

Keeping Emotional Control at the Bridge Table

By Maritha Pottenger

An amazing number of times, people do more poorly than they could because they let their feelings overwhelm their logical reasoning at the bridge table.

Here are some of the emotions that can cause problems for people:

Anger (at yourself and/or at your partner)

Depression (at what seems like a hopeless contract)

Fear of losing

Self-criticism (“Why did I bid that?”)

Despair (“I’ll never make it.”)

Rashness (can lead to playing too quickly)

Over-optimism (“If partner has the perfect hand, we could make slam.”)

Panic (“I have no idea what to do.”)

Frustration (“Neither of my finesses worked! What do I do now?”)

Obviously, many more reactions are possible. A key part of becoming a good bridge player is to train yourself to master your emotional responses. All of us have feelings, but we can choose whether to let those feelings overwhelm us, or whether to maintain a degree of control over them. Even if your initial response is extremely emotional, if you can pull yourself together and start to think about the hand logically, you will generally do much better. Training yourself to **never give up** is crucial!

A few key points to remember:

1. Even if the contract looks hopeless to you, the opponents do NOT have all the information that you have. If you **refuse to give up**, they may not realize how bad things were until you have pulled off a “miracle” recovery!
2. Because you know what your holdings are in a particular case does NOT mean that your opponents know. Especially when you are Declarer, at least one defender may be totally in the dark about your exact holding. A simple example would be when RHO bids a suit and you end up declaring in NT. LHO leads the suit and RHO plays the Jack. You take the trick with the King. RHO knows what is going on, but LHO does not know whether you started out with ONLY the King in the suit; with both the Ace and the King in the suit; or even with the Ace, King and Queen in that suit!
3. **Seemingly “hopeless” contracts are made every day due to defensive errors.** If you give your opponents the opportunity to make a mistake, they often will!
4. In duplicate bridge, it is not always necessary to make your contract. Your goal is to have a better score than the people sitting the same direction as you. If you are in a “hopeless” contract, decide first if it is likely to be a common contract. **If other people are likely to have the same bidding sequence and same end contract, just try to go down as few as possible.** You’ll have a better matchpoint score that way. If you are in a nonstandard contract (you pushed to an aggressive game or slam), go all out for any chance (no matter how slim) to make it. You will get few or no matchpoints for holding yourself to down only one.
5. **COUNT**—winners, losers, tricks needed (to make your contract or to set the opponents), distribution, high card holdings by everyone at the table. If you concentrate on what is going on and have clear goals, you’ll fare much better than if you rely on instinct or random responses.

6. Remember that one bad board is NOT the end of the world. If you continue to beat yourself up, you'll turn one bad board into two or more. **Be kind to yourself** (and your partner!).