**THE COGNITIVE EXPLANATION OF GAMBLING ADDICTIONS**

Gambling can also be approached from a cognitive perspective.

Sharpe and Tarrier (1993) propose that the physiological effects of gambling, including excitement and a natural ‘high’ or buzz, come about because of cognitive influences. In their theory, whilst gambling is initiated by operant conditioning, the excitement generated by gambling, and occasional wins, encourages further gambling. If gambling continues, cognitive mechanisms become more important in maintaining the behaviour. The way that gamblers think about their own behaviour and interpret their experiences is key to understanding how this addictive behaviour is sustained.

**Initiation**

Gambling behaviour may begin because it provides the person with positive feelings, particularly if the gambling is successful. Positive feelings generate positive thoughts and, once created, these thoughts may be extremely difficult to change. The experiences associated with gambling (the buzz of excitement, the environment etc) can provide the gambler with similarly enhanced positive feelings, further strengthening existing positive cognitions about gambling - leading to cognitive biases. Finally, just as with smoking, gambling may provide the gambler with a means of reducing boredom.

**Maintenance**

Cognitive Biases

Gamblers appear to have a number of distorted perceptions about their gambling behavior. Rickwood et al (2010) focuses on four:

* Skill and Judgement: Gamblers tend to over-estimate the amount of control they have. The illusion of control is more likely with fruit machines which give the gambler a feeling of control with features such as ‘nudge’ and ‘hold’ even though in practice very little skill is involved. Generally however, gamblers do tend to over-estimate this control, even with purely random forms of gambling such as the lottery. They may look back over recent draws believing they can spot patterns.

* Personal characteristics and Rituals: Gamblers sometimes believe themselves to be naturally lucky people or they engage in ritualistic behaviours prior to or during gambling which they believe may influence the odds. Wearing lucky pants or humming a particular song etc.

* Selective Recall: The tendency to over-estimate wins and under-estimate losses and to see big losses as totally inexplicable.
* Faulty perceptions: There are a number of these including:
  + Gambler’s fallacy: the idea that random events equal themselves out over time. “I haven’t had a win for three months so it’s my turn soon.” With the lottery, the idea that a number hasn’t been drawn for twelve weeks so it must come up this time.
  + Availability bias: is in some respects the above heuristic in reverse. The notion that because something has happened in the past it will occur again in the future. Big winners on the lottery get oodles of coverage leading us to think it’s a common occurrence and hence likely to happen to us too. In the early days of the lottery it soon became apparent that the number 44 was being drawn more than the others. Result: everyone was picking the number 44!

The maintenance of gambling behaviour can also be described with reference to Beck et al’s ‘vicious circle’. Once initiated, gambling may provide the person with a method of improving his or her mood. The nature of gambling is such that people tend not to win all the time. Most gamblers lose money rather than win, and so they may very well find themselves in financial difficulties. This in turn leads to negative mood, which the pathological gambler escapes by gambling. They have entered the circle.

The functions of coping may also explain why people continue to gamble. It may be that they do so because the experience of excitement, and the possibility of the occasional win, makes them feel good. These events encourage gamblers to interpret their behaviour positively.

In terms of self-efficacy, gambling may be maintained because people do not see it as a problem at all. Many people gamble and do not realise it, such as those that play the National Lottery. It could also be that the perceived positive effects of not gambling are not great enough to make someone wish to stop. To put it another way, the withdrawal symptoms of gambling are not as serious as those from giving up smoking. That being the case, the person may not feel that there is any point in giving up as they really can stop at any time, since the physical effects of giving up are

relatively easy to cope with.

Expectancy is extremely important here. The perceived benefits of gambling can be huge. Stories of people winning millions of pounds on the lottery, and hundreds of thousands of pounds betting on horse racing, are in the newspapers frequently. It

follows that the gambler sees the possibility that their actions will be life-changing: occasional wins will support these expectancies, so the gambler continues to gamble

**Relapse**

In simple terms, the withdrawal effects from gambling may not be too serious. The gambler may not experience any feelings of illness and when compared with other addictions, the withdrawal symptoms can be very mild. The consequences of relapse are seen as being simply that the gambler returns to the possibility of winning money. Since the withdrawal may be comparatively painless, gamblers may feel that they can stop at any time.

Moreover, as the gambler may feel able to stop easily, a relapse is not seen as too much of a problem.

Similarly, the life the gambler leads without gambling may seem extremely dull to them. Relapse may happen because it reduces this boredom.

GAMBLERS’ IRRATIONAL COGNITIVE BIASES

GRIFFITHS (1994)

Aims:

Procedure:

Findings:

Conclusions: