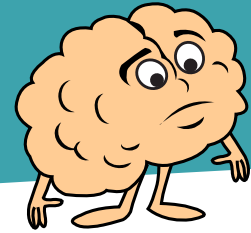


# SINCE I'VE STOPPED GAMBLING, WHY DOES NOTHING ELSE FEEL FUN?



**D**uring early recovery, many people find that what used to bring them excitement or pleasure, no longer does. This is called **anhedonia** – the reduced ability to experience pleasure. Activities like going out with friends, watching TV, hobbies, eating food, or being with family don't seem very fun or exciting. Understanding and recognizing anhedonia is very important because high levels of anhedonia are linked to strong gambling urges as well as relapse.

Let's talk about why anhedonia might occur and what can be done about it.

## CHANGING SETPOINTS

'Setpoints' are your natural mood states that can shift slightly with day-to-day activities. With addiction, though, natural setpoints can change<sup>1</sup>. Setpoints are usually stable, but can change because of major or continual stressors. Stressors can include negative events like losing a job, but also new events such as a big gambling win.

Figure 1 shows us how, at first, gambling increases pleasure, but then a person returns to his natural mood setpoint. However, as he continues to gamble and experience ongoing stressors (getting into debt, hiding gambling), his setpoint drops. Now gambling doesn't bring as much excitement, but also his setpoint is lower even when he's not gambling. His setpoint could be so low that he may even be depressed. Consequently, getting pleasure from natural rewards would be difficult for him.

## GAMBLING EFFECTS ON MOOD



Figure 1

<sup>1</sup> Koob & Le Moal (2001). *Neuropsychopharmacology*, 24(2), 97-129.

Problem gambling can lower the mood setpoint so the rewards that used to give pleasure don't anymore. For example, a recent brain imaging study showed how people in early recovery from substance use respond to natural rewards. People who were recently abstinent looked at pictures of natural rewards while having their brains scanned. The researchers compared individuals with anhedonia and without anhedonia as they viewed pictures of delicious-looking food or positive social situations, such as having a happy dinner with family<sup>2</sup>. People with higher levels of anhedonia showed less activity in the Reward Hub of the brain. This means that some individuals with anhedonia may have a reduced ability to feel pleasure from natural rewards like good food.

Another reason why experiencing pleasure is difficult for people with problem gambling is because the brain's Attention Network is still focused on gambling cues, and doesn't respond well to natural rewards yet (see *Figure 2*).

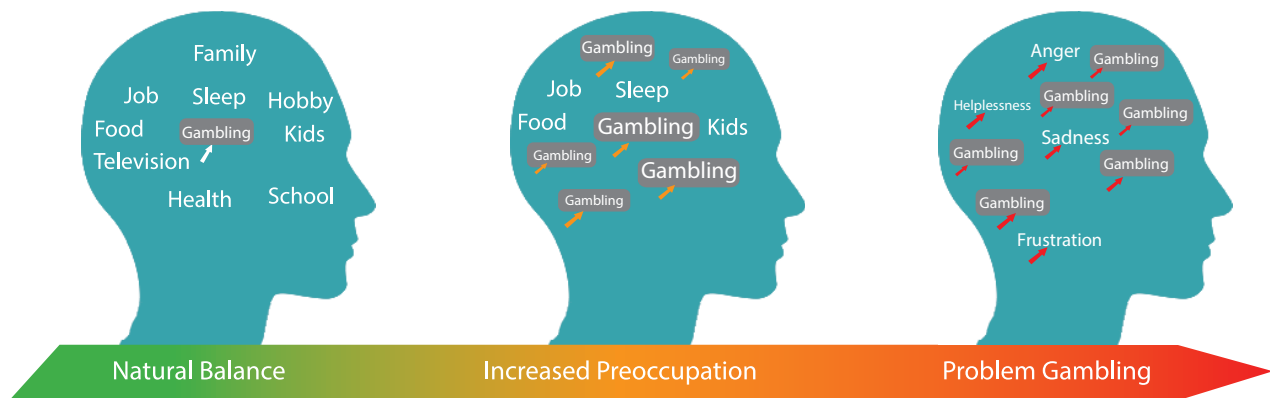


Figure 2

### CHANGING SETPOINTS AGAIN

The brain is always changing and so can the setpoint (see *Figure 3*). Research on how the brain recovers from addiction is just starting, but so far, early findings look promising. For example, one study showed that after 4 months of abstinence, the brains of individuals with substance-based addictions respond to non-drug cues<sup>3</sup>.

These brain changes are seen in areas involved in reward, attention and inhibitory control. This is a positive sign for people with problem gambling. It shows that the brain can change its responses to non-addiction cues. The brain's Reward and Attention Networks that may have been altered in addiction can change again!



Figure 3

<sup>2</sup> Huhn et al., (2016). *Brain Research Bulletin*, 123, 102-109.

<sup>3</sup> Balodis et al., (2016). *Neuropsychopharmacology*, 41(8), 2112-2121.

**ACTIVITY:**

Reflecting on your own gambling history: What were some events or experiences that impacted your setpoint? List them here:

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**GOING FURTHER:**

1. When gambling, what good and bad stressors have you experienced?

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2. What activities previously brought you pleasure before you started gambling?  
Can you think of some activities that you always wanted to do but gambling got in the way?

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**TAKE HOME MESSAGE:** The early stages of recovery from problem gambling are associated with anhedonia, which is the reduced ability to experience pleasure. This is a sensitive time period when an individual may have a very low mood, high gambling urges, and experience little pleasure from natural rewards. **The good news is that the brain can also change again during recovery. You may start to enjoy natural rewards again. These improvements take time so it is important to keep practicing hobbies you enjoyed and trying out new activities.**

