RECOVERY IN FOCUS

Sports Betting, Gaming & Scratchers

Gambling, gaming, and the wanting system · Recovery in Focus · Session Packet

Gambling has been around as long as people have. The reason is simple: taking a chance is exciting, and excitement feeds dopamine, the brain chemical of wanting. A healthy amount of risk is part of a good life. Trying out for a team, starting a business, asking someone out, pushing for a personal best at the gym: these are all gambles of a kind, and the excitement they give you is real and useful. The trouble starts when the risk gets packaged into a product that is designed to be played over and over, where the house sets the odds and the excitement is manufactured on purpose. Clinicians call the serious form of this **gambling disorder**, and it sits in the same chapter of the diagnostic manual as substance use disorders.

That matters for this group for one reason: your wanting system is already trained. A brain that learned to chase a substance can learn to chase a bet, a scratcher, or an in-game reward, and it can learn it fast. Gambling has also never been easier to reach. Betting apps are legal in most states, scratchers sit at every register, and many video games are built with casino mechanics inside them. In this session we look at how gambling works on the brain, where it hides in daily life, how it connects to relapse risk, and how to put guardrails around it.

What is in this session?

This session has four parts, usually covered over two group meetings:

CLASS 1 **1.** The Gambler's Brain **2.** The Casino in Your Pocket

CLASS 2 **3.** Same Brain System, New Supply **4.** Guardrails and the Plan

After this session you will be able to

- Explain how gambling products use the wanting system, including the near-miss effect
- Spot where betting, scratchers, and gaming show up in your own routine
- Recognize cross-addiction warning signs and the connection to substance relapse risk
- Set up real guardrails: app changes, money protections, and a person who knows

What will be asked of you?

You'll be asked to look honestly at your own gambling and gaming, including the small stuff like scratchers and in-game purchases. Nobody here judges amounts, and nobody grades this. If gambling turns out to be a bigger problem than you realized, that's worth knowing, and your counselor can help you with next steps.

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Part 1: The Gambler's Brain

WAIT, REALLY?

Brain imaging studies found that a **near miss**, two cherries and a blank, the ball landing one slot over, lights up the reward system almost like a real win. Slot machines, scratchers, and betting apps are tuned to serve you near misses on purpose.

How it works: gambling runs on the same slot-machine trick as the apps on your phone: a **variable reward**, which is a "maybe." Maybe this ticket hits. Maybe this parlay lands. A "maybe" pulls on the dopamine system harder than a sure thing. The near-miss effect makes it worse, because losing by a little feels like almost winning, and "almost" keeps you playing. Then comes **chasing**: betting more to win back what you lost. Chasing should sound familiar: using to fix a comedown is the same move in a different form.

EXERCISE 1

Answer yes or no:

1. In the past year I have bought scratchers or lottery tickets. ☐ Yes ☐ No
2. I have checked scores, odds, or lines mostly because I had money on it. ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. I have bet more to try to win back what I lost. ☐ Yes ☐ No
4. An almost-win has ever felt more exciting to me than a small real win. ☐ Yes ☐ No

EXERCISE 2

Check every form of the action you've tried. Then circle the ones that still have a pull on you now.

- ☐ Scratchers / lottery
- ☐ Casino (slots, tables)
- ☐ Cards or dice for money
- ☐ Sports betting apps
- ☐ Fantasy leagues with money in
- ☐ Day-trading or crypto apps
- ☐ Loot boxes / in-game purchases
- ☐ Bingo / raffles / side bets
- ☐ Other: _____

Which one is strongest right now? _____

EXERCISE 3

Write about one near miss or almost-win you remember clearly. What did it feel like in your body, and what did you do next?

Part 2: The Casino in Your Pocket

WAIT, REALLY?

Sports betting is now legal in most U.S. states, the ads run during every game, and a deposit takes about ten seconds. The same behavioral scientists who tune slot machines help design the apps.

Why availability matters: in addiction, speed and access change everything. Faster, stronger, easier-to-get versions of a drug are more addictive, and the same rule holds for gambling. A casino used to require a drive. Now the casino is in your pocket, open all night, and it takes no cash, just a tap. Scratchers sit at the register of every store on your route. And many video games now carry casino mechanics inside them: loot boxes and timed rewards are a "maybe" machine with better graphics.

EXERCISE 4

Check what's in YOUR pocket and on your route:

- ☐ A betting app or sportsbook account
- ☐ A group chat that trades picks
- ☐ Sports ads that wake up the urge
- ☐ A store on my route where I buy scratchers
- ☐ A casino or card room nearby
- ☐ Games where I spend real money on chances
- ☐ A trading or crypto app I check like a scoreboard
- ☐ Other: _____

Which one would be hardest to change? _____

EXERCISE 5: BEFORE / AFTER MAP

Think of your last three bets, tickets, or big in-game purchases.

The moment (where, when)	Feeling right BEFORE	Feeling right AFTER	What ELSE have I used to change that same feeling?
1.			
2.			
3.			

Marco

Marco is three months sober. Sunday morning a notification offers him a "risk-free" bet credit. He deposits forty dollars, just to use the credit. His first parlay misses by one leg, and the almost stings worse than a plain loss. By the night game he has deposited twice more and is down one-eighty. He tells his girlfriend he's just watching the game. Monday he feels the same shame he used to feel after a run, and for the first time in weeks he thinks about the old fix for shame.

EXERCISE 6

1. What was Marco's trigger? _____

2. Where did the near-miss effect show up? _____

3. Where was the easiest place to step out of the chain?

_____

4. What's the connection between Monday's shame and his craving?

_____

_____

5. What part of Marco's story is familiar to you?

_____

_____

_____

SKILL: RIDE THE ITCH

When the urge to bet, buy a ticket, or check the line hits: wait 10 seconds. Name the feeling underneath it (bored? broke? hyped? down?). Then decide. It's the same skill you use to ride out a craving; it's the same system underneath.

EXERCISE 7

My friction change for this week (one thing that puts a step between me and the action):

I'm going to: _____

The moment it will matter most: _____

End of Class 1. Talk it out:

- Which form of the action surprised you when you checked it in Exercise 2?
- Who else in this room feels the pull from the same place you do?

Part 3: Same Brain System, New Supply

WAIT, REALLY?

Gambling disorder is listed in the same chapter of the DSM, the diagnostic manual clinicians use, as substance use disorders. It's the only behavior in that chapter, and it's there because the brain research put it there.

Cross-addiction, in plain terms: a brain trained by one addiction can switch to a new supply. Counselors call it **cross-addiction**; members sometimes call it swapping seats on the same bus. It often looks harmless at first, especially when the new habit is legal, and it usually comes with the same old moves: hiding it, rounding the numbers down, promising to stop after one more.

Why it matters for your sobriety: gambling connects to substance relapse from three directions. A win feels like a celebration, and celebrations used to mean using. A loss leaves you wanting relief, and you know the old relief. And the places and people around the action, casinos, card games, game-day betting crews, usually come with alcohol attached. Money trouble from gambling also destabilizes everything recovery depends on: housing, trust, and self-respect.

EXERCISE 8

Warning signs. Check any that have been true for you in the past year:

- ☐ I've hidden how much I spent or lost
- ☐ I've used money that was meant for bills
- ☐ The time I spend on it keeps growing
- ☐ My mood follows the wins and losses
- ☐ I promised myself I'd stop, and didn't
- ☐ I've borrowed or sold something to play
- ☐ It gives me the old rush sobriety took away
- ☐ I feel the pull hardest when I'm stressed or down

Two or more checks is worth a real conversation in group or with your counselor. Not because you're in trouble. Because that's the loop working, and it's easier to interrupt early.

EXERCISE 9: MY ACTION DIET

Where I get the action (apps, tickets, games, tables)	What I honestly GET out of it	What it COSTS me
1.		
2.		
3.		

One item I'm willing to cut or cap this week: _____

Denise

Denise is five months sober. On the way home from her Tuesday meeting she stops for gas and buys a five-dollar scratcher, a little reward for showing up. Within a couple of months it's thirty or forty dollars a day, scratched in the car before she pulls out of the lot. She tells herself at least it's not using. Then she starts skipping the Tuesday meeting, because the gas station is right there and lately losing feels worse than not going. The first craving in months shows up the same week.

EXERCISE 10

1. Where did Denise's habit start, and what was it doing for her?

_____

2. What did it cost her besides money? _____

3. What's the connection between skipping the meeting and the craving?

_____

_____

4. What's the small, harmless-looking version of this in your own life?

_____

_____

_____

Part 4: Guardrails and the Plan

Willpower is the weakest tool against a product engineered by professionals. **Friction** is the strongest one: anything that puts steps, time, or another person between you and the bet. Every state with legal betting keeps a **self-exclusion list** you can put yourself on, and the apps are required to honor it. Deleting an app, blocking deposits, carrying cash only, changing your gas station, and telling one person the real numbers are all friction. None of it requires you to feel strong in the moment.

The other half is replacement. The excitement itself isn't the enemy; it's the product that's rigged. Watching the game with people and no money on it, real competition like a league or gym numbers, cards for points at the kitchen table: the excitement is real and the house takes nothing.

EXERCISE 11: MY GUARDRAILS

One app, account, or route change I'm making: _____

One money guardrail (cash-only, deposit block, bill autopay, second signer):

_____

One person who will know the real numbers: _____

One replacement for the excitement, and when: _____

EXERCISE 12

Real competition and excitement you'd actually do. Check honestly:

- ☐ Watch the game with people, nothing riding on it
- ☐ A rec league or pickup games
- ☐ Gym numbers (beat your own record)
- ☐ Cards or dominoes for points, not money
- ☐ Fishing, disc golf, bowling
- ☐ Video games without spending money in them
- ☐ Cooking or building something with a deadline
- ☐ Other: _____

SKILL OF THE DAY: "NAME THE ITCH"

Once a day this week, catch the urge to bet, buy a ticket, or check a line, and name it to yourself: "That's the wanting system, not a plan." Then ride it ten seconds before you decide. Be ready to share one example next group.

Take it to the group

- What does the action give you that sobriety hasn't replaced yet?
- Where does the near-miss feeling show up in your week?
- Which guardrail from Exercise 11 will be hardest to keep, and why?
- If a win and a loss both pull you toward using, what does that tell you about the habit?

Session summary

Gambling products run on the same wanting system addiction trained: variable rewards, near misses, and chasing. The casino now lives in your pocket and at every register, and a brain in recovery is more open to a new supply, not less. This session you mapped where the action shows up for you, connected wins, losses, and money stress to relapse risk, and set up guardrails that don't depend on willpower.

Words used in this session

- **Variable reward:** a "maybe" reward, like a slot machine. It hooks the brain harder than a sure thing.
- **Near-miss effect:** losing by a little lights up the reward system almost like winning, which keeps people playing.
- **Chasing:** betting more to win back losses. The gambling version of using to fix a comedown.
- **Cross-addiction:** a new compulsive habit running on the same brain system the addiction used.
- **Self-exclusion:** an official list you can join that bans you from casinos and betting apps.

Takeaway: You don't have to beat a machine built by professionals using willpower. Put friction between you and the bet, keep the excitement without the house, and treat the urge to bet like any other craving: name it, ride it out, and tell somebody.