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## The Habit Change Workbook: How to Break Bad Habits and Form Good Ones.

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*[This article prints out to about three pages]**This book review was not peer-reviewed.*

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*By James Claiborn and Cherry Pedrick (2001). Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 243 pages. Price: \$19.95 (US). ISBN: 1-572242-63-9*

This book was jointly written by a cognitive-behavioural psychologist and a nurse turned writer. Consequently, it is an easy-to-read work that claims to include “proven techniques for eliminating a wide range of unwanted habits” of which gambling is one of many. In one of the early chapters, the authors state that this book is not a substitute for medical, psychiatric or psychological treatment. They also state that the treatment of addictions is beyond the scope of the book. Furthermore, addictions are viewed as primarily physiological, involving the ingestion of a psychoactive substance like nicotine, alcohol or other drugs. This suggests the implicit assumption that gambling is not a bona fide addiction and is akin to other “bad habits” covered in the book, such as sleeping problems, relationship issues and health and fitness concerns.

The book is divided into four parts, each of which is broken down further. The sections are Habits — We All Have Them (four chapters), The Habit Change

Program (eight chapters), Detailed Guidance on Specific Habits (seven chapters) and a single concluding chapter, Further Help. The first four chapters in the book cover basic but important ideas: an overview of good and bad habits, a look at how habits develop, the reasons for changing or not changing habit patterns and a brief overview of some common habits. Most of these can be readily applied to gambling, and many gambling practitioners and gamblers themselves will find the material easy to digest and follow.

The second part of the book contains seven chapters that are the core of the book — the habit change program itself. This is necessarily generic but is supplemented by seven specific guidelines (in the third part of the book) covering nervous habits, sleeping problems, health and fitness problems, relationship problems, shopping and spending problems, excessive leisure problems (including problematic Internet and video game use) and problem gambling. As the authors point out, each reader “will take the same first steps, take a different direction, then meet together to complete the journey.”

The habit change program contains many self-assessment exercises that can either be used for self-help or adapted by practitioners to help their clients. Much of this section is a step-by-step guide and provides detailed instructions for eliminating specific habits. The theoretical basis for effective habit change is based on the well-known stages of change model developed by James Prochaska and his colleagues (precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action and maintenance). Many other areas of psychological theory underpin the program (habit formation, the role of reinforcement in behaviour, the basics of behavioural therapy, relapse prevention, cognitive therapy and cognitive-behavioural therapy, etc.) in addition to addressing behaviours that go beyond habits (addiction, obsessive-compulsive disorders). The latter, these behavioural excesses, are only examined briefly; but again, there is an implicit assumption that gambling does not fall under these.

The authors' habit change program includes self-help assessments on many important (but predictable) aspects, including why changing behaviour is difficult (fear, disgust, excuses, denial) and self-help behaviours that can be used in conjunction with the program (breathing, muscle relaxation and meditation exercises, etc.). Some of the program case studies, such as Changing the Way You Think (Chapter 9) use gambling scenarios as examples. Gambling practitioners will obviously find these the most helpful.

The third section outlining specific habits to break is a mixed bag in terms of underlying theory and the chapter layouts. There is no common structure to the chapters (13 to 19), although this may reflect that they cover such a diverse set of bad habits. Some of the chapters included background research in the area (e.g., Nervous Habits, Sleep Disorders) whereas most chapters featured little research.

The chapter on gambling was primarily concerned with cognitive distortions. While important, there are many other aspects that could also have been covered. The final section includes just one chapter that centres upon family and group habit change with a small section that is a selective list of follow-up resources.

The book is generally well written, which is not surprising given that one of the authors is a freelance writer! It is readable, logically and systematically organized, and has plenty to engage those who follow the program. Academics may be irritated that few references are provided but the book is not aimed at them. It has been written in a way that both the general public and busy therapists will find valuable. It's my guess that many practitioners with a cognitive-behavioural bias working with people who have gambling problems will be very aware of the strategies in this book (theoretically, at least). However, the case study approach that is laid out is still useful to those individuals. My only real gripe is the implicit assumption the authors make that problem gambling is not really an addiction like (say) alcoholism.

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