

PLAY BETTER POKER



A PARTTIMEPOKER / RAKEBACK101.COM EBOOK

Introduction

Thanks for downloading 'Play Better Poker'. This ebook is a collection of articles from PartTimePoker.com that all focus on ways to improve your mental and emotional approach to the game.

In-game tactics change and evolve along with the game, but certain concerns are essentially constant and universal. Tilt control, balancing poker and your life, understanding what goes into the decision-making process from a cognitive standpoint – these are all topics that every poker player has to deal with regardless of the game they play or how and when they play it.

RakeBack101.com is happy to offer this book free of charge to our readers. Hopefully you'll find something useful in the advice contained within that will help you take your game to the next level.

Thanks again, and be sure to visit us at <http://www.rakeback101.com>

RAKEBACK101

Table of Contents

Identifying and Attacking Risk Aversion

Page 4

If Tiger Woods suffers from risk aversion, you do too. Learn how to sniff it out in your game and ways to correct it without going too far over the edge.

Separating the Possible from the Probable

Page 8

How you utilize information in-hand is a critical factor in good decision-making. Learn how to make your process more efficient with a simple distinction.

God, Why Did I Call That? (A Brief Overview of Common Decision-Making Errors)

Page 13

We're all flawed, but knowing how you're flawed is the first step toward correcting those problems.

Impulse Control: Strategies to Improve Discipline at the Poker Table

Page 15

Learn how to put a leash on your impulsive self with a few simple steps.

Trimming up Your Poker Strategy with Occam's Razor

Page 17

Ready for a rethinking of your approach to poker decision-making? We provide a comprehensive model inside.

Poker Peer Pressure – How Other Players Impact Your Games Just by Being There

Page 22

From the playground to the poker table, peer pressure matters. How can you stop it from harming your game?

Empathy: The Neglected Skill

Page 25

Knowing how others feel lets you know how other will act, a skill we help you develop with just a little effort.

Dealing With the Emotional Impact of Bad Runs in Poker

Page 27

Everyone runs bad. Learn how to lessen the impact and take control of your downswing.

Friendly Poker?

Page 32

Playing against friends isn't easy, especially when you all play for a living.

Session Stages and Player Identities

Page 38

Identifying the life cycle of a poker player can give you a substantial edge. We provide a pocket guide in this article.

Poker and Your Significant Other

Page 41

Winning at poker but losing at home? Help is on the way.

Meditations of Pokus Professionalius (Things I Know to be True About Poker)

Page 44

A list of all of the true things we know about poker. We came up with 54.

Identifying and Attacking Risk Aversion



There has always been a bit of crossover between golf and poker. Whether it's the legendary wagers placed on the course between poker giants Ivey, Brunson and the like or Dusty Schmidt's million dollar golf and poker hybrid challenge, some similar threads undeniably run between the two games. That's why a new study that focuses on risk aversion in professional golfers may be especially interesting to poker players.

The study in question, "Is Tiger Woods Loss Averse? Persistent Bias in the Face of Experience, Competition, and High Stakes", is the work of University of Pennsylvania professors Devin G. Pope and Maurice E. Schweitzer. Pope and Schweitzer studied over 1.6 million putts and essentially found that golfers are more cautious on some putts because they (illogically) place more value on avoiding a bogey than achieving a birdie. And not just your average duffer – the study provides "evidence that even the best golfers – including Tiger Woods – show evidence of loss aversion" and that the tendency to irrationally defend against loss "costs the best golfers over \$1.2 million in tournament winnings per year."

That's 1.2 million a year *on average*.

If someone as disciplined and confident as Tiger Woods is susceptible to this effect, then you can safely bet that it's something everyone falls prey to and that it likely impacts the typical individual far more than they're aware of.

A moderate level of loss aversion is an admirable, desirable quality in a poker player. It keeps bankrolls managed, allows stacks to survive and generally lets players live to fight another day, as it were. An excessive amount, however, is essentially a leak in a player's game that can (and will) be exploited by players who more effectively assess the true cost of loss.

So where do you fall on the scale? Below we've outlined a few basic things you can do to get a better sense of how loss averse you are. As a bonus, most of the suggestions below will also serve as opportunities to identify other possible leaks in your game, so even if you end up concluding that you've got a steadier nerve than Tiger, you'll likely find other areas where you can improve.

Compare your stats to your peers in similar games

Take some key stats from PokerTracker or Holdem Manager like % went to showdown, preflop aggression, fold to three bet, etc and compare them to your friends stats. If you don't have a lot of poker-playing friends or your friends don't play the same games as you, post the stats (along with details about the limits /

games you play) on a poker forum. You'll have to sift through some bs responses, but you're likely to get other people to share stats with you. Obviously, there's no 'perfect' stat line you're shooting for, but if you start to notice that your numbers are consistently off from your peers (in the passive direction), you have some strong evidence that you're focusing too much on avoiding loss.

Save the hand histories of the next dozen times your tournament life (or stack, in a cash game) is put at risk. Review them a week later.

If you are excessively loss averse, it's most likely to manifest in the situations where you have the most at risk. Tracking those situations and then reviewing them when you have some distance from the event (and therefore can view it in a more removed and rational fashion) is a great way to get insight into your true level of loss aversion.

Play a friend in an online match. Review the match later from their perspective.

Hand histories offer a player a really awesome opportunity that not enough players utilize – the opportunity to review your play from an opponent's perspective. Play someone you know in a heads up cash or SNG match (make sure the stakes are high enough that you'll play close to your usual game). Have your friend save their HHs and send them to you. Review the HH in a hand history replayer after the match and see how your play looked from the other seat. Try to imagine how you would play against someone who played like that, and notice how your friend adjusted to your play. Both exercises should shed a lot of light on whether or not your concern about avoiding loss is translating into opportunities for your opponents.

Notice and record your reactions to getting big hands.

There are two kinds of poker players – those who look down at jacks in the BB and think 'awesome' and those who look down at jacks in the BB and think 'ahh, crap'. Try an experiment – keep a record for a session of your gut reaction when you get big hands in critical situations. If you fall more often into the 'ah crap' camp, that's a pretty clear sign that you are likely to be over-emphasizing limiting loss.

Drop your buy in level significantly for a session or two and see if your play changes.

It's one thing to say that you're not thinking about the money when you're playing poker – it's another thing to really mean it. A good way to test how good of a job you've done separating the chips on the table from the balance in your bank account is to drop down to a much smaller game. Do you find yourself calling far more often or mixing more bluffs into your game? Do some automatic plays no longer seem quite so automatic? If so, you might find that a few of your core assumptions about poker aren't underpinned by solid strategy but rather by a low tolerance for loss.

Obviously, loss aversion is a reflex that everyone has to some degree. In many areas of life, it's a positive trait. In poker, however, it's a tendency that needs to be aggressively – and finely – calibrated to ensure that your innate fear of losing doesn't prevent you from playing to win.



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Separating the possible from the probable



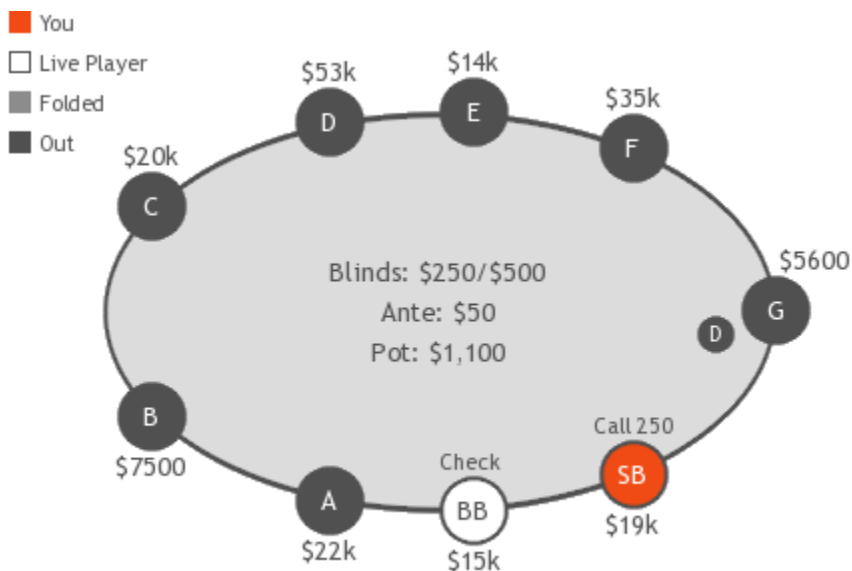
“Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.” The words of Arthur Conan Doyle, as spoken by his most famous creation Sherlock Holmes, have a special resonance for poker players, as they describe a model for uncovering the truth that disregards emotion, desire, ego, and relies instead on

logic alone.

Unfortunately, Doyle’s model doesn’t go quite far enough for poker players. Poker is a game of partial information, so when you’re trying to determine the contents of your opponent’s hand, there are really only a few combinations you can eliminate outright as impossible. For poker players, then, the key distinction isn’t between impossible and possible, but rather between possible and probable.

This sounds like a small distinction, and in many ways it is. There are plenty of contexts where you can even get away with using the concepts interchangeably. Poker, however, is not one of them. In fact, the ability to separate the possible from the probable is arguably one of the key skills that separates solid recreational players from professionals.

Let’s take a look at a sample hand that illustrates the concept. This hand is taken from tournament play on [Full Tilt Poker](#). You have about 40BBs and are in the SB. The table folds to you and you complete with Kh6c. The BB checks, leaving us with the following setup as we head to the flop:



From here on out, we’re going to evaluate our opponent’s hand from two perspectives: the possible and the probable. So, let’s start preflop.

Possible: All combinations that don't involve one of our hole cards (1225).

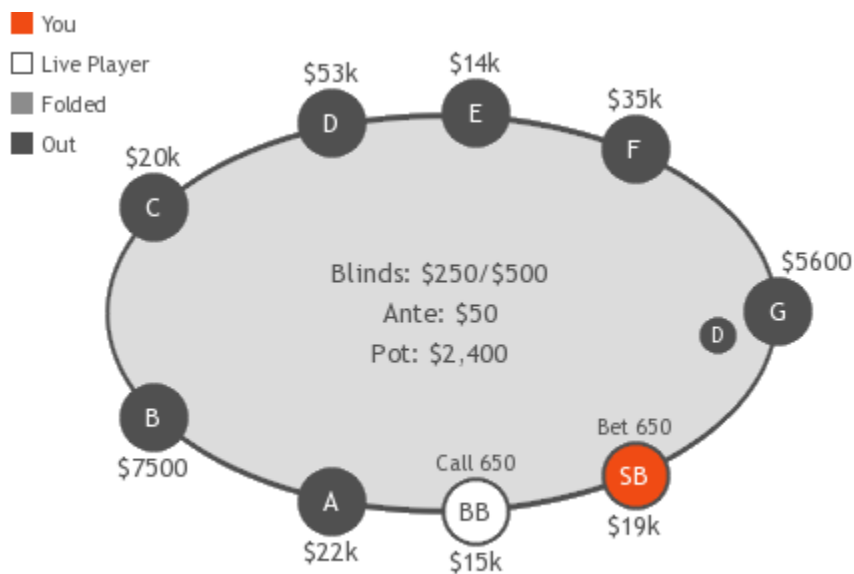
Probable: All combinations that don't involve one of our hole cards and aren't premium hands (AA-JJ, AK), as most opponents will raise the SB limp with strong hands in this spot (1185).

Obviously, that's a pretty small gap, but as the hand progresses and you get more information to work with, focusing on the probable and not the possible becomes critical. For many players, the possible becomes an enabler of bad behavior, allowing them to construct justifications for terrible plays that a consideration of the probable would never permit. Let's return to our sample hand to see this in action.

The flop gives you top pair and has some draws:

Ks Th 5s

You bet 650 and the BB calls.



Possible: All combinations that don't involve one of our hole cards or the flop and aren't premium hands (1021 combos).

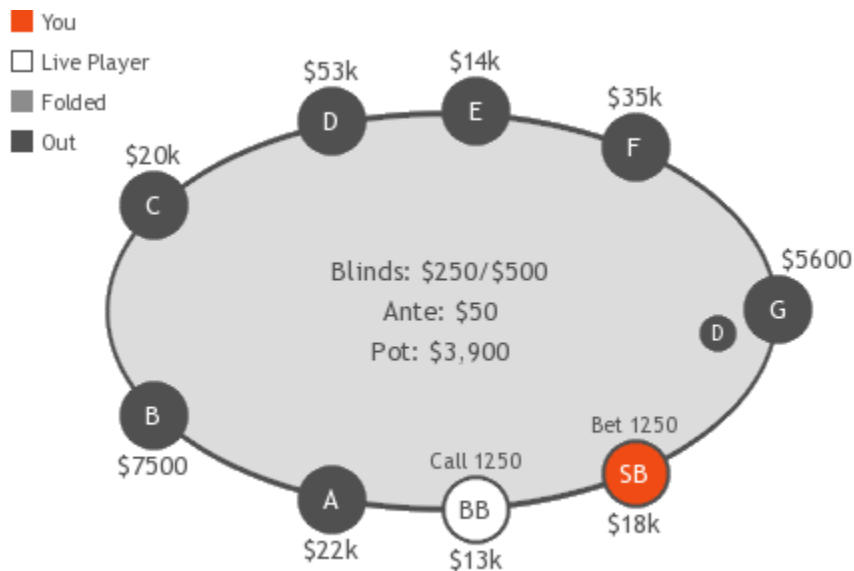
Probable: TT, 55, combinations with two spades, a king, a ten, a five, an open ended straight draw along with AJ, some underpairs and some complete air looking to take it away on a later street (approximately 500 combos)

Nothing earth-shattering there, but we're starting to see the significant difference that emerges between the probable and the possible as the hand progresses and you get more information, even in a generic situation. ***That's the first major flaw in thinking in terms of the possible instead of the probable: Thinking in***

terms of the possible doesn't fully utilize new information. Let's move on to the turn.

The turn is the 3d, for a board of Ks Th 5s 3d.

You bet 1250 and your opponent calls.



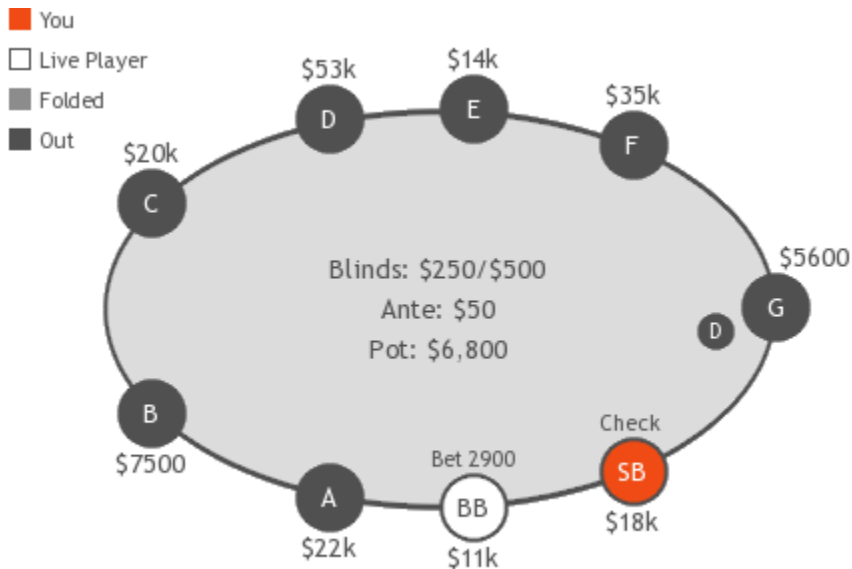
Now that we have new information, our possible set is based on our probable set from the previous street, and our probable set is a refinement of our possible set based on that new information. Note that there are some situations where you might want to insert additional hands into the possible set based on new information, but that's the exception rather than the rule.

Possible: TT, 55, combinations with two spades, a king, a ten, a five, an open ended straight draw along with AJ, some underpairs and some complete air looking to take it away on a later street (approximately 500 combos).

Probable: This second bet should chase out most of the air and the weaker draws, along with most fives, the underpairs and some weaker tens. That leaves us with kings, some tens, some spade draws, QJ and a few weaker fives and draws and the occasional air (approx 325 combos).

While there's a good amount of fuzziness involved in determining a probable range for our opponent, considering the probable instead of the possible still moves us much closer to our ultimate goal of correctly determining our opponent's hand. Let's return to our example.

The river pairs the board with the Tc, for a final board of Ks Th 5s 3d Tc. You check and your opponent bets 2900.



Possible: Some spade draws, QJ, a few weaker fives and missed draws, air, all kings, some tens, TT, 55 (approx 250 combos).

Probable: All kings, some tens, some spade draws, QJ and some weaker fives, missed draws and air, TT, 55 (approx 250 combos).

Those ranges appear, by all accounts, to be the same. To understand how they're actually very different, let's pause for a moment and think about how this hand looks to someone only considering the possible. From that point of view, your opponent could be making this bet with a very wide range that includes missed spade draws, missed straight draws, and even some smaller pairs that are now turning their hands into bluffs. That seems to suggest a relatively simple river call.

It's important to note that there's nothing about the above assessment that's untrue. All of those things are possible. However, in poker what's possible is a bit of a Rorschach test – when you focus on it, you're likely going to only see what you want to see. In this example, even decent players are going to skew their assessment to favor a distribution that allows them to win the pot. ***That highlights the second critical flaw in considering the possible: you leave yourself vulnerable to making decisions based on how you'd prefer things to be rather than how things likely are.***

The difference in the above ranges is, of course, in their weighting. The possible is arranged in the order of hands you'd like your opponent to have, while the probable is arranged in the order of the hands your opponent is most likely to have from a strict distributive perspective. ***That's the final flaw in relying on the possible: You risk ignoring the fact that some combinations of cards are far more or less likely than others.*** To understand the impact distribution can have, consider the following about our example:

- Two kings remain in the deck, and 44 cards remain for the kings to combine with. That results in 87 combinations. We assumed earlier that your opponent would likely raise preflop with KK and AK, removing 9 combinations for a total of 78. Of those combinations, you beat 16 and tie with 6.
- Two tens remain in the deck, so 87 combinations.
- 11 spades remain in the deck, resulting in 55 possible spade combinations. 10 of those combinations involve a ten, so 45 missed spade draw combinations exist.
- There are 16 ways to make QJ. One of those is QJ of spades, so 15.
- There are three ways to make 55 and one way to make TT.

That leaves us with 145 combinations you're losing to and 76 you're beating, along with 6 ties. Even with a healthy allowance for air and missed draws, you're still losing on this river a lot more often than you're winning. All of the sudden, the relatively simple river call seems a lot less simple.

The point of this article isn't really to determine whether or not you should be calling on the river – there are certainly other factors you'd need to consider before making that decision. Rather, the point is to illustrate how different a hand can look to you based solely on the manner in which you evaluate the information you receive during the hand. Considering only the possible results in decision-making bordering on pure guesswork, ignorant of new information and over-reliant on ego and emotion. Considering the probable results in guesswork as well, but an educated version steeped in deductive reasoning and an appreciation of the mathematical realities of distribution.

God, Why Did I Call That? (A Brief Overview of Common Decision-Making Errors)



Admit it – there's been a time or two where you're at the poker table and found yourself asleep at the wheel. Your mouth opens, your hands move, and before you know what's happened, you've made a bet or called a raise with no rhyme or reason. Every once in awhile these blunders work out for the best, but more often than not they end up being the plays we berate ourselves over for hours – sometimes days. If you're anything like me, the frustration isn't driven so much by the fact that you made a poor decision as by the fact that you feel like you didn't make a decision at all.

Thankfully, it's impossible to not make a decision in poker. every time you commit to a course of action, you're making some decision on some level, even if you're not aware of it. The trick then becomes to unearth the decision-making process you employ in pressure situations and to pick out the flaws in that process that are leading you into what Gabe Kaplan, in an episode of last season's High Stakes Poker, called 'The Poker Twilight Zone.'

There are books written about the reasons why our brains malfunction, especially during times of stress, but I'll save you the time of finding, buying and reading said books. Instead, we'll walk through a few common errors that are uniquely likely to spring up during the course of a poker hand. For more details on the errors below along with a decent bibliography of decision error theory, visit the Theories About Decision Errors Section of ChangingMinds.org.

Error One: The Endowment Effect

This error is based on the simple premise that we tend to overvalue things that we own. If a thing is ours, we will overestimate it's value; the corollary is that we tend to underestimate the value of things owned by others, especially if we own a similar thing. In poker this effect manifests mainly in two ways: first, we tend to overvalue our chips [for some, the value gets exaggerated when their chips are in the pot; for others the value is hiked when they are forced to risk some chips with a marginal hand] resulting in play that is alternatively too loose or too conservative. Second, we tend to overvalue our hands, so much so that we actually get attached to them ("I can't believe you cracked my aces") and, as a result, end up overplaying in situations where we should be able to fold.

Error Two: Representativeness Heuristic

This error isn't nearly as fancy as it sounds. Basically, when we're faced with the task of defining the probability of an unfamiliar event, we will base our decision on the most representative [similar] model in our personal experience. For example, if you go to a new grocery store, you're likely to guess the position of the deli based on where the deli is in your local grocery. At the table, we use the

representativeness heuristic to fill in the blanks when we're facing a player we don't have a lot of information about; we'll compare them to a class of player we've developed in our minds [weak tight, etc], a person who they resemble physically, or even sometimes the last player who was in their seat. The issue isn't so much that this method leads us to incorrect conclusions (although that's certainly a risk). The real problem is that we often default to a comparison model because it's the easiest way to get an answer – and while taking this path of least resistance, we often fail to consider all of the unique information available at the time.

Error Three: Availability Heuristic

This error is probably a familiar one to most of you. The Availability Heuristic asserts that when we attempt to explain a given situation, we tend to give pieces of evidence weight based largely on recency – and the more recent a piece of evidence is, the more weight we give it. Beware of this flaw when weighing a call – it tends to make us overestimate the chance that a recent bluffer is bluffing us again.

A few final thoughts on these and other common errors. Remember that you're not the only person who falls into these traps – they're pretty much universal. As a result, you can use them against your opponents – especially those who seem prone to make quick, impulsive decisions. Also, keep in mind that the more often you make these errors in your thinking away from the table, the more likely you are to be employing them to make poor decisions at the table. These types of errors amount to cognitive shortcuts – tactics your brain employs when it's placed under pressure to generate a quick decision. Recognizing your tendency to rely on such shortcuts when you're not in tough situations and developing strategies for avoiding them is your best bet for not slipping into bad habits – or the Poker Twilight Zone – when the pressure gets turned back on.

Impulse Control: Strategies to Improve Discipline at the Poker Table



For most poker players, the feeling is all too familiar: you're in a hand, the pot has grown a bit, you have a marginal hand and there's significant action in front of you. You're set to fold, you've gone through all the reasons in your head why it's correct to fold, you're telling yourself to hit the fold button and then, suddenly, none of those things happen. In fact, the exact opposite happens – against all of your better judgment, your hand, as if guided by a will of its own, grabs the mouse, whips the bet slider to the far right and snap-clicks the raise button.

So what went wrong? It's really not much of a mystery. In these situations, there's some emotional need we have – whether it be curiosity, entitlement, frustration, or some other irrational desire – that manages to wrestle away control, however momentarily, from the cool, commonsensical character we'd prefer be in the cognitive driver's seat. The real mystery for many players isn't why this happens. Rather, it's how to prevent it from happening. In this article we're going to outline some strategies, some simple and some surprising, for mitigating the ability of irrational needs to overwhelm your better judgment when the pressure's on.

Take More Time

I used to play 40/80 limit at the Venetian with this guy who talked non-stop. Before he made any decision, he would always chat a bit first. He was one of those guys who was funny if you were in a good mood and really annoying if you weren't. Anyhow, one of the things he used to say incessantly when it was his action before making a decision was "Coach always said you should sit on your hands." Annoying or no, it's good advice. Impulsive decisions rely on you temporarily suspending your better judgment for a moment, so logically if you can prolong the amount of time you take to make a decision as a matter of habit, you run a better chance of regaining your sense before you can do any real damage.

Some players build a little system of checks into their action routine – maybe a simple set of questions that you answer before every action (Why am I doing this? What am I hoping to accomplish?) will give you enough time for the impulse to pass and perhaps improve your rational decision-making to boot.

Reward Yourself

In simple terms, impulsive decisions are generally just manifestations of some irrational need. Maybe you feel like you 'deserve' to win a pot so you decide to play a hand you shouldn't. Maybe you're jealous of the guy scooping all of the big

pots so you get involved in bad spots. Whatever the irrational need, it's possible that you can satisfy it in some other way. When you find yourself in a spot where you feel an impulsive decision coming on, give yourself some kind of reward instead in an attempt to placate those needs.

It doesn't have to be much – a bite of candy, a couple bucks thrown in a jar that you eventually spend on a video game you've been wanting, a glance at some porn (hey, we're not here to judge. Whatever works for you) – the theory is that emotional needs are pretty blunt and just want some kind of satisfaction, and they're not picky about where it comes from.

Punish Yourself

It's not pretty and it's not pleasant, but negative reinforcement works. You would think that the negative reinforcement that comes from losing the pot (as you generally do when you make an impulsive decision) would do the trick, but it's generally after the fact and there's usually just enough times that you win to muddy the waters. Some people I know stop their session as soon as they make a decision like that. Others have elaborate systems where they deprive themselves of some reward whenever they make an impulsive play.

Whatever it is, remember – if you were a lab rat, you'd be getting a shock each time you pushed this level. Shocking yourself is probably a bit over the edge (although it would probably work pretty well), but the core principal is solid – if you associate negative consequences consistently and immediately with a behavior, chances are you'll cut down on or eliminate that behavior.

A promotional banner for Full Tilt Poker. The background is a green felt surface with a pile of red and black poker chips on the right side. Two playing cards, the Jack of Spades and the Ace of Clubs, are visible. The text is white and bold. At the top, it says "GET 27% RAKEBACK AT". Below that is the "FULL Tilt POKER" logo, where "Tilt" is in a stylized font with a red triangle behind it. Underneath the logo, it says "PLUS 100% DEPOSIT BONUS TO \$600". At the bottom, the website "WWW.RAKEBACK101.COM" is displayed in large, bold letters.

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Trimming up Your Poker Strategy with Occam's Razor



You Could Learn A Lot From A 14th Century Franciscan Friar And not just about theology, life before the printing press or how to pull off those haircuts where the crown is shaved, but a ring of curls remains along the edges. You could, in fact, learn a decent amount about poker, at least from the particular friar I have in mind: William of Ockham. He's the logician credited with what we today refer to as Occam's Razor, a principle that can be loosely summarized as "all things being equal, the simplest explanation is usually the best." He's also the reason why IT nerds and philosophy wonks own shirts that say "I shave with occam's razor."

Ever think so much in a given situation that you find yourself on the brink of mental paralysis? Let's say you're facing a massive bet on the river, which looks to you to be an absolute brick of a card, from an opponent who has been passively calling the whole hand. The pot is huge. You hold something marginal but defensible, say split two pair, you have position, and you've been betting the whole way. Suddenly this opponent, who up until now had seemed clearly predictable, appears to you as virtually indecipherable, and your brain is just a bit less overloaded than an Amish kid standing in the center of a Best Buy. Other players stare at you with thinly veiled disdain tinged with impatience (of course the answer is obvious to them – they're not in the hand), you riffle your chips unsteadily and it dawns on you that you really can't make a decision. You will make one, of course, but you're starting to think it's going to be a bit of a random act, not the output of the cool and calculating poker master you imagine yourself to be. In short, it's a decision that will probably sound a lot like: "Screw it, I ... [insert whatever comes out of your mouth when you open it], because all of your options seem equally reasonable.

In this spot, you're simply lacking a tool to help you choose between all the competing options [and the logic behind those options]. This makes it almost impossible for your brain to reach an informed conclusion – so it just draws any old conclusion to get the problem out the door. This is clearly a terrible way to make decisions. Sometimes you'll be right, sometimes you'll be wrong, but the outcome is really pretty irrelevant when the process is so deeply flawed. Some people might call this type of decision making "going with their gut", but the truth is that intuition plays a very small role in impulsive decisions and confusing the two – impulse and intuition – is an easy way to become a pretty bad poker player. While that's an important idea, it's not the focus of this article, so let's bring it back around to William of Ockham.

William would not be surprised that you're having a problem making your decision. He might wonder why you're not speaking Latin, but once that got all worked out, he'd appreciate your dilemma and identify the root culprit as we already have – a failure to recognize which bits of your analysis are relevant and

which are not. He'd invite you in for some mead or ale or whatever they drank back then and ask you to outline some competing explanations for your opponent's behavior.

Here's the first place Occam's Razor can help out your game, although it is admittedly drawing more on the general spirit of the idea – simplicity is good – than the principle itself. Rather than immediately spouting out theory after theory for why your opponent bet, remember that there really can be only three reasons – your opponent wants you to call, wants you to fold, or wants you to raise. What you need to do now is assemble a quick logic for each possible reason behind your opponent's action. Let's say, for the sake of simplicity, that you had pegged this opponent as a fairly straightforward player. With that in mind, here are some very generalized logics for their action.

1) My opponent wants me to fold: First, we'd have to assume that your opponent is acting a bit of character by bluffing. Next, we'd have to assume that your opponent has picked up some information about you that has made them think you can lay down a hand. Also, we'd have to assume that there was something on the flop and turn they thought was worth calling for that did not improve on the river.

2) My opponent wants me to call: Here we'd have to assume that your opponent had already made a hand before the river hit, and quite likely before the turn hit. We'd also have to assume that they believe there is a good chance you won't bet again, but at least some chance you might call.

3) My opponent wants me to raise: Here we would have to assume everything from "to call" above and also that your opponent has made several assumptions about you: first, that you are capable of viewing them as a very tricky player who can lay down after making a massive bet; second, that you are capable of interpreting a large river bet as a sign of weakness; third, that you have a hand strong enough to raise with (if you're not bluffing on the re-raise).

Over-simplified? Sure, but the point remains. The best decision in our hypothetical is clearly coming down to a race between options one and two. Remember, what this razor wants to do is cut out the unnecessary, to reduce the number of variables and assumptions involved in reaching a conclusion. Option three simply asks us to undertake too many assumptions to be attractive in the face of two equally predictive, simpler logics.

You might have two questions at this point – where's the value in all this work, and how do I use this principle in more complex, game-time settings? Let's take them in reverse, starting with the application issue. Obviously, the example in this article is tailor-made to articulate Occam's principle, and not all of your real-life situations will be so clear cut [that's not to say that a lot of them won't be - poker

is arguably a pretty simple game most of the time]. So, a few things to keep in mind when you're working this principle into your reasoning:

Occam's Razor is not a corrective tool for bad assumptions. Look, all of the fancy-schmancy logician's tools in the world won't save you if you're working from a bad root – if you think a player is a donkey and they're really a pro, game over. Any correct decisions you make will be in line, statistically, with the number a monkey would make. The only difference will be less feces flinging on your part [hopefully]. So, if you're making decisions with this tool and you're coming up on the dumb end more often than not, don't blame the razor – blame the data you're feeding in. As my computer programmer friends say, 'garbage in, garbage out.' Oddly, my garbage collector friends do not say this.

Occam's Razor is not meant to be a simple scale for weighing the sheer number of assumptions on each side. You can't cheat the razor simply by piling up extra, superfluous assumptions on the side of the decision that you want to avoid. This is a tool for weighing useful, substantial assumptions and it only works when that's what you give it. For example:

Relevant assumption: This player would have to have a reason to view me as weak in order to make this play as a bluff

Irrelevant assumption: This player probably watches a lot of History Channel.

Last, and probably most importantly, Occam's Razor is just one more tool in your decision-making arsenal. It should probably be thought of more as a compliment to other tools, a tiebreaker, than a stand alone solution for your toughest poker decisions. Remember, it does not generate logical explanations for you – it only helps you to choose between competing decisions of roughly equal plausibility. Say that last bit again – of roughly equal plausibility. This tool, then, comes into play only when you feel that you've reached a bit of an impasse, when you've already done the work required to generate two [or more] competing explanations for the situation at hand.

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So now that we've covered what it can't do, on to what it can. Where's the value in this tool? First off, Occam's Razor can function as a handy red flag that alerts you when you are attempting to rationalize what you know is a bad play. Everyone, at least on occasion, gets stuck to hands they know should've been released a round ago. If you're anything like me, you'll often find yourself attempting to convince yourself that continuing with the hand is a sound, rational decision [given the size of the pot of course, and the fact that you haven't won a hand in an two hours, so you're due, damnit] even though you know it pretty much isn't. Sometimes that voice sounds pretty convincing though, doesn't it? It's a trick. Usually what that voice is doing is just constructing a possible, though not

often plausible, scenario in which you're going to win the hand. Luckily for you, possible although not plausible scenario construction requires a greater number of assumptions than plain old plausible scenario construction, so when you hear thoughts running through your head at a critical decision point that sound like this:

"Now I've never seen this guy bluff before but he did make a comment about 30 minutes ago about being bored and I think he said something about 3 hours ago when I mucked my cards after making a big raise on the river, plus he seems like he wants to shed his tight image that he's had all day so I can see him calling for the runner flush draw on the flop... etc"

When you hear those thoughts, the razor should remind you that any explanation which requires an inordinate amount of assumptions is, on face, suspicious. Why should you be suspicious of your own logical prowess? Never forget that most poker players have to believe they can win more than their fair share of hands in order to be good players and, when you get right down to it, most of us are kinda greedy to boot. These are both forces that can skew your thought process and actually focus a large part of your mental abilities on rationalizing amazingly poor decisions, but a little poke with the razor can often help to keep them in line.

I think there's additional value in the fact that Occam's Razor gives you a reason to make a decision. I know that might sound a bit odd at first, so let me try to clarify. Think about the situation described way back at the start of the article. It's not an uncommon one, every day I know that I make several decisions just to make them, just to have the tension of the situation or problem resolved. Again, there are a ton of flaws with this decision-making model, but the relevant one here is a lack of replication. Since you made the decision randomly, you can't be sure that you'll make the same random decision the next time. If you can't repeat the process, it's awful hard to troubleshoot it when you find your decisions going consistently wrong. If you have a reason for making decisions, then you at least have a starting point for diagnosing the problem. So, if you always use the razor as your tiebreaker in those close call situations and you're wrong more often than not, you can start to address the problem by making sure you're applying the concept itself correctly. It might not sound like much, but I'm sure there's some cliché about the first step in solving a problem and how it is the most difficult step – and you can be sure that if I knew that cliché or if I had access to the internet while I was writing this, you would have gotten the cliché instead of all this. Wait, is it "Problems seem impossible to solve until you start"? No, that doesn't sound right. Well, fill it in yourself then.

With all of the hoopla surrounding poker right now, I'm sure it will only be a matter of time until some fancy philosophy professor / mildly successful poker player decides to cash in and write a Tao of Poker-esque book in which he or she applies the concept of Occam's Razor to poker in a far more elegant and insightful way. When that happens, I will remind people that my article came first,

was funnier, and a good deal shorter. Also, I made a good faith effort to keep the shaving puns to a minimum. And hopefully, I got across the point that, for all the potential complexity involved, poker still remains a game where the shortest distance between two points is very often the straightest and simplest line.



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Poker Peer Pressure – How Other Players Impact Your Games Just by Being There



Peer pressure is a subject that gets a lot of attention in discussions regarding juvenile behavior, but it's a powerful force for adults as well. Poker is so reliant on interaction and power that it creates an environment where peer pressure can be an especially strong factor in decision-making, particularly for newer players or for people making the switch from online play to live poker. Peer pressure has an effect on players in all types of games, but there's a uniquely powerful effect at work in No Limit and Pot Limit games.

Whether we like to admit it or not, winning the approval of others is a powerful need for everyone. Obviously, it matters more to some and less to others, but the fact remains that this basic social drive can alter the game plan for a session in several ways. The changes can range from very subtle to blatantly obvious – but they all carry negative repercussions for your performance at the table.

We're going to briefly suggest a few ways that peer pressure gets you off an optimal game, and offer quick suggestions for countering the natural tendencies for wanting others to like and respect us. Hopefully this article will give you a few ideas to take with you to the table in your next session and get you thinking about how much of an impact the other players can have upon you – even when they're not your opponent in a given hand.

Peer Pressure Makes You Act Faster

Why it happens: Let's face it, there's something cool in the quick action – it implies decisiveness, control, and a host of other characteristics we'd like to possess. Unfortunately, it all too often results in poor decisions that don't take all the available information into account – and that's a trade off that just isn't worth it. It's not just the 'cool' factor that drives us to make quick decisions – there's also the very real, tangible feeling of impatience you get from other players at the table, especially the ones who aren't involved and just want to move on to the next hand. People don't like to feel like they're annoying others, and when 8 other people are waiting on you, the stares and sighs can get to be a bit much.

How to check it: Try always taking a little longer to act. This will give you a better sense of how much time is actually passing when you think, will make taking your time seem like a natural act, and will condition the other players at the table to expect you to take a few seconds before you make your move, reducing their annoyance when you take a little longer for the big decisions. People might give you some static, but both they [and you] will get used to it pretty quickly.

Peer Pressure Over-Commits You to Pre-Flop Raises

Why it happens: So much of peer pressure is about power – by going along with the group, or by doing something that wins the approval of the group, you gain power. Back down in front of the group and you open yourself up to rejection and abuse – lessons we learned a long time ago on the playground. Now think about what happens when you raise preflop and someone calls – you’ve just picked a fight. When they stand up to you by betting into you on the flop or check-raising, you now face a situation where folding makes you seem [on some levels] weak – and all the more so because you picked the fight in the first place. Think of how much easier it is to lay down a bet that didn’t follow a preflop raise to a check-raise, or how less compelled you feel to take a stab at the flop when you didn’t raise the pot. Sure, there’s a little more money in the middle when you raise preflop, but rarely enough to justify the impulsive decisions players make to ‘protect’ their preflop raise [aka their image / ego] when another player challenges them on the flop.

How to check it: If this is a small problem for you, a deep breath will probably do the trick. However, if you find yourself consistently getting burned in this spot, you need to develop a safety valve. I suggest creating a checklist of factors that have to be met before you’re allowed to call a bet / raise in a hand where you raise preflop and forcing yourself to run through that checklist before making any move. Some things that might go on the list: Do I have reason to believe my opponent is bluffing? Do I have a good chance of improving in this hand? Do I have a plan for the next card if I get called or he bets again?

Peer Pressure makes You Personalize the Conflict of the Game

Why it happens: When someone lays a beat on you or makes a great play against you [or does both at once, as is sometimes the case] in the live play, it’s a lot easier to develop a mentality of playing for revenge, largely because you can put a face to your embarrassment, pain, whatever. This makes a huge difference – as mad as you can get at an invisible opponent online, it doesn’t begin to compare how pissed you can become at the living, breathing, visible opponent often just inches away from you. The fact that the person embarrassed you in front of the group creates a loss of face from your perspective that can only be erased by getting even – an eye for an eye and all that. Obviously, making decisions based on revenge is a generally terrible way to play poker and makes you very predictable and manipulable.

How to check it: This might sound odd, but try thinking about your opponents as seat numbers and nothing else. When I play online, the first thing I do is usually to turn off the avatars simply because I find that being able to think of my opponents as actual people lets me get angrier at them. Depersonalizing opponents in live play is tough, but it’s worth the work if revenge play is a big leak in your game.

Peer Pressure Makes You Buy In For More Than You’re Comfortable With

Why it happens: This is really only relevant to No Limit cash games, and especially relevant when there is no cap on the buy-in. No mystery about why this happens – sitting with a short stack feels weak. Especially in American culture, money equals power, and sitting without money at a table full of towering stacks can make you feel weak. The problem is that playing deeper than you want to or are used to can really jack your game in ways that you won't understand until they happen.

How to check it: Make a firm decision before you get to the casino and stick with it. Keep your buy-in money in one pocket and your re-buy money in another, or don't pull enough out for the re-buy until you need it [although having to go to the ATM has peer pressure implications all of its own]

Peer Pressure Makes You Feel Like You Have to Give Action Early

Why it happens: When you first sit down at a table, you're the new thing – so it feels, accurately, like people are paying more attention to you than the rest of the players at the table. There's a sort of 'spotlight' mentality that kicks in – all those eyes trained on you make it feel like you need to do something to establish yourself (roughly the poker equivalent of dogs pissing to mark territory). This feeling that you're being tested can lead to rash decisions based more on a desire to 'prove' yourself than sound logic and rationality. There's no doubt something to the idea that a loose move or two early can give your opponents the wrong idea for the whole session, but even those spots can be carefully chosen.

How to check it: Walk in with a clear plan dictating how you plan to play for the first round – the more of a problem you have with stage jitters, the more rigid your plan should be. Make solid, conservative decisions about what hands you are willing to play preflop and wait until you calm down to open up your game a bit.

Postscript

No one likes to admit that other people have an influence on their actions, but like it or not, they do – you might be less open to influence than some, but I've never met a person who escapes it entirely. The bad news is that newer poker players are more vulnerable than most. The good news is that once you've come to terms with how peer pressure impacts your game, not only will you have plugged some leaks that are hurting your bottom line – you'll also be able to spot those leaks in others and exploit them.

Empathy: The Neglected Skill



When I think about what qualities that are vital to becoming a good poker player a capacity for critical thinking, discipline, and creativity come to mind right away. But in talking to a lot of both good and great poker players over the past several years, I've noticed that one quality in particular that isn't usually associated with poker separates them – empathy.

The ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes isn't something that most players even think about. They ask the question "What does my opponent usually do?" This is the wrong question. The right question to be asking is "Why does my opponent do what he does?" If you try to put yourself in your opponents shoes and discover how they're thinking rather than just what they're thinking you'll find many more ways to take advantage of them.

In online poker, a lot of players tend to treat their opponents like robots, as if they will always play hands the same way and always tend to do the same sorts of things. I'm even guilty of it myself and have been burned when a player does something that seems inconsistent with his previous behavior. Obviously when someone's tilting that changes their play considerably but think about yourself and how much the quality of your play can change depending on how you've been doing for the past orbit/day/week/month and . Trying to figure out how your opponent is feeling at the time you're playing against him can be exceptionally helpful.

An example – I was recently playing in a rebuy tournament where I was fairly deep and one of the other players was a multitabling grinder who I've played with quite a bit and respect. We both had decent stacks of about 35 bbs. In the past orbit, he had opened twice and, even though he opens with a fairly tight range, been shoved on and folded both times. My rather extensive notes on him said that he only calls three bets or shoves w/ a very tight range. However, I tried to think about how I feel when I open with decent hands and get shoved on repeatedly. I'm a very emotionally stable player but I get extremely frustrated when this happens and, despite the fact that in all likelihood the other players had strong hands, I feel like I'm getting pushed around. So for the next orbit the villain didn't play a single hand, leading me to believe that he was not at all tilty. Then the following orbit he opened utg +1 for a standard 3x the bb raise and it folded to me in late position w/ AA. Normally against a tight player whose notes say "Won't call three bets lightly" I'm fairly unlikely to get all this players chips by reraising unless he happens to have a big hand as well. I may even flat-call to try to induce a squeeze play from the blinds and disguise my hand vs. the raiser. However, knowing that he likely felt pushed around and at least a little frustrated I

just shoved for a huge overbet of about 12 times the size of his raise and he snap called w/ AQ offsuit. I never would have been able to put myself in this great position without trying to understand how my opponent was feeling and how that was likely to effect the way he played his hand.

As important as this concept is for online poker, it's much more important for live poker. People seem, for whatever reason, to have a harder time consistently playing their A game in live poker. In my local cardroom, I frequently see skilled internet players come in and play well for a couple hours before losing their discipline for any of a number of reasons and losing all their money .

So many factors contribute to how well a given player will play when they sit at the table. If you strive to understand what those factors are and exactly how they will affect a player then you'll be much better equipped to capitalize on the particular mistakes they will make. One of the most common situations you'll see occurs when a player has had to wait awhile to get into the game. These players will often play much looser than they normally for the first several orbits. I know that when I have to wait that long I get impatient and my inclination is to play a ton of hands, so it follows that others are likely to feel that way too. I can realize that and make sure I don't make the mistake, but most people in the cardroom are playing recreationally and aren't likely to stop themselves from playing too loose. When I see someone who has had to wait for awhile I tend to make my bets bigger in the hands against them and value bet more thinly because they'll often show up with hands like king four suited that they limped in early position with and then couldn't get away from top pair to a bet on every street. Players that won a good amount in their last session tend to make the same kinds of errors; they likely hit a lot of draws or had their big hands hold up in their previous session and they think they're "running good" so you can get away with making bigger bets than normal when you think they're on a draw and they'll still call you.

A key aspect of using empathy to your advantage is that you can expect a move based on how your opponent is thinking or feeling despite having no evidence of them using that move previously. The most glaring example of this for me happened just recently with a player who had been beating the game consistently for about six months but had always stayed out of my way and had never, as far as I could tell, bluffed me or tried to make a hero call against me. For a little while he had been comparing stacks with me and asking me how much I'd won the previous week and generally trying to get into a competition with me about who was the better player. I didn't want to get involved in that so I'd always just say "I'm doing fine" or something to that effect. It seemed clear that he wanted to impress me, so I thought about how I'd play if I wanted to impress someone else. The two most obvious things would be to either make a big bluff and show it or make a big hero call against that player. If I had just been thinking like a lot of players think and only asked the question "What does this player do?" I never would have been looking for a spot where he would do either of those things against me. But because I was asking "Why does he do what he

does?" I was able to be on the lookout and, sure enough, pick off a huge three barrel bluff he tried against me w/ ace high on a raggy board in a spot where I would have surely folded.

If you pay close attention to how your opponents are thinking and feeling you can find profitable situations that you wouldn't have noticed otherwise. Taking this step can help you achieve a deeper understanding of the game and pad your bankroll as well.



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Dealing With the Emotional Impact of Bad Runs in Poker



Bad runs are sort of like the in-laws of your poker experience. You know they're inevitably going to show up, even if you aren't always sure when or why, you know that no matter how hard you try, there's nothing you can really do to make the experience any better, and, worst of all, once they're around, there's absolutely no telling when they're going to leave.

I'm not going to pretend that I can improve your relationship with your actual in-laws, but I can provide a few words of wisdom for dealing with their poker equivalent. Bad runs are a fact of life for every poker player, and the good news is that they're an equal-opportunity offender. Put simply: everyone gets the same luck. The bad news is that while we all experience the same amount of bad runs (in a purely objective sense), the choices you make about dealing with those stretches of misfortune play a huge role in determining the impact bad luck has on your attitude, your game, and – inevitably – your bottom line.

So where does that leave us? Well, if we know that bad runs are inevitable, and if we also know that there are choices you can make about how you deal with bad runs, it stands to reason that handling bad runs properly is a skill that not only can be developed, but must be developed if you're to be a successful poker player. Finally, we can assume that since bad runs have the potential to inflict a strong, focused emotional impact on you as a player, our development of a coping strategy would be best built upon a foundation of rationality and long-term perspective.

If you're a regular reader of my articles, you know what's coming next – my standard caveat. I've yet to hear a piece of poker advice that applies universally to every player in every situation, and the advice I'm about to dispense certainly isn't going to break that streak. What I'm going to offer are general guidelines that can be digested one of a few ways. They may work wonderfully for you just as they're typed on the page, they may require some serious tweaks based on your individual situation, or they may be useful only in the sense that they start you on a line of thinking that winds up dropping you off at a completely different (yet ultimately useful) action or conclusion. Whichever of the following ends up being the closest to your experience, the basic point is still the same: I'm just providing you with a point where you can start – it's up to you to determine where you head and when you stop.

With that out of the way, let's get into it. The following are three tactics for building positive habits that should help you cope with bad runs. Each focuses on a combination of short term and long term approaches for reducing your emotional entanglement with a stretch of bad luck, drawing on the premise that the more rational your perspective on the relationship between luck and poker is,

the more control you'll have over the resulting relationship between luck and your approach to poker.

Tactic one: When you're experiencing a bad run, raise your threshold for wanting to play.

A common tendency that I've observed in my own play (and the play of countless others) is to treat bad runs as a sort of finite problem that can be solved through sheer force – essentially that bad runs can be powered through if you simply play enough hands. The logic behind this approach is obvious and somewhat appealing: a bad run is just a statistical clumping, and if you increase your amount of play, you'll force the math to flatten out. The basic flaw in the logic, unfortunately, is just as obvious: the math will only flatten out if you're playing all of those hands optimally, and the chance of you doing that while you're in the midst of a losing streak is pretty slim. However, that flaw isn't always so easy to spot when you're three weeks into an incessant drubbing and desperately searching for any reasonable answer that might make the onslaught of lousy luck cease, so we need to account for that inevitable weakening of your ability to rationally evaluate the quality of an answer.

A solid solution is to demand a higher than usual level of interest, ability and mood from yourself before sitting down to play when you're mired in a bad run. Only playing when you really (or maybe even absolutely) want to and when you really feel capable of executing at a high level for an entire session can help you sidestep a few frustrations that you're a bit more vulnerable to when the cards aren't running your way. First, it helps you avoid allowing losing to become a habit. No matter how strong you are mentally, there's a number of consecutive losing sessions at which you're going to start to expect to lose – clearly a terrible starting point for any session, even if every other condition is optimal. It also helps you to avoid the self-flagellation born of post-session regret: "I knew I shouldn't have played before I sat down and, sure enough, I lost. I'm just not a very good player if I can't trust my own instincts." Last, but not least, only playing when you're 100% interested and invested makes it less likely that you'll pull the tilt trigger as soon as things start to go south – a dangerous cycle that can multiply mistakes with near-exponential force: "This sucks – I didn't even want to play and now I'm down 2 buy ins in 15 minutes ... well, I think I'm beat here, but what's one more buy in?"

Tactic two: Resist the urge to make radical changes to your game during a bad run.

If the urge to power through a bad run is alluring, the urge to overhaul your game as a method of escape is nearly irresistible. The tricky bit of the overhaul solution is that it rests on a logic that seems fairly unassailable: a bad run, in theory,

should increase the contrast setting on your game, making it easier to discern which plays are winners and which are losers. The fact is, that logic is absolutely solid – but only to a point. A bad run does force focus on -EV habits that you may have slipped in to while times were good, but it also creates an environment where plays with smaller edges that are long-term winners start to seem suspect as well. The frustration that accompanies bad runs also increases your desire for ‘quick-fix’ solutions, raising the troubling possibility that you will over-correct parts of your game that required only a minor adjustment (if any at all). This wouldn’t be so troubling except for the fact that your approach to poker is basically a living, dynamic entity that is both interconnected and holistic. If you make a change in one area, every other area will feel some level of impact. The more radical the change, the greater the depth and breadth of the impact. Even worse is the fact that radical changes exert impacts that are both unpredictable and tough to trace, making it very difficult to both identify what damage has been done and how to reverse it.

In short, radical changes are likely to fail, both at improving the quality of your game and at helping you to cope with a bad run. If anything, the additional frustration you’ll feel as the answer you settled on (“I just need to play way tighter from every position preflop and on the flop”) fails to provide results (“I tightened up, but now I’m so predictable that I’m not getting paid when one of my damn hands actually does hold up”) will artificially extend the run and decrease your ability to recoup losses when your luck does turn around. When you start to sense your luck going south, make a promise to yourself to make any adjustments to your game in a measured, deliberate fashion. It might be a hard promise to keep, but a little discipline on this issue will pay major dividends thought the remainder of the bad run and far beyond.

Tactic three: Find an outlet for releasing your frustration

I chose to put this tactic last because, as the most obvious idea, it’s also one of the easiest to dismiss or overlook. Here’s the deal: poker is a game largely populated by people with egos, and people with egos hate to think that they aren’t in control of a situation. Some of us find the idea so distasteful that we’d rather lie to ourselves about how much control we have in a given situation than admit any truth involving a lack of control. Bad runs, frustration, tilt – all of these things involve an absence of control, so there’s the very real possibility that many of us will choose to deceive ourselves about our true feelings for any given session that takes place in those contexts. To paraphrase common advice regarding addiction, the first step is admitting that you need help. You probably can’t control the feelings of frustration and helplessness that naturally arise out of a bad run through sheer will alone, and that fact doesn’t make you any less of a person or a poker player. The longer a bad run goes on, the less likely it becomes that you’ll be able to handle the anger (depression / disillusionment / whatever particular emotional form bad runs manifest in for you) on your own.

The answer? Don't try to handle it all on your own. Look beyond your natural defenses and coping mechanisms to some alternatives that you might not normally consider. Ideal mechanisms are ones that will drain you both mentally and physically, providing a type of reset function that helps you to strip the negative momentum from your stretch of bad luck. If you think that a total reset feels excessive, that a brief time-out will suffice for straightening out your head, ask yourself: Have you ever been in the middle of a bad run and you realized that you were starting to think of poker (or luck) as a sentient being that had something against you personally? Have you ever, in a moment of frustration, uttered a sentence along the lines of "It doesn't matter what I do – I just can't hit a draw!"? Both states of mind reflect a type of accumulated frustration that has resulted in you feeling like a passive victim of bad luck, a perspective that makes it pretty much impossible for you to have a winning session via any route save sheer dumb luck. Strenuous exercise, lengthy reading or writing sessions, time in the workshop – whatever allows you to wash off the emotional grime bad runs pile on your psyche, that's what you need to do.

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For most people, the only inevitabilities in life are death and taxes. If you're a poker player, you get to add at least one more to that list – runs of terrible luck with no apparent rhyme or reason. Also, you'll probably eventually develop an aversion to sunlight, but that's another issue. While the bad luck might be inevitable, a little foresight, planning and faith can ensure that permanent damage to your game and bankroll from that luck doesn't have to be. Think of it this way: you can't help when your in-laws arrive, but you can make a point to perpetually have enough alcohol and quality Tivo on hand to weather the storm as happily and sanely as any person can hope to.

Friendly Poker?



I'm rapidly approaching my one-year anniversary of playing poker for a living and among poker authors, this alone is cause for an article. It's strange to think of this moment as a cause for celebration or even mentioning in an article – seems self serving, like blowing my own horn. But I would be lying if I said I wasn't proud of what I've done. I am proud. I survived one year of relying on poker as my sole source of income and that's something!

And so I'm a year older, a year wiser, and a year more 'professional.' I've learned a thing or three. But amid all the associated rugged individualism, there's one topic I feel compelled, nay divinely inspired! to discuss in the glorious manifestation of this article – the idea I'm exorcising is 'poker friends.' Before I begin, please know that I feel like I could write a thesis on this subject, so this article may seem incomplete or appear to scratch the surface. It may seem like 'story telling hour.' That's OK. I just want to get the ball rolling.

'Poker friends' are those players you see often enough in your usual limit. You know their name. You know where they live. You even know how much they're up or down for the year. They're also the people you know you'll lay down marginal hands to, or fold some draws to when they appear to be strong. Basically, it's those opponents you play friendly and you know, or hope, will play you friendly in return.

On the surface, the issue seems tame. At the poker table, everyone plays their hand as well as they are capable. The money goes to the guy who plays the best or has the most luck that night. But when you play poker in a room and play there a lot, you're bound to play against the same people and play them a bunch. And you're bound to get to know them, maybe become their friend. And you're going to be playing pots against them with frequency.

However, the idea of making friends at the poker table bumps shoulders with poker ethics (i.e. collusion), polarizes the essence of professional poker (play to make money, period) causing some very awkward situations, and may give you a false impression that these people have YOUR best interests at heart.

Dunking the Drunks

Even when I first started playing for a living, I clearly could pick out who played for fun and who played for a living. And like most work environments, I began to become friends with the guys I worked with. And with plenty of idiots around, being 'friendly' meant pros stayed out of pots with pros (for the most part). Is it

ethical to cut up the two drunks? Then I wasn't so sure, but it certainly was, and remains to be, extremely profitable.

So is it cheating or unethical to take shots at the drunks money? Perhaps a hand I played in will illustrate, rather stimulate, some discussion in your head.

Late night 2-5 no limit at the Venetian in Las Vegas, short handed, \$500 cap. Three guys are DRIZZUNK, pulling handfuls of black \$100 chips from their pockets when they bust. They rotate straddling, get it in with any draw, nearly any black jack hand. You and another pro you know are picking off the bluffs and both are pretty deep considering the situation. You have \$2600, the other pro \$3250. So far, the hands have played themselves and you two haven't bumped heads until . . .

You're in the big blind with two kings. But before the last card hits the button, out of turn the action-junky drunk on your right in the small blind announces he's going to be all in BLIND for \$900. BINGO! First to act after the straddle, the other pro (your friend) says 'you're going to be all in? Well, I'm all in then.' SHIT! And he pushes his stack in. The drunk on the button folds and as promised, the small blind gets it in without even glancing at his holdings. Now it's your turn. Considering the situation, you think you probably have the best hand. The range of hands you think the other pro is likely to have is AK, AQ, and pocket pairs tens and above. Most unlikely is AA because you believe he's savvy enough to try to trap some money by limping, then reraising the promised 'all in.' There's still the straddle to act but he's already slid his cards forward, he's folding.

If you fold, you risk winning a very large pot. But folding also means you protect a solid win, eliminate the chance of getting sucked out on (or all-in against AA) and you maintain the 'status-quo' of friendliness. The hand most likely to beat you is probably the other pro as he has a hand he will commit all his chips on, and if you give him chips, you ain't seeing them again. If you call and win, well you might lose his 'friendly' play tonight, maybe forever.

Tight spot. What do you do?

Well I called because I believed more often than not, I would showdown the best hand and I could justify to the other pro why I called. It's not very friendly but sometimes business is just business. If he's the pro I think he is, he will understand. Well we ended up losing \$900 each to the idiot when he hit a miracle four card flush, with 5 8 off suit but I won the side pot with KK against the other pro's QQ. Neither of us had a spade. He shrugged it off and later said by raising all-in, he wanted to let me know he had a big hand so I wouldn't call with something like Tens or Ace King. And if one of the idiots woke up with a better hand, he knew the money would be live. Fair enough.

After watching two pots go in opposite directions away from him, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out five barneys (\$500 chips) and sets them on top of his stack. No one protests, even the dealer who's not really paying attention. It's a \$500 cap game and he just sat heavy enough to cover the idiot who just tagged us both with a blind hand. Should I say something?

Caps are in effect for a reason and I really enjoy being the only talented player with a big stack in a casino with free alcohol ;) He coming in for the cap is a very very very good situation for me. His deep buy in affects my profitability because now he can stack the idiot too instead of only tagging him for \$500 a time. AND we may get in to another big pot. Instead of facing a \$500 call, I may be facing nearly a \$3,000 call. Hmm.

Tight spot? What do you do?

I let this one go. I'm familiar enough with no cap games to be able to play deep stack against one talented opponent. Yes, it impacts my profitability but it REALLY impacts his. And as we're friends, I'd like to see him get these guys if I can't. After stacking him if I protest his buying deep, I would appear to be acting very greedy and unfriendly. That, between friends, would be rude.

A Short Word on Entitlement

That's one problem with poker friends. At the table, your friendships are always coupled with awkward feelings of entitlement. Entitlement? How's that? In the above example, he felt entitled to the courtesy of me not saying anything when he bought in deep. He also felt entitled for me to fold a lot of hands to his all-in raise. And I think it's safe to say that poker friends, for the most part, feel entitled for you NOT to TRY TO stack them. Sometimes things just happen, like set over set or straight over straight, but if you draw to a gutshot on a clean board heads up against a friend, they'll probably be pissed if you hit and get their stack. You just don't expect another pro, who's a friend, to try to tag you.

How's that good for you? If a player will pay you off massively when you hit, why WOULDN'T you draw? Statistically speaking, you're passing up on a very profitable situation. But it's only profitable once. They'll never let you get away with it again.

To some of you readers, this whole discussion may sound silly. Poker is poker, no hard feelings. For others, it's probably all too true. You expect your friends to play you soft and you will them OR you know someone who thinks like that. How do you play a cut throat game against players you don't want to see dead?

Once in Vegas, I spent about 20 minutes at a table getting to know this guy on my left, who obviously was a pro. I eventually wake up with Aces on the button. I make a 'I'm stealing' raise to \$30 and he comes over top out of the small blind for

\$150 total. Everyone folds. I just call (why not?). Flop comes 2-6-7 clean and he bets \$200. I raise to \$550 total. He's struggling with this spot and I can see it, so in this moment I honestly think 'what's the one thing I don't want to hear if I were him and I had kings or queens?'

So I say to him,

"What, you got aces?"

"No, you got aces?" he asks.

"Nope," I lied through my teeth.

"You flop a set?"

"Nope." That was the truth.

And he reraises me all-in for another \$700. I have no idea what he had because I called so fast and he just mucked when the turn and river didn't improve his hand. He got PISSED that I lied to him. And I mean REALLY pissed; said 'never speak to me again you scum.' Ouch. And I struggled with this. Did I do something wrong? I wasn't sure but EVERY one of my poker friends (pros) said I should do everything I can to get him to call. One said "we play a game based on deception. He can't believe anything you say or do." Another said "what kind of a pro is he? As soon as you opened your mouth I would have mucked anything but a set." Yeah. But this guy hates me still and we were BARELY poker friends for less than an hour.

And there are other problems associated with poker friends.

A Longer Word on Entitlement

I've had some bad nights playing poker. Played just horrible. When I left the house that night, I almost foresaw my destruction on the tables. "I'm not feeling it today. I think I'll only bring \$2,000 tonight instead of \$3,000 just in case." And then I lose the \$2,000 to a group of idiots and I REALLY want to get back in to the game. I know I shouldn't rebuy and forget that I'm playing like an idiot too. But all I have to do is walk over to the other 2-5 NL game, tap my friend on the shoulder and say "Hey (enter friend's nickname), front me a G. I came short today."

{Poof!}

Suddenly, with no questions asked, a magical pumpkin, that beautiful oversized yellow chip, or perhaps a firmly folded wad of hundreds APPEARS and I'm jogging to the cage!

An hour later, I'm bust, cursing myself for tapping a G I didn't even bring with me.

Most often with poker friends, at least the guys I know, we loan, front and borrow money, LARGE amounts of money, like it was nothing. We feel that if we bust, our friends should (that's entitlement) spot us the cash if they don't immediately need it. Having money always available is not always good for you, the poker player. And loaning or fronting money to poker friends isn't always good for you because face it, they're using it to gamble.

Who Are They Anyway?

I love to take poker trips. And I love to go with someone else, to make the drive shorter or have someone to hangout with in the room when the action's dead. The company CAN BE nice. The only people willing to go to Tunica MS or BFE Indiana for a week are your poker friends.

However, I've made two mistakes when selecting my traveling companion. Once I took off to Tunica and a poker friend wanted to go. I jumped at the opportunity, thinking this dude was a cool guy; we could save on a room. Little did I know he smoked (I'm slightly allergic), messy as hell (left nutshells and candy wrappers EVERYWHERE), and enjoyed going to strip clubs (nothing wrong with that, but it's not for me AND without telling me he had arranged to meet a stripper back at our hotel room, where I keep a couple thousand bucks and expensive electronics laying around). It wasn't a good trip for me.

This other time, I had a room at Caesars Indiana during the Denny Crum Event. This guy (a local) was putting me in to the daily tournaments. It's late and having already busted from the tourney, I'm playing cash games. My backer is playing cash games as well, getting drunk and doesn't want to drive home. So he asks me for my room key to grab a nap to sober up. No problem, right? No one's up there and I can play for a few more hours, get some sleep and then play the noon tourney the next day (a \$500+50 which he's paying for). I give him the key.

An hour later, another poker friend asks for my key to go take a shower to freshen up after a monster session. No problem! I'm still going to play another hour and he'd let me shower if I asked. I tell him my backer has the key and he's in the room napping, just wake his ass up! Well, ten minutes later my friend returns OBVIOUSLY without a shower.

"What the f***? Is (name deleted) still sleeping?" I ask.

"Oh, he's up there, with some chick, and he won't open the door, and I think they're smoking up a storm (this friend knows I hate smoking in my hotel room)."

So I call my room from a house phone in the poker room. “Uh, when he got here, I didn’t know what was going on,” he says. “Come on up. She’s leaving right now.”

I’m not the kind of guy to ‘hate’ so I wasn’t mad about the chick. And it’s hard to get mad at the guy fronting your tournament entries for the week. So I just go to the room and get ready to sleep.

When I get there, he’s passed out, SNORING like crazy. I’m really not some sensitive beyach BUT I don’t like smoking in my living space and I’m a light sleeper. So, my allergies start acting up, I get NO sleep before the tourney and tank in the first hour. At least it wasn’t my money.

And on a side note, I knew this guy for two years prior to this. At the time here’s what I thought I knew about my backer – he said he was 28, divorced, owned three houses and played poker for a living. Wrong. He was 32, married with kids, didn’t own even the house he lived in, ran up 50K in credit card debt to get money to play, and recently had ‘fraudulently’ obtained \$25,000 to bankroll himself and put me in tournaments. I had NO clue until the guy who ‘invested’ the 25K came looking for it.

I guess I have to end here or I’ll keep rambling. So, my conclusion is this – make as few poker friends as possible, try not to front money to ANYONE you don’t know REAL well, and when you travel it’s best to have your own room. If you have poker friends, be sure you understand their expectations and make sure you’re OK with those expectations. When you’re not, you must express them and get things on a level you’re both comfortable with, or you won’t be friends long.

ANOTHER SIDE NOTE: In the last year playing mostly 2-5 and 1-2 no limit games across the United States, I’ve amassed more than 1300 hours on the tables (all live), lost \$3,000 or more on six occasions, only won more than \$3,000 in a session twice but recorded only one losing month (August ‘06, ugh). I also have some really incredible hourly rates. For instance, I average \$153.05/hr playing 2-5 no limit on weekends in Las Vegas. And I have some really confusing stats (I only averaged about \$15/hr in all no limit games at Caesars Indiana, the room I play most). And after my successes, my meltdowns and my experiences, I no longer enjoy the game. I enjoy the freedom playing the game well provides me. I enjoy seeing new places and old ones too. But as well as I know the game, I know I need to get back to the real world.

Session Stages and Player Identities



There are few skills more critical at a poker table than the ability to take small pieces of information about your opponents and to extract from those pieces larger conclusions about how they're likely to play. One thing to consider when you're attempting to generalize about your opponents is the fact that people are prone to act very differently at unique points within a single session.

Understanding some basic truths about common tendencies that players exhibit during different stages within a session can present unique opportunities for profit, while failure to recognize a player's identity shifts can leave you acting on outdated information. Most importantly, paying attention to the impact that session stages have on your opponents can yield useful insights regarding your own play.

For the purposes of this article, we'll break a typical session into 3 stages: warm up, game time and wind down. Obviously, this is a broad schema, but it'll do the trick for our purposes. We'll take each stage in order and break down how to tell when a player's in a given stage, the factors that are likely to force a player from one stage to the next, and what you can assume about your opponent's play within each stage.

Session Stage One: The Warm Up.

The warm up is generally a short stage for most players, usually lasting a couple of orbits. During this stage, players are likely to play a bit more conservatively than usual as they settle into the game. For most people, a lack of comfort makes them more risk averse, and sitting at a table with 9 strangers and trying to stop them from taking your money isn't exactly the most natural setting for a lot of folks. Players in the warm up stage are generally reluctant to play large pots, will generally pass on marginal situations and are likely to be willing to wait for a better hand than usual before they open a pot for a raise. Players in the warm up stage are also likely to be paying extra attention to how you play, and forming strong opinions about you based on what moves you make at this stage of the session.

Some players skip the warm up stage entirely and jump right into game time. Common types who are likely to jump right in: drunk people, players who have just busted out of a tournament, people who have been on the list a long time, people who have come from table games (look for odd chip denominations like \$25 chips in a 1-2 no limit game).

Session Stage Two: Game Time

How do you know when someone's moved out of the warm up stage? It's different for everyone. For some players, it's simply a matter of time; other players don't seem to really enter a game until they win or lose a significant pot (or a pot of any size). Some players wait until drinks or food arrive, and some don't really start playing until an opponent they perceive as a target enters the game. Whatever the motivation, you'll be able to notice the change in their attitude – they'll become more talkative, more engaged. They might increase their buy in, order a drink, or even come right out and make comments about how "it's time to play."

Game time is by far the longest of our three stages, making up the majority of the session for most players. As players settle into this stage, their play is likely to open up. As people become more comfortable, they become more confident and generally more aggressive. This isn't to say that people are going to magically transform into LAGs after an hour at the table; rather, it just suggests that you can just expect most players to become more exaggerated versions of the player they were during the warm up stage. An important exception to this rule: some players will actually become much tighter in this stage of the session, as they've resolved to "wait their turn" for a big hand. These types of players can usually be spotted by their tendency to pay attention to the television, a magazine, or conversations with other players – anything but the game itself.

Session Stage Three: The Wind Down

The signs that someone is moving into the wind down stage are usually pretty clear. You'll get a lot of obvious verbal cues, like players announcing their intention to leave, commenting on the time (or some impending responsibility) or speaking about the session in the past tense. Some people do some pre-packing an orbit or two before they're ready to bail. Other players announce their intention to exit by checking out of the game mentally – if you see a player who was intently following hand action an hour ago intently following college football on the television, chances are they're just running out the clock.

How does entering this stage impact a player's game? A lot depends on how they've done to that point. Players who are winners for the session generally loosen up in small pots but tighten up in large ones. Exploit this by isolating these players and building large pots quickly. Pushing strong draws against these opponents is usually a very profitable strategy.

Players who are losers for the session are usually looking to catch up and are willing to make unreasonable gambles, especially if they think they can win a big pot. Plays that rely on fold vig to be profitable should be abandoned against these types of opponents, but your value betting range can safely be expanded, and over betting strong hands can be an insanely profitable strategy.

Break-even players are a little trickier to type, but a good rule of thumb is that the bigger an ego on a break-even player, the greater the likelihood that they'll make a significant mistake at the end of a session in an attempt to generate the win they think they deserve. If you've got a strong sense that you're up against a big-headed opponent who's even for the session, be on the lookout for massive bluffs, and be careful about making such bluffs against them, as you're likely to get picked off.

That's our quick survey of the different stages of a typical session and the impact each stage can have on the behavior of your opponents. The more you think about sessions in these terms, the more you'll discover about the natural rhythms and momentum that occur within a typical session. You're also likely to learn valuable truths about your own play in relation to different points in a session. In the long run, this type of knowledge will give you a more robust perspective on your opponents – an advantage that you can carry into any game you play.

Poker and Your Significant Other



Hobbies are great for killing two things: time and relationships. No matter how innocuous a hobby might seem at first, you can be sure that somewhere within those instructions for constructing a ship-in-a-bottle lurks a potential pitfall for you and your significant other. Some hobbies present more of a threat than others: golf, for example, has certainly unanchored more than a few relationships that otherwise might have worked out just fine, but if you find yourself screaming yourself hoarse over your girlfriend's crocheting obsession, it's likely that you all were just waiting for any reason to call it quits. Unfortunately for those of you reading this article, our shared hobby – poker – has a lot more in common with the former than the latter.

What is it about poker that makes it such a real threat to the stability of an otherwise healthy relationship? Answering that question is a task that might be better completed by a small book than a single paragraph, but here's a summary of the major issues in play. First, poker for many people occupies a strange middle ground between job and hobby. Since you can make (and lose) money playing poker, it can't quite be treated as a regular hobby, but it also doesn't have the schedule and guaranteed income typical of most forms of employment. This fact makes conversations about poker potentially difficult, as you and your significant other can have wildly different estimates of the importance of playing poker. The volatile nature of poker further complicates the role it plays in your relationship. All hobbies have the potential to impact you emotionally, but the variance inherent to poker makes it generally more stressful for you (and your partner) than, say, woodworking. Last, but certainly not least, there's the lingering social stigma attached to poker that can create a completely new pressure on your relationship, both from internal and external sources.

Even an abbreviated discussion like the one above leads to two simple conclusions. One, poker is basically a relationship minefield and two, successfully navigating that minefield without losing a limb (or a spot in your comfortable bed) requires a bit of planning and effort. As someone who's played poker for a number of years (and through a number of relationships), I've picked up a trick or two along the way for mitigating the impact poker has on your relationship. The best plan for your specific relationship has a lot to do with the way you already interact with your significant other, but I'll suggest three fundamental strategies that should help you find a solid starting point for balancing the needs of the two loves of your life.

The first, and probably most idealistic, strategy is to involve your significant other in your poker life. The underlying concept here is that (to paraphrase GI Joe)

getting them to know is half the battle. People have a lot of preconceptions about poker and those who play it, and a little bit of first-hand exposure might help to correct some of the prejudices your significant other has about poker. Plus, there's the basic truth about human nature that involves us fearing the unfamiliar, so increasing familiarity might also increase acceptance (or at least tolerance).

Before I go any further with this idea, I think it's important to issue a pretty vital caveat. I know at this point that several readers are entertaining idealized fantasies of loving, joy-filled nights shared with their significant other at a poker table (real or online). Do yourself a favor and ditch those fantasies post-haste. While having your significant other learn how to play poker is a good way to get them on board with the game, trying to teach them yourself is one of the surest ways to ensure that they will hate poker forever and ever, amen. Why? Well, for starters, good teachers allow students to learn (more or less) at their own pace. However, your agenda, conscious or not, will be for your significant other to be as advanced as you are right away – clearly not the most constructive learning environment for a new player. Beyond that, it's likely that you are still a developing player, meaning that your ideas about good play and bad play are still fairly amorphous. To understand how this might frustrate your significant other, imagine for a second having a math teacher who tells you one week that $2 + 2$ is 4, and the next week that $2 + 2$ is Virginia. Finally, the relationship between a student and a teacher is often an adversarial one, and the last thing you probably want is for any more frustration or conflict to be attached to your significant other's perception of poker.

So if you can't teach your significant other yourself, how can you involve them in poker? Simple. You can point them in the direction of resources that were helpful to you as a developing player. Suggest books and training aids that will help them learn the ropes, and then move them on to more advanced tutorials when they've mastered the basics. While this might not seem like a big deal, having someone to guide you through the maze of available poker advice is an invaluable asset for a new player. Also, don't mistake the caveat above as a complete prohibition of providing your significant other with a tip or two – it's important that you're available to answer their questions or to put advice they get from other sources in a proper context. The trick is to make sure that they're getting assistance from you on their terms and not yours. In short form: be accessible, but not intrusive.

While involvement is an appealing approach, the reality is that poker just isn't for everyone. It's entirely possible that you might do everything right and still end up in a spot where your significant other just isn't all that naturally interested in sharing the experience with you. At that point, you need to shift your focus to limiting the damage poker can potentially do to your relationship.

That's the heart of my second strategy for balancing poker and your significant other: Put a meaningful distance between poker and your significant other. When

I say meaningful distance, I'm referring to distance in both the physical and emotional sense. Try finding some kind of buffer activity like exercise or writing that you can do post-poker session. Giving yourself a bit of a forced time-out after poker can help you to settle whatever emotions you might be carrying with you from the day's play. When you move right from a session to spending time with your significant other, you run the risk of using them as something of an emotional landfill for your poker feelings – and that's a quick way to get them to really hate poker. It's also pretty critical to not use poker as a relationship weapon or even as a currency in a relationship. If you retaliate against something your significant other has done by heading off to play poker, not only are you probably going to play sub-optimally, but you're further ensuring that poker will serve as a wedge between the two of you. Even 'trading' for poker playing time (i.e. 'I'll see that movie you want if I can play poker all Saturday afternoon) sets a dangerous precedent for viewing poker and your significant other as things in opposition – things to be chosen between instead of things that can exist independent of each other.

The last strategy I'll suggest is probably both the simplest and the most effective. If you want poker to be a healthy part of your life and your relationship, you need to have an open, honest dialogue with your significant other about how that can and should happen. Like any hobby, it's easy to get wrapped up in poker and lose sight of the larger impact it's having on your life. Fight this tendency by having a serious conversation with your significant other about how much time you each have available in a given week, and how much of that time you expect to spend with each other. Don't just assume that you'll make time – instead, take active steps to manage the time you have available, and be realistic about how much poker deserves and how much your significant other deserves (hint: B should always be greater than A). Also, don't forget that any relationship, whether it be with a person or an activity, is a living, dynamic thing that requires constant re-examination. Make a point of having an ongoing dialogue with your significant other about poker and how it's impacting the relationship. While you're at it, make a point of having an ongoing dialogue with yourself about what you expect out of your relationship with poker and what you're willing to sacrifice to achieve those ends.

Some relationships are strong enough to survive whatever is thrown in their way, while others seem little more than a whisper away from collapse. In between those extremes you'll find the overwhelming majority of relationships, flexible enough to accommodate another passion, but still vulnerable to collapse under the weight of competition. Competing loves can be a tricky thing to manage, but with some planning and effort, you should be able to achieve a balance between the significant others in your life, making for a better time at the table is the poker room and the table in the kitchen.

Meditations of Pokus Professionalius (Things I Know to be True About Poker)



Awhile back I saw the movie 300 at the IMAX in the Palms Casino with two friends of mine. I'd never seen a Hollywood movie in IMAX, just educational titles like 'To the Moon' or 'This Green Earth' when I was, like, in grade school. Although I really didn't care for the movie 300, seeing blood and war and naked women on a screen like that was a cool experience.

It's worth mentioning because when I go on 'poker trips' to Vegas, Tunica, etc. I used to never do anything like that. Well, there's not much to do in Tunica anyway but I never looked either. When I travel, I'm there to play and win. Period. I sleep, try to eat somewhere good and free, play a lot of poker, and occasionally I check my email. Well, alright, sometimes I do find myself in random casino spa, relaxing in the grotto.

Well it got me thinking. On poker trips, I play to win money, but when I come home I have fun and rest. That's true. So, what else do I know is true for me, the professional poker player? About three weeks ago I started a list. And as I like my expressions to have themes, I wrote it with "The Meditations of Marcus Aurillieus" in mind.

So in no particular order (except the first and last one), here's a little flesh, a little breath and my 54 reasons to rule all in poker. I hope you enjoy them.

The Meditations of Pokus Professionalius.

For the poker professional, I know these following things to be undisputed and true:

1. You can never win enough
2. Hold'em is a much better game when you don't need the win
3. When you first get the urge to leave, leave
4. Never slow play a hand that can be out drawn IF you can't fold to a large raise from a maniac when a scare card hits
5. Get in the habit of carrying only three buy-ins to a game
6. Writing about poker in any form (personal journal, for PTP!, etc) is an unequalled catalyst for positive self-development

7. Do not borrow money to play, even if you have the money near by; should you lose, by borrowing you're only delaying the losing process
8. If all else fails, change tables; if that doesn't work, take the night off!
9. Do not stray too far from your original career path or when you bust, you'll really bust
10. Order the seafood salad or the wienerschnitzel at the Venetian in Vegas, you won't be disappointed with either
11. When you flop quads, bet
12. On the river when you miss your draw, it can be right to bet
13. On the river when you miss your draw, it can be right to make a massive raise
14. On the river when you miss your draw, it can be right to call but not often enough to make it profitable
15. A big loss has more emotional impact on your psyche than a big win
16. You can play well for six days straight and in the last hour on the seventh day play so bad it ruins your week
17. Gunsmoke is one hell of a TV show
18. Some Harvard study implies that you play poker worse after a large meal, so give yourself an hour or so after the last bite, seriously. It's science
19. Never drink alcohol when you play
20. When playing live, try not to drink ANYTHING when you have cards in front of you; subconscious needs can be a huge tell if you indulge at will
21. 90% of winning tournament players are big fish in the cash games I play
22. 5% of winning tournament players are smart enough not to play cash games
23. The other 5% of winning tournament players are scary enough to avoid at all costs
24. If you play poker profitably, you need an accountant NOW

25. If you play poker profitably, you need and never stop needing
26. As long as you play for a living, you will live with permanent jetlag
27. Once a hand of poker is played, it can never be played again
28. It's cooler to quote Steve McQueen than Matt Damon, John Malkovich and/or Edward Norton
29. However, it's cooler not to quote, and you can quote me on that. Or don't, but "it be a lot cooler if ya did" – Wooderson, Dazed and Confused
30. Zen and the Art of Poker is not a poker book
31. Never reveal why you did what you did in the middle of the hand. Why you think the way you think is the biggest weapon you have
32. Listen! Players will tell you how to beat them
33. When playing heads up against a coke head, wait for him to run out of coke, then grind him some more. He can not beat his addiction as well as you
34. Never play a micro-limit JUST to hit the bad beat jackpot; it's not worth your time
35. If you want to learn to play a new game, read at least three books specifically devoted to it; there's so much crap out there, and so many opinions on how to play, it's best to over due the education process when your money is at risk
36. If you want to play poker, play poker. If at the table you find yourself watching ESPN, go home. Your couch is much more comfortable
37. Speaking of ESPN, never watch poker on TV unless it's High Stakes Poker
38. Embrace bad beats as you'd embrace every opportunity to flip a coin for a lot of money with a 70% edge or better. If you don't embrace them, they will cost you your focus and your money
39. Losing when you're 51-69% to win is NOT a bad beat
40. Losing when you're 69-99% to win is NOT a bad beat
41. Bad beats are simply beats, ask for no sympathy and give none
42. Playing poker WILL make you lazier

43. World class poker players don't get better cards than you, they just play them better more frequently

44. You can not give your heart to a woman and poker at the same time, unless she's a better player than you

45. We enter the game at zero and without another source of income, we will return to zero several times over

46. You make your money off other's mistakes. Your skill is what keeps you even in the meantime

47. Poker is a sprint, a marathon and not a race at all

48. It is a lot easier to lose than it is to win

49. In your efforts to stack the idiot, do not become the idiot

50. No limit poker is unique in that rarely is there only one correct way to play a hand on the turn

51. Once you own a man in a game, you always own him

52. It's better to be unknown and un-owned

53. Remember that if you straddle, you significantly increase your variance in the game, and that can be good, bad and sometimes a lot of both

54. Some play for fun, for money, to socialize, to escape. Above all, know why you play



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