

# ***STEP ONE***

## ***THE FOUNDATION OF RECOVERY FOR COMPULSIVE GAMBLING***

***FIRST STEP: POWERLESSNESS AND  
UNMANAGEABILITY***



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### ***Part 1: We admitted we were powerless over gambling...***

This is the first part of Step One of the Gamblers Anonymous Recovery Programme. It is significant that the creators of the Twelve-Step Programme placed the emphasis on powerlessness.

Many times we have observed people taking powerlessness for granted or with a casual attitude. **UNDERSTANDING POWERLESSNESS IS THE FOUNDATION** of any successful approach to recovery from compulsive gambling.

Accepting powerlessness can be compared to laying the foundations of a building: foundations must be solid for the building to stand. A thorough understanding of our individual powerlessness must be solidly and firmly founded or we will fail to arrest our addiction.

Some people we see in the programme have the attitude, "If I can discover why I gambled I'll be alright." For example, we often hear, "My only problem is my job: I'm not getting raises fast enough; my spouse is spending more than I am making; no-one understands that I need to gamble to make ends meet." Some people blame a neighbour or a neighbourhood. The most common example we hear is, "I really don't have a problem with gambling, I'm just having a little run of bad luck." With such attitudes, the compulsive gambler is failing to see the psychological influences powerlessness has over his addiction.

We cannot deny that there is a psychological dependency upon gambling. Psychological dependency is verified by the medical profession, and it is important to stress the psychological aspects of addiction. To be specific, as dependent people, we have an *urge* to gamble. We all probably started gambling for many of the same reasons - to relax, to have fun, to make money - but not one of us started gambling with the express purpose of becoming a compulsive gambler.

When we talk of *the urge* for the gambling-dependent person, we need to be aware that it can and does surpass all other urges. The urge to repeat the experience of getting high is so strong that we will forsake many, if not all, of our responsibilities and values. We have thrown away things that are seemingly most important to us (such as families, jobs, personal welfare, respect and integrity) in order to satisfy the urge to gamble. We remember the good times and occasional big wins we had during the early stages of our gambling, and the psychological urge to repeat these experiences arises. Once the urge exists, it becomes totally self-sufficient, and will come to us of its own accord. We do not think continually of gambling, but the urge to gamble can occur at any time.

Reluctance to examine our powerlessness is as much a symptom of our illness as withdrawal or indigestion. We often tell ourselves and others, "I don't need to gamble: I don't gamble all the time." Social pressures, centred on the myth that *willpower is all that is needed to control a gambling problem*, can result in unwillingness to study our powerlessness.

The social image of being macho or financially independent is very demanding. It is not easy for people to admit powerlessness over anything, especially if they have experienced the social disapproval of uncontrolled gambling.

Negative attitudes are changing, however, with the gradual public acceptance of compulsive gambling as a disease. But the change is coming too slowly for some. Many times, when talking with families of compulsive gamblers, we have heard, "Thank goodness it's only a gambling problem, and not a drug-addiction." This kind of attitude may interfere with people seeking the necessary help to control their addictions, until a major crisis arises in their lives.

Often the stress and strain of daily life, gambling losses, family problems, job hassles and other factors directly relate to the continued gambling. This further demonstrates powerlessness in our lives.

An honest look at these symptoms will help us understand powerlessness. It will also help us deal with the self-deceiving shadow of fear that surrounds our compulsive gambling.

Understanding and accepting powerlessness is a path to freedom. We will be releasing ourselves from the insanity, the loss of respect and the loss of interest in activities that have been important in our lives. We will be freed of the necessity to withstand the depression caused by our gambling. We will lose the faulty thinking, the deceit and lying that have become so much a part of us that we have begun to believe our own lies. We will become less affected by the moral deterioration and the loss of regard for our individual value-systems. Ask yourself, "What am I really giving up?" You are really giving up misery, pain, discomfort and a fight for mere existence in your life.

Dependent people have an x-factor. This is a physical powerlessness. The x-factor is so-called because no-one knows exactly what it is or why it exists. Many studies have been, and are being, made, but so far, none has explained why some people become compulsive gamblers.

It is important to know that we are not responsible for the x-factor. For some reason, we respond with intense pleasure during the first stages of gambling. This pleasure is what allows us to develop the psychological dependency on gambling. This same effect could have taken place while drinking or using drugs, and the same results would have occurred.

**Dependency:** Non-compulsive gamblers may reach a level of pleasure while gambling, but the length of time that the pleasurable sensation is maintained is much shorter than for those of us who eventually become dependent on gambling. This may be a result of the x-factor. It is a fact of our existence. As some of us develop a heart-condition or diabetes, some of us become dependent on alcohol, drugs or gambling. Understanding the x-factor and powerlessness is essential in helping us overcome the moral implications and social stigmas which suggest that compulsive gamblers are bad, wicked or weak-

willed. It is very important to understand that we are not bad people trying to become good, but sick people trying to get well.

As we continue in recovery, we will begin to develop a programme and a deeper understanding of how to live with compulsive gambling, as we understand it to be an illness we are not personally responsible for having. It is a progressive illness, and one that is more likely to destroy us than any other illness. If it is not arrested, it will destroy us totally as a person, not only physically and emotionally, but spiritually as well.

As we develop a thorough understanding of compulsive gambling, we will begin to understand our personal powerlessness over the illness. We will not be ashamed to admit that we are powerless over it, just as we would be powerless over any other illness. We will also learn that we will not be able to adapt our lives until we have a thorough, ongoing programme of recovery, in the same way that a diabetic or heart-patient has an ongoing programme to keep *their* disease in check.

Personal responsibility for compulsive gambling occurs when we have recognised it in ourselves, or others have pointed out the symptoms to us and we realise we are afflicted with an illness. It then becomes our responsibility to start a recovery programme. At this point, it is self-defeating to condemn ourselves for being compulsive gamblers.

It is imperative that we work hard to understand personal powerlessness. It is apparent to me from my own history and from working with people in this field that what has helped us the most to identify powerlessness was taking an honest look at what gambling has done to us. Instead of living as free people, we were reduced to fighting for survival in life.

The process of identifying powerlessness involves a certain amount of emotional pain, but dependent people seem to have a low threshold of tolerance for pain. Thus, it is crucial that we have an atmosphere of care, concern, and reinforcement in GA and other treatment-programmes. Dependent people seem to walk a tightrope: the precariousness of their exact situation. We must be made aware of the painful side of our gambling and then be given emotional support as we work through it. The need for the rest of the Programme is not diminished by stressing powerlessness. However, the significance of powerlessness in a personal recovery programme is the essential foundation of recovery.

***Part 2: ...that our lives had become unmanageable.***

Unmanageability is related to powerlessness. Many types of social pressures and stresses prevent us from directing completely our own lives. There are two forms of unmanageability: social and personal.

Social unmanageability follows directly the act of compulsive gambling. There is little doubt that for some compulsive gamblers, after a loss, driving a car is unmanageable.

Someone who is gambling all hours of the day and night is pushing his or her body beyond the point of physical exhaustion. This person is unmanageable.

Unmanageability may be obvious in the number of bounced cheques, white-collar crimes, familial arguments or fights before or after gambling episodes, but this behaviour is not unique to the compulsive gambler. Any person who gambles as much or as often as we do would act in the same manner. Often such behaviour can readily be pointed out in many peoples' pasts. Think back to the family gatherings, birthdays and other social events that were missed due to gambling. Such behaviour could definitely be classed as unmanageability.

Our addiction affects directly every area of our lives. Our emotions and behaviours become affected. In the area of work, lost hours and shirked responsibilities are caused by gambling. Many people want to deny the effects of their gambling. A popular idea in our society is that gambling is the *demon* in our lives. We respect this view, however, we are more inclined to believe that it is we alone that cause most of our problems, and not gambling. The gambling will not bring destruction upon a person until that person learns to justify continual use and abuse of gambling.

Personal unmanageability relates to the attitudes and beliefs that we have about ourselves, our environment and the people with whom we live. In many cases personal unmanageability was present many years before compulsive gambling.

GA's belief is that stopping gambling is not enough. We need to rejuvenate our personalities. We need to learn about ourselves on an intimate level. We need to discover what the GA Programme calls our *character-defects* and *-shortcomings* in order to accept ourselves as human beings with strong and weak points like everyone else. There are some character-weaknesses that compulsive gamblers do seem to have in common. One is self-centredness. This defect must be present in each of us for our illness to prosper. It seems to require a direct assault to break our denial-system and rebuild trust in our concern for other people.

Another area of common personal unmanageability is the basic immaturity that seems to be prevalent amongst compulsive gamblers. It causes us to respond to life in a self-defeating way. Immature behaviour can also occur when we are not gambling.

Immaturity may not be obvious. A person may be able to function very well when not gambling, but the smallest agitation or disruption of the normal pattern will cause extreme reaction. Overreacting is immature. Any behaviour that would result in diminishing self-respect or dignity is also immature. Some examples are: temper-tantrums, not sharing feelings and emotions honestly with others, and insisting on having one's own way. Such behaviour-patterns enlarge and gradually take over a large part of one's personality.

Personal unmanageability covers a wide range of behaviour-patterns because of the many variables within each person. We do have, however, basic common desires. We want to love and be loved. We want to feel worthwhile as people and in our everyday lives.

Fulfilling these desires can be much easier if we meet life on life's terms instead of trying to battle and mould life to our own specifications.

The realisation that life is bigger than any of us may be hard to accept at first. Acceptance of the First Step and all its implications will help us learn to try different types of behaviour, and it will lead to attitude- and value-changes which will allow us to become comfortable with ourselves and others.

We challenge everyone reading this pamphlet to join the rest of us in the marvellous experience of becoming more aware of ourselves, our reactions to life, and the realisation of our potential as people. This can come naturally with continued work on the Twelve Steps of the GA Programme, which is based on understanding and accepting powerlessness and unmanageability.

## ***STEP ONE POWERLESSNESS***

***1. How has gambling placed your life or the lives of others in jeopardy?***

***a.*** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

***b.*** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

***c.*** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

***2. How have you lost self-respect due to your gambling?***

***a.*** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

***b.*** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

***c.*** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**3. What is it about your behaviour that your spouse/family/friends object to most?**

**a.** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**b.** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**c.** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**4. How have you tried to control your gambling?**

**a.** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**b.** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**c.** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



**5. Give five examples of how powerlessness (loss of control) has revealed itself through your own experiences.**

**a.** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**b.** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**c.** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**d.** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**e.** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**6. What type of physical abuse has happened to you or others as a result of your gambling?**

**a.** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**b.** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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**c.**

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**7. What is your current physical condition (blood pressure/headaches/fitness etc.)?**

**a.**

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**b.**

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**c.**

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**8. What is the difference between admittance and acceptance?**

**a. Are you admitting or accepting?**

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**b. How you are admitting or accepting through your behaviour.**

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**9. What convinces you that you can no longer gamble?**

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**10. Are you a compulsive gambler?**

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## ***UNMANAGEABILITY***

***1. What does unmanageability mean to you?***

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***2. What can you identify as your social unmanageability?***

***a.*** 

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***b.*** 

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***c.*** 

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***3. Give six examples of your personal unmanageability while not gambling.***

***a.*** 

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***b.*** 

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*c.* \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*d.* \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*e.* \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*f.* \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**4. What goals have you set for your life?**

*a.* \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*b.* \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*c.* \_\_\_\_\_  
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**5. *Prior to entering GA, how did you try to achieve these goals?***

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**6. *Give three examples of feelings you tried to alter by gambling.***

**a.** 

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**b.** 

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**c.** 

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**7. *How did you try to change your image prior to entering GA?***

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**8. *What crisis, besides the one that got you into GA, would have happened eventually?***

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**9. What is different about you from other people?**

**a.** \_\_\_\_\_

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**b.** \_\_\_\_\_

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**c.** \_\_\_\_\_

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**10. Give 10 reasons why you should continue with the Programme.**

**a.** \_\_\_\_\_ **b.** \_\_\_\_\_

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**c.** \_\_\_\_\_ **d.** \_\_\_\_\_

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**e.** \_\_\_\_\_ **f.** \_\_\_\_\_

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**g.** \_\_\_\_\_ **h.** \_\_\_\_\_

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**i.** \_\_\_\_\_ **j.** \_\_\_\_\_

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*God grant me the serenity  
to accept the things  
I cannot change...  
Courage to change  
the things I can...  
and wisdom  
to know the difference.*



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