

Step One for Gamblers

We admitted we were powerless over gambling—that our lives had become unmanageable.

—Gamblers Anonymous (GA) (1989b, p. 38)

Before beginning this exercise, please read Step One in *G.A.: A New Beginning* (GA, 1989b).

No one likes to admit defeat. Our minds rebel at the very thought that we have lost control. We are big, strong, intelligent, and capable. How can it be that we are powerless? How can our lives be unmanageable? This exercise will help you to sort through your life and to make some important decisions. Answer as completely as you can each question that applies to you. This is an opportunity for you to get accurate. You need to see the truth about yourself.

Let us pretend for a moment that you are the commander in a nuclear missile silo. You are in charge of a bomb. If you think about it, this is exactly the kind of control that you want over your life. You want to be in control of your thinking, feeling, and behavior. You want to be in control all of the time, not just some of the time. If you do something by accident or if you do something foolishly, then you might kill many people.

What is the first thing a compulsive gambler ought to do in order to stop gambling?
The compulsive gambler needs to accept the fact that he or she is in the grip of a progressive illness and has a desire to get well. (GA, 1989a, p. 8)

To accept powerlessness and unmanageability, a gambler must look at the truth. People who are powerless over gambling do things that are harmful to themselves and others. They do most anything to stay in action—to keep gambling. Gamblers do not consider the consequences of their behavior, and they keep gambling until they are on the verge of death.

Gamblers are *in action* when they plan a bet, make a bet, or wait for a bet to come in. Once the bet is in, they are out of action. Being in action is a primary goal of compulsive gamblers. By staying in action, gamblers feel how they want to feel. They escape reality. They live in a fantasy world of their own creation. Some gamblers gamble for the thrill and some to escape. Now it is time to get honest with yourself.

POWERLESSNESS

People who are powerless do things that they feel bad or guilty about later. To gamble, they may lie, cheat, steal, hurt their family members, or do poor work. Make a list of five things that made you feel the most uncomfortable about gambling in the past.

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

People who are powerless gradually lose respect for themselves. They will have difficulty in trusting themselves. List five ways have you lost respect for yourself due to gambling.

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

People who are powerless will do things that they do not remember doing. When gamblers gamble, they can lose all track of time. They might think that they have been gambling for only a few minutes when, in fact, they have been gambling for many hours. If you gamble enough, you cannot remember things properly.

Describe five situations when you lost track of time while you were gambling.

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

People who are powerless cannot keep promises they make to themselves or others. They promise that they will cut down on their gambling, and they do not. They promise that they will not gamble, and they do. They promise to be home, to be at work, to be at the Cub Scout meeting, or to go to school, but they do not make it. They cannot always do what they want to do. They disappoint themselves, and they lose trust in themselves. Other people lose trust in them. Gamblers can count on themselves some of the time, but they cannot count on themselves all of the time.

1. List five times you promised yourself that you would cut down on your gambling.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

2. What happened to each of these promises?

3. Did you ever promise yourself that you would quit entirely?

Yes

No

4. What happened to your promise?

5. Did you ever make a promise to someone that you did not keep because you were gambling? Give five examples.

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

6. Are you reliable when you are gambling?

Yes

No

People who are powerless lose control of their behavior. They do things that they would not normally do when not in action. They might get into fights. They might yell at people they love—their spouses, children, parents, or friends. They might say things that they do not mean.

Have you ever gotten into an argument with someone because you were gambling? Describe five times.

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

The desire to gamble is very powerful. It makes a gambler feel irritable and impatient. People who are powerless say things that they do not mean. They say things that they feel guilty about later. We might not remember everything we said, but the other person does remember. List five times when you said something or did something that you did not mean when gambling or craving gambling. What did you say? What did you do?

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

People are powerless when they cannot deal with their feelings. They may gamble because they feel frightened, angry, or sad. They medicate their feelings with gambling.

1. Have you ever gambled to cover up your feelings? Give three examples.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

2. List the feelings that you have difficulty dealing with.

People are powerless when they are not safe. What convinces you that you no longer can gamble safely?

People are powerless when they know that they should do something, but they cannot make themselves do it. They might make a great effort to do the right thing, but they keep doing the wrong thing.

1. Could you cut down on your gambling every time you wanted for as long as you wanted?

Yes

No

2. Did gambling ever keep you from doing something at home that you thought you should do? Give five examples.

3. Did gambling ever keep you from going to work? Give five examples.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

4. Did you ever lose a job because of your gambling? Write down what happened.

People are powerless when other people have to warn them that they are in trouble. You may have felt as though you were fine, but people close to you noticed that something was wrong. It probably was difficult for them to define just what was wrong, but they worried about you. It is difficult to confront people when they are wrong, so most people avoid the problem until they cannot stand the behavior anymore. When gamblers are confronted with their behavior, they feel annoyed and irritated. They want to be left alone with the lies that they are telling themselves. Has anyone ever talked to you about your gambling? Who was this? How did you feel?

People are powerless when they do not know the truth about themselves. Gamblers lie to themselves about how much they are gambling. They lie to themselves about

how often they gamble. They lie to themselves about the amount of money they are losing—even when the losses are obvious. They blame others for their problems. Some common lies that they tell themselves include the following:

- “I can quit anytime I want to.”
- “I only gamble a little.”
- “The police are out to get me.”
- “I only gamble when I want to.”
- “Everybody does it.”
- “I gamble, but I do not have a problem.”
- “Anybody can have financial problems.”
- “My friends will not like me if I do not gamble.”
- “I never have problems when I gamble.”
- “I can pay the money back later.”
- “From now on, I would just gamble a little.”
- “When I win, I am going to buy a present for my family.”

Gamblers continue to lie to themselves to the very end. They hold on to their delusional thinking, and they believe that their lies are the truth. They deliberately lie to those close to them. They hide their gambling. They make their problems seem smaller than they actually are. They make excuses for why they are gambling. They refuse to see the truth.

1. Have you ever lied to yourself about your gambling? List five lies that you told yourself.

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

2. List five ways in which you tried to convince yourself that you did not have a problem.

1. _____
2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

3. List five ways in which you tried to convince others that you did not have a problem.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Therefore, it is not surprising that our gambling careers have been characterized by countless vain attempts to prove we could gamble like other people. The idea that somehow, some day, we will control our gambling is the great obsession of every compulsive gambler. The persistence of this illusion is astonishing. Many pursue it to the gates of prison, insanity, or death. (GA, 1989a, p. 2)

UNMANAGEABILITY

Imagine that you are the manager of a large corporation. You are responsible for how everything runs. If you are not a good manager, then the business will fail. You must carefully plan everything and carry out those plans well. You must be alert. You must know exactly where you are and where you are going. These are the skills that you need to manage your life effectively.

Gamblers are not good managers. They keep losing control. Their plans fall through. They cannot devise and stick to things long enough to see a solution. They are lying to themselves, so they do not know who they are. They feel confused. Their feelings are being changed by gambling, so they cannot use their feelings to give them energy and direction for problem solving.

You do not have to be a bad manager all of the time. It is worse to be a bad manager some of the time. It is very confusing. Most gamblers have flurries of productive activity during which they work too much. They work themselves to the bone, and then they let things slide. It is like being on a roller coaster. Sometimes things are in control, and sometimes things are out of control. Things are up and down, and gamblers never can predict which way things are going to be tomorrow.

People's lives are unmanageable when they have plans fall apart because they are gambling. Make a list of five plans that you failed to complete because of your gambling.

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

People's lives are unmanageable when they cannot manage their finances consistently.

1. List the money problems that you are having.

2. Explain how gambling has contributed to these problems.

People's lives are unmanageable when they cannot trust their own judgments.

1. Have you ever been so absorbed in your gambling that you did not know what was happening around you? Explain.

2. Did you ever lie to yourself about your gambling? Explain how your lies contributed to your being unable to manage your life.

3. Have you ever made a decision while gambling that you were sorry about later? List five times.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

People's lives are unmanageable when they cannot work or play normally. Gamblers miss work and recreational activities because of their gambling.

List five times when you missed work because you were gambling.

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

List five recreational or family activities because you were gambling.

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

People's lives are unmanageable when they are in trouble with other people or society. Gamblers break the rules of society to get their own way. They have problems with authority.

1. Have you ever been in legal trouble when you were gambling? Explain the legal problems you have had.

2. Have you ever had problems with your parents because of your gambling? Explain.

3. Have you ever had problems in school because of your gambling? Explain.

People's lives are unmanageable when they cannot consistently achieve goals. Gamblers reach out for what they want, but something keeps getting in the way. It does not seem fair. They keep falling short of their goals. Finally, they give up completely. They may have had the goals of going to school, getting a better job, working on family problems, getting in good physical condition, and/or going on a diet. No matter what the goals are, something keeps going wrong with the plans. Gamblers constantly try to blame someone else, but they cannot work long enough to reach their goals. Gamblers are good starters, but they are poor finishers.

List five goals that you had for yourself that you did not achieve because of gambling.

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

People's lives are unmanageable when they cannot use their feelings appropriately. Feelings give us energy and direction for problem solving. Gamblers change their feelings by staying in action. Gambling gives them a different feeling. Gamblers become very confused about how they feel.

1. What feelings have you tried to alter with gambling?

2. How do you feel when you are gambling? Describe in detail.

People's lives are unmanageable when they violate their own rules by violating their own morals and values. Gamblers compromise their values to continue gambling. They have the value not to lie, but they lie anyway. They have the value not to steal, but they steal anyway. They have the value to be loyal to spouses or friends, but when they are gambling they do not remain loyal. Their values and morals fall away, one by one. They end up doing things that they do not believe in. They know that they are doing the wrong things, but they do them anyway.

1. Did you ever lie to cover up your gambling? How did you feel about yourself?

2. Were you ever disloyal when gambling? Explain.

3. Did you ever steal or write bad checks to gamble? Explain what you did and how you felt about yourself later.

4. Did you ever break the law when gambling? What did you do?

5. Did you ever hurt someone you loved while gambling? Explain.

6. Did you treat yourself poorly by refusing to stop gambling when you knew that it was bad for you? Explain how you were feeling about yourself.

7. Did you stop going to church? How did this make you feel about yourself?

People's lives are unmanageable when they continue to do something that gives them problems. Gambling creates severe financial problems. Even if gamblers are aware of the problems, they gamble anyway. They see gambling as the solution.

Gambling causes psychological problems. Compulsive gambling makes people feel depressed, fearful, anxious, and/or angry. Even when gamblers are aware of these symptoms, they continue to gamble.

Gambling creates relationship problems. It causes family problems in the form of family fights as well as verbal and physical abuse. It causes interpersonal conflict at work, with family, and with friends. Gamblers withdraw and become isolated and alone.

1. Did you have any persistent physical problems caused by or made worse by gambling? Describe the problems.

2. Did you have any persistent psychological problems, such as depression, that were caused by your gambling? Describe the problems.

3. Did you have persistent interpersonal conflicts that were made worse by gambling? Describe the problems.

We know that no real compulsive gambler ever regains control. All of us felt at times we were regaining control, but such intervals—usually brief—were inevitably followed by still less control, which led in time to pitiful and incomprehensible demoralization. We are convinced that gamblers of our type are in the grip of a progressive illness. Over any considerable period of time, we get worse, never better. (GA, 1989a, p. 3)

You must have good reasons to work toward a new life free from gambling. Look over this exercise, and list 10 reasons why you want to stop gambling.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

After completing this exercise, take a long look at yourself. What is the truth?

1. Have there been times when you were powerless over gambling?

Yes

No

2. Have there been times when your life was unmanageable?

Yes

No

I am in the _____.

_____ Precontemplation stage

_____ Contemplation stage

_____ Preparation stage

_____ Action stage

_____ Maintenance stage

