

# Kluwer Mediation Blog

## Games and Relationships: The Art of Knowing When to Stop

Andrea Maia (Mediar360 – Dispute Resolution) · Wednesday, January 8th, 2025

With the arrival of betting platforms and apps in Brazil, discussions about their impacts are on the rise. These games, which promise quick fun, and easy rewards, often trap players in a dangerous mental loop: the myth of the next move. It is the illusion that just one more round will recover all previous losses. Interestingly, not only gambling arouses this kind of illusion. It mirrors experiences in relationships: persisting, raising the stakes, and continuing to invest, even when all signs point to the fact that walking away would be the best choice.

This connection inspired today's post.

### The Psychology of Gambling: The Myth of the Next Move

In gambling, the hope of recovering losses can be alluring. A player who has lost everything believes that the next round will bring the lucky break needed to turn things around. But this rarely happens because gambling systems are designed to ensure the average gross profit from each game, the “house” will win eventually.

This behavior is rooted in the **sunk cost fallacy**, a cognitive bias that drives individuals to persist in unfavorable situations because they have already invested time, money, or effort. [Daniel Kahneman](#)), in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, explains that this bias stems from our loss aversion—our psychological resistance to admitting that resources spent cannot be recovered. [Max Bazerman](#) expands on this in *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making*, showing how irrational decisions in contexts such as gambling or negotiations often stem from an inability to disregard emotional and financial costs already incurred.

### What about Relationships?

Just like in gambling, we often fall prey to the “myth of the next move” in relationships. In difficult or even toxic situations, we convince ourselves that “just one more effort” will fix everything. We keep investing in something that brings more pain than joy, holding on to the hope that things will return to how they were at the beginning.

This illusion makes us overlook red flags, such as:

- Lack of reciprocity.
- Cycles of conflict and reconciliation without real change.
- Continuous emotional exhaustion.

Kahneman's insights on **confirmation bias** shed light on this phenomenon: people tend to seek information that reinforces their beliefs and dismiss evidence to the contrary. In relationships, this bias might make us justify toxic behaviors while ignoring the emotional toll they take. Like the gambler who does not know when to stop, we continue to invest energy into dynamics that yield no meaningful return, ignoring the devastating cost.

### **When the Stakes Get Higher: Risk vs. Reward**

In gambling, the risk grows with each lost round. To recover losses, many players double down, creating a dangerous cycle. In relationships, this cycle manifests when one party:

- Makes increasingly larger sacrifices to try to save the relationship.
- Ignores their happiness or self-esteem to maintain the dynamic.
- Tries to change the other person's behavior at all costs.

This pattern, known as **escalation of commitment**, is a common trap in emotionally dependent relationships. Bazerman, in his book *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making*, explores how individuals and organizations often continue to invest in failing ventures to justify prior commitments, even when walking away would be the smarter choice. Just as in gambling, outcomes in relationships often depend on factors beyond our control, and relying on someone else to turn things around can be a painful mistake.

### **The Price of Not Knowing When to Stop**

Whether at a betting table or in an emotional relationship, the cost of continuing to gamble can be profound. In gambling, the losses are usually financial, but the impact in relationships can be much deeper.

Examples of losses include:

- **In gambling:**

- o Financial ruin.
- o Emotional stress and anxiety.
- o Strained family or social relationships.

- **In relationships:**

- o Loss of self-esteem and identity.
- o Emotional trauma and difficulty trusting again.
- o Distancing from loved ones due to an abusive or controlling partner.

In both cases, persisting beyond the point of reason often leads to a breaking point.

### **Game Theory and the Decision to Stop**

This is where **Game Theory**, a branch of mathematics that studies how strategic decisions affect outcomes, becomes relevant. It offers insights applicable to both gambling and relationships.

#### **1. The Player's Dilemma: To Continue or to stop?**

Game Theory suggests that in many scenarios, quitting is the optimal strategy, especially when the system is working against you (as in gambling or unbalanced relationships).

## 2. Sunk Costs: A Decision-Making Trap

Both in gambling and in relationships, the idea that we have invested “too much” to quit now is one of the most common psychological traps. Kahneman and Bazerman highlight this as a major obstacle to rational decision-making.

## 3. Balance and Cooperation

In relationships, both spouses can achieve balance when both contribute fairly. When that balance disappears, persisting becomes the emotional equivalent of betting against the house.

### How to Know When to Stop

Recognizing the right time to leave a harmful situation is an essential skill. Here are some practical tips to help:

#### In gambling:

- Set clear limits before you start: decide on the maximum amount you are willing to lose.
- Pay attention to signs of stress or frustration.
- Remember: the house always has the advantage.

#### In relationships:

- Evaluate how you feel: is there more happiness or sadness?
- Talk to people you trust to get an external perspective.
- Ask yourself: Am I investing or insisting? The difference is that investing brings returns while insisting only brings exhaustion.

### Conclusion: Knowing When to Stop is a Victory

In both gambling and relationships, knowing when to stop is a sign of strength, not weakness. Recognizing that something is not working and deciding to preserve what remains—whether it is money, self-esteem, or emotional well-being—is an act of courage.

True victory does not lie in continuing to gamble but in learning from experience and using that knowledge to make better choices in the future. After all, whether in relationships or games, life always offers opportunities to a new bet this time, with greater wisdom.

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