

The Gambling Traps



In the heat of gambling, it is common to feel that your chances of winning are almost certain. You hope to beat the odds and hit the jackpot, and winning is all you are focused on. This is the precise point where emotion takes over from reason and sells you on the idea that your turn to win is about to come. And once this idea takes hold, you continue to bet more than you planned.

This reading reviews some of the thoughts and ideas that lie behind such emotions. They are usually false and are known as “gambling traps” because they cause you to lose more than you planned or can afford.

It is important to understand the difference between emotions when you are not gambling as opposed to emotions when you are.

When you are not gambling, you are emotionally detached and in what is known as a “cold” situation. Your thoughts tend to be more realistic and more accurately reflect how luck or chance can work against you. But when the desire to gamble strikes, you become emotionally aroused and move into a “hot” situation. This is when you are likely to fall into emotional and mental traps, and when you most need to resist thoughts that you are likely to win.

By understanding the emotional and mental traps that are part of gambling, you will gain powerful tools to protect yourself from heavy losses.

What is Chance?

Chance is something that you cannot predict or control. You cannot foresee the outcome, and you cannot control or influence the outcome.

In games of skill (e.g. golf, darts, soccer, or hockey), the results depend very much on the amount of effort and perseverance you invest. You can improve through practice: the more you practice, the better you become, very often making you better than someone who doesn't practice.

In games of chance, it is impossible to develop or improve winning strategies or to influence outcomes. There simply is no skill involved; there is no way to improve to make you better than anyone else. Whenever someone else does win, it is as a result of chance.

Previous outcomes do not predict future outcomes.

Casinos and slot venues only offer games of chance (although they may be disguised as games of skill). For example, even though you are allowed to choose your number when playing roulette, it is impossible to control or predict where the ball will stop. This same reality also applies to slot machines: no "ability" is required other than placing a bet and pressing the button. You have no control over the outcome, despite design features that give you "choices" and encourage you to believe otherwise.

Why You Can't Improve in Games of Chance

There are two main reasons why gamblers think they can improve their chances of winning. First, they believe that outcomes (winning or losing) are somehow linked to previous results. Second, they believe there are things they can do to improve their odds. The following sections show why both beliefs are false, and how they form the basis for gambling problems.

Rule 1: The Independence of Events

All games of chance operate within an absolute law known as the: "independence of events". This means that each play is a separate event and is in no way influenced by earlier plays or events – previous outcomes do not predict future outcomes.

Our first inclination before engaging in any form of gambling is to watch and look for patterns. It is natural to assume that studying something will reveal strategies that can improve our chances of winning. The truth is, however, that observation only lets us see things that are not there: all strategies are completely useless.

The "independence of events" can be understood by imagining a simple experiment. In it, a single red marble is set among a thousand white ones (much like those in lottery drawings that can be turned by a handle on the side). The task is to close your eyes, select a marble from the bin, and bet on your chances of selecting the red marble. If you select a white marble, you lose. You then have to put the white marble back into the bucket, which is well stirred, and try again.

Imagine now that you have drawn 50 times in a row, and on each attempt you drew a white marble. Here is a key question: After 50 unsuccessful attempts are you "due," or more likely to pick the red marble on the 51st draw? The answer, of course, is no.

This type of gambling is known as a replacement draw. Every white marble that is drawn is put back into the bucket. Before your first draw, your chances of picking the red marble were 1,000 to 1. When you put the first white marble back in the bucket and stirred it well, you reset the game back to 1,000 to 1 odds. You can see how you always have one chance in a thousand of winning. Even after betting 50, 100, or 300 times, you are no closer to selecting the red marble than you were the very first time.

Applying the Facts

The hard facts are that the number of attempts and your history of losing in no way influences your chances of winning. This is what “independence of events” means.

“What if I draw 1,000 times, am I likely to win?” No, because in a replacement draw, the odds are that you would have to draw many more than a 1000 times before you are likely to get your first win. Try it with some friends: place 19 white marbles and one red one in a bag. Let each person draw, and then put the selected marble back in the bag. Shake it and let someone draw again. Record how many draws are made versus the number of wins in this replacement draw. You will be surprised to learn that 20 to 1 odds in no way means that someone wins every 20 draws.

Now let’s apply this information to slots. Players often vary how quickly they bet, the amount they bet, the precise moment they push the button and so on. The red marble experiment shows us that whether you make 300 draws quickly or slowly, vary the amount you bet, or close your eyes waiting for an inspired moment, in no way alters your chances of winning.

The “independence of events” means:

- It is impossible to predict (or correctly anticipate) any outcome.
- Your chances of winnings get no better as you increase your number of bets.
- Each play is a completely new game.
- The probability of winning always remains the same.

The bottom line is, you never “get closer” to winning.

Recognizing Traps

Gambling venues only offer games of chance. In doing so, they ensure that the law of independence of events always applies, and you can never improve your performance.

Gambling traps occur when people’s thoughts take over and tell them it is somehow possible to improve their chances. Very often, such thoughts lead to betting more money than was planned or could be afforded. They are the paths to impaired control and gambling problems.

Here are some direct quotes showing how gamblers overlook the independence of events and fall into traps:

“At roulette, you are in a better position after three even numbers come up in a row. This means that a series of odd numbers are due soon.”

“At roulette, I bet the same number all night. I start by looking at the summary table and choose a number that hasn’t come up in a long time. Then I stick with it: each loss means the likelihood of it coming up gets closer!”

“It is better to find out how a slot machine has done during the day. Playing a machine that hasn’t paid out all day is a smart strategy!”

“When the blackjack dealer has been lucky many times in a row, I increase the amount of my bet because he is due to lose.”

Many slot players believe it is preferable to change machines after five or six spins if the machine doesn't pay out. Thinking this way suggests two things:

- The machine keeps track of bets and past payouts in order to “decide” when it's time for the next payout; and
- Wins are determined in advance and put on a “conveyor belt” – each losing play moves the next win one step closer and winning is just a matter of perseverance.

Both theories are wrong and are traps. Think back to the red marble experiment. The marbles don't keep track of your losses and decide they'll push the red one into your hand. Nor are slots like gumball machines, where the foil wrapped winner gets closer to the delivery chute with each loss.

With replacement draws, each play is independent of all past ones, and winning is all about chance.

Every dollar spent over your limit is almost a guaranteed loss.

Rule 2: Illusions of Control

Also important to remember is that players have no control over chance and nothing can be done to increase your chances of winning. Believing that the outcome can be influenced is known as illusion of control. The following sections review common illusions of control for different games.

Slot Machines Illusions

Slot machines are designed to create illusions of control. Although all machines have similar electronics on the inside, each present a different face to the player. This is where subtle traps are put in to create illusions of control. The designer's skill is reflected in how difficult it is to resist the illusion.

For each play, the slot machine simply draws a random number using an electronic generator, and the outcome is coded as either a win (large or small) or a loss. This means that a random outcome is selected every time you press the play button. By pressing the button, all you do is generate the random number and reveal the outcome.

The amount you wager can alter the size of the potential pot but that has no impact on the probability of winning. When you choose to press the button has no impact, nor does it serve any purpose to vary the amount you bet hoping this will influence the programming of the machine. Regardless of any actions you take, the probability of winning on any play is the same.

At the slots, it is an illusion to think that you can increase your chances by:

- Observing a machine's cycles or patterns of winning or losing.
- Choosing a machine by the amount paid out that day, as if there are full or empty machines.
- Choosing a slot machine that just took another player's money.
- Testing the machine with small initial bets.
- Pressing the button at a specific moment or betting on a preferred machine.
- Changing bets or machines if the machine doesn't pay.
- Letting the machine rest by changing games.
- Pressing the start button in different ways (e.g. changing your level of force, hitting it repeatedly, or changing your speed of betting).
- Cashing in or not and believing either action might affect future outcomes.
- Betting more heavily when the machine is starting to pay out.
- Returning to the same machine the next day, having lost the night before.

- Calculating in your mind the number of bets made, the time and so forth.
- Observing payouts at nearby machines to decide the amount you bet.
- Using any trick, strategy or system.

Lottery Illusions

Although relatively inoffensive, lotteries promote a range of illusions of control. Common examples are to think that you can increase your chances of winning by:

- choosing numbers such as birthdays;
- keeping track of winning numbers from previous draws;
- keeping the same numbers from previous draws;
- betting on lucky numbers;
- picking numbers evenly on the betting form;
- varying where tickets are purchased; and
- studying winning patterns of sports teams.

Players have no control over games of chance.

Bingo Illusions

At bingo, common illusions are to think you can increase your chances of winning by:

- choosing cards that have your favourite numbers on them;
- marking numbers in a certain way;
- choosing a table where nobody has won in awhile.
- choosing a table where several people have won recently.
- not playing cards with certain numbers on them.
- going to play with someone you consider to be “lucky”.

Blackjack Illusions

At blackjack, there is no better strategy than to follow the basic rules known to all players. Any other strategy put you at a disadvantage in the long run. With this in mind, you really have no decisions to make, and it is an illusion to think you can increase your chances of winning by:

- trying to memorize or count cards;
- choosing a particular table, seat or dealer;
- observing the cards dealt to other players in order to decide whether to draw;
- observing the style of other players before starting to play;
- slowing or speeding up the pace of the game;
- placing very high bets.

Roulette Illusions

The arrangements of the numbers inside the roulette wheel can inspire thoughts about control and introducing the croupier into the equation allows for even more. The rolling of the ball encourages you to observe the croupier’s technique in hopes of better predicting the outcome.

At roulette, it is an illusion to think you can increase your chances of winning by:

- observing the croupier’s rolling technique (e.g. rhythm, regularity, continuity);
- choosing a particular table, seat, or croupier;
- watching previous rolls and keeping count of outcomes;
- betting on “lucky” numbers;
- watching a player who is winning and placing similar bets; and
- increasing the size of your bet if the ball stops close to your preferred numbers.

Horse Racing Illusions

Research has shown that experienced horse gamblers “handicappers” achieve the same level of payout as rookies. The bottom line is that, despite studying an impressive amount of statistical information, they lose just as often as someone who selects horses on a random basis. Yet they are considered “specialists”, even though their financial situations often turn out to be disastrous.

Horse betters embrace a range of illusions, each implying that chance is a predictable and a logical science. They are convinced that their skills improve with time and study, and that their experience plays in their favour.

Illusions of control encourages players to bet more than they intended.

When betting on the horses, it is an illusion to think you can increase your chances of winning by:

- studying statistics from previous races;
- calculating future race times from a horse’s previous times;
- playing the rebound – a horse that paid out terribly will do better in the next race;
- assessing the race distance, the track condition, or type of surface (grass or dirt); and
- analyzing the physical attributes of the horse (muscularity, way of standing).

Superstitions

Superstitions are ritualistic, magical, or sacred thoughts and actions believed to have the power to overcome chance. They tap into gambler’s strong desires to win and mark a transition into mysticism in the effort to predict wins.

Here are quotes from common gambling-related superstitions:

“The 21st of the month is lucky as it is made up of three times the number seven.”

“I start to win immediately after eating a cheese sandwich. I know it sounds odd, but it works for me.”

“When I don’t try to win, I do. Wanting to win undermines my luck and makes me lose. I need to pull back on desire and get into the zone.”

In Conclusion

At this point, you can appreciate that if you do not counter erroneous thoughts, particularly when you are emotionally aroused by the desire to gamble (i.e. in a hot situation), you are more likely to incur substantial losses.

Failing to control these thoughts allows you to develop a false feeling of personal effectiveness and to believe that all the time and money invested in gambling is bound to be rewarded one day.

By maintaining these false beliefs, you lay the foundation for impaired control, problem gambling and harm to your health, social and financial well being.