Video Transcript: Mindfulness and Problem Gambling

This video will provide you with an overview of mindfulness and how it can be implemented in problem gambling treatment.

Mindfulness has been increasingly applied to a variety of health issues over the past decade. Emerging research on the effectiveness of mindfulness for addiction—including problem gambling—has shown promising results.

Teaching mindfulness to clients can help them respond rather than react. It reduces the habitual automatic response and allows them to slow down, consider options, and respond in a conscious way. Given that addiction is a habitual pattern of reacting to triggers, mindfulness can contribute to breaking this cycle.

Mindfulness approaches for problem gambling include cultivating present-moment awareness and stepping out of automatic pilot. This helps people to make more skillful and healthy lifestyle choices, instead of gambling.

The attitudes of mindfulness are also critical in managing slips and relapses by encouraging clients to learn from the experience, accept what has happened, and build patience for the process.

Using these principles and the structure of established programs such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, and Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention, the CAMH Problem Gambling Institute of Ontario recently developed Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention for Problem Gambling. This eight-week group session has shown promising results so far.

The core skill being taught is mindfulness: mindfulness of the breath, body sensations, sounds, thoughts and emotions. This helps people gain a better awareness of what may be triggering their gambling habits without needing to act on them; a better awareness about the thoughts and feelings they may be experiencing as a result of a triggering situation; and a better awareness about how to unhook from these thoughts and feelings and see them as passing mental events.

Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention for Problem Gambling was developed for clients in the action and maintenance stages of change. Clients need to be screened for suitability for this intervention. Exclusion criteria include anything that can make it difficult for the client to sit in quiet meditation for at least 20 minutes at a time.

Clients are provided with meditation recordings and asked to do a formal practice at home on a daily basis and to bring mindfulness to everyday activities, such as taking a shower, walking, washing dishes and eating. This will help them build on what they learned in group sessions and apply it to their everyday lives.
Although Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention for Problem Gambling is done in groups, it is important to note that some of the mindfulness activities can be done individually or be adapted to complement existing frameworks within your practice.

Now, let’s look at an example of what mindfulness can look like in practice.

A common gambling myth is that losses can be won back. A person who has recently received his credit card statement and realized he is in significant debt may be tempted to gamble in order to pay off his debt.

In a Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention for Problem Gambling group session, the therapist helps the client bring awareness to the triggering situation and the respective thoughts, feelings and body sensations, without acting on them.

For example, the therapist can help the client bring mindful awareness to the triggering situation of receiving the credit card statement; the thought that “this debt is unmanageable unless it is won at the casino”; the reaction of fear and anxiety associated with the pending debt; the stress-related body sensations; and the urge to gamble.

One of the techniques the client can use to cope with the urge is the RAIN technique. The purpose of this is to:

- recognize what is happening in the moment;
- accept that an urge has arisen;
- investigate the nature of the urge by observing thoughts, feelings and body sensations with curiosity and non-judgment;
- and non-identify with the thoughts, feelings and body sensations, seeing them as passing mental events.

Another technique that can be utilized here is urge surfing, during which clients envision their urges coming and going in waves. The client learns through mindfulness to accept the urge rather than try and resist it. The more we resist something, the more it resists back. Also important for clients to know is that urges, like everything else, are impermanent. They do not last forever.

The therapist can also teach clients a three-step breathing space, which they can do to help step out of automatic pilot when they experience a trigger. It is best for clients to practice this on a daily basis to gain proficiency with its use.

Once the client has an opportunity to practice mindfulness techniques, whether in a group or individually, the therapist can discuss some of the negative consequences of the gambling behaviour. This can include further debt, increased stress and strains on family relationships.
The aim of mindfulness is not to change or restructure thoughts but to recognize them as passing mental events that do not need to be acted upon. Recognizing that these are habits of mind, the more we resist them, the more they come back, like trying to push a beach ball underwater.

As clients develop their ability to be mindful, they are able to see things more clearly and develop a different relationship to their experiences. They learn to unhook or disengage from things that might trigger them to react.

Explore this section of ProblemGambling.ca for more detailed information on how mindfulness can help your clients with problem gambling.