

ILAPSC 2026 CONFERENCE

ILLINOIS COUNCIL ON PROBLEM GAMBLING

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: An Evidence-Based Treatment for Gambling Disorder

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Learning Objectives

1. Attendees will understand the core conceptual CBT model, including how to incorporate a client's cultural context and social identity.
2. Attendees will be able to define the purpose of a functional analysis and its purpose in the context of CBT.
3. Attendees will be able to identify common skills that clients can use to respond to antecedents that elicit the urge to gamble and increase the risk of relapse.

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Gambling Disorder Treatment



Few individuals with gambling disorder seek treatment (~10%).

No FDA-approved medications for GD; however, medications for comorbid psychiatric disorders may be warranted.

Pre-clinical testing of GLP-1s is promising, but it is a long way away.

Many individuals who present for gambling treatment have:

- Shame:
  - Gambling (social norm violation)
  - Being "other"
- Trauma histories (e.g., ≥4 ACES)
- Insecure attachment

These factors can **interrupt our ability to establish therapeutic rapport** and keep clients engaged in treatment over time!

Keough et al. (2018); Kraus et al., 2020; Rash, Weinstock, Van Patten, 2016; Sawin, Weinstock & Reid (*under review*); Van Patten, Weinstock, & McGrath (2018);

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Defining CBT – Classic CBT Model

Classic CBT model is big "C" and little "B".

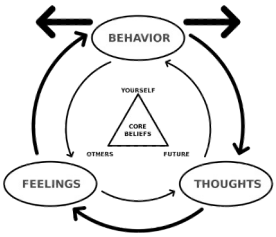


Image source: Wikipedia

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Defining CBT – Classic CBT Model

Sitting at home one night, watching TV, and you hear this noise coming from your kitchen. What is it? What happened?

Thought: Damn cat!

Feeling/Emotion: Annoyance

Behavior: Clean it up later…

What if your house got broken into a month ago?

Same situation, but how we **think** about it changes our **emotions** and **behaviors**.

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Introducing Complexity/Real World

How do we incorporate cultural context and social identity within the CBT model?

1. How does client identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality) impact core beliefs/schemas?
   - For example – individualistic versus collective cultural background.
   - For example – level of acculturation, client's and family's.



Rathod et al., 2015

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Introducing Complexity/Real World

How do we incorporate cultural context and social identity within the CBT model?

2. How does client identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality) affect symptom expression and meaning of symptoms?
   - For example - idioms of distress, acculturation, somatic vs cognitive symptoms.



Rathod et al., 2015

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Introducing Complexity/Real World

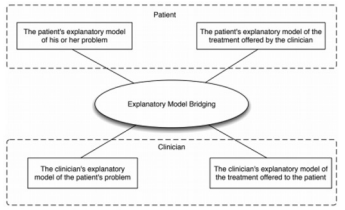


Fig. 2. The core clinical task of explanatory model bridging, with the clinical encounter configured as the negotiation of 4 types of explanatory models.

Hinton & Patel, 2017

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Introducing Complexity/Real World

How do we incorporate cultural context and social identity within the CBT model?

3. How does client identity affect what is considered normative behavior?
   - Acceptable to gamble regularly vs unacceptable to gamble! What is the norm within one's family or social group?



Rathod et al., 2015

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Key Elements of CBT

Collaborative relationship - "coach/guide"
Interventions guided by individualized conceptualization
Present-focused
Identification of client goals – *Moderation?*
Time-limited, goal-focused sessions
Sessions have a collaborative agenda; are structured
Psychoeducation
Out of session practice* & review

*not homework!

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Key Tasks of CBT for Gambling Disorder

1. **Identify antecedents and determinants of gambling behavior:**
   - Any predictable cues? What specific needs does gambling meet?
   - Functional Analysis - ABCs
2. **For Antecedents:**
   - Can we rearrange the environment to decrease likelihood of encountering cues within the environment?
   - For cues we cannot remove (e.g., fights with spouse), need to develop effective copings skills for responding to those cues.
3. **For Determinants:**
   - Find alternative ways of meeting those needs (e.g., social connection)



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The Eight Modules of CBT

1. **Functional analysis of behavior (Modules 1-2)**
   - Identifying antecedents (cues)
2. **Skill Building**
   - Behavioral activation (Module 3)
   - Seemingly irrelevant decisions/stimulus control (Module 4)
   - Problem solving (Module 5)
   - Coping with cravings (Module 6)
   - Gambling refusal skills, assertiveness training (Module 7)
   - Cognitive restructuring maladaptive thoughts (Module 8)
   - Planning for emergencies (Module 9)

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Functional Analysis

A fundamental tool for examining the relationship between behavior and the environment.

- Antecedents to the behavior
- Consequences to the behavior

Clarifying the desired consequences of client behavior can support identification of important alternative target behaviors that might lead and can increase the likelihood of change effort success.

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Functional Analysis Worksheet

List your top cues for gambling:

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

Gambling is one behavior that can occur following a cue. If a person responds to a recurrent cue by gambling, then a habit will develop. Each time that cue occurs, the person will be more likely to gamble.

The reason you gamble is that it has some positive consequences. Gambling may take your mind off the argument and help you relax. You may also think that the argument may be avoided if you win big this time. Gambling may help you feel energized or less depressed.

List positive effects you experience from gambling.

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

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Functional Analysis Worksheet

List your top triggers for gambling:

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

Gambling is one behavior that can occur following a trigger. If a person responds to a recurrent trigger by gambling, then a habit will develop. Each time that trigger occurs, the person will be more likely to gamble.

The reason you gamble is that it has some positive consequences. Gambling may take your mind off the argument and help you relax. You may also think that the argument may be avoided if you win big this time. Gambling may help you feel energized or less depressed.

List positive effects you experience from gambling.

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

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Functional Analysis Worksheet

Once you've finished gambling, you probably experience negative effects from gambling. You may have lost a lot of money, you may feel guilty for having gambled, and your argument may be even worse than before!

List the negative effects of gambling-- those that brought you into treatment.

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



Note that these negative effects from gambling do not necessarily occur right after or while you are gambling. Many of them take months or years to develop. That is why it is easy to fall into the trap of gambling—the short-term effects are mostly positive, and the negative effects are delayed.

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Functional Analysis Worksheet

Putting it all together…

Think back to the last time you gambled. List that gambling episode under the "Behavior" column. Immediately prior to that gambling episode, what were you thinking and feeling? Were you tense, irritable, or feeling lucky? List your feelings under the "Thoughts and Feelings" column.

Cue →	Thoughts and Feelings →	Behavior →	Positive Consequences &	Negative Consequences
Boredom	*It will be exciting to gamble. Lonely*	*Gamble*	*2 hours not thinking about my problems*	*Lost $300, lied to spouse*

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Common Responses to FA

Biggest Cues to Gamble:

1. Lack of structure time (boredom, spare time) – 50%
2. Negative emotional state (depressed, lonely) – 45%
3. Gambling cues (sign, pass gambling spot) – 37%
4. Access to money – 33%

Positive Consequences:

1. Enhance positive moods – 80%
2. Escape problems/negative moods – 50%
3. Social opportunity – 25%
4. Make money – 25%

Morasco, Weinstock, Ledgerwood, & Petry, 2007

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Common Responses to FA

Negative Consequences:

1. Negative emotional state - 62%
2. Lose money – 47%
3. Financial problems – 43%
4. Problems with family – 37%
5. Guilt – 21%

Morasco, Weinstock, Ledgerwood, & Petry, 2007

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Skill Building – Behavioral Activation

Many individuals with gambling disorder experience depression; moreover, their world has shrunken down to gambling as their one and only activity.

Individuals with gambling disorder (and depression) often do not have enough **enjoyable events** in their lives.

What (besides gambling) currently generates feelings of pleasure in your life?

What (besides gambling) currently generates feelings of accomplishment in your life?

Homework: Self-monitor activities hourly across the week with ratings of P&A

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Behavioral Activation – Increase Pleasant Events

AFTER REVIEWING THE LIST OF ACTIVITIES

Using this list to help you come up with ideas, name 5 things you'd be willing to try.

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

What did you like to do before you began feeling this way?

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

Some of these activities can be done on the spur of the moment, while others are better as planned activities. List some for each category.

Spontaneous	Planned
1._____	1._____
2._____	2._____
3._____	3._____
4._____	4._____

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Behavioral Activation – Increase Pleasant Events

Substitute Pleasant Activities for High-Risk Situations

Having fun will also help you get through high-risk situations. Here are some specific high-risk times and pleasant alternatives that can be done instead of gambling.



Instead of this -> Try this!



High-Risk Time	Pleasant Activity
1._____	1._____
2._____	2._____
3._____	3._____
4._____	4._____

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Coping with Cravings

Cravings (or urges) are a **normative experience** for individuals after they quit gambling.

Cravings are result when a rewarding learned behavior no longer occurs. They are just one's brain saying we used to do this activity, what happened? It was "fun" lets do it again!

Frequency and intensity of cravings dissipate over time as a period of abstinence gets established.



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Coping with Cravings

Cravings and urges are time-limited. They usually peak in a few minutes, and then die down, like a wave.

Urges become less frequent and less intense as you learn how to cope with them.

Ways to cope with cravings:

1. Get involved in a distracting activity and set a timer
2. Talk it through! (social support)
3. Acceptance and mindfulness activities
4. Challenge your thoughts
   - What's the evidence that if you don't gamble in 10 minutes you will die?
   - What's so awful about experiencing an urge? They are normal, and they pass.

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Stimulus Control



Seemingly Irrelevant Decisions

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Stimulus Control

Stimulus control is the idea that the closer you get to an "**addictive object**" the more difficult is to choose not to gamble. Therefore, we must "control" the gambling stimuli around us so that we not get too close to the addictive object.



Think about a decision you have made recently or are about to make that might in some way lead you closer to gambling. The decision could involve any aspect of your life, such as your job, recreational activities, friends, or family. Identify "safe" choices and choices that might result in gambling.

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Stimulus Control

Think back to the last time that you gambled. What were the steps that lead up to this decision to gamble?

Was there any point along the way when you could have made a different decision?

Write down how difficult it would be to carry out that alternate decision on a scale of 1 (very easy) to 10 (impossible).

After considering all the potential alternatives, and perceived difficulty, select the best strategy.

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Stimulus Control

Steps leading to gambling	A different decision	Difficulty (1-10)
1. _____	_____	_____
2. _____	_____	_____
3. _____	_____	_____
4. _____	_____	_____

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Assertive Communication

The goal here is to teach basic assertive communication skills and gambling refusal skills.

Clients may utilize a passive communication style.
Clients may utilize an aggressive communication style.
Clients may utilize a passive-aggressive communication style.



Communication style may vary depending upon social context.

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Assertive Communication

Passive responses involve giving in when conflicts arise. Passive people tend not to express their thoughts or feelings, and this response style can lead to anxiety, anger, and depression.

Aggressive responses involve doing what one wants, regardless of needs or wants of others. Aggressive people may often get what they want, but in the long run, they are often left out in the cold.

Assertive responses involve expressing opinions, feelings, and wants. Assertive people avoid threats or negative statements, and ask for input and suggestions from others. Assertive people are able to say NO when necessary (e.g., when someone asks them to wage a bet), but they do so in a way that makes them feel good about their decisions.

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Assertive Communication

Eleven Suggestions for Assertive Communication

1. Clearly express your needs and wants.
2. Tell the other person why you want it.
3. Balance the negative with the positive. If you have to say something critical, say something positive first.
4. Use "I" statements. Say, "I am angry because I feel no one cares about my needs," not "You make me feel awful."
5. Try not to use "you" statements. These can make the other person act defensively.
6. Acknowledge the other person's rights and feelings in the matter.
7. Be strong and specific in describing your needs and feelings. Instead of saying, "I don't feel much like gambling today," say, "No, I don't want to gamble."
8. Speak firmly. Say it with authority, but not hostility.
9. Respond promptly to others' requests. This will demonstrate your certainty.
10. Make good eye contact; look at the person while you speak and while you listen. This shows that you are certain.
11. Body gestures and facial expressions should be consistent with your message. For example, don't smile if you're angry.

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Assertive Communication

Gambling Refusal Skills

1. NO should be the FIRST thing you say.
   - **No** thank you.
   - **No,** I've decided to stop gambling for awhile. It was getting out control.
   - **No,** I have a gambling problem, so I am not gambling anymore.

2. Tell the person offering you an opportunity to gamble not to ask you now or in the future. Don't say things like "maybe later," "I have to get home," or "I don't have any money." These responses just make it more likely that they'll ask you again.

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Assertive Communication

Gambling Refusal Skills

3. Body language is important. Your eye contact, expression, and tone should indicate that you are serious.

4. Offer an alternative if you want to do something else with that person. Be sure the alternative is something incompatible with gambling (go to the movies, play basketball, or go out to dinner—but NOT at the casino).



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Relapse Prevention

Frame as a lapse, slip or learning opportunity.

It's a failure of coping skills, not the individual.

Psychoeducation about abstinence violation effect.



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Thank you!

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