learn skills that will help us meet the demands, such as learning to manage time more effectively.]

Activity

[Exercise 1.4](#) List of demands and Resources gives you the opportunity to write down, explore, and consider the resources and demands in your life.

What did you notice as you made your list? Did anything surprise you?

Consider asking a trusted friend or family member to review your list. Did they have anything to add or suggest things (perhaps resources) that you didn't think about?

What are your greatest demands and what are your greatest resources? What, if any, demands can you reduce or resources can you increase?

How many items on your list are temporary or only exist because of the COVID-19 pandemic or some other short-term situation?

Emotional focused coping can be helpful, especially when problem-solving approaches are not possible. Emotional focused coping involves **reorganizing the way we react to a stressor** through strategies that attempt to reduce unpleasant emotions such as fear, anxiety, or depression, rather than changing the situation itself. In other words, the problem may not be directly resolved but we can help clients reduce their levels of internal stress related to the problem. Some examples of emotionally focused coping strategies are outlined below.

Stress Coping Strategies

1. **Reframing:** Changing the way we look at a situation and focusing on some positive aspect. This involves searching for a more favorable understanding of the stressful situation and its implications. For example, job loss might provide opportunities for

other employment that will help us learn or grow. Having to home school children, while stressful, might provide an opportunity for a parent to understand more clearly their child's academic strengths and cultivate a closer relationship. Essentially, reframing considers that stress-related growth can occur and indeed, it has been reported in many studies including among those with health problems and other difficult challenges such as problem gambling. Positive changes have been noted in social relationships (e.g. becoming closer to family or friends), personal resources (e.g., developing patience or persistence), life philosophies (e.g., rethinking one's priorities), spirituality, coping skills (e.g., learning better ways to handle problems or manage emotions), and health behaviors (e.g. lessening stress and taking better care of one's self).¹³

2. **Social Support:** Connecting with others can reduce internal stress or worry, especially stress caused from feeling lonely or detached from others.¹⁴ When people feel they are unloved, uncared for, or not valued by others, loneliness often emerges, creating stress. A more primary issue is the fear of having to face life's challenges alone or having to tackle the obstacles without having others to help. During the current pandemic, social distancing is necessary, however, we don't have to be emotionally distant from others. Turning to a romantic partner, a friend, family members, religious leaders, co-workers, a therapist, members of a support group (e.g., Gamblers Anonymous), a 12-step sponsor, or neighbors can help us feel less isolated or alone. Looking for ways to volunteer can also help us feel more connected with others. People in our social support network can offer emotional support through listening empathically, validating our feelings, or giving us a simple hug. Others may offer practical help such as assisting us to complete tasks and easing some of our burdens. Some people are good at helping us think outside the box, sharing different points of view, reminding us of our strengths, and helping us maintain perspective. Those lacking in social support can consider things such as: casting a wider net, taking more social risks, getting more from the support you have, being proactive in reaching out, taking advantage of technology, following your interests, seeking out peer support or joining a support group, improving your social skills, asking for help, being patient, avoiding negative relationships, and nurturing the relationships you already have. [See also [American Psychological Association](#) or [Canadian Mental Health Association](#).]
3. **Humor:** Finding something humorous or funny about the situation can help relieve stress or tension about difficult situations. We need not look far on social media or

¹³ Park, C. (2013). The Meaning Making Model: A framework for understanding meaning, spirituality, and stress-related growth in health psychology. *The European Health Psychologist*, 15(2), 40-47.

¹⁴ C. Segrin & S. A. Passalacqua (2010). Functions of loneliness, social support, health behaviors, and stress in association with poor health. *Health Communications*, 25, 312-322.

elsewhere to find some comic relief. As a caveat, humor should not be in the form of jokes or sarcasm that discriminates or conveys harmful rhetoric towards others.

4. **Psychotherapy:** Therapy can be effective in helping people learn how to better manage stress and cope with life's difficulties. Cognitive behavioral therapy, focuses on helping individuals challenge thought patterns that cause or worsen stress. Many therapists have also been trained to provide telehealth through safe and secure technology that can protect your privacy and allow you to receive therapy from home.
5. **Mindfulness Meditation:** Meditation and mindfulness practices are effective methods to help people manage worry and stress.¹⁵⁻¹⁶ Like physical exercise, meditation is most effective when it is done regularly. One resource for learning mindfulness meditation strategies can be found online at [UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center](#). Popular meditation "apps" such as [Calm](#), [Headspace](#), or [Insight Timer](#) offer meditation exercises. Numerous other resources introduce Mindfulness. [See TedTalk by [Dr. Hedy Kober from Yale University](#), [LifeHack](#), [Mindful](#), [VeryWellMind](#), [PsychologyToday Mindfulness](#), [PsychologyToday Mindfulness Practice](#), [New York Times Article](#), [The Wellness Society](#), and [The Free Mindfulness Project](#).] See also Module on Mindfulness Approaches to Problem Gambling.
6. **Spirituality:** The health sciences field suggests a comprehensive definition of spirituality as "the search for ultimate meaning, purpose, and significance, in relation to oneself, family, others, community, nature, and the sacred, expressed through beliefs, values, traditions and practices."¹⁷⁻¹⁸ This personal "quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, about meaning, and about relationship to the sacred or transcendent"¹⁹ is important to seven in ten adults in the United States who have expressed a desire to experience spiritual growth.²⁰ This is notable insofar as spirituality has been linked to numerous positive health outcomes, including better stress coping, reduced worry, and lower levels of anxiety. Indeed, spirituality can help gamblers maintain hope and stability in times of turbulence.

¹⁵ P. R. Goldin & J. J. Gross (2010). Effects of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) on emotion regulation in social anxiety disorder. *Emotion*, 10(1), 83–91.

¹⁶ Krusche, A., Cyhlarova, E., King, S., & Williams, J. M. G. (2012). Mindfulness online: A preliminary evaluation of the feasibility of a web-based mindfulness course and the impact on stress. *British Medical Journal Open*, 2: e000803.

¹⁷ Puchalski, C.M., Vitillo, R., Hull, S.K., & Reller, N. (2014). Improving the spiritual dimension of whole person care. *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, 17, 642–656

¹⁸ Hill, P. C., & Pargament, K. I. (2003). Advances in the conceptualization and measurement of religion and spirituality: Implications for physical and mental health research. *American Psychologist*, 58(1), 64-74.

¹⁹ Koenig, H. G., McCullough, M. E., & Larson, D. B. (2001). *Handbook of religion and health*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc.

²⁰ Gallup, G., & Johnson, B. R. (2003). New index tracks "Spiritual State of The Union". Gallup Poll News Service.

Interestingly, prominent psychiatrist Viktor Frankl who was imprisoned in a Nazi camp during the Holocaust stated, “no cure that fails to engage our spirit can make us well.” Moreover, the World Health Organization even advocated for a modification to the concept of health to include spirituality in their 52nd Assembly, wherein they proposed: “Health is a dynamic state of complete physical, mental, spiritual, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”²¹ Collectively, both anecdotal and scientific research suggest cultivating spirituality can be a protective factor in helping clients cope more effectively with stress, reduce worrying, and diminish anxiety. This in turn, can reduce problem gambling behavior.

7. **Calming Music:** Research has shown that listening to relaxing music can have a significant impact on reducing levels of stress.²² This appears to be particularly true of classical music.²³
8. **Gratitude:** Several studies have found a relationship between the practice of being grateful and reduced stress.²⁴ Most studies have participants pay attention to feelings of gratitude through one or two journal entries daily. The findings from these studies consistently show people cope with stress much better when they take time each day for gratitude. Interestingly, problem gambling often occurs when people are focused on negative things or forgetting to remember things to be thankful for. Thus, incorporating a gratitude practice can help focus our attention on things that will reduce the likelihood of gambling behaviors. [See section on [Gratitude](#).]
9. **Self-Care:** This is about putting your own oxygen mask on first by taking a little bit of time each day to help you be your best self. It can include things like exercise, eating nutritiously, adequate rest, journaling, yoga, or going for a walk.
10. **Be Assertive:** Assertiveness is characterized by the ability to be confident and self-assured without being aggressive, forceful, or overbearing. In every-day life, being assertive means establishing a balance of standing up for our values, expressing thoughts, perspectives, or feelings in a direct way; while also showing mutual respect for the rights of others to do the same. We can demonstrate varying degrees of assertiveness depending on the situation or our relationship with the people involved in an interaction. For example, maybe we can be assertive for other people but not for ourselves, or maybe we can be assertive with friends and co-workers but

²¹ World Health Organization. Fifty-Second World Health Assembly, April 7, 1999.

²² C. L. Pelletier (2004). The effect of music on decreasing arousal due to stress: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Music Therapy*, 41(3), 192–214.

²³ P. M. Scheufele (2000). Effects of progressive relaxation and classical music on measurements of attention, relaxation, and stress responses. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 23(2), 207–228.

²⁴ Nezelek, J. B., Krejtz, I., Rusanowska, M., & Holas, P. (2019). Within-person relationships among daily gratitude, well-being, stress, and positive experiences. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 20, 883–898.

struggle when it comes to family members. Learning to be assertive allows us to set boundaries with others so we do not overcommit our time or other valuable resources that can contribute to stress. [Note: It is also important to work with romantic partners of problem gamblers to help them be assertive in the relationship with the gambler.]

11. **Develop Effective Time Management Strategies:** Time is one of our most valuable resources. Once it's gone, we can never get it back. This makes managing our time an important skill. Effective time management will also help us feel more productive and less stressed. There are lots of strategies to help with time management. Take some time to learn how to manage time by doing an Internet search on "time management tips." You will find articles, blogs, YouTube videos, podcasts, and much more. Incorporate ideas that seem "doable" for you and resonate with your style. Consider common strategies such as: delegate tasks when possible, prioritize work, create schedules, learn how to accurately estimate time, create realistic deadlines, avoid multitasking, get a head start on your day by waking up a little earlier, stop [procrastinating](#), and politely say "no" to requests when you know that you do not have the time to take on additional tasks or work.

Summary

Stress, worry, anxiety, and fear can be unpleasant experiences that can contribute to problem gambling and other addictive behaviors. Understanding these emotional states and learning effective coping strategies in responding to these experiences is important in recovery and overcoming addictive behaviors. There is overlap in strategies that are helpful for worry, anxiety, and stress. Part of effective coping requires us to reorganize the way we think about these experiences which can reduce the amount of distress we feel. As efforts are made to work through recovery, it is helpful to involve others we can trust to aid in the journey. Finally, talking to a professional healthcare provider who has experience working with problem gambling can create some additional accountability and support. On average, problem gamblers, who take advantage of the many available resources and remember to make recovery a priority, will find success in their efforts to cultivate emotional health and a balanced lifestyle free from addictive behaviors.

Additional Readings and Resources to Consider

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Chodron, P. (2019). Living beautifully: With uncertainty and change. Shambhala; Reprint Edition

Appendix: Coping with Stress, Worry, Fear, and Anxiety

Exercise 1.1 Identifying Your Worries

As you think about your worry, divide the things you worry about into two separate categories. The first is *practical worry* which consists of things you worry about that are real, tangible, and more likely to happen. Many, but not all, of these worries have solutions. The second category consists of *hypothetical worry*, the “what if” things we worry about. These are often things we have little control over.

Practical Worries (e.g. I lost my money gambling and worry I can’t afford my car payment).

Hypothetical Worries (e.g. I worry about getting cancer or getting in a car accident).

As you consider the worries you have identified, go to the section on next review some of the strategies below about how you can reduce your worry. Keep in mind the worries you have written down above as you read several strategies about [How to Reduce Worrying that Causes Stress?](#)

Exercise 1.2: Stress Inventory

Take an inventory of your current sources of stress. For this exercise, limit your inventory to short term stressors. Remember, everyone might have a different reaction to a situation so what is stressful for you might not be *perceived* as stressful for someone else and that's okay.

Positive—Eustress Control (Resources)	Positive—Eustress Powerless (No Resources)

Negative—Distress Control (Resources)	Negative—Distress Powerless (No Resources)

Now, write a few sentences about how you feel as you look at your current stressors. Then, share it with one or two people you trust and invite them to give you feedback on your list and perhaps a discussion that might include some of the following questions.

- Do they experience the same or different stressors? Why or why not?
- Did anyone see your stressors differently? Why did they “perceive” things differently? What if any resources do they have to help them reduce or cope with the stress? Do you have access to the same resources? If not, what would you need? What do they do about sources of stress over which they believe they have no control?

Exercise 1.3 Five Things I Learned About Stress from Dr. Kelly McGonigal

Write below five things you learned about stress from the TedTalk. After listening to Dr. McGonigal, revisit the things you listed in Exercise 1.1. Do you think about any of the stressors differently with the new perspectives you've listed below?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

An important take-home message from Dr. McGonigal is “How you think about stress matters.” Pragmatically, Dr. McGonigal is not suggesting we put on rose colored glasses during difficult times and pretend that stress doesn't exist. All of us have challenges, days that we struggle, and times where we feel discouraged by the onslaught of novel stresses that are part of our world. Some of our choices are limited, however, we can choose how we think about the current stressors in our lives. Dr. McGonigal is inviting us to consider that stress can give us meaning in life, that we can reorganize how we do our stress, and believe that perseverance through the adversity we currently face can make us stronger individuals. That is her message.

Exercise 1.4 List of Demands and Resources

In this exercise make a list of demands and resources. Remember to go beyond tangible things (e.g., whether or not you have money or food) and include intangible things like being creative, problem-solving skills, having one or two friends you can depend on, having a domestic animal that makes you smile, and so forth. Conversely, intangible demands might include things like difficulty thinking outside the box or problems communicating with a romantic partner or family member. (Note: Place a check mark ✓ by those that are COVID-19 specific).

Demands

Resources

Questions to ask for Exercise 1.4. What did you notice as you made your list? Did anything surprise you? Consider asking a trusted friend or family member to review your list? Did they have anything to add or suggest things (perhaps resources) that you didn't think about? What are your greatest demands and what are your greatest resources? What, if any, demands can you reduce or resources can you increase? How many items on your list are temporary or only exist because of the COVID-19 pandemic or some other short-term situation?

Some people might experience this exercise as encouraging while others may look at the list and feel discouraged. Regardless, it is important to have an accurate appraisal of your current demands and resources.

Declarations and Conflicts of Interest

Dr. Reid has no conflicts of interest to declare in the creation of this work. Dr. Reid is funded or receives salary support by the following organizations, grants, and agencies.

1) Mental Health Counseling and Consulting, Las Vegas, Nevada, 2) UCLA Gambling Studies Program, 3) California Office of Problem Gambling, 4) Nevada State Division of Public and Behavioral Health through Grant Number 17171 from Revolving Account for the Prevention and Treatment of Problem Gambling, and 5) Florida Council on Compulsive Gambling, Inc.