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The Dark Reality of Being a Professional Poker Player

Our Friends · Monday, March 9th, 2026

Most people who sit down at a poker table for the first time are thinking about the money. They have seen the televised final tables, the sunglasses, the towers of chips pushed across green felt. What they have not seen is the 14-hour session that ended in nothing, the three months without a cash, or the player sitting in a hotel room at 4 a.m. unable to sleep because the bankroll is shrinking and there is no boss to call, no paycheck coming Friday, no safety net at all. Professional poker sells a version of itself that barely resembles the actual life. The actual life is lonelier, more financially unstable, and harder on the body and mind than almost anyone on the outside would guess. And the people living it tend to keep quiet about the worst parts.

The Numbers Are Against You From the Start

Roughly 10% to 15% of poker players are profitable over a long period of time. That figure comes up again and again in industry discussions and player data. The rest lose money or break even, which, after accounting for travel costs, buy-ins, food, lodging, and rake, amounts to losing money anyway. A break-even year for a tournament player who spent \$40,000 on travel and expenses is effectively a \$40,000 loss.

The math filters out most people, but it does so slowly. A losing player can run well for six months and believe they have an edge. By the time variance corrects, they may have committed years of their life and tens of thousands of dollars. Walking away at that point feels like admitting the time was wasted, so many players stay longer than they should.

The Tax Problem Nobody Talks About

Starting January 1, 2026, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act changes how gambling losses are deducted. Players can only write off up to 90 percent of losses against winnings. Someone who wins and loses \$250,000 in a year owes tax on \$25,000 of phantom income, money they never actually made. For **poker pros**, tournament circuit grinders, cash game regulars, and high-volume online players, this compounds an already thin margin. The 10 to 15 percent who win long term now keep even less.

Financial pressure like this feeds directly into the mental health problems GambleAware documented in 2023.

What Losing Does to Your Head

A 2023 study conducted by GambleAware in the UK examined **mental health outcomes among professional gamblers**. The findings were grim. Professional gamblers reported higher rates of depression, fatigue, stress, loneliness, obsession, loss of self-worth, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts compared to the general population.

Board-certified medical professional Catherine Jaffe has warned that “loneliness, shame, and isolation are factors to be aware of” when assessing at-risk players. These three conditions are practically built into the profession. Poker rewards emotional suppression. You are trained to hide what you feel at the table, and over time, that habit bleeds into the rest of your life. Talking to someone about a \$15,000 downswing is hard when no one around you knows what that means or why it matters.

The Players Who Spoke Up

Brad Ruben has won five World Series of Poker bracelets. By external measures, he has succeeded at the highest level. He has also spoken publicly about living with trauma-induced depression, suicidal thoughts, and emotional volatility. He has described how the swings, long hours, and isolating grind of the profession magnified problems that already existed.

Rayan Chamas told a similar story from a different angle. He dealt with severe anxiety and turned to social drinking to manage it. Streaming and winning tournaments gave him a way to mask what was happening underneath. From the outside, he looked fine. From the inside, he was self-medicating.

These are not fringe cases. They are two players who happened to talk about it. For every public account, there are dozens of players dealing with the same things in private.

The Isolation Problem

A cash game regular might spend eight to twelve hours a day seated at a table without a single meaningful conversation. Tournament players fly alone to cities where they know nobody except other players who are also trying to take their money. **Friendships at the table are complicated** because every person you sit with is a direct competitor.

There is no team. There is no office. There are no coworkers asking how your weekend was. The social structure that most jobs provide by default does not exist in poker. You build it yourself or you go without.

Over months and years, that absence accumulates. Sleep schedules become irregular. Meals happen at odd hours or not at all. Exercise gets skipped. Relationships with people outside the game deteriorate because the lifestyle is hard to explain and harder to maintain.

Why People Stay Anyway

Some stay because they are winning, and winning at poker is genuinely rare and hard to replace with a normal salary. Some stay because they have been doing it for so long that they do not know what else to do. Some stay because the freedom of the schedule, even with its costs, is something they cannot give up.

But staying in a profession that has a built-in attrition rate above 85%, a tax code working against

you, and a social structure that encourages silence about mental health problems is a choice that deserves honest evaluation. The televised version of poker will never show you that evaluation. The people living it owe it to themselves to make it anyway.

Conclusion

The image of the professional poker player that most people recognize is built on highlights: televised tournaments, dramatic bluffs, and the occasional life-changing win. What those highlights leave out is the long stretch of uncertainty that surrounds them. The profession demands financial resilience, emotional discipline, and the ability to handle isolation in ways that few careers require.

For the small percentage of players who succeed, the rewards can be meaningful. But for many others, the grind exposes the hidden costs of turning a game into a livelihood. Understanding the darker side of being a professional poker player does not dismiss the skill involved in the game; instead, it provides a clearer picture of the realities behind the table, beyond the lights, cameras, and televised victories.

Photo: Freepik via their website.

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