



Research Rounds is devoted to disseminating insights from peer-reviewed sources to promote increased awareness, acceptance, and adoption of clinically relevant information for those working with problem gamblers and their loved ones.



Emotional Regulation and Problem Gambling

There is robust scientific evidence that emotional dysregulation plays a pivotal role in the onset, maintenance, and relapse of problem gambling behavior. Numerous studies have examined associations between emotions and problem gambling. These studies typically conclude problem gamblers struggle with emotion regulation, have poor coping strategies for unpleasant affective experiences, engage in more emotional suppression, and report higher levels of emotional distress (e.g., higher levels of anxiety, shame, depression, etc...) which in turn, correlate with greater gambling severity.¹ Studies exploring the chicken or egg hypothesis have found some individuals have emotion regulation deficits (as measured by psychiatric comorbidity of depression or anxiety) prior to the onset of problem gambling whereas other individuals develop emotion dysregulation as a consequence of problem gambling.²

Recently, a group of researchers sought to examine the literature to better understand specific patterns of emotion regulation deficits among problem gamblers.³ In their review, 38 studies were considered comprising 5242 participants. Although their

results might not be surprising to seasoned problem gambling therapists, their findings offer a comprehensive overview and a possible framework for targeted interventions uniquely tailored for problem gamblers. So, what did they find?

Dr. Velotti and her colleagues found associations between gambling disorder and specific emotion regulation deficits, namely (1) nonacceptance of negative emotional states, (2) difficulties in maintaining goal-directed behaviors when faced with intense emotional contexts, (3) a lack of clarity about emotional states (poor emotional awareness), (4) low impulse control in reaction to negative emotional states, and (5) difficulties in accessing adaptive emotion regulation strategies. Moreover, they found problem gambling was associated with a tendency for emotional suppression (a maladaptive emotion regulation strategy) and linked with reduced mindfulness abilities.

Notably, several of these deficits have been linked to overlapping constructs with common denominators. For example, difficulty in achieving a clear awareness of one's emotions and identifying feelings coincides with descriptions of the alexithymia construct (which has been associated with problem

gambling in several studies). Furthermore, tendencies to act rashly in response to intense negative emotional states has been characterized in the definition of negative urgency, an emotion-related impulsivity construct also linked with problem gambling in research studies. Yet, this review adds to our understanding in providing five distinct categories of emotion regulation deficits and demonstrating that these are indeed evident in many problem gamblers.

Clinical Application

This research suggests we might evaluate our clients in the context of their emotion regulation deficits and emotion regulation strategies (which can be adaptive or maladaptive). We can invite clients to consider how much they identify with the five emotion regulation deficits noted above. We can help address these deficits with therapeutic strategies matched to these five domains. For example, helping problem gamblers adopt mindfulness practices can empower them to accept unpleasant emotional states rather than be triggered by them. Teaching gamblers the language of emotion by helping them identify their feelings in sessions or having them journal about emotions during the week (e.g., give them an emotion word list to help them identify their feelings and then journal about those experiences to increase emotional awareness). We often ask clients “how do you feel?” to which they respond, “I feel like” or “I feel that.” Whenever they begin a sentence, with “I feel like” or “I feel that” they are describing their thoughts, not their feelings, and we can offer corrective feedback in therapy sessions to help them differentiate thoughts from feelings “I feel sad” or “I feel anxious.” We can give clients adaptive emotion regulation strategies such as cognitively reappraising irrational thoughts that give rise to unpleasant emotions or meditation exercises to help them cope with difficult feelings.

Additionally, it can be helpful to remember that *ruminative thinking* is a core feature of

many dysfunctional emotional regulation processes. Rumination typically involves a repetitive pattern of passive negative thinking that undermines problem-solving. For instance, the focus of attention in brooding rumination distracts one from identifying pragmatic solutions to problems leaving an individual feeling more depressed or anxious. Thus, unproductive rumination can be addressed through strategies such as “letting go” of tangential thoughts through mindfulness practices.

Collectively, providers will benefit from identifying maladaptive emotion regulation patterns among problem gamblers and helping clients develop specific strategies to target emotion regulation deficits. As problem gamblers cultivate a greater ability to regulate their emotions they will not need to escape, disassociate, or distract themselves from unpleasant feelings that might otherwise trigger problem gambling behaviors.

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 2. Sundqvist, K., & Rosendahl, I. (2019). Problem gambling and psychiatric comorbidity—Risk and temporal sequencing among women and men: Results from the Swelogs Case-Control Study. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 35: 757-771.
 3. Velotti, P., Rogier, G., Zobel, S. B., & Billieux, J. (2021). Association between gambling disorder and emotion dys(regulation): A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 87: 102037.

Study summaries for Research Rounds reviewed by Research Staff from the [UCLA Gambling Studies Program](#). Research Rounds is created with support from the [California Office of Problem Gambling](#). Inquiries can be directed to Dr. Rory Reid. Email: roryreid@ucla.edu